**City of Yarra – Youth and Middle Years Unit: response to Victorian Government Youth Policy discussion paper.**

The City of Yarra welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the development of a new youth policy for Victoria. Please find below our responses to the questions posed. Should you wish to discuss these or any other questions in greater details we would be happy to be involved. We are also happy to support deeper engagement with young people in the policy development at any stage. Should you wish to engage with us further please contact the Youth and Middle Years Coordinator on 9205 5206.

**Draft Vision**

A vision should be short, sharp and inspiring, with the details found in objectives and later actions. Given this vision is for a youth policy it is reasonable to also ensure that the language is youth friendly so young people can easily identify with it. With that in mind the following points should be considered around the draft vision:

* Language “to maximise” seems a little clunky and uninspiring, and not overly youth friendly.
* If the vision is for all young people to realise their potential then it is not necessary to say “including those…” as this is implied. It may be better worded as “particularly those” or something similar in recognition that some young people face extra barriers, though this may also be unnecessary as it is explored in the objectives.

A further question arises with the stated age range. Why is the age range 12-24 rather than 12-25 which is the generally accepted range across youth services? A shift in the age range may have impact upon service provision and exclude a number of young people who are currently able to access targeted youth services.

**Draft Objectives**

The following are points to consider regarding the existing objectives:

* The language of these objectives is quite passive, subsequently young people are disempowered recipients of programs and services rather than active agents.
* A grammatical issue to consider is that the dot points in the objectives don’t flow on from the leading sentence. For example the ‘needs’ of young people are not being given a fair go – the young people are.
* First dot point – often when organisations refer to matters that “affect” young people this narrows the scope of issues available for consideration. Young people are concerned about a range of issues not just the obvious and typical ‘youth’ issues and should be empowered to participate in discussions on all of these. Evidence shows young people’s civic participation is best harnessed in this way. Therefore it is suggested that the wording be changed to be more inclusive and empowering - for example “issues that matter to them”.
* Second dot point – should include the word support along with the opportunity to participate in education etc. as provision alone may not suffice for all young people.
* Third dot point – Perhaps the word ‘early’ can be removed from this to make it more inclusive. While early intervention is obviously the ideal, crisis support is also crucial at certain times in a young person’s life.
* Vulnerable groups mentioned do not include those experiencing stressors relating to income/socio-economic status or family status/relationships.

Further to this, some gaps in the current objectives for consideration are:

* Recognition of the role of a strong, well-resourced youth sector in achieving the vision.
* Opportunities for advocacy by and on behalf young people.

**What can be done to improve education for young people?**

Young people who are able to complete their secondary education and have positive experiences at school tend to fare better on a range of indicators later in life such as mental and physical health, employment and so on. Therefore it is important that education is strong and flexible and well-connected with service providers to support young people during this period. Some suggestions to support this are below:

* Community supports situated in schools to provide support for students and teachers.
* Individual support for young people within schools for those at risk of disengaging.
* Appropriate and timely sharing of information between primary schools and secondary schools (and secondary to secondary if a student is changing schools) on support required for each young person.
* Additional support for mental health organisations to work with school groups on managing these issues.
* More flexible education options for students in secondary school (online etc).

In addition to work with Secondary education providers there are opportunities to improve tertiary education for young people including:

* Supported university and TAFE placements for young people from refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds.
* No restrictions on low levels (up to Diploma level) of tertiary education funding for young people, to encourage lifelong learning and an exploration of options. This will also support young people who may attempt a number of certificates before they find an area that suits them.
* A review of the current funding structure to RTOs, to avoid young people being exploited by this industry.
* Career development and employment skills included in all TAFE and university curriculum.
* Stronger links developed between industry and educational institutions, to increase pathways to employment for young students.

**What can be done to increase employment opportunities for young people?**

In addition to improving education and training support and opportunities for young people, a range of targeted employment programs may be useful including:

* Individual support for young people in the job application process
* Increase in paid short-term training programs for young people to gain experience and be supported financially
* Increased incentives and support for employers to take on young people in their organisations, including increased incentives to employ apprentices/trainees
* Increased support for young entrepreneurs to develop their business skills and ideas

**What can be done to improve mental health for young people?**

As with many of these questions the answer is quite complex and the needs vary greatly between young people. Increased access to generalist and early intervention services would be valuable. Not simply assuming ‘Headspace’ is the right fit for every young person. Many youth support and counselling services have strict eligibility criteria such as having engaged with the police or DHHS, or strict service requirements such as limited timeframes (eg max 3 months). Local governments are particularly well placed to provide generalist supports which are flexible and open. Extra support for these kinds of services would be valuable.

It is also important to see mental health in the individual context and consider addressing the issues that can exacerbate mental health. For example, if a young person is living in an unsafe unstable housing situation their mental health is unlikely to improve greatly.

Another strategy that would be worth considering is increasing access to youth mental health first aid training (or similar) for young people so that are better equipped to act as peer supports, notice changes in their friends and encourage them to access appropriate support.

**What can be done to tackle AOD issues for young people?**

There needs to be more in-school programs dedicated to alcohol and other drug education. Young people need to learn about and understand the issues surrounding alcohol and other drug use from an early age, as drug availability is increasing and happening at an earlier age. Education could also involve families/parents and teachers, so that everyone understands the issues and risks involved, and also how to keep each other safe. Having families, parents and teachers educated could assist in reducing the strain on health services as they may be able to address issues with their children at home or at school.

More money needs to be put into outreach work for young people, to entice good workers into the field. Often you will see groups of young people hanging out intoxicated in parks etc but no skilled workers available to provide assistance. AOD agencies appear to be stretched to their limits, with very large caseloads per worker. This affects the quality of work and time being able to be spent on each young person.

