

Vulnerable Youth Framework discussion paper

Development of a policy framework for Victoria's vulnerable young people



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for Victoria's vulnerable young people

Prepared by:

Department of Human Services
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Ministerial foreword

Adolescence is an exciting and fast-moving life stage that can present as many challenges as it does opportunities in preparing for a healthy and fulfilling adulthood.

Most Victorian young people have positive support and relationships and are faring well in many aspects of their lives. They are engaged in education or training or are employed. Most young Victorians are participating and contributing in a positive way to their communities. There is, however, a small but significant number of young people who are experiencing issues and challenges that require active interventions and support to enable them to reach their full potential.

Developing the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* provides the opportunity for a coordinated approach to government policy and measuring outcomes for vulnerable young people aged 10–25 years.

Prevention and the early identification of risk factors that may jeopardise young people's social and emotional development during adolescence is essential to ensuring all young people are able to succeed in their transition to adulthood.

Young people are not just our future – they are also important in the present. We are committed to working towards a coordinated system that works together to better support vulnerable young Victorians. This not only benefits them as young people, but our whole community is richer when our young people are healthy and achieving positive outcomes.

The Victorian Government recognises the importance of early identification and intervention and in strengthening the environments and key influences around young people. Currently, major reforms to reflect this are taking place in mental health. The *Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform* is also being finalised. This adopts a holistic approach to reducing poor outcomes for children and young people, focusing on partnerships with parents and communities, workforce and system development and reform.

The *Vulnerable Youth Framework* builds on these important reforms, focusing on five key areas where the Victorian Government can make a difference by supporting and encouraging action in schools, communities and services to meet the needs of vulnerable young people.

This discussion paper has been developed to seek feedback within and across local government and the youth, education, health (including mental and community health) and community services sectors on the key elements of the *Vulnerable Youth Framework*.

Most of all, this discussion paper aims to position the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* as the foundation for coordinated and effective youth services that assist all vulnerable young Victorians at the time they most need support.



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Introduction

Adolescence is a time of great change. During this period, young people experience fast-paced physical and emotional development. Young people are still dependent on their families and on schools and other institutions in their lives, but are also heading towards becoming independent. During this transition to independence, they test out a range of new behaviours and activities. Young people may trial value and belief sets different to those of their family, experiment with drugs and alcohol, learn how to drive and take risks in some aspects of their behaviour.

Young people's peer groups often become pivotal in their lives. They look to their friends for information about currently acceptable social trends: what to wear, who to know and how to behave in a given situation. Testing new boundaries and forming self-identity can be both exhilarating and dangerous for young people.

Adolescence is also a time of heightened emotions. Young people often have periods of intense 'highs and lows'. Relationships, conflict and social interactions can feel more important and meaningful than at other times in life. When young people feel rejected by their peers or are in conflict with family members, their responses are often exaggerated relative to other life stages.

Some young people are very impulsive and can make poor decisions. These decisions can be costly to young people and their families, friends and community.

Most Victorian young people do get through their adolescence relatively unscathed. As part of growing up, many young people will try or experience one or more risky behaviours. Some young people have a negative experience of adolescence. Vulnerability becomes problematic when negative behaviours or experiences multiply and there are few or no supports in place to assist young people. In addition, the individual developmental, social and environmental context in which young people grow up can mean they confront issues that they do not have the skills, knowledge or support to get through. Their development may be impeded by disrupted family lives, poverty, homelessness or isolation.

Without extra support, too few of these young people will become healthy, well-functioning adults with positive futures. In some cases, this vulnerability can end in tragedy.

Vulnerable young people can therefore be described as:

Young people who, through a combination of their circumstances and adolescent risk-taking behaviour, are at risk of not realising their potential to achieve positive life outcomes.

To ensure that supports and services are available for vulnerable young Victorians at the earliest point possible, the Victorian Government is developing the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* (the framework) to address the needs of vulnerable young Victorians aged 10–25 years. Current government youth policy focuses on young people aged 12–25 years; the age group for the framework has been selected because intervention early in the onset of a problem is more likely to be effective. Ten and 11 year olds have been included because of the significant transition point between primary and secondary school. At this transition point vulnerability can be identified and responses implemented. Vulnerability can, however, occur at any age. A 20 year old entering university and moving away from home may also experience difficulties that require services.

The framework will take a whole-of-government perspective and connect current policy and service delivery efforts across a range of state and local government portfolios to support vulnerable young Victorians. It will consider the ways in which schools, health and community services and training and employment services can work together, and where effort is best placed to achieve positive outcomes.

The framework has five focus areas: prevention and early identification; engagement in education, training and employment; local planning for youth services; tailored responses for particular groups; and effective services, capable people.

Prevention and early identification

Preventing vulnerability can take many forms. Involvement in sports, cultural and youth groups, strong bonds with family, engagement in school, training or employment and fostering a sense of belonging to local community are all examples of good prevention activity. Keeping young people within their families and connecting them with positive activities is an important focus of prevention.

Vulnerability, which requires a formal service response, needs to be identified as early in the onset of the problem as possible to ensure that risk factors are addressed quickly and young people are assisted to get back on track.

Engagement in education, training and employment

School, training or employment is a big part of young people's lives. Barriers and obstacles to achieving in school, training or employment must be removed. Vulnerable young people should be enabled and supported to positively engage in education or training or successfully participate in employment opportunities.

Local planning for youth services

In order to wrap services around vulnerable young people and their families, it is important to be clear about what services are available in each local community. Local planning is a key element of the framework. Understanding who the vulnerable young people are and what barriers are preventing them from attending school, training or employment is part of a local planning process. Identifying local service needs and analysing what is available and what is missing can establish a platform to improve the availability, accessibility and effectiveness of the local youth service system. Identifying how we can do better with what is currently available will be a key activity from this work.

Tailored responses for particular groups

Particular groups of young people need particular responses. These responses need to be tailored to their needs and a 'one size fits all' approach is not always the most effective. Utilising key members of groups within communities in identifying vulnerable young people as part of the local planning process will assist in understanding what are the most effective responses.

Effective services, capable people

Victoria currently invests in a range of programs and supports across the service continuum. Many are available through schools. Others include generalist and other supports at the local level as well as more intensive services to address issues such as alcohol or other drug misuse, mental health issues, homelessness and criminal behaviour. Responses to vulnerable young people need to be effective and delivered by capable people.

Discussion paper

This discussion paper has been developed to facilitate input into a *Vulnerable Youth Framework*. It has been drafted on the basis of existing evidence, current research and cross-government input about how to best meet the needs of vulnerable young people.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to test key components of a framework. There are questions at the end designed to seek feedback on the basis of the framework, the five key focus areas and proposed actions for change.

Following a consultation period, the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* will be finalised. The framework will then be implemented across state government portfolios through a high-level action plan based on the five focus areas and actions for change. The action plan will include implementation timeframes.

Opportunity for change – an integrated policy approach

The White Paper *Protecting Children – the next steps*¹ provided an opportunity for comment on the foundations of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*. It also made a commitment to developing a framework for vulnerable youth that would establish common goals and shared principles for vulnerable youth services and identify clear future directions for development.

This initial commitment has been the starting point for developing the framework.

Victorian policy context

Victoria has a strong existing legislative and policy framework. The *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005*, the *Children, Youth and Families Act* and regular, formal inter-departmental discussion (for example, the Children's Services Coordination Board) focus on strategies to continually improve child and youth wellbeing and are examples of the high level of interest and concern for the welfare of Victorian children and young people.

At the policy level, Victoria currently considers the needs of its young people through a range of strategies. *Growing Victoria Together*² and *A Fairer Victoria*³ establish the overarching strategic goals to be achieved for all Victorians, including particular focus on young Victorians.

The government has also developed policies that focus primarily on young people. The key overarching policy for young people is *Future Directions: An action agenda for young people*⁴ released in 2006. This is an action agenda that reflects and drives a broad range of activity occurring across government to improve life outcomes for all young Victorians including community participation, education, information, health and safety.

Figure 1 depicts the interaction between these key policies, the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* and the outcomes that the government (and the Victorian community) are seeking for young people. The diagram depicts the relationship between policies related to young people. At a high level, *Growing Victoria Together* and *A Fairer Victoria* identify directions for young people. Flowing from this is the whole-of-government *Future Directions* youth policy. The *Vulnerable Youth Framework* flows from *Future Directions* to represent and address the particular needs of young Victorians defined as vulnerable.

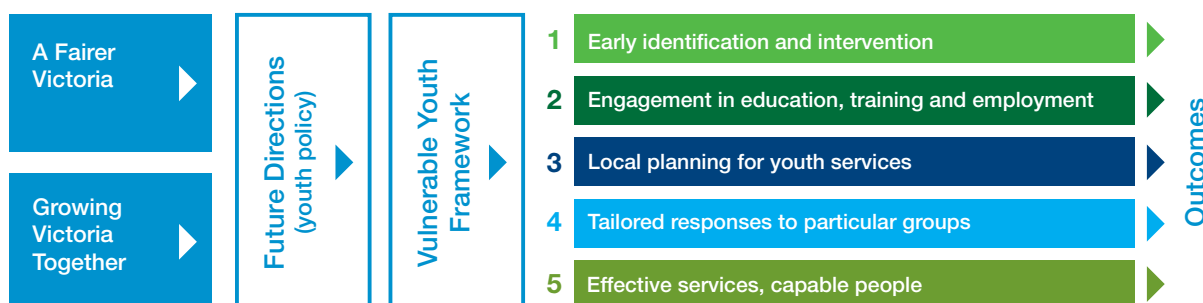


Figure 1: Victorian policy interaction

Vulnerable Youth Framework policy

There are some young people who, because of individual, historical and environmental circumstances, are more vulnerable and require a greater level of support and service. A more detailed policy approach that reflects the overarching strategic goals and complements the government's major youth policy, is required for vulnerable Victorian young people.

The *Vulnerable Youth Framework* will underpin all policy development related to vulnerable young people. It is the mechanism by which efforts can be concentrated across government to create consistent responses and coordinated approaches both locally and across the state. There is already considerable investment in youth-focused interventions. A focus of this framework is on coordinating existing effort to ensure that current activity is as effective and efficient as it can be.

The purpose of the framework is to guide and strengthen action across state and local government and communities, including schools, to better respond to the needs of vulnerable young people, from late primary school and into adulthood by:

- ensuring that vulnerable young people and their families get help when and where they need it
- creating a well-planned and coordinated localised youth service system designed to strengthen vulnerable young people, their families and communities
- assisting the education sector to remove barriers so that vulnerable young people can receive an education or actively participate in other training or employment opportunities
- focusing on reducing disadvantage and creating healthy and sustainable communities.

Vulnerable Youth Framework vision

The government's overarching policy framework for all Victorian young people is *Future Directions: An action agenda for young Victorians*. *Future Directions* articulates a vision for Victorian young people as follows:

All young Victorians have a strong sense of belonging, are motivated to create and share in opportunities, and are valued for their contributions and influence in their communities.

This vision encompasses all Victorian young people no matter what their vulnerabilities, disadvantage or stage of development. It provides the vision for all youth policy development, and focuses on the value of all Victorian young people and the contribution they can make when they are provided with adequate opportunities and supports. This vision statement will also apply to the *Vulnerable Youth Framework*.

