



Youth Affairs  
Council Victoria

# Youth Policy 2016: Building Stronger Youth Engagement in Victoria

Response by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria

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## About YACVic

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc. (YACVic) is the peak body and leading policy advocate on young people's issues in Victoria. Our vision is for a Victorian community that values and provides opportunity, participation, justice and equity for all young people. We are an independent, not-for-profit organisation.

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## A new Youth Policy and Youth Engagement Charter

Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) welcomes the release of the Victorian Government's *Youth Policy: Building Stronger Youth Engagement in Victoria*.

We have long maintained that young people must be visible and active in policy making, program development and service reform, their priorities championed by a strong youth sector and Office for Youth. The Victorian Government's new policy represents a significant step forward. It is the result of an extensive consultation process undertaken in 2015, which involved over 2,000 young people from diverse backgrounds as well as submissions by numerous youth and community services.<sup>1</sup>

The Youth Policy introduces a range of new mechanisms through which young people will be able to engage with the Victorian Government and shape policy development and service reform. It undertakes to ensure quality youth engagement across government through the implementation of a new Youth Engagement Charter. The Youth Policy is accompanied by new funding for youth workers to support vulnerable young people via the Empower Youth initiative.

These are significant and ambitious undertakings by the Victorian Government, and YACVic looks forward to the opportunity to support their implementation.

We note that the Youth Policy is a substantially different document to the original 'What's Important to YOUTH?' discussion paper (2015). Many of these changes reflect feedback from young people and the youth sector, and demonstrate the Victorian Government's willingness to listen and respond.

For example, the new 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'* – reflects messages from young people and the youth sector that a vision should be strengths-based, inclusive, non-stigmatising and recognise young people's contributions to their communities. (As stated in our original submission, YACVic would have welcomed a commitment to young people's wellbeing and rights in the

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<sup>1</sup> YACVic's original submission is available [here](#).

vision too, but we recognise that these issues are addressed elsewhere in the Youth Policy.)

We also welcome the move away from the original discussion paper's dichotomy between 'most young people' who are 'doing well' and the relatively small numbers experiencing extreme disadvantage. Instead, the new Youth Policy outlines major issues affecting young people across our community, and recognises the need to engage with diverse young people in inclusive ways and combat marginalisation and disadvantage.

### **Youth participation, engagement and research**

The Youth Policy places young people themselves at the centre of policy development and program design. It promises new opportunities for young Victorians to work directly with the Victorian Government to identify issues of concern and design innovative solutions. There is a commitment to ensuring that a wide range of voices are heard, notably those of young people who have traditionally not been well included in mainstream consultation processes.

These mechanisms will include:

- An annual Youth Summit to bring together over 100 young people from across Victoria to identify and discuss issues of importance to them and their peers. The young people attending will be drawn from around the state and will include representatives from youth advisory / action groups which currently work within local governments and youth sector organisations. The young people at the Summit will develop a strategic plan and appoint an executive to form the Victorian Youth Congress.
- A Victorian Youth Congress – an advisory group of young people aged between 12 and 24, elected through the Youth Summit, to provide advice to the Victorian Government on new and priority issues for young people. The group will include representation of young Aboriginal people, young people from multicultural backgrounds, LGBTI young people, young people with a disability, and young

people living in rural, regional and metropolitan Victoria. A cabinet minister will attend key meetings of this group.

- An annual Victorian youth survey, to develop a strong evidence base to understand and address issues, trends and action areas of importance to young people. This survey will be developed in consultation with young people, and will use data from across government and community agencies.
- The Youth Barometer, which will gather qualitative data and insights from young people who may not necessarily engage in the annual youth survey. Non-government organisations will be supported to undertake in-depth consultations with particular groups of young people, including young people in out-of-home care, young people with the justice system, LGBTI young people, Aboriginal young people and young people from multicultural backgrounds.
- Social Policy Design Labs, to bring together youth sector representatives and young people from a range of backgrounds, to discuss key youth-focused issues, challenges, ideas and solutions.
- A symposium on co-design, bringing together young people, government and sector representatives to showcase best practice approaches to youth engagement, co-design and youth-led initiatives.
- Cross-government partnerships to strengthen the voices of young people from diverse backgrounds. There will be 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 to provide opportunities for young people from diverse backgrounds to advise government on key issues affecting them, including as service users. Similarly, there will be support for 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, to advise government on critical issues affecting them, including as service users.

