

***Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency's  
Submission to  
Victoria's Draft 30-year Infrastructure Strategy  
February 2021***

1. The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into *Victoria's Draft 30-year Infrastructure Strategy* prepared by Infrastructure Victoria. VACCA's submission seeks to advocate for the Aboriginal community's current and future infrastructure needs across Victoria.

**Note on language**

2. We use the term 'Aboriginal' to describe the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Clans and Traditional Owner Groups whose traditional lands comprise what is now called Australia.

**About VACCA**

3. VACCA is the lead Aboriginal child welfare organisation in Victoria. As an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO), VACCA provides services to vulnerable Aboriginal children, families, and communities. VACCA's vision is Aboriginal self-determination – Live, Experience and Be. Our purpose is supporting culturally strong, safe and thriving Aboriginal communities.
4. VACCA's key areas of work are in service delivery, advocacy and training. Working across the spectrum of prevention, early help, early intervention, targeted support and tertiary level services.
5. Our approach is underpinned by principles of; prevention, early intervention and therapeutic healing, premised on human rights, self-determination, promoting client voice, cultural respect and safety. VACCA delivers cultural training and develops resources for the Aboriginal community and for a range of organisations.
6. VACCA advocates for better outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people, families and community members for their right to be connected to culture. VACCA believes culturally appropriate services that support the safety and social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) of children, young people and families can minimise involvement in tertiary systems such as Child Protection and Youth Justice.

**Context: existing demand across ACCO sector**

7. In framing our response to the Draft Strategy, VACCA seeks to highlight existing demand across the ACCO sector. The Aboriginal Executive Council (AEC) contracted SVA to prepare a report (drawing on the original work undertaken for VACCA) for its own

advocacy work. The report found that the Aboriginal population is projected to rise by 48 per cent by 2028, with population growth highest in Central Highlands, Ovens Murray, Barwon and Western Melbourne<sup>1</sup>. It also highlighted that service provision by ACCOs has not been adequately resourced and supported through a jointly agreed and planned approach to ensure a wrap around of services are available from ACCOs across the state.

8. Demand for child and family services is projected to increase significantly over the next decade, and will require increased investment, particularly in prevention services to reduce the need for OOHC placements and intensive family services. For the child and family service sector, at current growth rates, we anticipate that over 4,000 Aboriginal children and young people will be in OOHC by 2028.
9. There is a significant need for culturally safe mental health and AOD services, with 31,000 Aboriginal people projected to have high or very high levels of psychological distress by 2028, and 9,500 people estimated to need AOD services. Demand for culturally safe and coordinated service system to meet the needs across family violence, homelessness and justice sectors will also grow significantly.
10. Significant consideration must be put to the ongoing impact of COVID-19 coupled with existing demand as this is likely to put further pressure on the ACCO sector over the coming years.
11. Another key aspect contributing to pressure on existing ACCO infrastructure is a legacy of colonialism; mainstream CSOs have unparalleled access to infrastructure, whether it be from a bequeath from a church or a benefactor, the inherent injustice to land wealth for the First Peoples of this country is tangible. This gives mainstream agencies systemic advantage over ACCOs and is not in line with the government's commitment to progressing Aboriginal self-determination.

### **Overall impression of Victoria's Draft 30-year Infrastructure Strategy**

12. The Draft Strategy includes two specific recommendations focusing on the Aboriginal community and ACCO sector:
  - Recommendation 72: Co-design an Aboriginal Community-Controlled Infrastructure Plan*
  - Recommendation 83: Develop a Victorian Aboriginal tourism strategy*
13. The Draft Strategy provides a welcome opportunity to align the strategic direction of the state with the required infrastructure needs. It is important that all Victorians are reflected in this 30 year vision, and while it is significant to have a recommendation specific to ACCO infrastructure, the needs of Community should be reflected throughout. This is discussed further below.

---

<sup>1</sup> SVA, 2019. Demand for services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria Report prepared for the Aboriginal Executive Council.

14. It is pleasing to see that the following key advocacy points have been included in the Draft Strategy:
  - A strong focus on regions and outer metropolitan growth corridors
  - An Aboriginal community/ACCO specific long term, funded, infrastructure plan developed with and for the ACCO sector
  - Acknowledges that an Aboriginal Community-Controlled Infrastructure Plan must reflect priorities in the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap
15. It is important for the Co-design of the Aboriginal Community Controlled Infrastructure Plan to reflect the needs of community at a local and state based level, directly aligning to the priorities set out in relevant government agreements and frameworks including Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF) and Victoria's implementation plan of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
16. We maintain that there are a number of overall concerns that must be rectified in the Strategy for it to more effectively address the current and future infrastructure needs of the Aboriginal community, these include:
  - Embedding the voices of children and young people, so that this 30 year infrastructure plan reflects generations to come
  - A cultural lens must be embedded throughout the Strategy
  - Ensuring there are accountability mechanisms built into the development of an Aboriginal Community Controlled Infrastructure Plan
  - Investment in Aboriginal cultural, sporting and recreation infrastructure
  - Investment in ACCO infrastructure and service development linked to the rapidly growing Aboriginal population in Victoria
  - Investment in all forms of infrastructure for ACCOs, from major capital investment in new multipurpose service facilities, to investment in ICT, sustainable fleet and Disaster/COVID-19 safe workplaces
17. Genuine consultation, led by the commitment to self-determination, can only occur when the Aboriginal community is involved across the development, implementation and evaluation process. Community must be given the opportunity to identify needs, have input in the design of interventions and plans and define measures and indicators that meaningfully represent change.