Future Directions principles

The *Future Directions* youth policy details the Victorian Government's approach towards youth issues. *Future Directions* outlines five key principles that underpin government activity for all young Victorians:

- Young people's voices are central to youth policy and services.
- Institutions that young people rely on should collaborate and take a shared approach.
- Young people should be considered in their family and community context.
- The diversity of young Victorians must be acknowledged.
- Interventions and programs need to be put in place early, because prevention-based approaches work best.

Vulnerable Youth Framework principles

The *Future Directions* principles set the context for activity aimed at supporting all young Victorians. Responding to vulnerable young people requires a more targeted set of principles specific to this group. These are:

- Inclusiveness
 - Vulnerable young people need to be understood in the context of their social world: school, family, community and culture. They need to be given ongoing opportunities to participate in a wide range of engaging, positive and successful experiences.
 - Behaviour should not be a barrier to inclusion – active outreach and innovative engagement is necessary to help young people who are disconnected.
- Developmentally responsive
 - An understanding of development should underpin all service design and specific interventions for vulnerable young people. Responses should be tailored according to individual developmental, social and environmental circumstances, and cultural context.
- Timely and proactive
 - Vulnerable young people need to be responded to proactively and early in the onset of a problem or early in life. Vulnerability is less likely to compound if responses are provided in a timely and proactive manner.

- Place based
 - Young people identify with their local communities, their peers, and the organisations and services they frequent and attend. Responses for vulnerable young people need to be developed locally, and tailored for both individual and group intervention.
- Comprehensive, flexible and enduring
 - Young people with multiple and complex needs require coordinated responses from all the services involved in their lives.
 - The duration of services offered to young people should be flexible and be delivered until they are no longer required. A variety of short- and long-term interventions should be available.

Focus areas and actions for change

The *Vulnerable Youth Framework* discussion paper describes a set of five focus areas. These focus areas identify where changes can be made to Victoria's youth service system to better meet the needs of vulnerable young people. They are designed to provide a way forward in strengthening and enhancing the current effort already in place in Victoria for vulnerable young people.

The five focus areas are outlined below.

1. Prevention and early identification:

- ensure that existing prevention strategies available at the state and local level are coordinated and easily accessible for vulnerable young people
- identifying vulnerability early in the onset of a problem (for example, truancy, low-level offending, alcohol and other drug misuse, family conflict) and include a focus on strategies for different age groups (10–14 years, 15–17 years, 18–25 years)
- strengthening parents, families and communities.

2. Engagement in education, training and employment:

- earlier identification of vulnerable young people, including those truanting
- retaining or attracting young people back to school
- individual planning for vulnerable young people
- improving connections with the broader service system and other training or employment options.

3. Local planning for youth services:

- establish or enhance local youth plans to strengthen connections between youth services, identify priorities and outcomes and assist in establishing a locally based, navigable and integrated service system
- improve cooperation and collaboration between state government, local government and community service organisations
- agree measures to inform whether the youth service system is achieving outcomes
- provide opportunities for vulnerable young people to participate in service planning and program development.

4. Tailored responses to particular groups:

- the merit of identifying particular groups
- local planning that identifies particular groups of vulnerable young people requiring services.

5. Effective services, capable people:

- embed locally based youth services that are effective, youth-centred, visible, flexible, accessible and responsive to vulnerable young people
- recognise and build the capacity and capability of the people who work with vulnerable young people
- develop practice models from the evidence on what works.

Vulnerable Youth Framework outcomes

The Victorian Government's vision is that every child and young person should thrive, learn and grow, be valued and respected, and become an effective adult. The government's aspirations, articulated in *The Victorian Child and Adolescent Outcomes Framework*⁵, are for:

- young people who are safe, healthy and continuing to develop, learn and achieve wellbeing
- confident and capable parents
- strong and supportive communities... positive peers
- an enabling society.

Figure 2 illustrates the identified outcomes for children and young people across the key domains of individual, family, community and society.

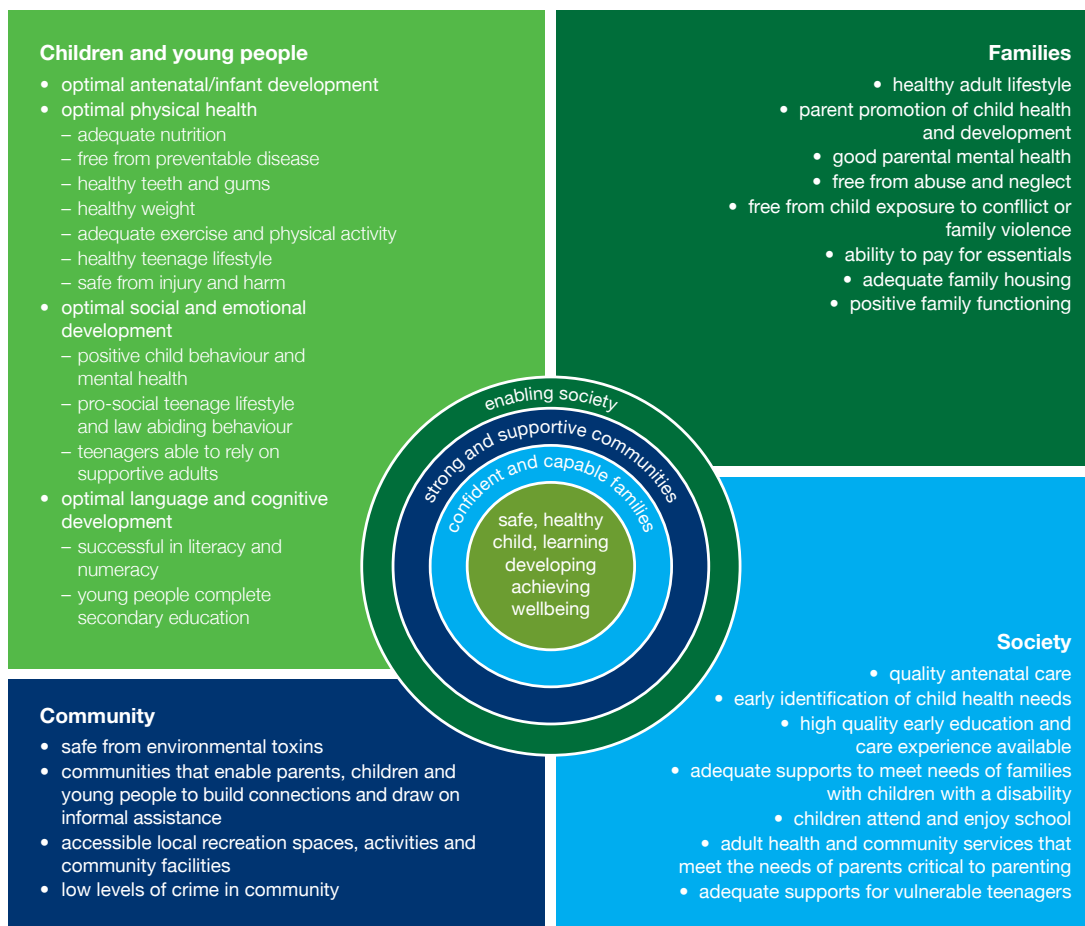


Figure 2: The Victorian child and adolescent outcomes framework

The Victorian Government recently released *The State of Victoria's Young People*⁶, a report on how young people aged 12–24 years are faring across Victoria. A focus on outcomes continues to provide a way to measure our progress. There are currently more than 150 indicators, including some specific to adolescents, that the Victorian Government is building the capacity to monitor at a local government area (LGA) level as well as statewide. This data provides the basis for evaluation and comparison of relative outcomes for particular groups or communities. The government is gradually building a comprehensive evidence base about effective interventions to improve outcomes. These outcomes will be used to monitor the impact of the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* over time. Victorians will then be able to see how vulnerable young people are faring.

Understanding young people and precursors for vulnerability

Individual developmental, social and environmental factors all influence young people's adolescence. When there are issues in any of these spheres, vulnerability is heightened. It is a complex phase of development for young people, their families and often the community.

Adolescent development

All stages of life involve physical and emotional developments and changes. The period of adolescence is of particular importance because of the impact this can have on a young person's capacity to manage their life (that is, on their experience of and outcomes from school, developing a sense of self, belonging and exploring social relationships). The effects of negative experiences during adolescence can have consequences in later life. This phase affects later employment prospects, social networks, prospects for healthy relationships and a young person's ability to fit into their community and make a meaningful contribution to society. If alcohol and other drug misuse, criminal activity, unemployment or homelessness become entrenched it takes longer to reduce the level of support young people require. Early identification and intervention can mean that less intensive interventions are needed for shorter periods of time.

The field of adolescent development is informed by a range of different theories and especially by behaviourism, cognitive-structuralism and psychoanalysis, which have dominated the field over the past 25 years.⁷ Theories such as these have assumed that most adolescents experience the same life trajectories and in the same sequence, as if there is a 'normal' pattern of adolescent development. More recently, research on young people's development has demonstrated the shortcomings of these theories. This research has shown that young people's cultural upbringing, for example, can have profound impacts on adolescent development. We can no longer assume that there is a process of 'normal' adolescent development and that any 'deviation' from this therefore indicates vulnerability or risk. More attention and sensitivity must be paid to understanding individual development within very diverse cultural and social groups and environments during different stages of adolescence.⁸

We now also have a better understanding of the influence of social and cultural contexts on young people's development. That is, the need to focus more broadly than just on the young person and their family and consider other influences including the impact of the media, schools, and overarching cultural belief systems.⁹ Additionally, it is important to recognise that young people themselves bring feelings, understanding and perceptions to their context, and as such, co-construct their own development.¹⁰

Brain development

Research on adolescent brain development has added a further dimension to the mix of ideas about how adolescents develop.¹¹ Although the neural circuits of the brain are developed by the time a child is aged around six years, equally important neural circuitry is expanded and developed during adolescence and early adulthood.