Encouraging local government to work more closely with agencies could assist in addressing AOD issues. When resources are combined, as well as money, more can be achieved and a wider net can be spread. Programming can be spread across the different organisations, so more intensive work can be achieved at the agencies, then more therapeutic/recreational activities can occur at youth centres etc. This can create a more holistic approach to education/rehabilitation, where the focus isn’t only on the drug use, but also on skill and social development.

More safe places could be set up where young people frequent (city areas, around night clubs, festivals, skate parks). This would allow alcohol and drug affected young people a safe and welcoming place to sit and sober up, rather than them walking around alone. Education could begin here, as well as a trained worker being able to chat to the young people about any issues that may present.

**What can be done to improve housing for young people?**

Many young people are not engaged in full time work as they study or try to forge a career pathway; yet very little housing falls within the budgets of these people. For those lucky enough to be able to live at home longer, this places extra pressure on their families, for others this places them in a vulnerable situation.

Exploring improved access to safe and affordable housing for young people should include a broad exploration of the housing system generally. A number of measures are needed to arrest the ongoing shrinkage of affordable housing, not all of which may be actionable by the Victorian government and may require advocacy to other levels of government. For example Centrelink payments go nowhere near providing the level of income required to afford the majority of private rentals.

Other strategies that the Victorian Government could explore include brokerage models to support increased access to private rentals, increased support for existing models which have proved successful such as the foyer model, and specific youth focused public housing models.

**What can be done to tackle discrimination for young people?**

As with many issues in our community, education is the key. Programs need to be delivered within school, starting in primary schools and continuing through secondary. This needs to tackle all types of discrimination, and be a consistently delivered program, not just one session every one or two years.

In terms of discrimination *of* young people, there should be many meaningful opportunities provided to young people to be active members of their community. This can allow community members to see the worth of young people, that the majority of young people are actually quite capable of achieving great things for themselves and the community. Young people should be given a stronger voice in advocating for services to local, state and federal government. Young people are in tune with what is happening within their age group – they know what young people want and need. More representative groups, that have a profile, should be established to provide input into government policy and agendas.

More opportunities to celebrate young people could also be provided. Whether it is award ceremonies, entertainment opportunities, workshops run by young people for adults – anyway to give young people the opportunity to be noticed and celebrated by adults and their community should be explored.

Further to these approaches it would be fabulous if the State Government could explore systemic discrimination including access to programs service, funding, housing and so on. This bold and brave move would go a long way to removing barriers in line with the policy vision and would encourage other organisations to do the same.

**What can be done to improve public transport for young people?**

Young people are regular users of public transport and at Yarra Youth Services young people often seek help for public transport fines. Our experiences supporting them through this process – often with support from Youthlaw – suggest that there would be value in exploring reducing fines for young people, having a better appeals process, and better promoting the appeals avenues.

Better services on weekends and nights would also be beneficial especially as young people are often engaged in part time/shift work or out socialising at these times.

An easy way to ensure the needs of young people are considered in an ongoing capacity is ensuring youth representation on the public transport users association and any internal representative groups.

**What else matters to young people?**

In the final question we address the idea that issues vary between communities and the importance of local solutions. However the following are some key areas worth considering as part of an overarching policy framework.

Family breakdown/family violence is an issue which is gaining much attention and seems a glaring omission in this discussion paper. Family violence is often a precursor to a number of risk factors for young people such as mental health and homelessness.

In the list of issues facing young people the adult justice system is named including a statistic which suggests it isn’t significant issue. It may be more pertinent to include and explore young people engaged in the youth justice system, and explore rates of recidivism, and comorbid issues being faced.

The Middle Years has long been discussed as a gap in the service system yet is absent from this discussion paper. A great deal of research has demonstrated this need and offered suggestions. *Building the Scaffolding* is one such report that would be worth considering in the development of a youth policy. Addressing the needs of the middle years should not detract from continuing to address the distinct needs of older young people.

**Further comments:**

The importance of process and evidence based practice:

The challenges facing young people vary from community to community. Responses that work in one community may not be appropriate in another. Therefore, the development of a Victorian Youth Policy needs to recognise the importance of the following:

* Local level responses and initiatives.
* Providing a framework that will enable communities to respond to localised needs.
* The important role of local government to facilitate to drive local responses.

To maximise the opportunities and remove barriers for young people, communities should be supported to implement a framework to establish:

* Structures that enable all stakeholders, particular young people to have the opportunity to be involved, be heard and work collaboratively.
* An understanding of local needs, existing community resources and strengths.
* A common agenda for change including a shared understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through an agreed action plan. The action plan should have a focus on early intervention and prevention, and draw on evidence when selecting strategies and programs for implementation.
* An evaluation plan and measurement systems for collecting data and measuring results to ensure accountability.

To enact this framework, a neutral local organisation is needed to coordinate participating stakeholders and serve the entire initiative. Local government is ideally situated to play such a role. Recognising this The City of Yarra has recently established Communities that Care in the City of Yarra. Established under a joint initiative of The Royal Children’s Hospital and the Rotary Club of Melbourne, Communities That Care is an evidence-based community-change process to improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

The Communities That Care process uses an early intervention and prevention framework to guide communities towards understanding their local needs, identifying and setting priorities, and implementing effective evidence-based strategies to address those needs. For further information please refer to <http://www.communitiesthatcare.org.au/>

A further comment would be to ensure that any policy framework or intervention is based on strong evidence, and that meaningful evaluation of outcomes occurs to measure the efficacy of these.