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**10 Year Community Services Industry Plan**

**Consultation with youth services sector**

**November 2017**

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**About YACVic**

Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) is the peak body and leading policy advocate on young people’s issues in Victoria. YACVic’s vision is that young Victorians have their rights upheld and are valued as active participants in their communities.

YACVic is an independent, not-for-profit, member driven organisation that represents young people (aged 12-25 years) and the sector that works with them. Through our research, advocacy and services, we:

* lead policy responses on issues affecting young people
* represent the youth sector and elevate young people’s voices to government
* resource high-quality youth work practice.

We are driven by our members and prioritise their needs and concerns.

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**Background and approach**

Victoria’s community services sector is experiencing one of the busiest periods of reform in recent memory. Not only is our sector being transformed by changes to policy and service delivery in areas including disability support, child protection and family violence, we must also adapt to major changes in our community – social, economic and technological.

In light of this, the Human Services and Health Partnership Implementation Committee, co-chaired by Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) and Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) decided to develop a 10-year plan for the community services industry. The final document will be industry-owned and industry-led, in partnership with the Victorian Government.

As part of the consultation process, VCOSS engaged Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) to consult with representatives of youth services to gauge their ideas and recommendations for how the plan could help build a community services sector which delivers strong, positive outcomes for Victorians aged 12-25.

We held consultations in Melbourne and Warrnambool and a teleconference. We spoke to 20 representatives from 18 services. Altogether, these services worked across approximately 25 Victorian local government areas. Due to where we held the consultations, most participants came from metropolitan Melbourne and south-western Victoria. However, there was one participant from Victoria’s north-east and several from state-wide organisations. Services present included 7 local government youth services, 4 non-government community service organisations, one School Focused Youth Service, one Community House, one representative from the Department of Health and Human Services, one international charity providing services in Victoria, two organisations focused on research and advocacy, and one provider of youth work training.

We took the participants through VCOSS’s [discussion paper](http://vcoss.org.au/strong-sector/community-services-industry-planning/?utm_source=website&utm_medium=featured-left&utm_campaign=community-services-industry-planning), using the key issues raised there to guide our discussion.

**A 10-Year Industry Plan – who should be included?**

Participants engaged in close debate over which services belonged within the scope of an industry plan. They identified several stakeholders whom they felt should have been more fully recognised in the discussion paper, including in the diagram on p.4. Perhaps the most important point raised was the need to name the providers of vocational education and training (VET), including TAFEs and community VCAL, and engage them in the industry plan.

Many members of the youth sector’s workforce have done their training at VET providers. This is also true of the community sector more broadly.

At the same time, youth services work with many young people who are studying at VET providers, or being supported to re-engage with education and employment via a VET qualification. Many of these young people have experienced disengagement from mainstream education, training and employment, and the vulnerabilities that go along with that.

Young people, especially those experiencing disadvantage, are also vulnerable to adverse outcomes in VET, including being encouraged into courses which are inappropriate for them, and being targeted by unscrupulous providers selling qualifications which are costly and do not lead to meaningful employment.

In addition to VET providers, participants at our consultations named several other providers of services for young people which were not mentioned in the discussion paper. These were:

* Local government – a core provider of youth services around Victoria
* Neighbourhood Houses
* Community providers of alternative education and flexible learning
* Sexual health services
* Youth-led organisations, such as Oaktree and UN Youth Australia

When considering the bigger picture of service delivery to young people, participants also pointed to the importance of Centrelink and universities. While they are not ‘youth service providers’ and will not be working to this industry plan, they do have a significant impact on young people’s lives and thus influence the kinds of help young people need from youth services.

Moreover, participants identified a number of local services and stakeholders which engage regularly with young people, but which are often marginalised from sector policy and planning. These players are especially important in smaller rural communities, where it would be impossible to do effective ‘place-based’ work with young people without engaging them. They are:

* Local sporting clubs
* Scouts and Guides
* Service groups like Rotary and Lions clubs
* Local libraries
* Arts and cultural centres
* Local businesses like fast food providers and cafes where young people gather

Our participants also debated how an industry plan should represent faith-based youth groups and other programs provided by religious bodies. These groups are very influential in certain cultural communities, and can assist young people with things like emergency aid and social isolation. They often operate differently to ‘mainstream’ youth services.

There was no consensus about how the above stakeholders should be represented in a 10-year industry plan. Indeed, some participants cautioned that they would not like to see the plan take on a ‘cast of thousands’. However, there was a sense that the plan would need to be clearer about which services it would recognise and why, and what roles it envisaged for services and stakeholders which impact on the community services sector without being technically part of it.