This neural circuitry development particularly affects the areas governing learning and socialisation that enable young people to maximise their engagement with learning, both formally and informally, and to have positive relationships with others. The greatest changes to the parts of the brain responsible for impulse control, judgement, decision making, planning, and emotions, occur in adolescence. This area is the last part of the brain to mature at around age 25.¹²

Developmentally, research shows that the adolescent period of brain development is just as significant as development in the early years (0 to 6). Using MRI brain scans, Figure 3 shows the developing brain from age five to 20 years. The dark blue areas of the brain are the fully mature parts.¹³

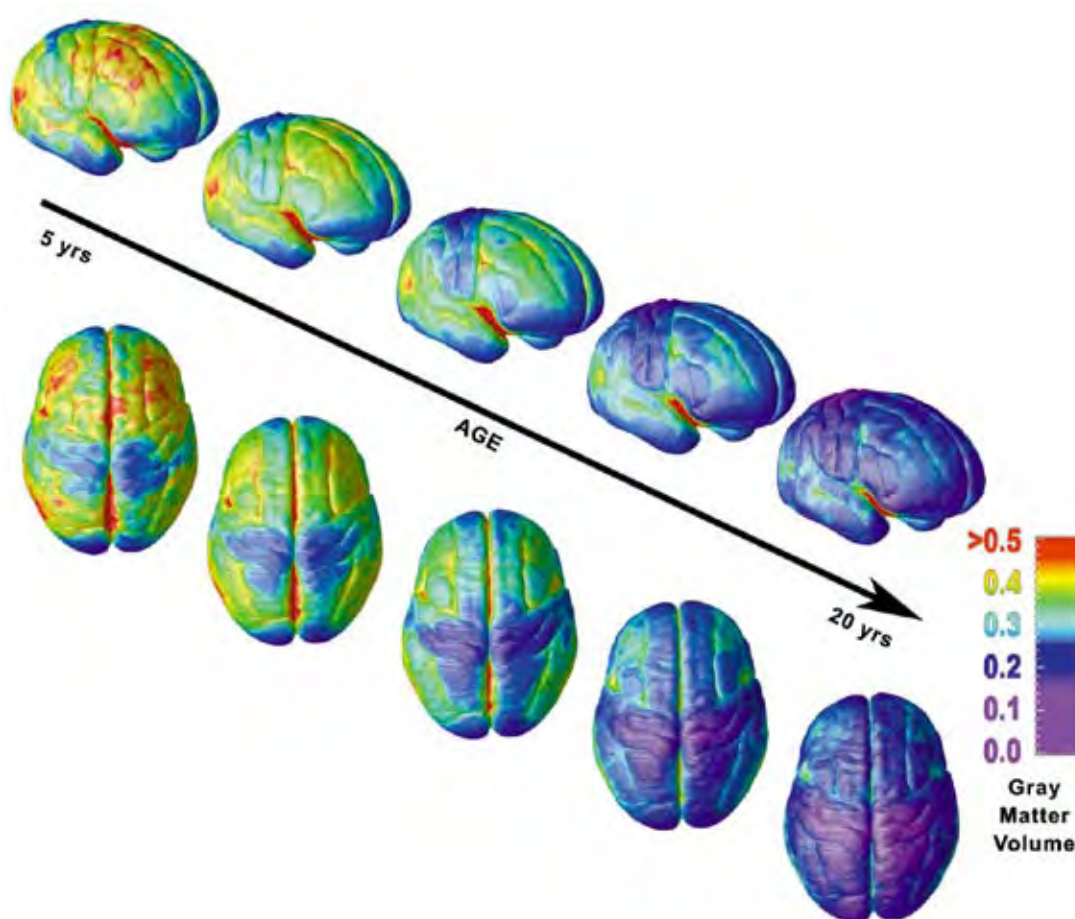


Figure 3: MRI scans showing brain maturation from age five to 20 years
(Source: Lenroot & Giedd 2006, reproduced by permission)

It is argued that young people need to be surrounded by caring adults and institutions that help them learn specific skills and appropriate adult behaviours through cognitive behavioural approaches.¹⁴ Young people need to be supported by positive learning and social experiences to embed the new and developing neural pathways. When these are not in place, positive brain development may not occur, leaving young people without the cognitive ability to make good judgements and decisions.

In service delivery young people are frequently relied on to make good judgements and control their impulses. Appointments and office-based approaches are based on an assumption that young people will maintain their motivation to attend, not be distracted and that they will control the impulse to do something more pleasurable than attend an appointment with a professional. This understanding of brain development provides us with guidance about how services to young people should be delivered to ensure effectiveness.

Social conditions

Young people's development is affected by the rapid social changes occurring in our society. They currently face particular challenges because Australian society, like all western countries, is undergoing a period of rapid social changes. These changes include the emergence of a greater number of higher education choices, the trend towards uncertain labour markets (even for the qualified), high rates of job and geographic mobility, decreasing rates of marriage and parenthood, lower rates of home buying, and the widespread use of digital communication technologies.¹⁵ It has been concluded that young people's lives today have been made more complex by social, technological, economic and environmental change.¹⁶

These changes have impacted on the social aspects of young people's development. For example, using mobile phones to communicate is a relatively new phenomenon and has led to new events such as 'swarming' (large groups of young people suddenly congregating) and 'cyber bullying'. Mobile phones and the internet have enabled new ways of communicating and social networking, including online chatting, blogging and personalised web pages. These new forms of communication challenge traditional ways of making and retaining relationships or dealing with conflict.

The relatively dramatic changes that have occurred in the patterns of life and the expectations of young people over the past 25 years have also challenged ideas about stages of life. Evidence shows that young people are entering adulthood younger and are shaping new patterns of adult life earlier.¹⁷

Environment

The socioeconomic status of a young person, their family and community affects their future outcomes. Research is clear that these factors impact on young people's development and the choices that are available to them. National and international evidence indicates a strong link between economic disadvantage and education and, consequently, employment outcomes. For example, young people from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to do well at school, which results in fewer employment options.¹⁸

Disadvantage is often concentrated in certain areas.¹⁹ More generally across Victoria, 5 per cent of postcodes account for a quarter of unemployment.²⁰ This means that whole communities are impacted by disadvantage and points to the need for place-based approaches together with individually based strategies.

Young people need to be connected and supported within their families. In one study, most young Victorians aged 18–24 years indicated they could get help from their family when they needed it. However 6.8 per cent of young people in the lowest socioeconomic status quintile felt they could not get assistance from their family compared with 3.1 per cent in the highest socioeconomic status quintile.²¹ This study reinforces the notion that keeping, reconnecting or building bonds between young people and their families, while ensuring the safety of the young people, is necessary. For younger people, families provide the care and support they need; for older young people their family is the safety net they rely on as they trial new experiences and independence.

Homelessness or a lack of stable housing is a risk factor for heightened vulnerability. Young people aged 15–25 years make up the largest group assisted by the homelessness service sector in Victoria.²² Many factors can contribute to youth homelessness including family conflict, rejection of parental authority, poverty, violence and alcohol and other drug misuse. Without stable housing, a young person can quickly disconnect from family and community, education, training or work and require a more intensive service response.

Access to transport is also a significant factor for young people. Young people report that the absence of adequate transport affects their participation and ability to access the support they need. Research suggests that this is also the case for some young people living in the outer suburbs of Melbourne.²³ Young people living in rural areas can be vulnerable due to a range of factors associated with geographic isolation including poorer access to services, education, training, employment and leisure opportunities compounded by a greater dependence on transport for utilising these services relative to young people living in metropolitan Melbourne.²⁴

The research and literature on youth offenders indicates that lack of connection to or involvement in the community, low-income neighbourhoods or neighbourhoods that have 'anti-authority' attitudes are some of the factors that relate to offending behaviour.

Planning for and subsequent investment in communities has significant benefits for young people in terms of facilitating a sense of belonging, safety and health.²⁵ This approach emphasises understanding and improving the quality of 'community wellbeing', including addressing infrastructure issues such as housing, transport and employment in different locations. In planning interventions for young people, a comprehensive approach is required. This approach must include a focus on the individual (their development and individual characteristics), the family (strengthening relationships and the skills of parents) and the local community (addressing disadvantage).

Vulnerability depicted

Most young people go through adolescence with few problems that require formal service interventions. Vulnerability can be identified when a young person has begun to exhibit some of the risk factors listed in Figure 4. The earlier these risks are identified and acted on, the more likely it is that they can be effectively addressed and the less likely they will escalate and become entrenched.

Figure 4 is a conceptual model that places various risk factors within each ‘vulnerability layer’. The diagram’s colours and layers represent the increasing degree of vulnerability as the cumulative effect of risk factors becomes more intense, rather than associating any particular risk factor with a level of vulnerability.



Figure 4: Layers of vulnerability

A focus and commitment is required to reduce the flow through of vulnerable young people into the high-risk layer. It is proposed that young people who fall into layers two and three be the primary focus of the *Vulnerable Youth Framework*.

Risk factors

Utilising risk factors, the following provides some explanation of Figure 4.

- **Low risk** – The majority of young people in Victoria are at low risk for vulnerability. The adolescent stage of development is a time of vulnerability, but generally these young people have a number of supports in place that can assist them with their issues. These young people might take a drink once in a while or occasionally truant. They may be sexually active but generally use contraception. These young people may also experience relationship or social difficulties with their peers, but generally have a positive peer and support network. These young people are also connected to their family and community.
- **Experiencing additional problems** – These young people make up the largest percentage of vulnerable young people and are involved in one or two high-risk behaviours but not as intensely as their high-risk and highly vulnerable peers. These young people may be not achieving academically at school, occasionally truant, experiment with alcohol or other drugs, have unprotected sex sometimes, or have suicidal thoughts from time to time. They are vulnerable because of their behaviours and need support to ensure their issues do not compound and become complex. These young people mainly have pro-social peers and are generally still attached to their families.
- **Highly vulnerable** – This group makes up a small percentage of all young Victorians, but is a larger group than the high-risk group. These young people are most often heavily involved with drinking, smoking and using illegal drugs. They are not achieving academically, are often truant, and frequently have unprotected sex. Others might be identified as 'high mental health risk' adolescents because they are experiencing mental health issues that significantly impact on their personal and social functioning, often occurring together with alcohol or other drug misuse. The peers of these young people are likely to be engaging in similar behaviours, although these young people may also have a few pro-social peers. These young people may still be attached to their family and be engaged in pro-social activities such as sport.
- **High risk** – A small percentage of young people are at high risk. Many of them will be experiencing multiple risk factors. For example, these young people are likely to have been arrested at least once during the year, regularly drinking (probably to excess), using illegal drugs and are likely to be sexually active, engaging mostly in unprotected sex. Many have mental health issues or diagnoses; some will have attempted suicide or have histories of repeated self-harm. Most of these young people will have left school early or will be significantly behind in their academic attainment. These young people will mostly be associating with peers who have similar behaviours and issues and are likely to be disengaged from their family. Many will be homeless or in transient accommodation.

Assessment of vulnerable young people needs to be comprehensive to ensure that all risk factors are identified across the individual, family and community contexts. Interventions need to be planned to strengthen the positive aspects in young people's lives while incorporating strategies to reduce apparent risk factors.

Age-related transitions

The *Vulnerable Youth Framework* is focused on intervening early in the emergence of behaviours that are associated with vulnerability (such as truancy, low-level offending or family conflict). Vulnerability can also be a function of age or developmental stage as the young person moves through a range of significant transition points between the ages of 10 and 25 years. Interventions can be provided to age-related groupings of young people to prevent vulnerability from occurring, or can be effective in reducing low-level vulnerability from escalating.

The transitions that occur between the ages of 10 and 14 years for young people can increase their risk: moving from primary to secondary school; the onset of puberty; joining new peer groups and disconnecting from previous friends; greater freedom and independence and increased independent mobility are examples of these.

Between the ages of 15 and 17 years challenges such as the increased focus on academic performance, pressure to experimental with drugs and alcohol, heightened sexual activity, increasing dependence on peer groups and rejection of authority can all contribute to heightened vulnerability.

Between the ages of 18 and 25 years pressure to live independently, gain further education, training or employment, access to cars and driving, binge drinking, relationship challenges and the onset of mental illness can add to vulnerability. Twenty year olds entering university and moving away from home for the first time can experience vulnerability as much as a 12 year old moving from primary to secondary school. Each of these activities can contribute to vulnerability with harmful results. Age and independence should not be confused with maturity and resilience.

The following provides some examples of combining risk factors with age-related transitions and describes some of the strategies that can support young people to manage through these significant transition points.