- Redeveloping the Youth Central website, including design, structure and content, to make it more device-accessible and provide an interactive platform for young people to engage in direct dialogue with government.

If appropriately supported and implemented, these new initiatives will greatly increase young people's engagement with policy development and program design, and ensure Victorian Government policies and programs are informed by substantial new data and analysis.

We look forward to learning more about the scope of these new initiatives and how they will be resourced and structured. In particular, we would encourage further discussion with young people and the youth sector about the following issues.

### **An empowering approach to youth engagement**

One of the strengths of the Youth Policy is its undertaking to engage with young people on different levels and through different mechanisms. Some young people will be happy to engage with government through mechanisms which are relatively simple, 'one-off' and consultative, for example an online youth survey. Others will be seeking more active, sustained and 'two-way' relationships with government. These young people, in particular, are likely to be looking for engagement opportunities which also enable them to build skills and networks, and to see clear outcomes from their work.

The Youth Policy has evidently been shaped by a strong appreciation of good principles of youth engagement. However, from our reading of the approaches proposed for the Youth Summit, Youth Congress and Youth Barometer, we suggest there is a risk that these might become purely 'advisory' mechanisms through which young people feed ideas 'up' to government.

To guard against this, it will be important for the Victorian Government to seek advice from the youth sector and young people on approaches to active, 'two-way' youth participation. Approaches adopted by some organisations include:

- Resourcing committees of young people to undertake their own projects and events, with independent outcomes besides the provision of ‘advice’ to adults.
- Providing young people who take part in your youth engagement mechanisms with training in relevant areas. These might include media skills, group facilitation, research and interviewing, public speaking, advocacy to government, or wellbeing and self-care.
- Supporting young people to take part in overseeing and allocating youth engagement grants. (For example, could there be a role for the Youth Congress in feeding into the grant rounds administered through the Office for Youth?)
- Training young people to lead consultation sessions with other young people and adults – e.g. through the Youth Policy Design Labs or service co-design symposium.
- Employing young people to undertake specific pieces of work, for example redesigning a website or producing promotional photos, artwork or videos.
- Designing large-scale events like the Youth Summit to include significant participation by youth-led organisations, school principals, and / or representatives from government and the youth sector, with an emphasis on enabling young people to build relationships with them and ‘pitch’ proposals for future work to them.
- Ensuring that youth engagement mechanisms (especially those seeking to involve young people who have not provided advice to government before) are tailored to the interests of those young people and provide opportunities for them to have fun, make friends, learn new skills, and / or contribute something to their communities. This should take place in an environment which is welcoming and accessible, and where the young people have time to build relationships with each other and with the adults running the event.
- Working with young people to design and support models for diverse representation. For instance, the Youth Policy proposes that members of the Youth Congress will be elected by Summit participants but will also be



representative of a wide range of community cohorts. Here, work will be needed to design this structure and process, work with relevant youth organisations (who would presumably be expected to support young people to take part), and engage with young participants in the Summit and Congress about why diverse representation is important and how to make it work.

The Youth Policy commits to collecting and evaluating further evidence about different approaches to youth participation and engagement. In 2013, YACVic was contracted by the Victorian Government to produce a guide to youth engagement for young people and services, *Yerp*, and we would welcome the opportunity to work further with the Victorian Government in this space.

Another potential challenge will be pinpointing which ideas, problems and solutions young people will be enabled to address through the different new mechanisms. At present the Youth Policy seems to imply that the main ways young people will feed into *generalist* government priority setting will be via the Annual Survey and Youth Central, while the Youth Summit, Young Congress, Social Policy Design Labs and Capacity Building will address *youth-focused* policy, program and service design issues.