***Suggested steps for the industry plan:***

1. Recognise that the core work of community service providers involves engaging, collaborating and partnering with a wide range of stakeholders beyond government and other community providers. To deliver effective outcomes for young people, youth services must devote time, skill and long-term commitment to building local relationships and partnerships with very diverse stakeholders. This work should be resourced and measured as a key part of what youth service providers do.

2. Recognise the influence of the stakeholders listed above, and acknowledge them as existing somewhere within the ‘scope’ of the industry plan.

3. Develop an approach to engaging the above stakeholders in the industry plan. They should be informed about the aims, processes and rationale of the industry plan, and consulted about how it should evolve at a local community level.

**Maintaining youth-specific service delivery and expertise**

A recurring theme raised by participants in our consultations was the need for high-quality, youth-specific service delivery by experienced local providers. Concerns were raised that young people in some parts of Victoria are expected to receive support for issues like unemployment, family violence and mental health from ‘mainstream’ services which do not have the skills and relationships to work well with vulnerable clients aged 12-25.

A number of our participants worried that over the next decade, we might see an erosion of services designed to meet the needs of young people, and that without these services more young people would fall through the cracks of the system. Some participants cautioned that youth services were at risk of being absorbed entirely into ‘child and family’ services or ‘community’ services – a controversial topic. Others worried that huge, generic providers would secure the majority of contracts in the future, removing smaller local players from the picture.

In consequence, participants were eager to see an industry plan recognise the need for expert youth-specific interventions, within and outside of mainstream services. Examples of these interventions include:

* Youth-specific community legal services
* Youth-specific employment providers
* Supports designed for young mothers
* Community-based advocacy services for young people

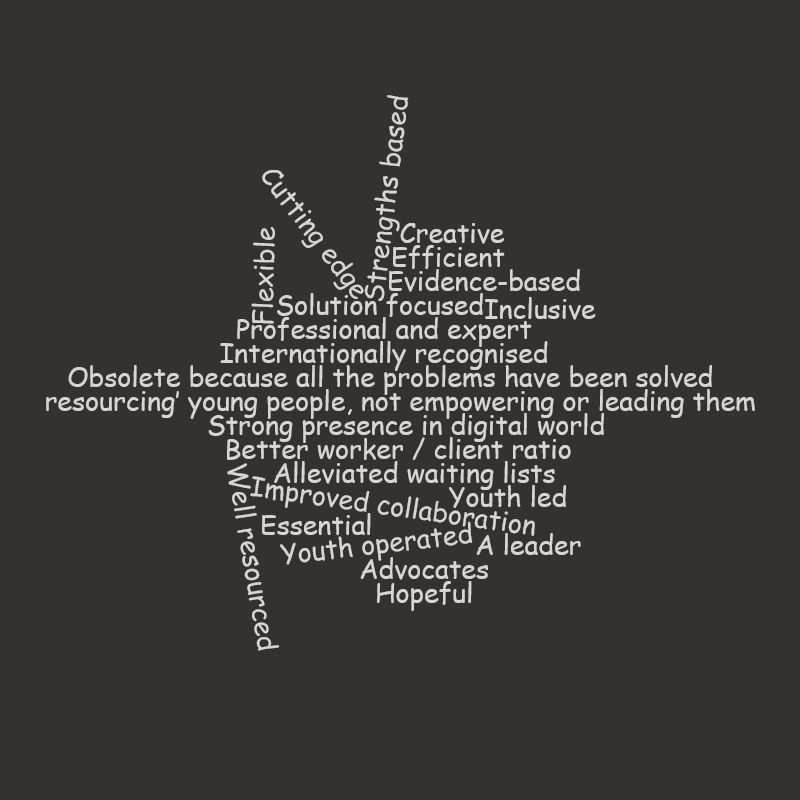
Meanwhile, some other participants called for a rethink about how the industry plan represents the structure of the community services sector. They pointed out that the discussion paper (p.4) lists ‘youth services’ alongside services like housing/homelessness, mental health, justice, AOD, education and financial counselling. But this does not recognise the fact that youth services are also *providers* of many of these other interventions. Many people assume that youth services offer nothing but recreational programs, so it is important to boost awareness of the many other outcomes they help to deliver.

***Suggested steps for the industry plan:***

4. Recognise that vulnerable cohorts, including young people aged 12-25, often need services and interventions which are designed specifically to meet their unique needs. An industry plan should support the work of these services, acknowledging their expertise and the outcomes they deliver, which would not necessarily be delivered by generic, ‘mainstream’ services.