Transition to secondary school

- Adolescence – The young person needs to integrate many roles (child, sibling, student, athlete, worker for example) into a self-image.
 - Risk factors: risk-taking behaviour including experimenting with drugs and alcohol, unemployment, antisocial peers, lack of parental support, teenage pregnancy, truanting or disengagement from school.
 - Developmental tasks: defining identity, growth of autonomy in a context of peer conformity, developing a value system, establishing intimate relationships outside of the family.
 - Preventative strategies: anti-bullying programs, community support for young people in schools, activities that retain young people in an educational or vocational setting, family mediation, mentoring, educating young men and women about building healthy, respectful relationships, parenting courses, or engaging young people in sports or other leisure activities, pre- and part-time employment programs, crisis intervention programs.

Transition to work and adult relationships

- Early adulthood – The adult learns to make personal commitments to another as parent or partner.
 - Risk factors: unemployment, poverty, homelessness, social isolation.
 - Developmental tasks: adult roles and responsibilities.
 - Preventative strategies: health promotion activities, drug and alcohol awareness/education programs, crime prevention activities, defensive driving courses, pre- and part-time employment and training programs, building social networks.²⁶

Definition

Adolescence is characterised as a time of fast-paced physiological and emotional change. During this period, young people are still dependent on their families and other institutions in their lives, as well as moving towards independence. Gaining independence often involves pushing boundaries and experimentation. Young people will sometimes lack the experience, resources and support to make good decisions, or to cope with periods of stress as a result of the changes they are experiencing. The negative effects of this vary for each young person, depending on a range of individual, family and community factors.

For the purposes of the framework vulnerable young people are described as:

Young people who, through a combination of their circumstances and adolescent risk-taking behaviour, are at risk of not realising their potential to achieve positive life outcomes.

Data on vulnerability

Using the layer diagram depicted in Figure 4 on page 12, examples of data about the number of Victorian young people experiencing varying degrees of vulnerability are provided in the following table. Table 1 demonstrates that if we do not identify vulnerability early, young people are more likely to move into higher levels of vulnerability. It also shows that fewer young people overall progress into the high-risk tertiary (red) service system but there is an opportunity, through intervening earlier, to reduce this even further.

<p>The majority of Victoria's young people cope well with the vulnerabilities that arise through adolescence.</p>	<p>Some young people experience additional problems that require an early service intervention. Community-based interventions at this level reduce the escalation of problems.</p>	<p>Young people experiencing this level of vulnerability require comprehensive and coordinated interventions from a range of support services.</p>	<p>Although relatively small in number, young people experiencing this level of vulnerability require intensive support. Many are already in custodial settings.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 75 per cent have a 'great deal' of confidence in parental advice. • 84.9 per cent of 18–24 year olds feel they are valued. • 86.1 per cent of young people aged 20–24 years had completed Year 12 or equivalent in 2007. • 82 per cent of young Victorians aged 17 intend to continue their education beyond secondary school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 per cent of 12–15 year olds and 23 per cent of 16–17 year olds drink at levels that risk short-term harm. • 9,000 young people need the support of specialist alcohol and other drug services each year. • 45,000 young people access support each year through the Youth Participation and Access Program. • 30,000 young people under 18 years were processed by police in 2006–07. • There were 1,931 births to women under 20 years in 2006. • Of all reported sexual assault victims/survivors 74 per cent are women under 24 with 64 per cent aged under 18. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2,503 young people aged 12–25 presented with self-harm at hospital emergency departments in 2006–07. • 5.5 per cent of 15–19 year olds and 10.7 per cent of 20 to 24 year olds are not in education, training or employment. • 7,064 young people aged 12–24 were homeless on the 2006 census night. • Youth early psychosis services assist more than 1,400 young people per year. • 5,700 young people aged 15–19 years and 5,650 young people aged 20–24 accessed SAAP services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13,000 Victorian young people in this age range receive treatment from specialist mental health services per annum. • 3,000 young people are under care and protection orders at any time. • 546 young people aged 18–24 were in the adult correction system. • There were 57 suicides among 12–24 year olds in Victoria in 2005. • There are 140 young people in youth justice custodial centres. • 1,100 young people aged 10–17 years are on youth justice community-based orders.

Table 1: Sample data to illustrate vulnerability, as shown in the 'Layers of vulnerability' diagram

Summary

Young people all experience adolescence differently, but none experience it passively. Adolescence can be a time when particular difficulties can arise. Transitions can be challenging and difficult such as moving from primary to secondary school, leaving home or entering new social groups. Most young people find adolescence stressful, without complications such as the onset of mental illness, parental conflict or truancy that further contributes to vulnerability. In addition to addressing individual vulnerability, we must also focus on understanding and addressing the social and environmental issues that are impacting on young people.

Focus areas

The following five focus areas each include a rationale and a set of proposed actions for change. These proposed actions are designed to shape the future activity and further development of a youth service system for vulnerable young people.

Focus area one: Prevention and early identification

What will Victorians see?

Prevention and early identification of vulnerability and high quality interventions build strong families and communities that nurture young people to realise their full potential.

This is imperative because:

- Prevention and intervention early in the onset of a problem is effective.
- Intervening with younger adolescents, where behaviour has not become entrenched, is especially effective.
- Adolescence provides opportunities for targeted interventions to improve life outcomes.
- A focus on strengthening families and communities is needed.
- More intervention strategies are required at the earlier end of the youth service continuum.

Actions for change:

Ensure that existing prevention strategies available at the local level are coordinated and are easily accessible for vulnerable young people.	Develop mechanisms for identifying vulnerability early.	Families and communities are provided with support in their care of young people (for example, mediation services and parenting skills).	Establish a continuum of youth-focused services that support prevention and effective early intervention.
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The evidence

Prevention, early identification and providing interventions is essential in preventing and reducing the escalation of problems.

The Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies Professor Alan Hayes describes prevention and early intervention as follows:

From a pathways perspective, prevention seeks to reduce the overall likelihood of negative pathways and increase the incidence of positive, while early intervention seeks to alter an emergent pathway.

Hayes continues to say:

Intervention starts with evidence of risk, either in terms of the individual's characteristics and/or circumstances or, more typically, as a result of membership of a group that is held to be at risk.²⁷

Prevention strategies

A suite of prevention strategies are required to reduce vulnerability. Prevention strategies that work include health (including mental health) promotion, alcohol and other drug harm minimisation, school engagement strategies, sporting and other recreational activities and building positive and vibrant communities in which young people feel they belong to and take pride in.

In partnership with local communities, state and local governments currently have a number of strategies in place designed to improve community, family and individual wellbeing. These strategies include crime prevention/community safety activities led by Victoria Police, health promotion and drug and alcohol harm minimisation programs and resources through the Department of Human Services, programs and funding through the Office for Youth, as well as local-level activities through local government. Ensuring that the greatest advantage is gained by combining the resources of both state and local government policy and program development will lead to better integrated prevention activities at the local level to create safe and healthy neighbourhoods and communities.

Within schools, prevention strategies are both about engaging young people so they attend and benefit from school (truanting young people are at much higher risk of doing damage to themselves or others) and supporting programs that aim to promote broader health or wellbeing goals.

Identifying vulnerable young people early

The early identification of and subsequent intervention around vulnerability during adolescence is important because adolescence is a critical period of transition from childhood into adulthood. In considering prevention and early identification in this context, the work of Catalano, Hawkins and others provides important guidance in identifying risk and protective factors.²⁸

Risk factors are characteristics of individuals, school, community, family and peer groups that are known to increase the likelihood of harmful drug use, crime, violent behaviour, disengagement from school and mental health problems among young people.²⁹ There are many risk factors at the individual, family, community, school and peer-group levels. These include disengagement or truanting from school, lack of attendance or non-enrolment in study/training or work, appearance of mental health illness, alcohol and other drug misuse, involvement with antisocial peer groups, poor family functioning, unstable accommodation and low community attachment.

Protective factors exert a positive influence and can buffer against the negative influence of risk, thus increasing the likelihood that children and young people will develop the resilience to cope with adversity and vulnerability. Protective factors include strong bonding to family, school, community and peers, healthy beliefs and clear standards for behaviour provided by positive role models.

Vulnerability will, for some young people, emerge despite the presence of protective factors. It is important that young people experiencing additional problems and those considered highly vulnerable are identified as early as possible. Parents, teachers, sports coaches and other adults interacting with young people are well placed to identify young people at risk.

Engaging with young people and assessing their circumstances is a way to ensure that young people know they have someone to talk to if they need to. Other mechanisms include talking to young people about their interests/strengths and assisting them to engage in those activities or referring or assisting young people to access other services or supports in the community.

Adolescents as members of family and community

Families, communities and peer groups are an important influence in young people's lives. For example, while conflict is often a feature in parent-adolescent relationships, evidence suggests that this relationship is a key influence on young people. The YouthSCAN survey (2007) found that family, parents and particularly mothers, remain the central and dominant influences in young Australians' lives. Eighty seven per cent of young people aged 14-17 surveyed by YouthSCAN agreed that family is the most important thing to them.

The role of friends, partners and extended family in providing support for young people is often overlooked in youth-focused interventions, yet evidence reveals that young people continue to have a great attachment and connection to family.³⁰ Recognising the importance of family, peers and partners in the lives of young people can help them make positive changes and move forward. The importance of strengthening attachments to both parents and other adults has increasingly been emphasised in research.

A focus on a young person's broader context to include family, school, community, and peer group can ensure that assessment of vulnerability and subsequent intervention will be effective.

Actions for change

Prevention strategies

Ensure that existing prevention strategies available at the local level are coordinated and are easily accessible for vulnerable young people.

Clearly articulated local-level prevention strategies need to exist in all areas. Victoria Police, mental health and drugs strategies, Office of Housing, local government and community-based organisations all have or are developing preventative strategies. State government departments will provide comprehensive information and input to ensure linkage between local-level and state government department strategies.

LGAs should have a range of prevention strategies in place for vulnerable young people, which may include:

- crime prevention/diversion strategies
- mentoring
- access to services such as parenting skills programs
- drug and alcohol awareness education
- generalist youth services
- family mediation services.

Early identification mechanisms

Develop mechanisms for identifying vulnerability early.

Strategies to enable the early identification of vulnerability are required. The onset of vulnerability is often readily identifiable: low-level offending, antisocial behaviour and disengagement from school can all be indicators of heightened vulnerability. Police, teachers and other adults in the community interacting with young people have a role in identifying vulnerable young people and acting on this. Actions can include linking the young person in with sport, recreation or cultural activities or, if needed, referral to services.

Guidelines, toolkits or other information material will be developed or accessed and made easily available to assist adults who are interacting with young people to identify when young people may be vulnerable.

Positive family relationships

Families and communities are provided with support in their care of young people (for example, mediation services and parenting skills).

Renewed emphasis on placing adolescents in the context of their families is essential in interventions with vulnerable young people. Having a positive family life and friendships and engagement in sport and recreational activities helps young people to stay connected and safe in their communities.

To support families, there will be a focus on reconnection. Family mediation, parenting skills programs, family therapy, in-home support and mentoring are all effective interventions to support both parents and young people. Effective programs and services should be developed and implemented within communities.

A continuum of youth-focused services that deliver effective early interventions

Establish a continuum of youth-focused services that support prevention and effective early intervention.

