



Victorian Aboriginal
Children & Young
People's Alliance

Submission to the Victorian Youth Strategy

Introduction

The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (the Alliance) welcomes the development of a Victorian Youth Strategy, and the opportunity to provide a submission on behalf of our members.

As an alliance of 15 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations from across Victoria, we play a crucial role in driving change to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. Each of our members are authorized to deliver child and family services, with a deep understanding of the needs of their communities and young people.

It is essential a Youth Strategy take into consideration the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Aboriginal communities and be adaptable to the everchanging landscape that lies ahead. Many of the complex issues already disproportionately affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people have been exacerbated by COVID-19. Our members have seen an increase in service demand throughout the pandemic, especially in child and family services, greater emphasising the importance of a Youth Strategy that comprehensively captures and projects the voices of Aboriginal young people and their communities.

Recommendations

- Aboriginal culture and expertise, with an emphasis on self-determination and community control, is valued and prioritised at all phases of a Youth Strategy's design, implementation, and review
- The Department of Premier and Cabinet draws on existing mechanisms and committees to create equitable opportunities to hear the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, embedding them in governance and decision making
- A commitment to action the recommendations of the *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System* in a Youth Strategy, with those recommendations relating directly to Aboriginal children and young people to be designed and implemented with ACCOs
- A Victorian Youth Strategy adopts a whole of Government approach, aligning with existing Government frameworks, strategies, and commitments, most pertinently *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir*, *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework*, *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020-2030* and *the Victorian LGBTIQ+ Strategy*

Hear Our Voice

A Victorian Youth Strategy should include the voices and ideas of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people at every phase. There needs to be opportunities for input beyond the design phase, with Aboriginal voices and ideas to be echoed throughout the implementation and monitoring of the strategy. This requires targeted systems and processes to ensure there are numerous and equitable opportunities for Aboriginal young people with lived experience to be heard.

Our young people are resilient, intuitive, and strong in their culture and sense of community. It is important, their voice be heard proportionate to the issues affecting them. We know that Aboriginal young people are overrepresented in the out-of-home care and youth justice systems. It is often that our young people know these systems better than anyone and can contribute a wealth of ideas, solutions and systemic changes derived from their lived experiences.

Ensuring Aboriginal culture and ways of knowing and doing are included in each stage of the strategy's development and implementation is critical. Valuing and prioritising culture and Aboriginal expertise will be one of the strongest protective factors we can offer our young people at a strategic and policy level. Including the voices of Aboriginal young people, Elders, Community leaders and ACCOs at every opportunity will be crucial to this.

A strong connection to culture, Community and Country are some of the best protective factors for Aboriginal children and young people. It is the Elders, ACCOs and community leaders who play an essential role in fostering and strengthening these connections and their knowledge and expertise should be central to a Youth Strategy.

Key Considerations

A Victorian Youth Strategy needs to recognize and address the unique barriers facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. Our young people endure the hardships faced by other young Australians, many of which are included in the discussion paper¹. However, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people these issues are often compounded by

discrimination, unconscious bias, institutionalised racism, and intergenerational trauma. These require extensive consideration and inclusion in a youth strategy with particular attention to the nuanced challenges facing young Aboriginal people in metropolitan, regional and remote areas.

Mental Health

The discussion paper accurately highlighted mental health as one of the biggest issues facing Victorian young people, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people disproportionately affected². The Interim Report from the *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System* found that Aboriginal people aged 15–24 years are estimated to be over five times more likely to suicide than their non-Aboriginal peers³. This is clearly a significant issue for Aboriginal communities and one that requires focus in a Victorian Youth Strategy, with consideration of the impacts of COVID-19 and the forthcoming release of the *Royal Commissions Final Report*. The engagement and inclusion of Aboriginal communities and young people in these discussions is imperative in reducing these alarming statistics. It is important a Victorian Youth Strategy be positioned to advance Aboriginal self-determination and leverage better funding and resourcing for ACCOs to design and implement community-led solutions to better support the mental health of Aboriginal young people.

