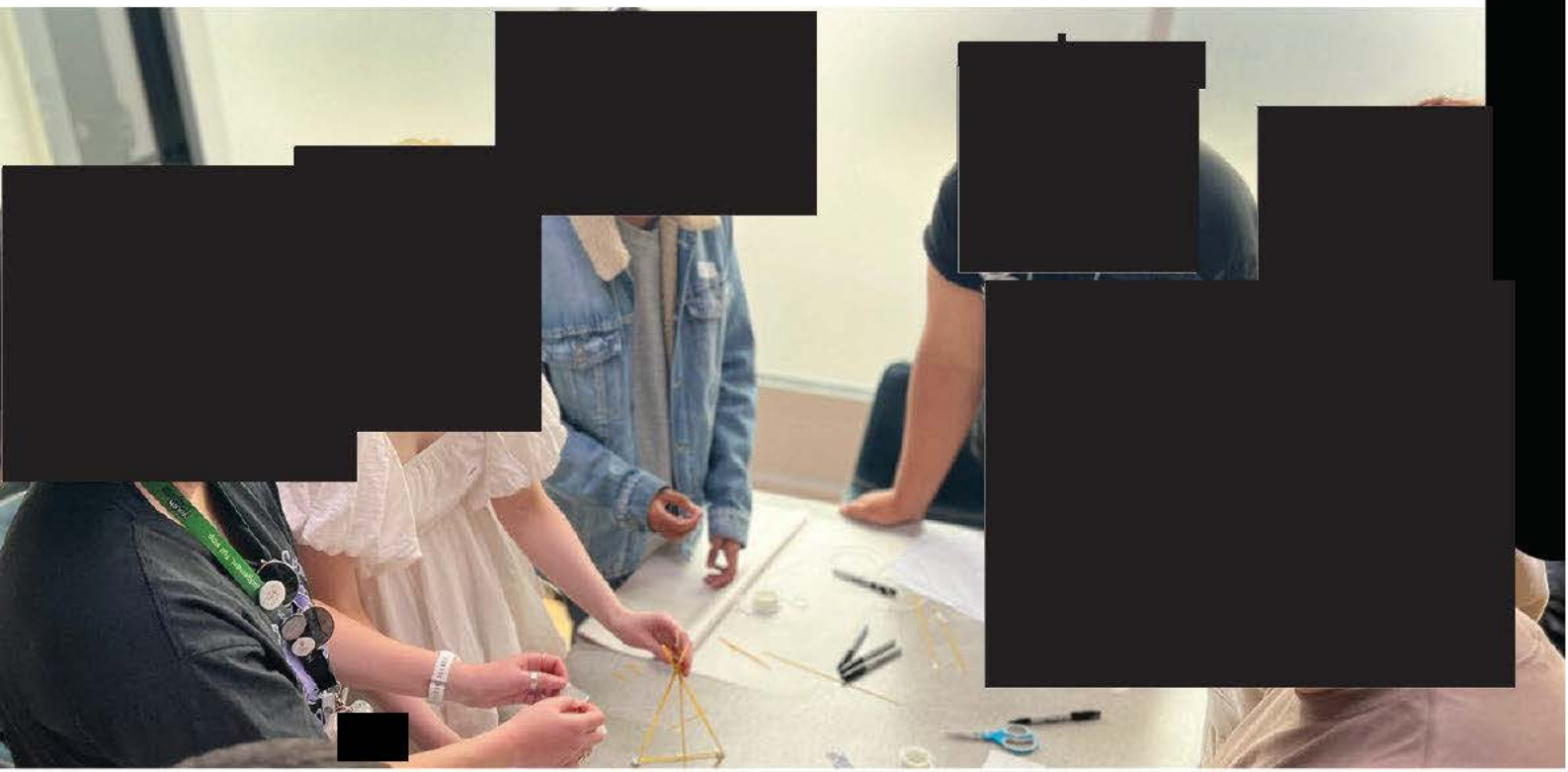


'A Stronger, More Diverse and Independent Community Sector'

Youth Projects' response to the Department of Social Service's issues paper, which aims to provide guidance for the community sector and the wider Australian community to provide feedback on the government's election commitment for a stronger, more diverse and independent community sector.