A balance of services across a continuum of interventions will be developed and implemented. This will mean ensuring that prevention and early intervention services are available for young people and their families. Currently, intensive and tertiary services tend to dominate this continuum. While these services provide a crucial response to young people, it is important that sufficient effort is directed towards prevention and responding to vulnerabilities early in their onset.

The education system has an important place on this continuum – as a key platform for early identification, intervention and a means to relate to and engage with parents and families. It also provides the major means for young people to gain skills, qualifications and later employment success.

Other opportunities for building a continuum of youth-focused services will be identified as part of the local planning process, outlined later in this discussion paper.

Focus area two: Engagement in education, training and employment

What will Victorians see?

Vulnerable young people benefiting from education, training and employment opportunities, with schools paying close attention to their progress and working with families and relevant community and specialist services to support their learning, safety, health and wellbeing.

This is imperative because:

- Engagement in education, training and employment is a key pathway to future life opportunities.
- Attendance and engagement in education reduces the likelihood of young people engaging in high-risk or antisocial behaviour.
- Schools and other education providers are a key universal platform from which to deploy a range of prevention strategies and to promote positive outcomes.
- Health and other professionals are available to support teachers and schools, as well as working with students and families.
- Schools have an existing set of strategies to assist student wellbeing and achievement, support services built on or alongside schools, and local partnerships such as the School Focused Youth Service that can be enhanced and strengthened over time.

Actions for change:

Support schools to keep vulnerable young people engaged in education and training.

Strengthen the role of school health and welfare specialist staff to improve identification and early intervention.

Ensure that individualised plans are in place for highly vulnerable students, with schools and other agencies working together.

Strengthen partnerships with the broader service system to support entry into further education, training or employment.

The evidence

Education and training are the primary pathway through which young people gain access to employment and earnings. They represent a key investment to ensure Victoria's future prosperity.

Vulnerable young people, because of their circumstances or their behaviours, are much less likely to gain the benefits that education offers. In turn, not attending or missing out on school compounds the situation, making it more likely that they will come into contact with police or crisis services.

Many of the most troubled and most vulnerable young people are disengaged from school as well as separated from their families. Engaging vulnerable young people in education, training and employment (or re-engaging them when they have dropped out) is therefore a key focus area for the *Vulnerable Youth Framework*.

Schools

Schools are the universal service platform for all young people aged 5–18 years in Victoria. The great majority of young people are enrolled in school until they complete Year 12, with many others engaged in tertiary or further education thereafter. A rising proportion of Victorian young people now complete Year 12 or equivalent, however more vulnerable young people are underachieving. For example, 57 per cent of 17 year olds in out-of-home care are attending school, compared with 78 per cent of all 17 year olds. When leaving school, it appears that children in out-of-home care are far less likely to move into education or employment than other early school leavers, making them at even higher risk of future disadvantage.³¹ Currently, many early school leavers also struggle to find employment.

Schools can face challenges in continuing to engage vulnerable young people. Developmental problems, disrupted schooling, family or peer difficulties, and demanding behaviours – any or all of these can impede learning, reduce school success and discourage participation.

Victorian schools already respond to vulnerabilities that emerge in adolescence in a range of ways. This includes recognising the need for the curriculum and the classroom to engage students from a wide range of backgrounds in learning, as well as responding to the needs of individual students that impede learning.

While the responsibilities of schools centre on the learning needs of children and young people, the Victorian education system includes a wide-ranging set of specialist responses to the broader needs of students. These include student welfare coordinators, primary welfare officers, secondary school nurses, school student support officers (including psychologists, social workers, speech pathologists and visiting teachers for hearing, vision and physical health-impaired students), careers and pathways advisors and learning support staff including literacy specialists. Various policies and tools have been developed to provide an individualised focus on education pathways and to pay attention to the needs of particular young people.

Victoria has widened the range of curriculum offerings to include vocational, education and training (VET) in schools as well as introducing the alternative Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) for young people who are interested in going on to training and Technical and Further Education (TAFE), doing an apprenticeship or getting a job after completing Year 12. Transition Support Workers are available in targeted areas to assist young people who have left school to take advantage of the wider range of education and employment opportunities. Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) bring together education providers, industry, community and government organisations to improve education, training and employment outcomes for young people across Victoria.

Victoria can build on approaches already established in schools and extend community partnerships with local or specialist health and community services as well as with other education, training and employment services related to school. Similarly, Victoria can extend school partnerships with parents, including around the young person's entry into the labour market.

Furthermore, business and community organisations such as local government services, social and sporting clubs can provide schools with access to a wealth of resources and opportunities to broaden students' educational experiences. These organisations can give learning real context and relevance. Local business, industry and vocational education centres can provide apprenticeships, referral pathways and strategies to engage young people leaving school.

A particular strength of Victoria's state schooling system is the extent to which schools are locally managed. Local school communities are able to respond to local needs and challenges. Some will be better equipped or positioned than others to respond to opportunities under this framework.

Schools sometimes lack either the expertise or the ability to mobilise the supports that young people may need from wider health and community services. School Focused Youth Service coordinators are available to support schools to link with these services. The Strengthening Student Support Services initiative, the extension of the Primary Welfare Officer initiative and the existing student wellbeing resources and policy support for schools, aims to improve system and school capacity. However, specialist service capacity and limited ability to coordinate this with school approaches remains a challenge.

The transition from school to further education, training and employment is a crucial one for young people's success in adulthood. Transition Support Workers in locations of high need provide one way in which more vulnerable school leavers can be supported across this transition.

Further education training and employment

Coupled with a focus on school education and employment however is the need to ensure that the young workforce is appropriately qualified and 'work ready'. Programs that support those young people who are not compulsorily required to attend school are needed. Local planning for the youth service system should include the local TAFE and other training providers to ensure that vulnerable young people have access to training courses and are properly supported to complete them.

Providing a bridge into the labour market

Employment is highly correlated with positive life outcomes, such as stable housing and an adequate standard of living. A focus on ensuring that vulnerable young people are supported into employment is important. For example, the Business Council of Australia noted that:

The most effective way to ensure that as many Australians as possible can participate in the economy's prosperity is through employment. Lack of employment is the single greatest predictor that an individual will be in the poorest 20% of Australia's population.³²

A lack of employment is associated with a range of difficulties including crime, depression and alcohol or other drug misuse.

There is a correlation between unemployment (and low participation) and level of education. Young people who obtain a Year 12 qualification are more likely to continue their involvement in further education and training and be employed. The most common difficulty reported by unemployed people aged 15–19 years and 20–24 years was 'insufficient work experience.'³³

The Dusseldorp Skills Forum notes that:

Today's good economic times provide us with a unique opportunity to cement the institutional arrangements surrounding the school-to-work transition to sustain the country over the long term, well beyond the influence of the current boom. Australia still has a significant number of young people not adequately engaged or prepared for the future.³⁴

Effective employment programs appear to be those that:

- target youth at high risk of poor employment or educational outcomes
- are well structured
- target young adolescents (16–19 year olds)³⁵
- have high standards and expectations of achievement
- take a holistic approach to address the varying needs of young people (for example, hands-on instruction, child care and transport)
- find ways to integrate and use community members (including parents/caregivers)
- utilise work-based learning activities (such as placements)
- have long-term support and follow-up in the critical early months of employment.³⁶

This provides us with four strategies for improving the likelihood that vulnerable young people will achieve employment:

- focus on the education sector retaining young people for as long as possible in school/education or other training
- actively monitor vulnerable young people who have left school and are participating in training to ensure they are assisted to complete this
- provide opportunities for young people to gain work experience by linking them with local business or industry
- work with parents to support young people's transition to work.

Building on Victoria's strengths

Secondary schools play a key part in the lives of adolescents. They provide the main controlled social setting in which young people establish, experiment and transition to adulthood. They also provide the learning opportunities that underpin not just school success but shape future employment chances. Along with other education and training providers, they make up a universal platform on which the adolescent population can be reached to deliver broad health and wellbeing promotion or disease prevention services.

As discussed above, Victoria's education and training system already pays attention to many of the vulnerabilities and challenges that emerge in adolescence and assist students and their families with health or personal needs. More vulnerable young people, particularly those with troubled family lives and inadequate care, continue to do more poorly and often face difficult transitions to adulthood.

These directions will be reinforced with broader reforms under consideration for Victorian schools. The Victorian Government's *Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform*³⁷ discussion paper proposes systemic changes to:

- ensure that every child makes good progress, supporting schools and teachers to provide each individual student with the benefits of Victoria's curriculum
- improve pathways and transitions from school, including expanding school responsibility for young people's pathways until they complete Year 12 or equivalent or turn 19
- establish clearer expectations for non-government schools
- partner with parents and families, including providing specific guidance to families on how they can support their child's learning and development
- mobilise community resources, particularly developing wider networks to offer post-compulsory education, training and employment options.

These approaches provide the context for building further on the many efforts within Victorian schools to better meet the needs of vulnerable young people.

Given adequate resources, Victorian secondary schools are well positioned to be able to identify vulnerable young people and, together with local youth-focused services, to develop processes and protocols for these students to access appropriate supports and services, including other educational and training opportunities, in their local area.

Actions for change

Keeping vulnerable young people at school

Support schools to keep vulnerable young people engaged in education and training.

Secondary schools will be encouraged to explore and implement new strategies to maintain student engagement, and to reduce early school leaving, drawing both on international evidence and on the approaches that appear to be most successful in Victoria.

Early identification and early intervention

Strengthen the role of school health and welfare specialist staff to improve identification and early intervention.

Drawing on the skills of school student support officers, school nurses and student wellbeing staff, the capability of teachers to identify students with risk factors and emerging vulnerabilities will be developed.

Particular attention will be paid to identifying children in primary school who may face difficulties in the transition to secondary school.

Early identification of health or wellbeing issues emerging in adolescence will enable schools and families to respond quickly. When a student is identified as being at risk of disengaging, schools will intervene quickly and ensure that appropriate supports are put in place, taking advantage of school student support officers, school nurses and student wellbeing staff and of wider health and community services.

Individualised plans for more vulnerable students

Ensure that individualised plans are in place for highly vulnerable students, with schools and other agencies working together.

Individual education and pathway plans for students identified as being highly vulnerable will be developed and implemented as early as possible. This will build on the experience of schools in planning for children in out-of-home care, as well as the approach being developed for Aboriginal children.

The plans will pay particular attention to the transition from primary to secondary school and the transition into post-compulsory education, training and the labour market, which commonly begins in the middle years of schooling.

For very vulnerable young people, a multi-agency planning approach will need to be put in place around the young person, with their families, local youth and family services or specialist agencies working together and responding to the particular circumstances of the young person and their family, their community and their peer relationships.

Greater coordination with the broader services system

Strengthen partnerships with the broader service system to support entry into further education, training or employment.

Improved coordination with the broader service system and with VET and employment services will occur. A common approach to understanding, assessing and reducing risks and vulnerability will allow schools and youth-focused services, including mental health and alcohol or other drug services, to work together more effectively. Stronger links between the service, whether based in schools or around them, will produce a greater awareness of how to work together to maximise efficiency and effectiveness.

A greater focus on the transition from school to other training or employment is also important. This will be achieved through the increased coordination of services (discussed in the next section) delivered by TAFE and other tertiary education providers, local business and industry.

Focus area three: Local planning for youth services

What will Victorians see?

Locally based planning to ensure the local youth service system is responsive and meets the needs of vulnerable young people.