Out-of-home Care

A recent report by the Productivity Commission into Government Services found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are 19 times more likely than their non-Indigenous peers to be placed in out-of-home care in Victoria⁴. This

is a significant issue facing Aboriginal young people and one that requires thorough consideration in the development of a Victorian Youth Strategy. The strategy should align and complement existing agreements and strategies such as *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir*⁵ of which the Alliance is a signatory. This tripart agreement between ACCOs, Community Service Organisations and the Victorian Government sets a clear agenda to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal young people in out-of-home care. A major component of *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir* is resourcing and supporting ACCO-led solutions, with Aboriginal self-determination central to this⁶. A Youth Strategy that complements this work and drives its objectives will be critical in reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal young people. It provides an opportunity to leverage greater investment in Aboriginal-led solutions, focusing on early intervention and prevention and holistic culturally safe supports. Evidence shows us that these are the most effective ways to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people and should therefore be a key component of the strategy⁷.

Youth Justice

The recent Productivity Commission report found that in Victoria Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are nine times more likely to be in custody than their non-Aboriginal peers⁸. A Victorian Youth Strategy needs to complement and strengthen the reform work already underway within the youth justice space and provide a platform for greater investment in Aboriginal-led solutions. We strongly believe in culturally therapeutic, trauma-informed programs delivered by ACCOs which holistically support children and their

families. Programs that connect Aboriginal children and young people to culture, family and community allow for healing, address the impacts of trauma, and support positive social and emotional wellbeing as key to preventing offending behaviour and recidivism. Given the over representation of Aboriginal children in the justice system, a youth strategy ought to prioritise self-determination and increased Aboriginal community control.

Young Rainbow Mob

The Alliance urges the Victorian Government to ensure a Victorian Youth Strategy thoroughly considers the needs and issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who identify as LGBTQI+. The 2020 Goanna survey into the sexual health of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia found that the number of young people identifying as sexually diverse is increasing⁹. Despite this growth there is limited research and understanding across the sector of the unique and complex challenges and needs of this cohort and the meaningful supports that they require. It is an area of significant under-investment from Government with only \$3 million invested in the LGBTQI community in the 2020/21 State Budget, with no funding allocated for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LGBTQI community¹⁰. This is alarming, as the available data tells us that young Rainbow mob are among the most vulnerable and high-risk population groups in Victoria. Already we know that Aboriginal young people are five times more likely to suicide than their non-Aboriginal peers. We also know that LGBTQI+ people aged between 16-27 years are five times more likely to attempt suicide than the general population¹¹. This means that young people

who are both LGBTQI+ and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander are at an incredibly high risk. A Victorian Youth Strategy can position the sector to increase research and understanding of our young Rainbow mob, to generate greater investment in targeted, community controlled and culturally safe supports.

Conclusion

A Victorian Youth Strategy is an opportunity to secure a better future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Building on existing mechanisms and utilising the expertise and knowledge of Aboriginal young people and Communities will ensure a Youth Strategy advances Aboriginal self-determination and positions the sector to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people for generations to come.

Endnotes

¹ Victorian State Government. What matters to young people in Victoria? Victorian Youth Strategy Discussion Paper. Department of Premier and Cabinet. 2020

² Victorian State Government. What matters to young people in Victoria? Victorian Youth Strategy Discussion Paper. Department of Premier and Cabinet. 2020

³ State of Victoria. Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, Interim Report. 2020

⁴ Australian Government. Report on Government Services, Child Protection Services. Productivity Commission. 2021

⁵ Victorian State Government. Wungurilwil Gagapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement. Department of Health and Human Services. 2018

⁶ Victorian State Government. Wungurilwil Gagapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement. Department of Health and Human Services. 2018

⁷ State Government of Victoria. Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023. P. 34

⁸ Australian Government. Report on Government Services, Youth Justice Services. Productivity Commission. 2021

⁹ South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute. The Goanna Survey 2. 2020

¹⁰ Victorian State Government. 2020-21 State Budget. Department of Treasury and Finance. 2020

¹¹ State of Victoria. Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, Interim Report. 2020