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This document has been prepared in response to the Stronger More Diverse Independent Community Sector issues paper, which aims to provide guidance for the community sector and the wider Australian community to provide feedback on the government's election commitment for a Stronger, more diverse and independent community sector. The feedback will inform the development of a package of recommendations to government, for consideration, on innovative approaches to grant funding that will support both short and longer-term reform to the operation of community sector grants.

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Introduction

The following insights are derived from front line experience across Youth Projects' Community Health, Employment, Training and Social Enterprise divisions. Youth Projects deliver significant community health and homelessness services, youth employment services (under the Transition to Work, Employability Skills Training and Disability Employment Services programs) and youth outreach programs across Melbourne. In developing this response, we have consulted with all levels of Youth Projects management and staff.

Youth Projects is an independent, registered charity providing front line support to young people and people experiencing disadvantage to open up pathways out of poverty and homelessness - breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Our team provide a complete wrap around, judgement free service with a strong focus on respect, client-centred care and harm prevention. We recognise the complex and varying needs of the people we work with and go above and beyond to provide life changing opportunities for people accessing our services. We embed our Theory of Change and Story of Impact into everything we do, operating the following services across Greater Melbourne:

The Living Room

At the heart of Youth Projects lies The Living Room, a unique primary health service that offers free, confidential healthcare and assistance to those at risk of homelessness or experiencing it. Our skilled multidisciplinary team provides services such as immunisations, mental health nursing, opioid replacement therapy, referrals to housing organisations and more. We embrace harm minimisation and empowerment, concentrating on the broader social determinants of health.

Health Services


Our commitment to well-being takes centre stage in our health services. The Living Room allows us to deliver free access to health and support services, addressing physical, mental, and social well-being. Our approach emphasises harm minimisation, early intervention, and prevention, all within a welcoming environment offering a range of amenities including showers, phone charging, and nourishment.

Drug Safety

Youth Projects has long pioneered harm prevention through initiatives such as its Needle Syringe Program, dating back to 1990. Our drug safety programs pivot around harm reduction, encompassing education, training, and access to support services. Our goal is to ensure a secure and understanding space for those in need.

Outreach and Counselling

Our flexible outreach and counselling services meet young individuals where they are. These services encompass a broad spectrum, from housing and mental health to education, employment, and crisis support, creating a holistic support network.



Transition to Work

For early school leavers and unemployed young individuals, our Transition to Work program provides a stepping-stone to meaningful and sustainable employment and education. While addressing barriers to employment, our strength-based approach cultivates practical skills, an understanding of employer expectations, and comprehensive job-seeking guidance, honing both vocational and personal skills.

Employability Skills Training (EST)

Our Employability Skills Training offers a bespoke route to employment. This three-week intensive program, guided by employment and training specialists, immerses young people in a blend of project-based, tailored and practical training, including real-world simulations and immersive experiences.

Disability Employment Services (DES)

Our Disability Employment Services program focuses on employment and education goals for young people with disabilities. Embracing strengths and passions, we forge individualised pathways through a strength-based approach, securing local job opportunities, and providing ongoing support for successful job retention.

Social Enterprise - The Little Social Cafe

The Little Social cafes (████████████████████), go beyond serving coffee and food. They serve as a platform for skills development and work experience, empowering young individuals. Customers can also contribute to social change through our pay-it-forward initiative, enriching our holistic approach.

Here4Hospitality

Young individuals with different abilities receive immersive industry-specific training, equipping them for roles in the hospitality sector. Through mentorship, intensive training, accredited courses, and hands-on experience, participants build confidence, work-readiness, and motivation.

Youth Advisory Group

Our Youth Advisory Group (YAG) provides invaluable insights into services and current program gaps within the community and help us improve service delivery for our clients. Our YAG members are involved in regular consultations on issues that directly impact young people - both at Youth Projects and in the broader local community.

The impact we seek enables each person to lead longer lives, have improved health, meaningful employment and a greater sense of belonging, safety and security through a holistic model of care. There continues to be an enormous need for services that reach, engages and support those struggling with significant issues in the community - poverty, homelessness, poor mental health, substance-related problems, family breakdown, unemployment, school and community disengagement.

