



# Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited

*Submission to*

*Infrastructure Victoria's Draft 30-year Strategy*

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## **Abstract**

The Victorian Aboriginal Community Service Association (VACSAL) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into Victoria's draft 30-year infrastructure strategy. VACSAL supports an integrated approach and welcomes Infrastructure Victoria's commitment to consulting with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). Infrastructure investment and planning is integral to support the rapidly growing Aboriginal community in Victoria, and provide an opportunity to expand the reach and effectiveness of ACCOs.

## **Note on language**

We use the term 'Aboriginal' to describe people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

## **About VACSAL**

VACSAL is a state-wide agency that provides advice to Government on a range of community issues, as well as being a major provider of extensive services to the Aboriginal community. VACSAL supports and assists children, young people and families as well as strengthening communities and culture, servicing the Metropolitan Melbourne as well as some regional communities. Established in 1984, VACSAL has been instrumental in assisting the Victorian and Commonwealth Government develop policies and programs in major areas relating to the advancement of Aboriginal people. VACSAL is seen as key advocate that has representation on over 85 local, regional and State reference/advisory committees.

As an Aboriginal community service organisation, we are committed to:

- A commitment to self-determination and self-management for Aboriginal communities
- Advocating for the needs of individuals, families and communities.
- A respect for and acknowledgement of Aboriginal history and kinship networks.
- The delivery of high-quality services.
- Creating an organisation that is open, welcoming and one which encourages participation by the Aboriginal community.
- Redressing inequality and disadvantage

## **Background**

The Aboriginal community in Victoria is estimated to grow by 48 per cent by 2028, with demand for health and social services forecast to rise correspondingly across all sectors.<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the projected demands for social services are based on data commissioned by the Aboriginal Executive Council (AEC) in 2019, before the COVID-19 Pandemic. Added pressure has been placed on services in the wake

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<sup>1</sup> The State Government of Victoria, *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework*, 2018, [https://content.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-09/Victorian-Aboriginal-Affairs-Framework\\_1.pdf](https://content.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-09/Victorian-Aboriginal-Affairs-Framework_1.pdf)



of rising unemployment, homelessness, family violence and a series of lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Alongside the growth in service demand, ACCOs will require appropriate infrastructure to be supported to provide a wealth of services to the Aboriginal community in the metropolitan and regional areas. At VACSAL this will encompass our focus areas of focus areas of homelessness, family violence, justice and education. VACSAL requires infrastructure that allows us to better respond as a service hub, we currently have several offices across the northern metropolitan region and are experiencing a rapid growth in service demand. ACCOs have historically fallen short of infrastructure due to mainstream agencies gaining freehold titles and being gifted buildings, whilst ACCOs face having to put bids against one another. VACSAL welcomes this strategy as an opportunity to adequately plan for the future infrastructure needs of the Aboriginal community and ensure requirements are met across several domains.

### **Forecast demand across VACSALs focus areas**

#### **Homelessness and Family Violence**

Demand for family violence and homelessness services is forecast to increase dramatically over the next decade. Based on research commissioned by the Aboriginal Executive Council (AEC), Aboriginal people will access homelessness services nearly 15,000 times in 2028.<sup>2</sup> VACSAL supports Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness in the Northern Metropolitan region (NMR). Prior to COVID-19 the capacity of the NMR homelessness service system was very limited, being able to support only approximately 11% of households seeking assistance.<sup>3</sup> There is currently an exasperating lack of housing and support options for single people, young people, people with no income and people leaving prison. During the COVID-19 pandemic, transitional housing was only available due to the collapse of the tourism sector and resulting availability of bought hotel accommodation, demonstrating the lack of options available to service users and community organisations.<sup>4</sup> As one of the few ACCOs working in the homelessness sector, VACSAL will require increased access to transitional and social housing to support the growing demand, and the Victorian governments 30-year infrastructure should reflect this need.

By 2028, an estimated 6,300 Aboriginal people (mainly women) will be reported as affected by family violence, with half of total demand in three regions: Mallee, Bayside, and Peninsula.<sup>5</sup> Demands for services for venerable families is projected steadily increase, from 3,757 individuals currently accessing family services in 2021 to 5,565 individuals.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, family violence has a huge effect on children and young people, with a reported 88 per cent of children in out of home care affected by family violence<sup>7</sup>. Across the ACCO sector, supporting infrastructure will be vital to combat rising rates of family violence and support culturally safe and Aboriginal led responses.

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<sup>2</sup> SVA Consulting, *Demand for services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria* (Report prepared for the Aboriginal Executive Council), 2019, <https://aal.org.au/wp-content/uploads/AEC-SVA-Service-Demand-forecasting-report-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Kelly, David, *NLASN Homelessness Response to COVID-19* (RMIT University), 2020.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> SVA Consulting, *Demand for services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*



## **Education and Youth Justice**

There is currently a lack of infrastructure to foster the expansion of Aboriginal led education opportunities. At present, VACSALs RTO is turning away students due to limited space and limited options to fund infrastructure expansion. The lack of infrastructure results in less opportunity to run varied courses and offer diverse avenues for employment. Over the next decade, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15-24 years), is forecast to rise to 67 per cent.<sup>8</sup> It is integral that Aboriginal led education initiatives be included in infrastructure requirements for both regional and metropolitan areas.