However, there are some significant issues which young people may potentially wish to address in depth through the Summit and Congress which are not traditionally seen as ‘youth-focused’, such as environmental policy, family violence or public transport. We trust that the new mechanisms developed through the Youth Policy will be flexible and responsive enough to enable young people to address what they consider to be core issues affecting their communities, and not limit them to traditional ‘youth’ issues such as education, recreation and youth service usage.

### **Appropriate resourcing and planning**

The youth engagement mechanisms proposed through the Youth Policy are ambitious and have potential for significant impact. To this end, appropriate resourcing will be needed.

For example, large-scale youth summits tend to require several months' planning, at least one month of intensive work prior to the event, and the involvement of a significant number of workers and volunteers on the day. Meanwhile a youth council necessitates regular meetings, relationship building and appropriate assistance for young people in relation to transport and accessibility. A council model also requires individual support for young people who may lack experience and confidence, collaboration with youth organisations who are expected to send representatives to this committee, and additional items such as camps, training sessions and group preparation prior to ministerial meetings.

We await details on how such work will be resourced, and whether the Victorian Government will be seeking to run all these projects directly within the Office for Youth, or whether they wish to engage youth sector providers to undertake some of the planning / design or implementation.

It is also important to note that a number of existing youth organisations have developed their own longstanding and well-regarded models for youth policy events, such as the VicSRC annual student Congress, the YMCA Youth Parliament, the Koorie Youth Council's annual Koorie Youth Summit, the events held by the Rural Youth Ambassadors Program (Country Education Project), the Nexus Australia Youth Summit for young philanthropists and social entrepreneurs, and the Foundation for Young Australians' Unleashed Festival for young people leading social change, as well as the Victorian Schools' Parliamentary Conventions.

It will be important for the Victorian Government to work with the providers of these events to ensure that government is being guided by the expertise of these youth organisations, while also appropriately recognising and respecting these organisations' independent achievements and intellectual property. One possible approach might be for the Victorian Government to formally engage and resource relevant youth organisations to work with government to develop a targeted, distinctive and appealing model for mechanisms like the Youth Summit.

Part of this work should involve identifying 'gaps' in existing large-scale events for young people, which a new Victorian Youth Summit might address, rather than

replicating or encroaching on existing work. The Youth Policy seems to suggest that one role for the Summit might be to bring together representatives from different existing youth bodies and networks, to facilitate more cooperative work between them. This might well be a welcome approach, but further consultation with the relevant youth organisations and young people is needed to confirm this.

YACVic would be happy to support such a process.

### **A cross-government approach**

Another welcome aspect of the Youth Policy is its commitment to a cross-government approach, feeding young people's ideas into policy development across a range of areas. To this end, the policy states that different cabinet ministers will attend relevant meetings with the Youth Congress, that a new Youth Interdepartmental Committee will be established to oversee the implementation of the Youth Policy and ensure a coordinated approach, and that 'cross-government partnerships' will be developed to support the engagement of young people from diverse backgrounds. These undertakings are very positive.

However, historically there have been significant challenges in engaging different areas of government with young people and the youth sector. To achieve meaningful cultural change, it is important that the Youth Engagement Charter is adopted, supported and promoted across government. As the Youth Policy has nominated its policy priority areas as education, employment and mental health (with additional focus areas including family violence, housing, transport, rural and regional development, local government, and support for young people from a diversity of cultures, genders and sexualities), it is especially important that the Youth Charter is adopted across the relevant areas of the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Education and Training, Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources, and Department of Premier and Cabinet.

We suggest that this progress might be facilitated by different government departments engaging in the following:

- A public ‘sign-on’ to the Youth Engagement Charter.
- Incorporation of the principles and youth engagement mechanisms of the Youth Policy into major areas of policy reform as listed in the Youth Policy, including Education State planning, employment stimulation, the 10 Year Mental Health Plan, Roadmap for Reform, and the response to the Royal Commission into Family Violence. These areas of policy reform should be represented on the Youth Interdepartmental Committee.
- Departmental reporting requirements in relation to the Youth Engagement Charter.
- Incorporation of the Youth Engagement Charter into departmental strategic planning.
- Structured opportunities for senior public servants to engage directly with young people via the Youth Summit and Youth Congress.
- Support for ‘local champions’ of youth engagement in different departments.
- Incorporation of the principles and approaches of the Youth Engagement Charter into policy work and allocation of relevant grants rounds.