5. Recognise the structuralneed for youth services (and some other providers like community health services and Neighbourhood Houses) to be in place in a community before there can be successful interventions in areas like school re-engagement, crime prevention, housing, and mental health.

We asked participants at our Melbourne consultation what words they would like to be using to describe their sector in 10 years from now. Their answers included…



**What will shape our sector over the next decade?**

Participants contemplated the large-scale changes – economic, technological, social, political and administrative – which are likely to shape how we work with young people over the next ten years. The most common issues they cited were:

* ***Casualization of the workforce and disappearance of entry-level jobs***

Participants observed that the casualization of Victoria’s workforce and the growing use of short-term contract work are impacting heavily on young people, along with the disappearance of low-qualification and entry-level jobs. There are now more part-time than full-time young workers aged 15-24,[[1]](#endnote-1) and according to the Foundation for Young Australians in 2015 it took a young person an average of 4.7 years from leaving full-time education to finding full-time work.[[2]](#endnote-2) While our state might be experiencing general employment growth, this is not benefiting many young people. Community services will be called upon to deal with the impacts over the next decade. The Life Patterns study of young Australians commented recently ‘Difficult transitions to work have become an increasing reality for everyone, not just for those historically labelled as disadvantaged.’[[3]](#endnote-3)

These issues were raised many times at our consultations. Participants described the confusion and distress expressed by young people who struggled to finish school, only to find that a Year 12 qualification is not enough to get them a job.

Participants also commented that it is becoming harder for adults to effectively support young people in planning a career. The frequent refrain ‘The job you’ll have in 10 years hasn’t been created yet’ sounds exciting to some young people and adults, but many others find it stressful and bewildering. Some young people, especially in rurally isolated communities, have not been exposed to many career options. They may believe there are no prospects for skilled, well-paid work where they live, even if such opportunities might emerge there in the future, such as in the renewable energy sector. Other young people aspire to jobs associated with fame and online presence; their parents, teachers and support workers often have no idea how viable their ambitions may be, or how to support them.

Meanwhile, short-term contract work is common and problematic in the youth services sector. Very few workers are on permanent or long-term contracts, and many programs depend on short-term grants like Engage. It is common for our services to lose skilled employees to other sectors, and for significant time and effort to be expended trying to keep programs running without any promise of future funding. This results in disrupted relationships with young people, loss of productivity, and fewer positive, sustainable or innovative outcomes.

* ***Demands and costs of education and training***

Victoria’s young people are, on average, quite highly educated, graduating from school and higher education in large numbers. However, this does not guarantee a positive school experience or a gainful career for everyone. Indeed, as Year 12 completion and higher education become normalised, this can lead to further marginalisation and disadvantage for those young people who can’t or won’t remain in mainstream education into adulthood.

A number of participants at our consultations raised concerns about the high costs of education. They noted the rising costs of ‘public’ education (e.g. iPads), and the fact that post-school study – usually essential for a young person to start a gainful career – means going into significant debt, especially for young people who experiment with several different career paths.

Meanwhile, pressures outside of school are contributing to some secondary-aged young people disengaging entirely from their education. The most common contributing factor raised at our consultations was anxiety and other mental health problems. Participants attributed these problems to social media, family violence and poverty. The Navigator program provides very important support to such students in some communities, but Navigator does not operate everywhere. Participants also noted the pressure on schools to deal with an enormous range of wellbeing issues, with limited resources.

Concerns were also raised about the growing divide between state schools operating in communities with high levels of disadvantage, and state schools which market themselves to ‘aspirational’ and wealthy families. This divide is even more prominent in some isolated rural communities, where the children of better-off families leave town to go to boarding school; staying at the local secondary school is associated with poverty and low community expectations.

Some young people are also feeling the effects of having been trained by inappropriate RTOs, sometimes at great cost and with no viable career at the end. Participants expressed frustration that metropolitan-based RTOs are still promoting courses to young people in rural communities which are unlikely to help young people into local jobs.

Finally, some participants observed that young people were calling for greater help to develop life skills and workplace skills. YACVic would add that this same point was made by a number of young people during a series of regional youth consultations which we held in 12 Victorian communities in 2016.[[4]](#endnote-4) However, the right support is not always easy to access. One participant at our consultations noted that there are many foundational and pre-training courses out there, but their quality varies greatly.

* ***Rural and regional Victoria: changing populations and service needs***

Despite the many strengths of rural communities, they tend to be poorly served in terms of infrastructure and services. Adequate, effective outreach is relatively rare; the high needs in regional centres, combined with the difficult logistics and costs of rural delivery, combine to keep many services in regional cities. Thus, it is common for young people in rurally isolated areas to be unable to access timely, appropriate youth service responses where they live. To access services in regional centres or Melbourne, they must deal with transport stress or move away from their families and communities.