Youth Projects is dedicated to supporting and advocating for marginalised and vulnerable people at risk and people experiencing homelessness and unemployment. We continually advocate for policies and practices that directly impact the well-being of these individuals. To give some context around how closely we work with the community and the impact we make as an organisation, the following points highlight the impact we have made over the past 12 months:

- We have supported more than 2,864 young people (many of which present to us with mental health and disability barriers) across our youth outreach, employment, training and social enterprise programs into work, education and re-engaged back into the community.
- Due to increased need, we have expanded our youth outreach from north/north west (currently supporting 422 young people) to the western suburbs of Melbourne in response to a critical emerging mental health and social wellbeing crisis.

- In FY 22/23, our social enterprise, The Little Social Cafe sold over 250,000 coffees and through this, we have been able to re-invest over \$100K back into our youth and homelessness services at The Living Room.
- We have had 12,497 client visits at The Living Room with the number of homeless people dropping-in each day, doubling.
- We have shared over 8,875 meals, provided 14,471 practical supports and over 2,678 health promotion and counselling sessions at The Living Room.
- After hours, our Night Nurses provided 3,243 episodes of care and our Needle Syringe Programs saw almost 15,000 contacts.



Youth Projects impact can be seen through our direct experience working on the frontline, addressing the complex challenges faced by our disadvantaged clients. This experience will provide valuable insights and expertise that has the ability to inform policy decisions and ensure that government initiatives are practical and effective in the real world.

Government grant funding can have a substantial impact on the services provided by organisations such as ours. We can provide current information that may be able to influence how these resources are allocated in the future and advocate for funding mechanisms that will maximise the effectiveness in addressing critical social issues.

Youth Projects represents a diverse range of voices within the community. We are able to provide the government with a wide range of perspectives, including those of marginalised and underrepresented groups, so that they are considered in the future planning of the community sector.

We welcome this opportunity to play a vital role in shaping government policy and grant funding processes by providing real-world insights, advocating for vulnerable populations and ensuring that resources are used effectively to address pressing social and healthcare issues.

We are hopeful that our responses will contribute to more inclusive, equitable and impactful sector that benefit the broader community.



Response

Below, we have included some suggestions that address the five key focus areas that we believe will help create a stronger, more diverse community sector.

Focus Area 1: Supporting a Sustainable and Independent Community Sector

Administrative and Management Fees

The sustainability and independence of the community sector are integral to its ability to support effectively. To further this objective, we propose transparency in the allocation of a minimum of 20% of grant funding for administrative and management fees, not including operational costs such as rent and outgoings. This allocation is critical for several reasons:

- Community organisations often require substantial infrastructure to manage programs efficiently and meet regulatory requirements. Adequate administrative funding enables us to invest in systems, processes and skilled staff.
- Administrative funding supports training and development, which are essential for building a skilled workforce. A well-trained team is better equipped to provide high-quality services to the community.
- Compliance with regulatory standards is a necessity. Administrative funds are essential for organisations to meet reporting obligations, ensuring transparency and accountability.

Transparency

We would like to see more transparent decision-making processes including a commitment to providing detailed feedback on unsuccessful applications and the opportunity for public evaluations.

Focus Area 2: Strengthening Grant Funding Processes

Longer Funding Cycles to Allow Better Assessment of Outcomes

In order to strengthen grant funding processes and ensure enough time to adequately assess outcomes, we recommend the introduction of longer-term grant cycles, spanning 3-5 years. We have experienced challenges with shorter-term grant cycles including:

- Frequent grant application cycles disrupt service continuity, directly impacting the quality and effectiveness of services that we provide.
- Short-term grants require allocation of substantial resources from the initial preparation of grant applications to reporting and acquittals. Longer grant cycles will greatly reduce administrative overheads, allowing us to focus on our core mission.
- Longer-term grant cycles will allow us to engage in strategic planning and program development. This is critical for us to achieve long-term impact and sustainability. It also enables better engagement with philanthropists and other private funding sources who are more willing to value add to programs that are stable and longer term.

To streamline the process, we request a minimum of three months before the end of the grant to be informed of any extensions in order to retain our staff and to maintain continuity in our program delivery and future intakes.