The Office for Youth must be empowered to play a central role in leading these changes.

We note that the Victorian Government has hosted a youth interdepartmental committee in the past. One valuable aspect of this model was that it welcomed presentations and input from the youth sector, including YACVic, the Centre for Multicultural Youth, and representatives from the old Regional Youth Affairs Networks. This allowed for a valuable exchanges of ideas, information and strategic advice. We trust that the new Youth Interdepartmental Committee will include a similar space for youth sector contributions.

YACVic would also reflect that in order for a new Youth Interdepartmental Committee to operate effectively, it will need high-level membership with appropriate decision-making powers.

## Original, relevant and accessible new research

The Youth Survey, Youth Barometer and Social Policy Design Labs will gather and analyse significant new information about young people's priorities, concerns, needs and ideas. Related information will presumably also be recorded and publicised from the Youth Summit. This will ensure a strengthened evidence base for youth policy and program development. YACVic welcomes this focus on data gathering and analysis.

It would be ideal if young people involved in mechanisms like the Youth Congress were supported to play an active role in designing, promoting and interpreting this research – and the Youth Policy seems to suggest that such an approach will be supported.

Further planning and consultation will be needed to maximise the originality and impact of this research. For example, we would assume that one role of the research will be to address gaps in youth-specific knowledge in relation to the Victorian Government's key policy priority areas, such as family violence, vocational education, mental health and school engagement. For example, despite the significant *On Track* research into the pathways of Year 12 graduates, we still know comparatively little about the long-term pathways, aspirations and qualitative insights of early school leavers in Victoria. And at a time of significant reform to disability supports, it is concerning (as the Youth Disability Advocacy Service found in their submission to 'What's Important to YOUTH?') that there is very little high-quality research into the concerns, aspirations and solutions offered by young people with disabilities – researchers have been far more likely to consult with these young people's parents, teachers and service providers.<sup>2</sup> New research into such 'gap' areas could make a powerful contribution to policy development.

Here, it will be important to scope existing studies to clarify the current knowledge base and identify significant gaps in data and analysis. Relevant pieces of research would include the annual *Mission Australia Youth Survey*, the *Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth*, the *Foundation for Young Australians' New Work Order, Report Card 2016* and *How Young People Are Faring* report, the *Reach Foundation's Hopes & Dreams* report on young

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<sup>2</sup> Youth Disability Advocacy Service, 'What's Important to YOUTH', 2015, <http://www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au/ngo-reports-youth-policy-consultation>

people's aspirations, and the data published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Victorian Government's *On Track*, *State of Victoria's Children* and *Victorian Training Market Reports*. Research bodies which should be consulted include the Youth Research Centre (University of Melbourne), the Victoria Institute (Victoria University), the Dusseldorp Forum and VicHealth, as well as Local Learning and Employment Networks and local government youth services, who collate and analyse significant data through their local youth surveys and environmental scans.

The Youth Policy anticipates that community-based organisations will play a significant role in supporting or leading this research, notably through the Youth Barometer. However, some of our stakeholders who have undertaken research with young people in the past have found the process of working with DHHS on youth research quite arduous and alienating, mostly in relation to ethics clearance. While we fully appreciate the need for research to be ethical and age-appropriate, we also note that ethics requirements which are excessively detailed and complex can be unfeasible for community-based youth organisations to navigate without adequate support, and may result in young people's voices being silenced because working with them becomes 'too hard'. We hope that one positive outcome of the Youth Engagement Charter might be to make research collaborations between DHHS and appropriate youth organisations more accessible and straightforward – especially when the youth organisations in question have been invited or endorsed by the Victorian Government to undertake generalist consultations with young people.

For all this new research to be meaningful and useful, it is essential that the findings are conveyed in accessible ways to young people and the youth services sector. It will also be important to work with young people (for example, members of the Youth Congress) to discuss how the findings of this research might be shared with the wider community, to promote greater understanding of young people's circumstances, priorities and aims, and to combat misinformation and discrimination.