### **Aboriginal lens across Draft Strategy objectives and recommendations**

18. A number of Draft Strategy objectives directly relate to the lives of the Aboriginal community and the work of the ACCO sector and must be reframed to include Aboriginal community needs. VACCA strongly contends that ACCOs and community groups are engaged in further consultation, to ensure that this strategy remains pertinent to all Victorians.

#### ***Objective 1: Prepare for population change***

19. An accurate depiction of population growth including the Aboriginal community across the state with reflective service demand increases is essential.

**Objective 2: Foster healthy, safe and inclusive communities**

20. This objective should align with government's commitments and vision in the VAAF 'All Aboriginal Victorian people, families and communities are healthy, safe, resilient, thriving and living culturally rich lives'. Government must significantly invest in fit for purpose ACCO infrastructure so we can respond to community need and can collectively achieve this vision.

**Objective 3: Reduce disadvantage**

21. Reducing disadvantage is a commitment of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and this objective should be linked to Victoria's Implementation Plan of Closing the Gap.

**Objective 4: Enable workforce participation**

22. ACCOs need infrastructure to support economic viability and build and strengthen Aboriginal workforce.

**Objective 10: Build resilience to shocks**

23. VACCA has been advocating for a whole of government Aboriginal Community Disaster Management Plan to be established to provide an overarching planning framework. An Aboriginal Community Disaster Management Plan must identify the risks for Aboriginal communities across the state when faced with disasters such as bushfires, flooding or a health emergency. It must implement a systemic approach when planning, preparing and responding to these risks. VACCA has included this as a recommendation in our submission to the *Parliament of Victoria Public Accounts and Estimates Committee: Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*<sup>2</sup>.

**Recommendation 22: Modernise courts through digitisation and contemporary shared facilities.**

24. While COVID-19 has required technological innovation with the way matters are seen at court, community's response to this has varied across the board. Government should be mindful to not disenfranchise vulnerable communities who may not have access to technology or have adequate digital literacy. Digitisation should be done in a culturally safe way, respectful of Elders and community's needs. This has particular consequences for the Koori Court, Marram-Ngala Ganbu and VACCA's Nugel program.

**Recommendation 73: Set targets to grow social housing**

---

<sup>2</sup> Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, 2020. Submission to the Parliament of Victoria Public Accounts and Estimates Committee: Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. August 2020. Available <[https://www.vacca.org/content/Document/VACCA-Submission-PAEC-Inquiry-into-COVID19-FINAL1%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.vacca.org/content/Document/VACCA-Submission-PAEC-Inquiry-into-COVID19-FINAL1%20(1).pdf)>

25. These recommendations should be consistent with recent social housing investment, *Big Housing Build* with 10% of all net growth of social housing built to be purposed for Aboriginal people. It should also align with commitments in *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort: Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework (VAHHF)*.

***Recommendation 57: Rapidly renew old public housing***

26. VACCA contends that when the government renews public housing, it must ensure existing Aboriginal tenants are not displaced in the process, removed from their immediate community and are supported with appropriate additional services. The ACCO sector and the Aboriginal community should be consulted and have a direct role in determining the renewal process to ensure renewals meet the dwelling needs of community.

***Recommendation 60: Expand the legislated definition of critical infrastructure and improve information flows***

27. It is essential or ACCOs/VACCA to be defined as critical infrastructure, as we respond to family violence, OOHC reports, crisis and emergency relief. This can improve cross agency collaboration and information sharing where appropriate, and strengthen ACCO's ability to respond to disaster or emergency events.

***Recommendation 68: Prioritise and oversee infrastructure delivery in growing communities***

28. The ACCO sector must be involved in the government's plans for public infrastructure delivery in high growth areas such as new train stations and regional hubs. This will help to ensure Aboriginal communities have access to ACCO services that are culturally safe.

***Recommendation 75: Deliver infrastructure for a better mental health system***

29. Mental health infrastructure must be consistent with Aboriginal community needs given the concerning interim findings of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. A systematic approach is needed that embeds a holistic, trauma informed response to support the SEWB needs of Aboriginal children and families. Including respecting and honouring the importance of connection to family, Country, community and culture. ACCOs need significant resources to build their infrastructure and deliver culturally safe mental health and SEWB support services.

