St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria response to DSS Issues Paper: A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector

Introduction

The St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria (SVDPV) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Commonwealth Department of Social Services consultation on "a stronger, more diverse and independent community sector" Issues Paper.

The St Vincent de Paul Society and its wide network of members and volunteers provide practical frontline support, advocacy and friendship for the most vulnerable members of our community. SVDP arrived in Victoria on 5 March 1854 and, each year, has continued to provide practical assistance and support to thousands of people in need. For more than 169 years, SVDP has focused on serving people in need by meeting with them and personally working through their issues to provide the best possible assistance.

In Victoria, we have more than 10,000 members and volunteers assisting people whose daily struggles can include putting food on the table, paying essential utilities and ensuring their children remain at school to obtain an education. They are supported by a small cohort (approx. 660) of employees, some of whom also deliver front-line services via government-funded programs.

Each person receiving our assistance is provided with care and compassion. Each year, SVDPV provides millions of dollars' worth of assistance through its core 'Good Works' of support around food insecurity, cost of living, homelessness and education. SVDPV provides a vast array of services, including:

Advocacy and assistance
Assistance Centres in regional Victoria
Crisis Supported Accommodation
Custody Centre Program
Disaster recovery
Drug and alcohol addiction recovery services

Financial Counselling and capability
Home and hospital visitation
Homeless accommodation and specialist homelessness support services
Mobile food services
Overseas support programs
No Interest Loan (NILs)
Refuge accommodation for women and children escaping family violence
Refugee, asylum seekers and migrant support services
School-based mentoring programs

Specialist family violence support services
Subsidised accommodation for tertiary students
Transitional Housing and Social Housing
Vinnies Shops
Volunteer programs
Youth and education programs

To provide this assistance, SVDPV relies on various income sources, which come through our network of 112 Vinnies Shops, donations, bequests, investments and government funding. Government funding (State and Commonwealth) represented approximately 30% of our total revenue in 2022. Delivery of services in Victoria requires significant subsidisation from donations, social enterprise, investments and a large voluntary workforce.

Our submission aims to directly answer some of the questions posed by DSS in its Issues Paper in the hope that our experience and insights can contribute to more effective investment in community services and community service organisations.

1.1 What would a partnership between CSOs and the government that achieves outcomes for Australians being supported by the community sector look like?

In our context at SVDPV, a successful partnership with the government should involve a strengths-based approach, recognising the niche capabilities of CSOs like SVDPV and allowing them freedom of action to deliver agreed outcomes.

A process of establishing clear agreed objectives, roles, responsibilities and metrics to monitor performance and outcomes will ensure efficient delivery of services. Regular feedback sessions would allow us to align our efforts and resources with government priorities and policies, while maintaining our unique value, our way of working and commitment to our local communities. Clear documentation of a genuine partnership approach is critical, including accountability and performance metrics, access to research, and regular meetings to report on, and reflect upon, service challenges and opportunities.

1.2 How can CSOs and government streamline the sharing of information, particularly through utilising technology to effectively engage, distribute, share, influence and inform in a timely and efficient manner?

To streamline information sharing, especially with our organisation's decentralised structure, technology must be employed effectively. There is a role government can play in leading and championing a culture of openness in information sharing. Cross-sector information sharing needs to be supported to ensure effective care coordination. An information sharing protocol or framework would enable this.

Implementing a free-to-use, centralised and secure, user-friendly digital platform that allows for real-time data sharing, reporting and communication would greatly enhance our collaboration with the government. This would enable us to share insights on the impact of our programs, respond promptly to changing needs, and minimise administration, ultimately maximising the efficiency of our partnership. It would be helpful if there were government-championed basic business rules around data collection, monitoring and reporting that all CSOs can easily adopt to allow for sector-wide trend analysis. Additionally, the government can support the development and maintenance of communities of practice, or roundtables for key topics such as homelessness, domestic violence, drug and alcohol recovery etc. and draw on input and experience from CSOs that deliver frontline services, to inform government policy and practice.

1.3 How can government ensure the community sector, including service users and those not able to access services, have an opportunity to contribute to program design without imposing significant burdens?

Involving the community sector and service users in program design is integral to our mission. Government can support this by providing resources for targeted engagement initiatives within Victoria's diverse communities. This would ensure that we reach marginalised and underserved populations effectively, without imposing undue burdens.

Additionally, creating advisory panels comprising individuals with lived experiences can offer invaluable insights, shaping policies and programs to better address the unique needs of our service users. The Pride in Place Stakeholder Advisory Committee is a good example of where this works well.