### **Evaluation of the Youth Policy**

It is positive to hear that a detailed outcomes framework for the Youth Policy will be developed in consultation with young people, with indicators and measures specific to

each action area and flagship project. The youth engagement outcomes of the Youth Policy will be conveyed via a Report Card, which will be available on Youth Central and promoted through social media.

To inform this evaluation process, it might be valuable to bring together young people, youth services and interdepartmental representatives to review how the policy is tracking and connecting to different areas of work.

We submit that it might also be useful to articulate more clearly how the various grants programs funded through the Victorian Government Office for Youth – notably Engage!, FReeZA and the new Empower Youth initiative – connect to and progress the Youth Policy, and how Youth Policy priorities will inform the allocation and implementation of such grants in the future.

In recent years there was a separation between policy and program development in the Office for Youth, which unfortunately led to uncertainty in the youth sector about the relationship between the two areas. This would seem an optimal time to clarify and strengthen this relationship.

### **New funding for youth support**

The release of the Youth Policy was accompanied by a welcome commitment of \$4 million over three years in new funding for the Empower Youth initiative. This funding will be available to local governments and not-for-profit organisations to engage youth workers to support disadvantaged young people to strengthen their health and wellbeing, community participation, education and training outcomes, and employment pathways.

The Empower Youth program will target communities experiencing high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, including youth unemployment, youth offending, low educational engagement and poor health or mental wellbeing indicators. Each funded organisation must work with at least 50 young people per year (for the maximum funding of \$570,000 the organisation must work with 100+ young people). Young people themselves must be engaged in the design and development of both the program itself

and their own aspirational plans, which will identify goals and appropriate support in the areas of health and wellbeing, community participation, education/training, and employment.

The youth workers employed through Empower Youth will provide outreach and intensive, coordinated support for young people, and will broker relevant local partnerships. They must work collaboratively with other stakeholders, including schools, training providers, local government, and community and health organisations.

YACVic applauds this new investment in generalist youth work, the first such new commitment to be funded by a Victorian Government for several years. It will make a significant difference to the lives of vulnerable young people.

We would encourage further discussion about which communities will be prioritised for Empower Youth funding. The information currently available about Empower Youth names the 'priority areas' as Ballarat, Frankston, Hume, Brimbank, Greater Geelong, LaTrobe, Casey, Greater Dandenong, Whittlesea, and Wyndham, while implying that other communities may also be eligible. We suggest that further communication with the youth sector is needed to clarify exactly how priority communities are identified – while the LGAs listed certainly contain high levels of disadvantage, so do a number of other Victorian communities – and whether or not it is worthwhile for services in other LGAs to apply for Empower Youth funding. YACVic is already receiving such queries from interested youth services.

In particular, it would be valuable to make Empower Youth funding available to rural communities where the numbers of young people experiencing disadvantage are relatively low (due to a small local population) but where young people face significant and demonstrated barriers to educational attainment, service access and social / cultural connections.

It might also be useful to make Empower Youth funding available for projects which assist a particular group of young people experiencing support needs who may be living across different geographical areas – i.e. projects which support young people



based on their community cohort rather than just their geographical location. For example, YACVic has supported calls by the Koorie Youth Council for greater investment in Koorie youth worker roles to assist Aboriginal young people with a range of needs, circumstances and backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

### **The role of the youth services sector**

Youth services provide a wide range of vital supports to young people, and are a rich source of data, qualitative insights and strategic advice. We welcome the Youth Policy's initial articulation of how youth services will be engaged in the development, implementation and evaluation of this policy.

The Youth Policy proposes to engage with services which support young people in several ways, notably through:

- Participation of these services in a sector advisory group comprising representatives from the youth and community sectors, to support the implementation and evaluation of the Youth Policy and advise on youth issues.
- Participation of youth services in Social Policy Design Labs, a symposium on service co-design, and capacity-building activities to share good practices in youth engagement.
- A leading role for youth services in the Youth Barometer, where not-for-profit organisations will be selected and supported to consult on youth policy issues with specific groups of young people, including young people in out-of-home care, young people with the justice system, LGBTI young people, Aboriginal young people and young people from multicultural backgrounds.