Youth Projects' Here4Hospitality program (funded by DSS Individual Capacity Building program) was initially only funded for 18-months. Fortunately, we were able to request additional funding from the Department for another 18-months which consequently allowed the program to grow and become one of our most successful programs of all time, positively impacting 62 young trainees.

Focus Area 3: Enhancing Flexibility and Responsiveness in Grant Funding

Grant funding flexibility is paramount to addressing the ever-evolving needs of the community. To enhance flexibility, we propose the government encourages a funding framework that allows a percentage funding breakdown to encompass Admin, Block/Establishment Costs, Service Delivery (with flexibility) and Pay by Outcomes. A proposed percentage (e.g 10-20%) of contingency funding could allow for flexibility within certain parameters. The flexible use of funding should still be accountable through reporting to articulate the outcome/impact/reason for innovation.

Youth Projects believes that there should be opportunities to receive further funding to scale up existing programs that have shown success, as this would allow for these programs to have a wider impact through more positive outcomes - for example, our Here4Hospitality program has had remarkable success and employment/training outcomes, however the funding concludes in June 2024. There are very few opportunities to request additional funding to further bolster programs that are currently being delivered with successful outcomes.

Finally, Youth Projects recognises the importance of flexibility in the grant funding process, particularly regarding the timing of proposal submissions in response to critical needs. The ability to pitch project proposals at any time, rather than being confined to fixed application periods, could be a practical approach, as it allows us to directly respond to individuals and communities facing crises or those who are in need of urgent support.

Focus Area 4: Ensuring Grant Funding Flows to a Greater Diversity of CSOs

Prioritise Local Initiatives and Support Smaller Organisations

To ensure that grant funding reaches a more diverse range of community sector organisations, we emphasise the importance of prioritising "place-based" initiatives. These initiatives should favour local organisations over large international organisations with local contracts. Local organisations have several advantages:

- They possess an in-depth understanding of their communities, allowing them to tailor services to specific needs.
- Trust is crucial for successful service delivery and local organisations often have existing relationships and trust within their communities.
- Supporting local organisations stimulates local economies, creating a positive feedback loop of community development.
- A percentage of the total grant funds allocation could be allocated only to smaller organisations (<\$20M).

Focus Area 5: Partnering with Trusted Community Organisations with Strong Local Links

Stronger Links Between Government and Community Organisations

We strongly encourage the government to work more closely with trusted community organisations that have strong local links. Such partnerships are essential for delivering effective services. We recommend streamlining the evaluation processes and allocating government funding for those organisations.

Sharing learnings, case studies, good news stories, data and outcomes from projects can enable those organisations to replicate successful strategies to address similar needs. For example, a successful program that has been running in Perth could easily be adapted and run in Melbourne with a similar cohort to address a specific need. Data and learnings from that program could be beneficial to the design and development of new programs, which may also lead to further innovation.

An example of this can be demonstrated through a recent in-house research project conducted by Youth

Projects as part of our organisation-wide 'Mental Health Strategy 2021 - 2025' which is currently being implemented. This valuable research saw us contact 20 key service providers throughout Melbourne for updates regarding current waiting list times for clients to receive the care they need. This research saw some concerning trends for example, a key service provider that services Merri-bek, Hume and Maribyrnong reported waitlists of up to 12 weeks at all three locations and another large service provider reported a minimum four weeks wait time across all of their support service hubs in the west and north west suburbs of Melbourne.

Clearly defining what is meant by "local services" within grant guidelines is a critical step in ensuring that government funds are directed toward organisations that are deeply connected to and invested in the communities that they operate within.

Other Areas of Importance

Scaling

The level of accountability should be adjusted in proportion to the funding amount allocated. A significant amount of administrative effort is dedicated to managing, accounting for, and reporting on smaller funding allocations. A more flexible funding structure could be designed to accommodate the expansion of successful programs that can demonstrate their long-term viability.

Upstream and Downstream Initiatives

It is important not to overlook the need to fund both upstream (reactive) and downstream (responsive) initiatives. By addressing the root causes of issues in their early stages, we can prevent crises and reduce the strain on downstream services.

One example where Youth Projects is able to do this is through our assertive outreach program - YHOP (Youth Holistic Outreach Program). This approach aligns with our mission to create sustainable, long-term positive change in our communities.