This is imperative because:

- Schools and families are not always sufficient to provide all the support vulnerable young people need.
- Vulnerable young people and their families need to be able to easily access services that can respond to their needs.
- Current service planning is not consistent and crosses multiple networks. A process to oversee all local planning and networks will assist to identify priorities, service gaps and enable a consistent approach to implementing new initiatives.

Actions for change:

Establish or enhance local-level youth plans to strengthen connections between youth services, identify priorities and outcomes and assist in establishing a locally based, navigable and integrated service system.

Improve cooperation and collaboration between state government, local government and community service organisations.

Embed an outcomes focus into locally based youth services to enable the youth service system's effectiveness with vulnerable young people to be measured.

Implement processes that support vulnerable young people to actively participate in local networks including developing local-level youth plans.

The evidence

In each local area there are vulnerable young people who require services to support and assist them. Between communities there is variation in the number of services and the types of services that are available. Communities that are characterised as having high numbers of vulnerable young people and stressed families coping with multiple disadvantage and few services will mean that young people are not likely to be getting the support they need. In turn, their ability to become healthy, well-functioning adults is limited. Understanding what services are available in each community is one of the keys to planning and building a better system for young people.

In 2007 the Office for Youth (Department of Planning and Community Development) and the Youth Services and Youth Justice Branch (Department of Human Services) commissioned KPMG to undertake research related to Victoria's young people. This research included a literature review of international and national best practice models in providing early support services to young people and a review of existing services and practice models in Victoria.³⁸

This project found that a number of best-practice studies identify the need for developing a youth services system based on a continuum of service delivery that ranges from prevention and early intervention through to secondary and tertiary responses to meet young peoples needs. In Victoria, many local government authorities provide programs for youth, most often concentrated at the universal end of service delivery. However analysis of youth services in Victoria indicates that most Victorian state government investment in youth services is concentrated on secondary and tertiary interventions.

The KPMG study also found that, currently in Victoria, there is no single body that has responsibility for coordinating an overall youth services system, nor is there a coordinated system for managing and monitoring service planning and delivery.³⁹ Despite the investment from three levels of government (including the Commonwealth), there is lack of consistency with respect to youth service provision at the local level. Youth services in Victoria exist in a range of forms and are provided by a range of organisations. The current youth services system tends to be characterised by lack of systematic coordination and little data-sharing to help inform comprehensive service delivery. For many vulnerable young people it is a difficult system to navigate.

Many youth services are constrained by funding agreements that influence eligibility criteria. Service targets and strategies are generally single issue focused. A service response may not be available until a problem is significant. Waiting times for services vary, as does the amount of time available for service delivery. There is often no clear point of entry for a young person or a family experiencing problems in any given locality. These constraints may lead to young people feeling rejected by the system.⁴⁰

The report *Staying Connected: Solutions for addressing service gaps for young people living at the interface*⁴¹ also identified many of these issues.

A local-level youth service system that is uncoordinated and complex does not meet the needs of vulnerable young people and their families. Other advantages are also gained by local planning activity that results in better coordinated and integrated service delivery:

- increased efficiency
- achieving more from limited resources
- enhanced effectiveness, resulting in better outcomes for service clients and providers.⁴²

More recently the importance of service networking in Victoria has been recognised and there is now a greater integration of service systems (School Focused Youth Service, Child and Family Alliances and Primary Care Partnerships are examples of this). These voluntary partnerships provide a platform for improving service access, employment and training opportunities and care coordination, managing holistic approaches to health and welfare and establishing quality improvement initiatives.

In order to promote coordination and integration of youth services, improved planning and coordination needs to occur within and across local and state governments.⁴³ Local youth plans should be developed in each LGA in collaboration with all youth-focused services. The youth planning function should complement or build on existing planning mechanisms and address the following key questions:

- What is the youth composition in each local area and what are the particular needs of vulnerable young people?
- What are the mechanisms by which vulnerability can be identified early?
- What prevention and supports or services exist to assist vulnerable young people and their families early in the onset of a problem?
- How will schools ensure that vulnerable young people are retained or attracted back to school or assisted into training or employment opportunities?
- What barriers or obstacles exist that reduce the ability of the services or the broader community to assist vulnerable young people?
- What is required to support families and the community better?
- What efficiencies could be achieved from within the existing system?
- How could youth service system effectiveness be enhanced and how would we know that this has been achieved?

To assist with the planning process examples of prevention and early identification strategies are outlined in focus area one. Options for including schools, representatives of particular groups of young people and characteristics of effective services are outlined in focus areas two, four and five respectively.

Local youth plans should also focus on processes for streamlining existing service accessibility. This may include:

- outreach services to address issues of geographic isolation or service unavailability
- the implementation of casework and planning approaches that respond to the range of needs of young people and their families and involve all services working together
- ensuring services are available for young people when they need them (for example, this may mean working outside 'core' working hours)
- 'memorandums of understanding' regarding information sharing and developing protocols for data sharing to better respond to both individual and group issues in a local area.

This initial step in the planning process will require a concerted effort across state and local government and must include community-based services who work with vulnerable young people as well as other organisations such as schools, other education providers and local businesses.

It is expected that this local-level planning process will result in a greater understanding of the needs of vulnerable young people and their families, the services that currently exist and the local area's capability and capacity to respond to the identified needs. This in turn creates an understanding of the existing overlaps and duplication in services and assists in developing strategies to address this. Local planning will identify barriers to active participation by vulnerable young people in school, training or employment or other preventative activities and what is required to resolve this.

Youth participation in community planning

There is an increasing recognition that the community benefits from actively engaging young people. Young people provide important insights into what works in communities because those aged 12–18 years are the most ‘embedded’ in their local spaces.⁴⁴ They have the most at stake in ensuring that communities are safe and enjoyable places to be.⁴⁵

Youth participation in services and systems that work with young people needs to ensure that:

- the service is youth friendly and youth focused⁴⁶
- the service is attractive to other young people⁴⁷
- young people feel they have meaningful input
- quality assurance measures are comprehensive and include the views of those who they are designed for.⁴⁸

Youth participation may include the following:

- representation of young people on youth advisory committees that develop youth policy
- inclusion of young people in developing and delivering services
- active participation of young people in service evaluation and quality improvement processes.

Active participation increases the confidence that young people have in consultation processes and increases their access to the service system and community and government structures.

Building an evidence base to inform planning

Local planning needs to be focused on the outcomes that matter for young people, particularly vulnerable young people, and informed by data on indicators of young people’s safety, health, development, learning and wellbeing. Such local data regarding young children is now being made available by the Victorian Government. This could be extended to include older children and adolescents.

Resourcing local government and local networks with the latest evidence on effective interventions to improve adolescent outcomes is a further key element in ensuring local planning leads to local action. The Victorian Government has published, and is regularly updating, a catalogue of evidence on effective interventions for the early years of life. These particularly focus on actions that are suited to a local or school level. Such a catalogue around interventions for young people, regularly reviewed and updated, would provide a common evidence base for planning across the state.

Actions for change

Local planning and coordination

Establish or enhance local-level youth plans to strengthen connections between youth services, identify priorities and outcomes and assist in establishing a locally based, navigable and integrated service system.

It is proposed that local-level youth plans be developed to ensure that a coordinated and integrated system is available that meets the needs of vulnerable young people. A broad range of youth-focused services should be involved in developing the local youth plan, including schools, TAFEs, police, local business, community service and health organisations. Local-level youth plans should complement existing planning mechanisms or could build on plans developed by other related networks such as the School Focused Youth Service.

Youth plans will also detail the activities required in each locality to establish or enhance a comprehensive youth service system. Local-level youth plans will identify the outcomes sought in each locality and the means by which these will be measured.

Improved collaboration

Improve cooperation and collaboration between state government, local government and community service organisations.

Existing mechanisms for cooperation and collaboration between state and local government and community service organisations will be enhanced to facilitate better partnerships. This will lead to improved information sharing, cross-government understanding of local needs, and better decision making regarding service development, implementation and funding.

Consideration needs to be given to the nature of shared data to assist in local planning efforts and identify local issues and priorities. Effective information sharing provisions are fundamental to informing local service planning networks and direct service providers to enable earlier intervention within and between the universal, secondary and tertiary sectors.

Improved understanding and greater emphasis on outcomes

Embed an outcomes focus into locally based youth services to enable the youth service system's effectiveness with vulnerable young people to be measured.

High level outcomes and indicators for all of Victoria's young people are framed by the *Future Directions* youth policy and the *Outcomes Framework*. The Victorian Child and Adolescent Monitoring System (VCAMS) collects relevant state-level data.

These high-level outcomes and indicators will frame the basis for agreement across government and funded organisations on the improvements that their individual and joint efforts are intended to achieve for vulnerable young people. Local outcomes and indicators will be consistent with these but adapted and tailored to reflect the local context of vulnerable young people. Outcomes and indicators will be determined through local youth plans and will assist in building effective, integrated and collaborative service models for vulnerable young people.

The Victorian Government will resource this with agency data reports, local-level outcomes data and information about evidence based, effective interventions.

Reporting on and measuring progress in service delivery

The Victorian Government's 2008 action plan *Strengthening Community Organisations*⁴⁹ has stated a commitment to ensuring service agreement consistency for funded agencies. Where community organisations receive funding from a number of state government departments for service provision, there will be an alignment of quality and accountability requirements as well as better and more streamlined processes for reporting and monitoring.

This streamlining of interaction with government will reduce the current administrative burden on community organisations providing services to vulnerable young people and release resources for more efficient performance of core activities.

Participation of vulnerable young people

Implement processes that support vulnerable young people to actively participate in local networks including developing local-level youth plans.

Processes for including vulnerable young people in developing local youth plans will be created to ensure they are able to meaningfully provide input into services that directly affect them. Currently, the perspectives of vulnerable young people are not consistently taken into consideration in program and service planning and evaluation. Engaging with vulnerable young people to involve them in decision making is challenging, but also rewarding for them and their community.

Focus area four: Tailored responses to particular groups

What will Victorians see?

Diversity respected and inclusion promoted ensuring effective responses to the needs of particular groups of vulnerable young people.

This is imperative because:

- Some families and young people from particular groups require specific consideration because of their history, circumstances and the additional difficulties they face.
- Services that are inclusive but also recognise and value diversity are required.

Actions for change:

Identify the needs of particular groups (Indigenous, CALD, young people with a disability) as relevant to local areas through local planning mechanisms and coordinate appropriate responses.	Identify the needs of other groups of vulnerable young people as relevant to local areas through local planning mechanisms and coordinate appropriate responses.	Monitor the outcomes that particular groups of young people are achieving.	Develop and implement individual and group responses that recognise and value diversity.
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The evidence

Particular groups of the Victorian community are especially vulnerable. Vulnerability experienced by these groups can be due to inter-generational disadvantage affecting many aspects of life (especially relevant for Indigenous people) or arrival to a new country that has a very different culture, values and societal norms (especially relevant for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families). In addition, some young people are born vulnerable (for example, those born with a disability) or live in areas of chronic economic and social disadvantage.

The State of Victoria's Young People report reiterates the government's commitment to improving the wellbeing of all young Victorians and its attention on four particular groups of young people:

- Indigenous
- CALD
- people with a disability
- the chronically disadvantaged (note, chronic disadvantage is an aspect of a young person's life addressed in the discussion on the impacts of a young person's environment).