***Recommendation 72: Co-design and Aboriginal Community Controlled Infrastructure Plan***

30. An Aboriginal Infrastructure Plan that is co-designed and community controlled is key to collectively identifying and responding to specific infrastructure needs. From VACCA's perspective, the co-designed plan must factor increased demand on child and family services, OOHC, family violence, homelessness, justice and mental health system. Long term, flexible resourcing to ACCOs is critical to action 'Recommendation 72' and to genuinely reflect self-determination. Further to this, the co-designed plan requires



co-governance where implementation, accountability and review mechanisms designed by and for community. Greater clarity is needed around the timeline of the plan's development given this is a 30-year strategy. VACCA believes that the co-design process should be iterative and aligned to budget bids and following the established Aboriginal governance structures to ensure accountability. This plan should acknowledge and be informed by the Victorian Treaty process.

***Recommendation 76: Plan and consistently deliver corrections and youth justice infrastructure while managing demand with policy settings.***

31. Given the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the youth justice system, in addition to current reforms to Youth Justice in Victoria, infrastructure investment over the next 30 years must not only focus on tertiary interventions but early intervention and prevention. ACCOs have the experience and solutions and are best placed to design infrastructure that can deliver cultural strengthening programs, address key risk factors and prevent engagement with Youth Justice. On the tertiary end, there is a significant need for transitional housing to prevent people exiting into homelessness.

***Recommendation 83: Develop a Victorian Aboriginal tourism strategy***

32. VACCA understand that this recommendation aims to develop resourcing for Traditional Owners, independent from the Victorian Government. It also has a key role in empowering Traditional Owners to share Aboriginal history and stories to the general public. This recommendation could be improved if the wording was strengthened to reflect the treaty process and within that, specifically the Self-Determination Fund. The connection Traditional Owners have to land extends beyond tourism and they must be engaged around environmental issues including energy and land management. A more direct focus is needed on the rights of Traditional Owner Groups to have well-resourced community/cultural infrastructure/facilities that they can utilise to strengthen and maintain their communities, facilitate return to Country etc; and to enable them to develop tourism focused businesses.

## **Recommendations**

33. VACCA provides the following recommendations to be considered by Infrastructure Victoria in the development of the Infrastructure Strategy:
  - i. To include a statement on Aboriginal people's right to self-determination that aligns with the VAAF self-determination principle and commitments in other agreements (*Closing the Gap, Wungurilwil Gapgapduir, VAHMF, AJA4* etc).
    - a. The commitment of transfer of resources in these agreements from mainstream organisations to ACCOs to deliver services must be included in the vision of this strategy for the next 30 years. ACCOs need to be

- empowered and adequately resourced to conduct forward strategic planning. To align with future thinking and proofing, a plan and investment strategy is needed for ACCOs to develop their own sustainability plans.
- ii. To include a specific Aboriginal community/ACCO sector objective to implement *Closing the Gap*.
  - iii. To include the challenge of Closing the Gap in '*Section One – Confront Long term challenges*' of the strategy. Currently this section includes, energy transition, climate change, embracing new technologies, staying connected to global markets, whilst all are important the Strategy must include that infrastructure has a key role in meeting Closing the Gap.
  - iv. Aboriginal culture, protocols and self-determination must be prioritised and guide the Strategy given the government's commitment to advancing Aboriginal self-determination.
  - v. Ensure the co-designed, Aboriginal infrastructure plan in 'Recommendation 72' is specifically linked to demand and growth areas, particularly, inner and outer metropolitan areas.
  - vi. Acknowledge that the needs of the Aboriginal community are heightened and existing infrastructure is under considerable pressure due to population growth, COVID-19 and the legacy of colonisation privileging mainstream agencies access to infrastructure.
  - vii. The treaty process cannot be thought of in isolation from the strategy's vision for the next 30 years. VACCA contends that strong engagement with the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria will be necessary once the Treaty Negotiation Framework has been confirmed.
  - viii. An iterative process is needed for the strategy so it can be flexible to present and future needs of all Victorians.
  - ix. Acknowledge the ACCO sector needs investment across the board. The co-design plan must be cognisant that every ACCO is at a different level and capacity building needs to reflect individual needs.
  - x. Section 3.3 Align social infrastructure with better service delivery only focuses on housing, mental health and youth justice, lacking mention of increased demand in other key sectors such as child and family, family violence or AOD. Given this is a 30-year strategy, a holistic and coordinated response to service delivery pressures needs to be adapted and appropriate infrastructure provided.

### **Suggestions for implementing the Strategy**

34. Implementation of the Strategy must be driven by a commitment towards Aboriginal self-determination; whereby the government is working closely with the ACCO sector to develop and lead this process. To support successful implementation of the Strategy,



government’s budget bids must correspond priorities in the co-design and Aboriginal Community Controlled Infrastructure Plan. Importantly, the Strategy must also have an independent review and accountability mechanism for the 30-year period, providing an opportunity to reevaluate and prioritise goals and objectives.

- 35. VACCA welcomes further opportunities to engage in the development of this strategy.

**For further information please contact Sarah Gafforini, Director Office of the CEO.**

**sarahg@vacca.org | 0427 621 421**