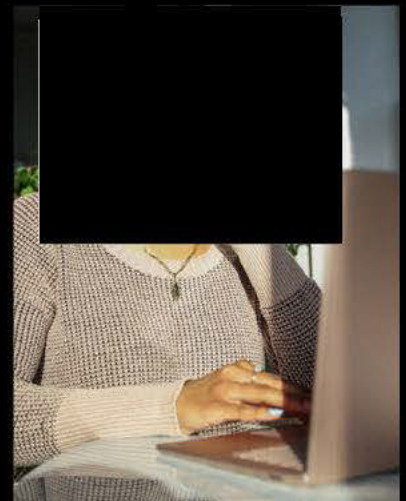
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Story

_____ initially presented to YHOP, attending our Glenroy Youth Hub in a crisis state and seeking immediate housing support. _____ was new to the area, having just relocated to Glenroy with her family. _____ was familiar with Youth Projects after being linked previously with our Transition to Work team in _____ knowing it was a safe place to turn to at the time.

_____ commenced the YHOP program and the team supported in her accessing immediate housing supports, working collaboratively with _____ to complete all relevant steps and successfully referred her to _____ for crisis housing support the next day.

During _____ time in YHOP, we explored the many complex barriers which she was facing; having recently escaped family violence and forcing her family to relocate, managing complex trauma, mental health concerns, and as result, had become increasingly socially isolated. _____ also identified having a learning disability which impacted her cognitive ability.



_____ identified goals in mental health and general health supports, social engagement, personal safety, and capacity building in catching public transport independently. With these goals at the forefront and her personalised needs identified, YHOP supported _____ with referrals to Headspace and Reclink, in addition to in-house events such as YHOP Open Days and Jobs Clubs.

_____ was incredibly engaged and committed to reaching her goals, bringing a notebook to every appointment, setting SMART Goals, highlighting and reflecting on her achievements. However, she would often become overwhelmed by her social anxiety, suffering from panic attacks when in new environments or around new people. YHOP explored alternative strategies with _____ to build distress tolerance and self-soothing techniques using evidence-based methods that _____ could do, building her resilience and strength. Over time, YHOP watched as _____ ability to self-regulate in new experiences grew, being able to use her strategies during times of distress and bring herself back to a mindful state.

With a new toolkit of mental health strategies under her belt and foundational support now in place, _____ was able to set her sights on the next big goal: Public Transport training. Over a series of appointments, _____ learned how to top-up her myki, use the PTV app to plan trips and build time management skills in the process.

For _____ second last appointment with YHOP, she and her coach planned a trip to _____ on the train, gently exposing her to the process at her own pace. For her final appointment with YHOP, _____ chose to meet her YHOP coach out at _____, using all the skills she had learned to get there, feeling comfortable and safe, as well as making her own way home afterwards.

Occasionally _____ drops into the _____ Hub to say hello to the team, and last we heard, she was using her transport skills to attend appointments and spend time in the community.

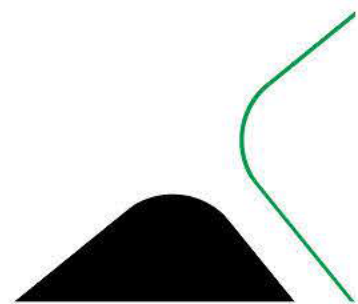


Social Enterprise

We strongly encourage the Department to consider social enterprises that require investment for work integration, as they play a vital role in helping marginalised individuals gain meaningful employment and independence. The 22/23 financial year was a successful one for Youth Projects' three 'The Little Social' cafes, with a surplus of \$100k achieved (any surplus is reinvested into our homelessness service which is chronically under-funded).

The Here4Hospitality program supports disadvantaged young people with a disability to work in our cafes, has also had a positive impact on 62 trainees. FY24 will see us continue to build on this momentum and we remain committed to maintaining our financial stability and increasing our impact even further. Further financial support from government funding will allow us to innovate, refine our operations and explore new avenues to maximise our social and financial sustainability.

In conclusion, we believe that by addressing these focus areas and implementing the proposed recommendations, grant funding processes can become more effective, efficient, and equitable. Together, we can strengthen the community sector, enhance the lives of those we support - and build a more resilient and inclusive society.





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