2.1 What would adequate and flexible funding look like?

Adequate and flexible funding for SVDPV should be based on a thorough assessment of the real costs of delivering services in Victoria, considering factors like local living costs and community-specific needs. Flexibility should allow us to adapt to changing circumstances, ensuring that our services remain responsive and effective. Flexible funding should also enable organisations to research and analyse local data and evidence to provide more responsive and agile services. Evidence-based service design is essential to developing effective client and community outcomes.

2.2 What administrative and overhead costs are not being considered in current grant funding?

Administrative and overhead costs are often underestimated in grant funding. To address this issue, government funding should explicitly cover these indirect costs for SVDPV, including employee salaries, training, and infrastructure maintenance. While DSS do deliver some professional development, it is typically generalist and intended for entry-level employees.

Council to Homeless Persons' (CHP) Workforce Development Strategy is a great starting point for how government and CSOs can partner for workforce development. In addition, the cost of maintaining cybersecurity, risk management and incident management are increasing significantly. Technology infrastructure and systems maintenance are essential for the provision of safe and compliant services that support delivery of continuous quality improvement. Adequate funding for these aspects is crucial to maintaining the quality and sustainability of our services.

2.3 How are rising operational costs impacting the delivery of community services?

Rising operational costs directly impact our ability to serve communities in Victoria. Adequate funding should be adjusted to account for inflation and other economic factors to prevent the erosion of our capacity and the quality of services we provide.

2.4 What have been your experiences with, and reflections on, the supplementation and change to indexation?

Regarding supplementation and change to indexation, close collaboration between SVDPV and the government is essential. We can work together to assess the impact of these changes on our ability to serve the community effectively. This collaboration can help identify areas where adjustments are needed to ensure the continued success of our programs.

2.5 How can CSOs and the department work together to determine where funds are needed most to ensure equitable and responsive distribution of funds?

Collaboration with the government should be data-driven, focusing on the specific needs of communities in Victoria. Having the opportunity to co-design datasets with DSS and AIHW to ensure we are collecting appropriate information on community future needs would be beneficial as the current DSS dataset is limited. By regularly sharing data and insights, we can work together to identify where funds are needed most within the region, ensuring an equitable and responsive distribution of resources.

2.6 How can government streamline reporting requirements, including across multiple grants, to reduce administrative burden on CSOs?

To reduce administrative burden, government and SVDPV should work towards harmonising reporting requirements across multiple grants and interrogating what baseline data is required. Providing standardised base reporting templates and processes would streamline administrative tasks, allowing our organisation to focus on its core mission of serving the community. Regular feedback and refinements in reporting requirements would further enhance our partnership's efficiency.

3.1 What length grant agreements are CSOs seeking to provide certainty and stability for ongoing service delivery?

SVDPV seeks grant agreements of sufficient length, typically multi-year agreements spanning at least three to five years. These longer-term agreements provide the necessary certainty and stability required for ongoing service delivery. They allow us to plan strategically, invest in employee training and development, and make sustainable improvements to our programs, ultimately leading to better outcomes for the communities we serve.

3.2 What timeframes should the government aim for, at a minimum, to provide final outcomes on grant variations/extensions before the current grant ceases?

To ensure smooth continuity of services, the government should aim to provide final outcomes on grant variations/extensions well in advance of the current grant's expiration. A minimum timeframe of six to 12 months prior to grant cessation would be ideal. This lead time is essential for CSOs like ours to make necessary adjustments, such as recruitment and resource allocation, and to minimise disruptions to service delivery.

3.3 What funding flexibility do CSOs require to enable service delivery and innovation

CSOs like SVDPV require funding flexibility that allows for innovation and adaptability. Flexible funding should encompass the ability to redirect resources within programs to respond to emerging needs, experiment with new service models, and engage in pilot projects. This flexibility enables us to remain responsive to evolving community demands and ensures that our services remain effective and relevant.

3.4 What flexibility is required by CSOs in acquittal processes to support and encourage sector innovation?

To support and encourage sector innovation, CSOs need flexibility in the acquittal processes. This includes streamlined reporting requirements and the option to provide evidence of outcomes through various means, such as qualitative assessments and case studies, in addition to quantitative metrics. Flexibility in reporting allows CSOs to focus on delivering impact rather than solely meeting bureaucratic demands, thus fostering innovation and improved service delivery.

3.5 How can government improve the variation process, with consideration that CSOs must demonstrate alignment with the grant agreement and provide evidence of value-for-money outcomes?