For several years, the youth sector has had very few regular, supported opportunities to provide strategic and policy advice to government, or to develop shared, evidence-based policy positions and good practice with each other across the state. This problem

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<sup>3</sup> See Koorie Youth Council, 'Victorian Government Youth Policy – What's Important to Youth – Koorie Youth Council Final Report,' 2015, <http://www.yacvic.org.au/policy-publications/publications-listed-by-policy-area/30-indigenous-issues/630-victorian-government-youth-policy-what-s-important-to-youth-koorie-youth-council-final-report>

has been especially acute since the cessation of the Regional Youth Affairs Networks (RYANs) in 2013.

The shortage of opportunities for sector-government discussion and collaboration continues to be raised by YACVic's stakeholders as a serious concern for the youth sector. This concern was raised repeatedly during the ten local government youth services forums which YACVic hosted in 2015. During 2014, YACVic also undertook a detailed piece of work to advise the previous Victorian Government on what form of sector engagement might replace the RYANs – [this work](#) included eleven sector consultation sessions and a youth sector survey.<sup>4</sup>

We would be happy to provide further advice to government in relation to this work.

Youth services are eager to see a new model for sector-government communication and collaboration developed, and will have high expectations of what can be achieved through the promised sector advisory group and consultative mechanisms. We suggest that any new partnerships between the youth sector and the Victorian Government should include the following elements, which were articulated by the youth sector during our above-mentioned consultations in 2014-15:

- Strong, shared agreements between government and youth sector stakeholders concerning key problems to be addressed, desired outcomes and KPIs, evaluation processes, and resources to be committed.
- Clear, effective, respectful communication between services and government.
- A diverse and targeted membership with decision-making powers.
- Accurate, accessible, shared data, and support to build relationships with research partners.

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<sup>4</sup> See YACVic, 'Final report of LGA Youth Services Forums 2014-15,' 2015, <http://www.yacvic.org.au/policy-publications/publications-listed-by-policy-area/114-local-government> and 'Youth Service Sector Participation in Local Area Policy and Planning,' 2014, <http://www.yacvic.org.au/policy-publications/publications-listed-by-policy-area/46-youth-and-community-sector-information-funding-and-sustainability/517-youth-service-sector-participation-in-local-area-policy-and-planning>

- Meaningful engagement with work already undertaken by youth sector brokerage bodies, notably the Local Learning and Employment Networks, the School Focused Youth Service, and local government youth development units.
- Opportunities for the sector to plan strategic responses to new laws, policies and plans, share findings and solutions, identify policy concerns, and build relationships with ministers and senior departmental staff.
- Adequate funding for coordination and data-gathering.

It is also relevant to consider the capacity of youth services and other community services to take part in the Youth Policy's promised consultative and advisory mechanisms. In particular, we must consider how the funding, structures and reporting requirements of community-based services may or may not facilitate them to take part in such valuable new work. When the Victorian Government consults with the sector on co-design of services and good practices in youth engagement, these structural issues should be part of the discussion. Services which are reliant on short-term funding, or which work to very prescriptive requirements, may struggle to engage with young people partly because they believe their circumstances do not allow for it.

### **Age range of young people for Youth Policy and Empower Youth grants**

As in our original submission to 'What's Important to YOUTh?', YACVic would dispute the Youth Policy's restriction of the 'youth' age range to 12-24. Traditionally the youth sector has worked with young people up to *and including* the age of 25. We do not support reducing the numbers of young people who can access engagement opportunities and support services.

The information currently available about the Empower Youth grants does not specify the age range of the young people who can be involved. We would encourage the adoption of 12-25 as the age range for Empower Youth; this has been the traditional age range for the Victorian Government's FReeZA and Engage! grants.

YACVic commends the Victorian Government again on the development of the Youth Policy, and looks forward to opportunities to work further with government and the sector on the development, implementation and evaluation of this policy. For further information, please contact YACVic Policy Manager Jessie Mitchell, on 9267 3722 or [policy@yacvic.org.au](mailto:policy@yacvic.org.au)