Rural and regional areas are also experiencing great demographic changes, which will impact on the demands for community service delivery. Most regional cities are experiencing population growth, with high numbers of relatively young people moving there, and high birth rates.

Meanwhile, many young people are leaving smaller rural towns, where options for higher education and well-paid jobs are relatively scarce. In some communities, this begins during the teenage years when young people move away to boarding school. Several participants made a point which YACVic has heard before: that there is an expectation that ‘high achieving’ young people from better-off families will leave rural towns, while those experiencing disadvantage are more likely to stay. Indeed, services have told us that there has been a recent, growing trend for families experiencing serious disadvantage to move out to rural areas from metropolitan or regional centres in search of affordable housing.

Thus, while the numbers of young people needing service provision in rural towns may be relatively few, the *proportion* of young people in need can be quite high.

* ***Housing stress and income stress***

Participants agreed that housing stress was likely to remain a priority issue over the coming decade. Specific concerns include the lack of affordable rental properties, young people being ‘locked out’ of home ownership, and the fact that living in cheaper parts of Victoria often comes with transport disadvantage. Participants mentioned the need for supported, specialised accommodation for young people with complex needs in areas such as AOD and mental illness. They also mentioned how housing costs were impacting on some young people’s ability to access other necessities of daily life, including food. There is an ongoing need for emergency relief and food aid for young people experiencing disadvantage. One participant asserted that the shortages of affordable housing were compounded by unwillingness on the part of some workers to refer young people for public housing, due to the belief that young people would make bad public housing tenants or would experience greater disadvantage there.

YACVic would add to all these points our observation that housing stress also means that young people are living in the parental home (when they can) for longer than previous generations. In 2015, more than half of young Australians aged 18-24 still lived with their parents.[[5]](#endnote-5) As such, over the next ten years, youth services can expect to work with high numbers of young adults who continue to have some dependence on, and proximity to, their families. Doing youth work which appropriately engages families may prove more important than ever.

Other social and economic issues which participants felt were likely to impact on our sector over the next ten years included:

* ***Child protection*** – participants agreed that the number of children being taken into child protection was a priority issue. The rates of Aboriginal children being taken into care are very high and rising; these young people are also over-represented in the justice system. Over the next decade, we can expect to see strong and growing demand for post-care supports, which are often inadequate at present.
* ***Climate change*** and its particular impacts on rural communities in relation to employment and population.
* ***Poor mental health*** continues to be a major concern for young people. YACVic would note that young women are twice as likely as young men to suffer serious mental illness, and that Aboriginal young people are significantly more likely to suffer mental illness than their non-Aboriginal peers.[[6]](#endnote-6) Youth services will be called upon to deal with the impacts of this – and to address the structural discrimination, injustice and trauma that make some young people more vulnerable than others.
* ***New technologies*** play a huge role in young people’s lives; this can be a strength, as young people tend to be highly proficient and adaptable. But it also means young people can be profoundly impacted by negative experiences in cyber spaces.
* ***Visa / residency status*** – Some young people are being affected by changes to the law, especially refugees and New Zealanders.
* ***Sexuality and/or gender expression* –** Some youth services, especially in rural and regional areas, are reporting a rise in requests for support by young people expressing concerns in relation their sexuality and/or gender identity. It is conceivable that these demands may continue to rise, due to the prominence of these issues in popular and social media, as well as the impacts of the national debate over marriage equality.
* ***Alcohol and other drug use*** – Participants at the Warrnambool consultation noted that shortage of rehabilitation and other supports outside of larger cities, and the call for stronger rural AOD services.
* ***Multiculturalism, including in rural communities –*** Some rural communities are struggling with the desire to attract new families and uncertainty over how to manage their settlement. Young people can be leaders in bridging the divide between cultural groups; it’s important young people’s voices are heard. Also important are partnerships between local government youth services, schools and School Focused Youth Service to boost school and community engagement amongst newly arrived young people.
* ***Independent transport*** – YACVic would add that compared to previous generations, fewer young people are getting their driving licenses and young people are starting to drive at a later age. In 2014, only 40% of 18-year-olds held a license, and only three-quarters of 24-year-olds held one.[[7]](#endnote-7) In consequence, youth services can expect to work with high numbers of young people who don’t have their own transportation, and who may be dealing with employment disadvantage as a result (see the work of the Brotherhood of St Lawrence).[[8]](#endnote-8) Services will continue to field requests to help young people become mobile – e.g. through the over-subscribed L2P driver-mentor program.