Membership in one or more of these groups is not synonymous with vulnerability but young people from these population groups are often over-represented among those with complex problems. They can experience poor outcomes across a broad range of areas including employment, education, health, housing and justice. Specific responses need to be planned, developed and delivered in acknowledgement of the particular needs of the young people in these population groups.

Tailored responses for vulnerable young people should not only be limited to these groupings. To effectively engage students and local communities, schools have to adapt to changing patterns of diversity. In developing a local youth plan, local youth organisations and stakeholders should identify the groups of young people that require particular responses or approaches according to the unique features of the area as well as trends and issues that are apparent. For example, young people involved in low-level crime, the long-term unemployed, homeless young people or teenage parents.

Indigenous young people

Young Indigenous Victorians are faring less well than their non-Indigenous peers on a range of measures. For example, there is evidence that Victoria's Indigenous people are homeless at a rate six times greater than the general population. In terms of education, Indigenous students tend not to perform as well as other students at Victorian secondary schools. Indigenous students in Years 6 and 8 are more likely (than non-Indigenous students) to report rarely or never enjoying school – 14.2 per cent compared with 10.4 per cent of other students.⁵⁰

A number of innovative initiatives are already underway to support and improve outcomes for young Aboriginal people in Victoria. These include the *Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework (VIAF)* and the *Wannik Education Strategy for Koorie Students*.⁵¹ The VIAF expresses a commitment to ensuring concerted effort focuses on building protective factors to reduce the trauma and risk experienced in Indigenous communities, especially by young people and to build the strength of Indigenous communities (human, social and economic resources). *Wannik* takes a strengths-based approach to supporting Indigenous students.

It is critical to ensure that, at the local level, representatives from Indigenous communities are consulted as part of the planning and implementation of services for young Indigenous people.

Culturally and linguistically diverse

There is a lack of targeted services and programs for CALD young people. Existing mainstream services cannot always deliver culturally appropriate services due to a range of issues, including resource constraints and a lack of training.

Young refugees in Victoria today arrive principally from Africa and the Middle East under the Commonwealth Government's humanitarian program. The Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues identified that there were 1,110 youth arrivals (aged 13–25 years) to Victoria in 2006–07 under the humanitarian program.

Many of these refugee young people arrive with a number of emotional, psychological and developmental difficulties. Refugee young people may have undergone a variety of traumatic experiences before arriving in Australia, including torture and trauma, persecution, violent civil discord, arbitrary abductions, sexual abuse, the loss of loved ones, imprisonment, disease and starvation, or periods of time spent in refugee camps.

Areas with a high refugee population often fall on urban fringe areas in Victoria. There are a number of agencies delivering services and programs to vulnerable young people in these areas. Existing services can be hampered by a lack of coordination and scarce resources to deliver to a growing high-need refugee, newly arrived and CALD population.

The newly established Multifaith Multicultural Youth Network (MMYN) represents the voice of young people from diverse faith and cultural backgrounds to Victorian Government. The MMYN have worked with a wide group of young people to highlight and develop key issues for Victorian youth from diverse backgrounds. They have identified the following five themes as key priority areas for future work:

- education – further developing faith and cultural education programs in schools, particularly in regional areas
- sport – increasing the use of sport to foster connections between young people from diverse faith and cultural backgrounds
- media – working with the media to improve the ways in which faith and culture are represented
- employment discrimination – working to reduce employment discrimination against youth from diverse backgrounds, to develop and foster diverse workplaces
- newly arrived young people – working to provide specific and tailored support to young people who are newly arrived in Australia.

These priorities are important foundations for early intervention and prevention strategies for CALD young people in terms of gaining wider community acceptance of difference and diversity. They are also important protective factors for enhancing individual self-esteem and sense of belonging in times of crisis or incidents of racism and discrimination against particular ethnic or religious groups.

Young people with a disability

The evidence shows that individual young people can be vulnerable because they have disability that requires additional support and treatment. These include young people with a range of cognitive or physical disabilities that prevent them from participating fully in mainstream education and in social life. According to the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW), 12 per cent of young people aged 15–19 years with a disability stated that they needed at least one day a week off school or could not attend school because of their disability.⁵² Young people with a disability are less likely than those without a disability to complete Year 12 or to have studies beyond Year 12.⁵³

The AIHW analysis of the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003 *Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers* found that around 8 per cent (20,000) of young people surveyed were permanently unable to work because of their disability.⁵⁴ While 40 per cent of young people did not identify any restrictions to employment, the remaining 60 per cent reported a number of barriers.

Peak bodies representing young people with a disability as well as local disability service providers should be included in developing local-level youth plans. This will ensure an informed approach to services and interventions for young people with disabilities.

The Victorian Government is also committed to developing an *Autism State Plan* in partnership with Autism Victoria to build new and better approaches across government for meeting the growing and complex needs of people with autism and autism spectrum disorders. Work is currently underway with a draft plan due to government by the end of 2008.⁵⁵

Actions for change

Needs identification through local planning

Identify the needs of particular groups (Indigenous, CALD, young people with a disability) as relevant to local areas through local planning mechanisms and coordinate appropriate responses.

Processes to ensure representation from each of the groups as relevant to local areas need to be developed. Broad representation from each of the groups could be sought directly from communities or from peak or other specialist organisations to ensure that a consistent and informed evidence base of successful interventions is promoted across the range of particular groups.

Other groups of vulnerable young people

Identify the needs of other groups of vulnerable young people as relevant to local areas through local planning mechanisms and coordinate appropriate responses.

Each LGA will be aware of other groups of vulnerable young people who have particular needs. These groups may include young people involved in crime, homeless young people, those engaged in alcohol or other drug misuse or same-sex-attracted youth. It is critical to ensure that representatives of these groups are included as part of the development of local-level youth plans and subsequent development and implementation of service responses.

Consideration of specific outcomes measures

Monitor the outcomes that particular groups of young people are achieving.

While local-level youth plans will allow for an outcomes focus, representative organisations of the particular groups should determine a set of specific outcome measures for these groups. Indicators of how progress will be measured should also be agreed. More broad central support from government will enable promotion of successful strategies and services across the state for particular groups and consolidate data across agreed outcomes.

Responding to groups of young people

Develop and implement individual and group responses that recognise and value diversity.

At the local level, particular trends and issues for groups of young people will be evident. Local planning will identify particular groups of vulnerable young people and develop individual and group responses. The local youth plan will then articulate need, demand, outcomes measures and evaluation of these.

Focus area five: Effective services, capable people

What will Victorians see?

Capable people delivering effective services working with vulnerable young people and their families in their own communities.

This is imperative because:

- Services must be effective when addressing the needs of vulnerable young people.
- When families are unavailable, vulnerable young people need to engage with positive adult role models and services that can assist them to access the supports they require.
- Quality assurance processes contribute to improving the effectiveness of youth services.

Actions for change:

Embed locally based youth services that are effective, youth-centred, visible, flexible, accessible and responsive to vulnerable young people.

Enhance or develop the capacity and capability of the people who work with vulnerable young people.

Embed quality assurance and evaluation processes into the service system to inform best practice models.

Implement interventions for young people with highly complex needs that are coordinated and comprehensive.

The evidence

There is a need to provide more service responses for vulnerable young people and to intervene both:

- early in onset so if problems have occurred they can be tackled as early as possible
- early in life (as young as possible) and as soon as problems are identified.

In 2007, the Youth Services and Youth Justice Branch of the Department of Human Services and the Office for Youth, within the former Department for Victorian Communities, engaged KPMG to provide advice about options for developing a more integrated and coordinated generalist youth service system in Victoria. The following service characteristics were identified as being important in achieving positive outcomes for young people:

- Services are visible and accessible to young people.
- Services are flexibly delivered and able to assist a broad range of young people.
- Services enable staff and young people to develop solid relationships.
- Services provide opportunities for young people to have a sense of belonging, connectedness and participation.
- Services are informed by evidence about what is appropriate to support the developmental needs of young people and work within a risk/protective factor framework.
- Services are sustainable.
- Services are supported by partnership and collaborative approaches to address the needs of young people.
- Interventions that incorporate and involve a coordinated effort across the three spheres of a young person's social world (school, family and community) are among the most effective.
- Action interventions that span multi-year programs appear to have longer lasting effects.
- Services that seek young people's feedback on the quality, appropriateness and effectiveness of interventions and programs are essential to improving and developing best practice.

A comprehensive localised youth service system that provides early intervention services

The following table shows the four layers of vulnerability described earlier and provides some indicators for services that appear to work best for each layer.

While the layers are indicated in various colours, it needs to be emphasised that there are no hard boundaries around the layers. Young people can move between each layer at any point in time. It is important for services to be able to provide smooth pathways both into and out of their area of expertise so that young people can experience service flexibility that focuses on their individual needs.

The majority of Victorian young people	Experiencing additional problems	Highly vulnerable	High risk
Lower concentration of services	→		Highest concentration of services
The broadest area of activity relating to all young people.	A substantial area of timely activity for young people identified as vulnerable.	The area that involves a range of support services for a smaller number of young people with serious problems.	The area of out-of-the ordinary traumas – emergencies that needs careful planning to enable appropriate responses. Tertiary interventions are usually involuntary.
Activities include:	Activities include:	Activities include:	Activities include:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good supportive connections to family • positive engagement with school • positive peer groups • access to information • health promotion programs • leadership development programs • involvement in recreational / cultural events or organisations • neighbourhood and community renewal, including youth-friendly/ specific 'spaces'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prevention activities • generalist youth services, including counselling • youth development activities • access to other services, including family planning, drug and alcohol awareness and education • a focus on keeping young people engaged at school • mentoring • crime prevention / diversion programs • parent support groups / parenting education • mental health and alcohol or other drug assessment and treatment services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activities include: • family services • intensive youth support services • a focus on returning young people to school, TAFE / university or other educational / vocational training activity • activities that are culturally relevant • mentoring • parenting education / support groups • mental health and alcohol or other drug assessment and treatment services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • child protection services – targeted and specialist services • youth justice services – targeted and specialist services • specialist mental health or alcohol or other drug assessment and treatment services • inpatient drug and alcohol rehabilitation • access to educational / vocational / training activity • providing comprehensive / integrated and intensive support services.

Table 2: A youth service continuum⁵⁶

Table 2 broadly outlines services and interventions that work with vulnerable young people depending on their level of vulnerability as depicted in Figure 4 on page 12. It is likely that those young people in layer three will need multiple services. They require comprehensive case management approaches to ensure that services are coordinated and progress monitored.

Community-based organisation partnerships are required to mobilise all the available resources around the young person, and to ensure that vulnerable young people are able to access support services. Innovations that have assisted this include:

- the introduction of community-based service networks to build stronger links between services
- implementation of casework and planning approaches that respond to a range of needs of clients and involve a number of agencies working together
- co-locating services to achieve improvements in communication and to streamline service delivery
- using publicised community intake points to enable easier navigation of the service system⁵⁷.

Group work as an intervention for vulnerable young people and their parents

Group work models of practice intervention can be an effective means of engaging with young people. Adolescents are familiar with a group environment; they are taught in groups and socialise in groups. Working with vulnerable young people in groups can achieve a number of benefits. It can enhance individual growth, provide opportunities for teaching pro-social values and behaviours and connect young people into positive peer groups.