Disengagement from employment and education increase the risk of an individual committing an offence and being involved in the justice system, and Aboriginal young people tend to become involved in the criminal justice system younger than non-Aboriginal young people. At current rates, by 2028 approximately 1,000 young Aboriginal people under 18 will be involved with the youth justice system during the year.<sup>9</sup> Infrastructure requirements for the Aboriginal young people need to preface healing centers and cultural camps, rather than detention and confinement.

## **Overall Impression of the Draft Strategy**

VACSAL supports Infrastructure Victoria's efforts to consult with ACCOs and the positive nature of these discussions. The draft strategy has a strong focus on Regions and Outer Metropolitan growth corridors, which is an extremely important focus for the Aboriginal community. Reference to the new Closing the Gap framework and an effort to progress the Co-design of an Aboriginal Community Controlled Infrastructure plan is a welcome opportunity for collaboration. Moreover, it is encouraging to see the draft strategy's commitment to perusing the development of a Victorian Aboriginal Tourism Strategy to enhance education and knowledge of Aboriginal history generate income for ACCOs.

The strategy could be improved by prioritising Aboriginal people's right to self-determination given the government's commitment to progressing self-determination in the VAAF and across the Aboriginal policy portfolio. Further to this, a cultural lens must be adapted across the strategy in acknowledging the role of connection to family, country, community and culture for Aboriginal communities and the need for investment in cultural infrastructure. Given this is a 30-year strategy, consistent review and revaluation is required to ensure it aligns with the needs of the community. There are several frameworks being progressed at present, including the Dhelk Dja framework to address family violence, the progression of Treaty in Victoria and the Man-na Woorin-tyeen Maar-takoort housing framework and strategy. The Infrastructure strategy should align with existing commitments and frameworks such as these, which have already agreed to by the State Government, to ensure its effectiveness.

It should be noted that every recommendation affects the Aboriginal community, and a more comprehensive and initial consultation could have been undertaken to ensure an Aboriginal lens was applied across a

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> SVA Consulting, *Demand for services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria*



broader scope of the objectives and recommendations. An initial consultation according to specialist areas, such as family violence, justice, homelessness, housing and health would embed self-determination into the strategy. For the genuine progression of self-determination, the Aboriginal community must be involved at the very initial stages of strategy design, rather than consulting later and retrofitting the strategy.

In particular VACSAL notes that Recommendation 89, ‘Deliver multipurpose shared social service facilities in the regions’ does not make reference to the Aboriginal community despite the incredibly important role ACCOs play in social service delivery. There is an opportunity while the strategy is in draft form to gain more involvement from ACCOs so the Aboriginal community can have a comprehensive input into the planning and decision-making process for social services. Similarly, under recommendation 93, ‘fund more youth foyers in regional Victoria’ a more comprehensive initial consultation would have been beneficial to ensure these youth foyers include the needs of Aboriginal youth. The future for Aboriginal communities will depend on our children and young people who are future elders, we therefore need to ensure that our children and young people have every opportunity to develop in a positive, caring, nurturing and culturally sensitive and respectful environment. Considering the overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people in the justice system, more comprehensive consultation with the Aboriginal community about recommendation 79, ‘Plan and consistently deliver corrections and youth justice infrastructure while managing demand with policy settings’ is required.

### **Recommendations**

- 1. Whilst VACSAL supports the increase in investment for centralised police hubs, we recommend a further emphasis on improving infrastructure for community service organisations to work collaboratively alongside police, including:**
  - Infrastructure for ACCOs to run centralized service hubs
  - Increased property ownership for ACCO’s to meet growing service demand
  
- 2. Recommendation to include a plan for infrastructure that supports Aboriginal led education, including:**
  - Language Centers
  - Cultural Learning Centers
  - RTO’s running through Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations
  
- 3. Whilst VACSAL supports the increase in investment for youth justice, we recommend a direct investment in infrastructure aimed at cultural healing and early intervention including;**
  - Aboriginal community owned healing centers that can accommodate families, youth and singles
  - Aboriginal community owned cultural and recreational camps
  
- 4. Recommendation that infrastructure for social housing also include quality transitional housing for people exiting prison, experiencing family violence and rough sleepers;**



- 5. Recommendation that all infrastructure planning and design for the Aboriginal community be undertaken by the Aboriginal community;**
- 6. Recommendation that Section One, *Confront Long-term challenges* include Closing the Gap, as infrastructure has a key role to play;**
- 7. Identifying those recommendations that are of particular significance to ACCOs and which should be progressed in partnership with the Aboriginal community require further consultation and engagement;**
  - This could include recommendations: 16, 21, 22, 32, 36, 56, 57, 60, 61, 68, 73, 75, 76, 80, 84, 89 to 95.
- 8. Referencing Aboriginal people's right to self-determination and the self-determination principles in the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework.**

#### **Suggestions for implementing the strategy**

The implementation of the strategy must be driven by a commitment towards Aboriginal self-determination. Implementation will be strengthened by ongoing consultation with the Aboriginal community and ACCOs, and a formalised mechanism for shared decision-making. Further to this, successful implementation of the Strategy should be supported through the government's yearly budget process which must align to the co-design and Aboriginal Community Controlled Infrastructure Plan. The strategy must have an independent review and accountability mechanism for the 30-year period, allowing for the opportunity to reevaluate and prioritise goals and objectives.