Alongside these social changes, participants also identified a number of changes in policy development and sector reform which seemed likely to impact on service delivery to young people. These include:

* ***Funding shortages for generalist youth work***

A strong message we received during our consultations was the need for well-trained generalist youth workers right around Victoria. The shortage of dedicated funding for youth worker roles is an ongoing concern. (The problem may well intensify if some local governments seek to offset the impacts of rate-capping by cutting back their youth service provision.)

Participants at our Warrnambool consultation observed that some communities were still feeling the effects of the loss of the Youth Connections program, where workers had strong generalist skills and could support young people in flexible, wrap-around ways. Additional concerns were raised that youth work is at risk of being entirely absorbed into ‘community work’ or ‘child and family work’ in some communities.

* ***Youth justice***

Major changes to the youth justice system will include the implementation of the recommendations of the Ogloff / Armytage youth justice review, as well as any changes following the recent parliamentary inquiry into youth justice centres (still to be released). The space will also be transformed by the building of a large new youth prison with more specialist capacity. The issue of youth offending is prominent in politics and the media, and seems likely to remain that way. Many participants at our consultations were worried about the likelihood of more punitive, ‘tough on crime’ approaches in the future, and the pressure that will be placed on their services to respond. Participants also stressed the need to stop the ‘pipeline’ between child protection and youth justice, and to address the shortage of culturally appropriate services for young people in the justice system

* ***Competitive tendering for community services***

Participants at our consultations raised concerns about the trend of competitive tendering for community service provision. Forcing services to compete for (usually short-term) funding, while also expecting them to collaborate closely together, is a highly problematic approach.

Furthermore, the competitive tendering model has tended to favour large-scale organisations which are able to work on a business model, and which have whole teams dedicated to leveraging grants and other resources. In some communities, this has led to services being delivered by large, ‘mainstream’ providers which were not designed to work specifically with young people. Some of these services do not work effectively in rural areas, even when contracted to operate ‘state-wide’. Smaller, local, specialised services, including youth-specific services, find it hard to compete for contracts, which in turn makes it harder for vulnerable young people to access local interventions which are tailored to their needs.

* ***New technologies impacting on our sector***

Youth services are increasingly expected to maintain a strong, innovative online presence in order to work effectively with young people. Some services connect young people with a range of ways to access after-hours / offsite support through digital means. Participants gave examples of mental health apps, apps to encourage coping strategies for young people experiencing stress or sadness, and Askizzy.org.au, an app which guides young people through various supports available across areas like housing, Centrelink, money, health and recreation. Such online options can be convenient for young people seeking support after hours. They also provide young people with a non-threatening ‘toe in’ option if they are not yet confident to approach services in person.

However, there are a number of risks and drawbacks to expecting youth services to provide online supports. These supports are not free or simple to provide, and there are risks concerning the collection and storage of data. Some workplaces (for example, local government) can be quite risk-averse and reluctant to permit youth services to extend their online reach.

Meanwhile, rural and regional stakeholders regularly warn us about the dangers of promoting online models when some communities have poor or unreliable internet connection, and when there is a desperate need for tangible, in-person supports.

Furthermore, some participants observed that new technologies are making youth workers ‘connectable’ 24 hours a day – this brings its own problems. Some participants commented that people increasingly expect to be able to access help for any issue immediately, through any service. This carries a risk of harmful outcomes, miscommunication, and worker burnout.

There needs to be clarity about when and how young people can contact a service, what sort of responses they can expect to receive, and where to go in the mean time. Expectations should be reasonable in light of workers’ time and resourcing.

* ***Impacts of the NDIS***

Participants noted the great potential of the NDIS model to support better outcomes for young people. However, they added that it is critical young people can access appropriate advocacy and support to take full advantage of this new model. Carers alone cannot always advocate adequately for vulnerable young people.

Participants also raised concerns about the risk that young people with mental illness may fall between the cracks of the system if they do not access the NDIS and can no longer access adequate community-based services.

Some participants also wondered how the NDIS would play out in rurally isolated communities, where there are few services and high delivery costs.

* ***Tenants’ rights***

Recently we have seen legislative changes to further protect the rights of tenants. Participants at our consultations felt this was a positive sign and waited to see how it would progress in practice.

* ***Punitive approaches to youth un(der)employment***

While this issue was not raised by participants at our consultations, YACVic would add that harsh policies towards young job-seekers continue to be intermittently proposed, and sometimes adopted, at a Commonwealth level. This can leave young people vulnerable to losing adequate income support and depending on youth services for assistance.