Group work for parents of vulnerable youth can provide education about adolescent development and can assist in providing strength based responses to adolescent behaviour. Groups can reduce feelings of isolation and increase and strengthen social networks.

The people who work with young people

Youth workers

The KPMG report, cited earlier, indicated that youth sector consultations overwhelmingly supported a generalist youth services/support approach in Victoria. The reach and existence of generalist youth workers and universally accessible early intervention services are currently limited. The consultations also highlighted the need to ensure that the scope and focus of Victorian youth services is clearly defined. This comprises:

- increasing the focus on generalist youth services including counselling, youth development activities, health services, sport and recreation and employment services
- linking generalist youth services (from the broader community, health and school sectors) with secondary and tertiary youth services
- acknowledging that youth participation can be difficult to achieve and that all mechanisms to engage young people must be meaningful. In particular, the group of young people consulted felt most connected and valued when they owned and developed youth activities and programs within their communities. The young people identified the roles of youth workers and services as being supportive and providing assistance when they needed to trouble-shoot issues.

While the generalist youth worker/services approach is supported, there is an equal need to ensure that services that are delivered are consistent and of high quality. A set of common core competencies is required across the youth service continuum to achieve this. Common core competencies may include understanding the nature of vulnerability, individual and family counselling skills, and a capacity to undertake local community development activities.

Mentors and volunteers

The Victorian Government's *Strategic Framework on Mentoring Young People 2005–2008* defines mentoring as:

*The formation of a helping relationship between a younger person and an unrelated, relatively older, more experienced person who can increase the capacity of the young person to connect with positive social and economic networks to improve their life chances.*⁵⁸

There is a body of evidence suggesting formal mentoring relationships between vulnerable young people and positive adult role models (where successful 'matching' has occurred) can reduce the impacts of vulnerability. Australian research indicates that participation by vulnerable young people in mentoring programs is associated with significant benefits. These include:

- improved school attendance and academic outcomes
- increased school retention rates and completion of secondary school
- continued engagement in education and training
- increased employment rates
- improved self-confidence, social and interpersonal skills
- increased involvement in social activities
- reduced rates of risk-taking behaviours, including alcohol and other drug misuse, and teenage pregnancy
- less involvement in gang-related activity, including violent offending
- lower rates of youth offending
- improved relationships with parents and other family members.

Mentoring is most often undertaken on a voluntary basis and there is evidence that young people value this highly.

There are currently a number of mentoring programs and networks throughout Victoria, including some within secondary schools. Given their proven effectiveness with vulnerable young people, these should be considered when developing the local youth plans.⁵⁹

Other volunteers may also undertake work with vulnerable young people. *Volunteering Victoria*, the state's peak body representing all aspects of the volunteering sector, notes that the principles of volunteering are that:

- volunteering benefits the community and the volunteer
- volunteer work is unpaid
- volunteering is always a matter of choice
- volunteering is a legitimate way in which citizens can participate in the activities of their community
- volunteering seeks to provide mutual benefit for the community and the individual
- volunteers do not replace paid workers.⁶⁰

Keeping these principles in mind, volunteers can be a valuable and possibly untapped resource within communities. Particularly in the sport and recreation areas, volunteers currently work with large numbers of young people within their communities. Volunteer organisations and local community members wishing to volunteer could be more greatly utilised to support and assist vulnerable young people.

High-quality practice informed by evidence

It is important to have standards that are common across professional roles to ensure a consistent approach to working with young people. A research agenda assists in understanding what practice approaches work best in what circumstance and enables the ongoing strengthening of the workforce and the service system.

Research indicates that in order for youth services to fully incorporate evidence-based practice into their approach they must:

- evaluate and monitor their programs against an agreed set of outcomes and indicators including establishing methods of collecting data and reporting on performance⁶¹
- provide training and support to staff and practitioners to develop evidence-based interventions as well as reflect on their own practice
- employ a process of action–reflection and continuous improvement to service provision.⁶²

Programs that appear to be effective are those that focus on addressing risk factors, take a broader approach to resolving issues and build on existing strength factors, either at the individual, family, school/peer or community level. These youth development principles can enhance effectiveness:

- Youth development is about young people being connected to their families, communities, schools, training institutions or workplace and their peers.
- Youth development is based on a consistent strengths-based approach – building on young people’s strengths/protective factors to enhance young people’s capacity to resist risk factors.
- Youth development happens through quality relationships.
- Youth development is triggered when young people fully participate – this includes young people being given greater opportunities to have greater control over what happens to them through seeking their advice, participation and engagement.
- Youth development needs good information.⁶³

The 1999 *Report of the National Anti-Crime Strategy*⁶⁴ suggests some questions that could be posed when developing youth programs. The following questions are designed to enhance program effectiveness.

- What risk and protective factors are targeted? Are they relevant to program goals?
- How effectively does a given program influence specific factors or address specific needs?
- What ‘life course transition points’ come within the ambit of the program? Are there too many or too few?
- Are only individual ‘clients’ targeted, or are settings or contexts the target?
- Do the operations of the program facilitate agency partnership at the local level?
- How well does the program fit within emerging crime prevention frameworks at state and federal levels?

Interventions and practice approaches with young people must be based on current best practice and evidence of what works. Programs that are developmentally targeted and promote healthy relationships between adolescents and adults provide the most successful generalist support.⁶⁵

Actions for change

Services that work

Embed locally based youth services that are effective, youth-centred, visible, flexible, accessible and responsive to vulnerable young people.

Youth plans should ensure that local youth services are visible, accessible and welcoming. The plans should highlight the need to provide services that meet the needs of young people and are responsive and proactive in their engagement and delivery.

Interventions need to consider group as well as individual approaches and have clear connections to the broader service system such as Centrelink, employment placement programs, TAFE colleges and community health centres. Local youth plans will consider the current range of youth services and programs being delivered and determine their effectiveness. As a result youth services will be implemented that are youth-centered, flexible, accessible and responsive to vulnerable young people.

New program development will be based on the ‘what works’ literature and systematic sharing across local areas of potentially effective interventions. It will also reflect local data that is accessible.

Workforce development

Enhance or develop the capacity and capability of the people who work with vulnerable young people.

Young people experiencing vulnerability will benefit from a professionally trained workforce that delivers quality services. Recent work in Victoria has seen the development of a Voluntary Code of Practice for the Victorian Youth Sector, which is an important step in developing consistent practice across the state.

In order to progress a best practice system of youth services in Victoria, the following strategies will be implemented:

- Standards in youth service practice will continue to be refined.
- All funded agencies will adopt a process for continuous quality improvement and workforce planning and development.
- Program evaluation will be emphasised in all state government funding agreements and grants.
- Mechanisms for sharing good practice will continue to be resourced.

In order to progress a robust, quality, high-achieving youth service workforce, it is necessary to:

- build a knowledgeable, skilled and sustainable youth services workforce
- embed a culture of service quality, responsive to evidence-based practice and the needs of vulnerable young people
- improve the interface of the service system between early intervention, secondary and tertiary interventions so that young people can access the services they need, at the time they need them
- strengthen leadership within youth services and across the broader community sector.

Mentors and volunteers will be considered as part of the youth services workforce and be assisted to develop skills and knowledge as applicable to their particular field of expertise.

Building an evidence base to inform best practice models

Embed quality assurance and evaluation processes into the service system to inform best practice models.

Quality assurance and evaluation processes will be built in to services to ensure that interventions result in positive outcomes for vulnerable young people. We will consider how to build an evidence base for youth services, utilising the data available, both quantitative and qualitative. Development of an action research model to enable the collation and sharing of evidence and learning in existing and new youth service programs will assist in this.

Working with highly vulnerable young people

Implement interventions for young people with highly complex needs that are coordinated and comprehensive.

Young people with multiple issues have greater difficulty if the help they need is fragmented or has to be accessed from more than one provider. A lack of coordination of existing services can also create barriers to participation. Multiple assessments, varying duration of service delivery, lack of information sharing and multiple case plans can result in poor outcomes for vulnerable young people. Proactive responses to complex young people will include:

- engaging all relevant services in a coordinated 'care team' approach including strategies for the engagement, assessment, planning and management of complex/highly vulnerable young people
- the care team approach recognising the need for persistence and flexibility in service delivery (such as flexible hours of operation and outreach services).

Next steps

This *Vulnerable Youth Framework* discussion paper has described the vision that the Victorian Government shares with families and communities to provide an environment in which young people are able to achieve their full potential. While the majority of young people in Victoria are doing well, some groups and individuals through a combination of their circumstances and risk taking behaviour are considered vulnerable.

Young people are an asset to our communities. Early intervention in identified areas of vulnerability is essential so that every young person has the opportunity to contribute to the life of their communities and reach their full potential.

This discussion paper has built the case for developing a framework for our vulnerable youth. It is expected that the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* will, over time, strengthen and develop a coordinated service system for vulnerable young people.

We would like to hear from you as we prepare to finalise the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* and develop an associated action plan.

We encourage you to take this opportunity to give us feedback, particularly focusing on the actions for change.

On the next page are a set of questions that we would like you to comment on. You may provide a response to all questions or just those you have a particular interest in.

Your feedback can be provided either by emailing <vulnerableyouthframework@dhs.vic.gov.au> or phoning (03) 9096 7018 or (03) 9096 7025.

The consultation period will occur from 1 September to 30 September 2008. We anticipate finalising the *Vulnerable Youth Framework* and an associated action plan in 2009.

More information can be found on <www.cyf.vic.gov.au/youth-services/vulnerable-youth-framework>.

Consultation questions

Do you think the five focus areas are where and how we can make the greatest amount of effective system change? If not, why?

Which are your priority focus areas? Why?

Do you think the actions for change are adequate? Do you have other suggestions?

Which actions are the priority actions from your perspective? Why?

If you could do one thing to improve the existing youth service system, what would it be?

Prevention and early identification

How can we best identify vulnerable young people early?

What initiatives/tools/guidelines work best in responding early to young people showing signs of vulnerability?

Engagement in education, training and employment

How can the education sector be better supported to identify and respond at an early stage to vulnerability in young people?

What tools/resources would they need to achieve this?

Are there enough and the right types of programs reconnecting young people back to school or into training or employment? What else could be done?

How can we improve coordination across schools, community and training and employment

Local planning for youth services

Do you think it is feasible to have local youth plans? Who should lead the development of youth plans in each LGA?

How can the state government departments work best with local government and community-based organisations to deliver/provide/establish/improve the youth service system?

How does local collaboration between local services currently occur? Are existing networks or coordination mechanisms effective? How can collaboration be improved?

How do we ensure vulnerable young people are involved in service planning and program development?

Tailored responses for particular groups

How do local area youth services and networks recognise and respond to diversity in the youth population? How could this be improved?

Are vulnerable young people from particular groups included in local planning efforts?

What tools and resources would you need to strengthen the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds and vulnerable young people from particular groups in local planning efforts and youth services?

How would we know that any specific actions taken to respond to the needs of particular groups of vulnerable young people are working?

Effective services, capable people

Do you agree a workforce strategy should be developed?

How should a workforce strategy be developed? What are the key components or activities to be undertaken?

What would an effective youth service system look like? How would we know it is working?

What are the key components of good quality and effective practice?

How should an evidence base for youth services be developed, maintained and accessible to those who need it?

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