***Suggested steps for the industry plan:***

6. Incorporate the above social, economic, technological and political issues within the scope of the industry plan. YACVic would like to see particular attention paid to the need to address competitive, short-term funding cycles; the need for trained, supported youth workers right around the state; the need for funding models which take into account the real costs of rural service delivery; the need for expert, youth-specific services in areas like education re-engagement and mental health; and the need for innovative, long-term planning to provide meaningful jobs and career opportunities for young people.

**Our next generation of community services workers**

During our consultations, we encouraged the participants to reflect on young people not only as community members and clients, but also as the current and future workforce of the community services industry. We asked them what strengths they felt young people would bring to the sector over the next decade, and what challenges young workers are likely to face.

Services were enthusiastic in their praise for their young workers and the strengths these workers are bringing to the sector. The advantages of young workers include:

* They bring strong values, enthusiasm, resilience, optimism and inclusive policies and practices to their work.
* As ‘digital natives’, they have high levels of technological proficiency and adaptability.
* They can draw on common life experiences to form positive relationships with young clients.
* Many are skilled at ‘networking’ their programs and services right across the community, including engaging non-traditional stakeholders such as philanthropy and business.
* They are willing to disrupt the sector and work creatively, injecting fresh new ideas and approaches.
* Because career pathways are no longer linear, they often come to the community sector with a multitude of skills and experiences.

At the same time, however, providers of youth services identified a number of areas where their young workers (current and future) seemed likely to need further support. Key concerns included the following:

* Many youth work students and aspiring youth workers are young people (and older people) who have a lived experience of disadvantage, and who wish to give back to the community and help other young people in similar circumstances. These young people can make excellent workers, due to their passion and optimism, their experience of the service system from both sides, and their ability to connect with clients. However, it is vital that they are supported to develop appropriate skills, professionalism and qualifications, and that they receive career mentoring and (if necessary) support to manage their own experiences of trauma. As one participant at our consultation put it, ‘Wanting to “do good” is not enough!’
* Unfortunately, not all aspiring youth workers have received appropriate training and support. Due to the proliferation of VET providers, and the very loose understandings of ‘youth work’ that exist in the community, some young people keen to work in the sector do not have a clear understanding of what the work involves and how demanding it can be. Some have obtained their qualifications through providers which are not industry-recognised, including providers which operate entirely online. As such, these young people are isolated, their drop-out rates are high, and they struggle to find work with reputable services.
* Some newly-arrived young people need support to strengthen their English language skills and their knowledge of the sector before they can successfully qualify as youth workers.
* Ultimately, the shortage of long-term, well-funded roles within the youth services sector is a barrier to engaging and keeping excellent young workers. This is a particular concern in rural communities, where services are scarce.

***Suggested steps for the industry plan:***

7. When planning for the ‘Workforce of the Future’, reflect on the particular strengths and needs of young workers entering the industry over the next decade, and the steps needed to support them. (See also below under ‘Building a strong youth services sector’.)

**Our future leaders of the community services sector**

We asked participants at our consultations what sort of skills, philosophy and supports our CEOs, senior managers and board members would need over the next ten years, to ensure that they are leading our services to deliver strong, meaningful outcomes for young people.

Participants stated that we need leaders with a strong humanistic approach and a real understanding of human rights, youth work, and social/emotional health. They should also have a genuine commitment to appropriately recruiting, training, nurturing and supporting young workers with lived experience of disadvantage and service use. (YACVic would add that organisational leaders should have a commitment to youth service delivery according to the *Code of Ethical Practice*.)

At present, this is not always the case. Many youth services operate within much broader service settings, where there is no guarantee their role will be understood or valued by those higher up. At the same time, some CEOs and senior managers in generalist service settings (for example, local government) have come to their role via pathways such as finance or HR. They did not necessarily set out to manage youth services, and their connection to the youth sector may not be strong.

Meanwhile, some other services, such as Neighbourhood Houses, take their direction from boards of volunteers, who come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Not all of them are familiar with youth work as a discipline, or with the value of specific services for young people.

Participants identified a number of skills and capacities they would like to see in the future leaders of their sector. These included:

* Diverse skills sets and expertise in youth work, advocacy, liaison, community development and economic development.
* An ability to ‘network’ and galvanise support beyond our typical stakeholders, including with media and business.
* CEOs, senior managers and Board member from diverse backgrounds, including young people.

To achieve this end, participants urged that youth workers be supported to grow and ‘age’ in the sector, to build expertise over several decades. This would require leadership training and structured mentoring over the course of a worker’s career, beginning when they are young or junior. It would also require ensuring that our sector is a desirable and rewarding place to build a career, to stop the loss of great workers to other sectors.

***Suggested steps for the industry plan:***

8. Support youth workers and the broader youth services sector to promote the value of what they deliver to leaders of their organisations, including CEOs, senior management and boards of governance.

9. Recognise the need to train, mentor and nurture the next generation of community services leaders, with a focus on promoting leaders with a background in youth work and community service delivery, a commitment to human rights and the *Code of Ethical Practice*, and diverse and relevant skill sets.

**Building a strong youth services sector**

We asked participants what changes would be necessary over the next ten years, to build a youth services sector that delivers the best possible results for young people, and provides the best possible working environment and career path for young workers especially. Key responses were as follows:

* **Funding and contracting – what’s needed:**
* A move away from short-term funding cycles and towards interventions that are funded for at least three years at a time. This should be accompanied by a move away from casual and contract work, an emphasis on long-term or permanent contracts, improved pay and conditions, and proper indexing of youth programs and wages, to reflect the demanding nature of the services provided. Pay and conditions should be more consistent across the sector.
* Strong, state-wide funding for generalist youth workers, and, where needed, for youth work positions designed to work specifically with vulnerable cohorts.
* More entry-level positions and structured entry points into the sector.
* A move away from competitive tendering approaches which hinder collaboration and best practice care for vulnerable people.
* Funding models which reflect the real costs of rural service delivery.
* Aboriginal-specific youth work interventions, especially for communities experiencing rural isolation and/or intergenerational poverty, child removal and family violence.
* **Education, training and support for workers – what’s needed:**
* Strong, relevant baseline qualifications for youth workers, delivered by high quality providers and teachers with recent, relevant experience in the field.
* Access to affordable, high quality vocational education and training for community services workers in rural and regional areas especially.
* Protection of vulnerable young people from unscrupulous and inappropriate VET providers.
* Scholarships, traineeships and education support for youth workers who have a lived experience of disadvantage.
* More ‘real life’ workforce experience for youth work students.
* More volunteering and ‘taster’ opportunities for young people interested in working in the sector – as long as these improve young people’s understanding of youth work, help young people to build real skills and capacities, and lead to jobs later on.
* High quality mentoring, supervision, role modelling and career coaching for young workers from older experts, and better promotion of self-care.
* More and better opportunities for inter-agency networking (not just forums and conferences), including at a state-wide level.
* High quality clinical and group supervision and study leave for relevant workers.
* **Recognition of the sector – what’s needed:**
* Accurate understanding in the community of what youth workers do, the value they contribute, the demands and challenges of the work, and the skills and qualifications needed to build a career in youth work. To this end, more work is needed to engage an array of community stakeholders and lift the profile of youth work.
* Strong bipartisan commitment to youth work and other youth-specific service provision at a state and local government level, backed up by legislation where appropriate.
* Representation of community services on an industry training advisory board, as is already the case in other Australian states.
* Acknowledge the fact that the youth services sector has a majority female workforce and that this is a key reason why it tends to be undervalued, underfunded and underpaid. Engage with mechanisms such as Victoria’s Gender Equality Plan to address this as an equity/discrimination issue.
* Recognise and resource the building of trusting, long-term relationships with young people as a critical aspect of youth work. This is not only vital to ensuring positive outcomes for young people, it is also crucial to engaging and retaining a high quality workforce. Youth workers reflect that their favourite part of the job is working with young people and seeing young people develop skills, confidence and independence over time. Youth workers who have to spend unreasonable time on administration or short-term interventions are less likely to stay in the field.
* Recognise and resource advocacy as a key part of what youth workers do. Youth workers not only advocate on behalf of young people, they also strengthen communities by building good relationships between the generations, and by promoting young people’s positive contributions.

***Suggested steps for the industry plan:***

10. Incorporate the above suggested directions into the industry plan.

**Person-centred, place-based, outcomes-focused?**

**How should youth services function in the future?**

Participants at our consultations agreed that services should be focused on the needs of the young person and able to ensure ‘wrap around’ support. Indeed, there was a strong sense that this is what high-quality youth services already provide, and that trained youth workers are particularly well suited to providing ‘person centred’ support.

We asked participants what other skills workers needed in order to provide ‘person centred’ support for young people. In response, participants emphasised that workers need the time, skills and flexibility to build good rapport and strong, trusting, long-term relationships with young people, backed up by good knowledge of the local community. Bouncing young people between multiple providers was felt to be the opposite of ‘person centred’ work. Workers also need support to work closely with individuals without burning out.

Participants also noted that ‘person centred’ work must be flexible enough to include working with young people’s families and recognising their social context.

However, there was some push-back against the notion that ‘person centred’ work is the opposite to ‘program centred’ work. Many participants felt this was a false dichotomy. They pointed out that appealing, well-designed programs in areas like art and recreation can be the ‘hook’ that gets vulnerable young people into a service, helping them to start building rapport with youth workers and connect to other, more individualised supports. Young people are not always comfortable approaching a service with a list of their personal needs; a non-threatening, youth-friendly program can provide them with an accessible point of entry.

Participants also pointed out the value of youth-led organisations, and the value of programs that support small groups of young people to lead their own community advocacy and design and run their own local projects. Shifting the sector entirely away from program-based work would seem to pose a risk to these often valuable interventions.

One participant also noted that ‘person centred’ work is problematic in the youth services sector because young people are not always in a position to lead their own decision-making, due to their young age (as young as 12) and due to requirements around mandatory reporting and parental / carer permission. While youth work strongly supports young people to make informed choices, there are legal, organisational and practical limitations to this. When attempting to work in a ‘person centred’ way, youth service workers must navigate a difficult course between supporting the young person to develop independence, and complying with requirements that limit the young person’s autonomy.

Meanwhile, participants were strongly in favour of ‘place-based’ approaches to working with young people. They stressed that this should involve engaging young people in local decision-making, and funding programs which can be flexible to local needs. There is no one, standard intervention for young people.

Several participants from rural areas argued that ‘place-based’ service delivery is hard to achieve as long as services for young people are contracted to large, ‘mainstream’ providers based in Melbourne or regional cities. These rural participants asserted that services from out of town often did not have a deep understanding of local strengths or needs, or a real commitment to local partnerships. Generic service delivery and fly-in/fly-out models often do not deliver the best results for vulnerable young people.

The outcomes of youth work interventions can be major and sometimes life-saving. However, they are notoriously difficult to measure and communicate through standardised, quantitative approaches. Impacts are not always immediate – part of the justification for working with young people is ‘it will pay off later’ – and a lot of progress is specific to the individual: for example, the young person whose conduct in school improves, or who starts getting along better with their family or desisting from anti-social behaviour and crime.

Participants felt they would be better able to show the outcomes of their work if they had more capacity to represent individualised and qualitative changes, and if they could operate and evaluate their work over (say) a 10-year period, to chart how young people’s lives change in the long term. Participants also wanted the flexibility and resourcing to work with young people across a broader range of indicators and measure the outcomes achieved. At present, a service might be funded to (for example) secure housing for a homeless young person, but workers find themselves called upon to support the young person across many other indicators too, due to their proximity to the young person’s whole life. But the additional assistance they might provide is not necessarily resourced or measured at present.

One participant contrasted this frustrating situation with the more comprehensive supports provided to very young children through ‘cradle-to-kinder’ programs. These models, which assist mothers and babies for the first four years of the child’s life across many different issues, show strong results over time.

Some participants added that our sector also needs the time and skills to measure and communicate all the unmet need – the young people we cannot adequately support. It is also important to record and communicate the additional work our services provide on top of what they are funded to do.

***Suggested steps for the industry plan:***

11. Support more youth work positions across Victoria, to enable youth workers with strong generalist skills to build trusting relationships with young people and support young people across a wide range of issues. This work should be backed by strong understanding of the local community.

12. Recognise that developing a ‘person centred’ approach requires workers to balance supporting the independent decision-making of young people with complex considerations around the young person’s legal autonomy, safety and wellbeing, as well as engaging young people’s families where appropriate. These demanding aspects of youth work must be recognised and resourced.

13. Recognise that ‘programs’ are not necessarily the antithesis of ‘person centred’ support. High quality youth programs, tailored to the needs of young participants, can provide a young person with an important pathway into a community service, and can help to build an individual’s skills, capacity, confidence and connections.

14. Recognise that place-based work should involve developing interventions which are flexible and suited to the changing needs of local young people.

15. Support locally-based interventions and the building of local skills, capacities and leadership. Where large, ‘mainstream’, metropolitan-based services are funded to begin operating in rural areas, there should be a clearer rationale as to why this is the best approach, and stronger expectations about their local expertise and local partnerships.

16. Support services and funding bodies to move towards a model where youth services can measure and communicate individualised and qualitative outcomes, support young people across a wider range of outcomes, operate and evaluate their work over a longer time period, and measure and communicate the additional contributions youth services make on top of their contracted work.

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7. YACVic estimate, based on data by RACV, 'Young adult licensing trends and travel modes', 2015 and ABS, 'Australian Demographic Statistics,' Sep 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Brotherhood of St Laurence, *U-Turn: The Transport Woes Of Australia’s Young Jobseekers*, November 2016 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)