Government can improve the variation process by engaging in collaborative, transparent and evidence-based discussions with CSOs. This includes clear communication of expectations, assessment criteria, and the specific alignment required with grant agreements. A value-for-money approach should be balanced with a recognition of the complex and often unique challenges faced by CSOs in delivering social services.

Government and CSOs can work together to establish clear, achievable performance indicators and milestones that demonstrate both alignment and value for money. This collaborative approach will ensure that variations are based on sound principles and lead to more effective outcomes for the community.

4.1 How can the government ensure opportunities are available for new and emerging organisations to access funding?

To ensure opportunities are available for new and emerging organisations, the government can take several steps. First, they can establish a transparent and accessible grant application process that is easy to navigate, with clear guidelines and requirements. Second, the government can set aside a portion of available funding specifically for new and emerging organisations, ensuring that there is a fair allocation of resources. Third, the government can provide capacity-building workshops and training programs to help these organisations develop strong proposals and build their organisational capabilities. Lastly, creating mentorship or partnership programs between established CSOs like SVDPV and emerging organisations can help transfer knowledge and expertise, fostering growth within the sector.

4.2 What programs, supports and information are already available for smaller CSOs to help build capacity of the organisation? Are these working?

CSOs of all sizes, and particularly smaller staffed CSOs, often benefit from programs and supports that help build their governance and administrative capacity. These may include grant writing workshops, financial management training, and access to shared resources such as office space and technology infrastructure. However, the effectiveness of these programs can vary. To assess their impact, it is essential to gather feedback from smaller CSOs to identify areas for improvement. Collaborative evaluations and regular communication channels between the government and CSOs can help tailor these programs to the specific needs of smaller organisations to ensure they are effective in enhancing their capacity.

4.3 How could larger CSOs support smaller CSOs? What are the barriers to providing this support?

Irrespective of size, CSOs have unique value propositions that make collaboration, partnership and coordination particularly meaningful, as together they can achieve wraparound supports or build sector capacity and capability. Sharing knowledge, providing mentorship, and offering opportunities for collaboration on joint projects are some mechanisms that can be used by bigger CSOs to support smaller ones who do not have the capability. However, barriers to providing this support may include resource constraints and competition for funding. To overcome these barriers, the government can incentivise collaboration by allocating funding for partnership initiatives between CSOs. Additionally, creating networking events and platforms that facilitate connections between organisations of different sizes can encourage knowledge exchange and collaboration. It's essential to recognise that when larger CSOs support smaller ones, it strengthens the overall capacity of the sector, leading to better outcomes for communities in need.

5.1 What is your experience with, and reflections on, place-based funding approaches?

Our experience with place-based funding approaches has been generally positive. These approaches acknowledge the unique needs of specific communities and allow us to tailor our services to address local challenges effectively. By working closely with community members and local organisations, we can identify and implement solutions that are contextually relevant. However, it's crucial for such funding to be accompanied by clear guidelines and support to ensure accountability and the successful delivery of outcomes.

5.2 What innovative approaches could be implemented to ensure grant funding reaches trusted community organisations with strong local links?

Innovative approaches to ensure grant funding reaches trusted community organisations with strong local links could involve the use of community advisory boards or panels. These panels, comprising local community leaders and representatives, could be involved in the decision-making process for grant allocations. Additionally, the government can establish grant programs

specifically targeting organisations with deep local connections and a demonstrated track record of serving their communities effectively. This targeted approach ensures that funding is directed to organisations with a strong presence in the areas they serve.

5.3 Which areas do you consider have duplicative funding or gaps you think need to be addressed, and what is the evidence?

Identifying duplicative funding or gaps in service provision requires a comprehensive analysis of existing funding allocations and their impact on communities. SVDPV suggests conducting periodic reviews and assessments of funding programs to identify areas of overlap or unmet needs. Evidence for these assessments could be gathered through community consultations, service utilisation data, and impact evaluations. By regularly reviewing funding allocations, government agencies can optimise resource distribution and ensure that no community is left underserved or experiences duplicative efforts.

5.4 Where there is a community-led change initiative, could shared accountability to community and funders (government) strengthen service delivery?

Shared accountability between community-led change initiatives and funders, such as the government, can indeed strengthen service delivery. SVDPV believes that involving the community in decision-making processes and performance evaluations fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to achieving desired outcomes. Community-led initiatives are often more responsive to local needs and can leverage community resources effectively. Establishing mechanisms for ongoing collaboration, transparent reporting, and joint problem-solving can enhance the effectiveness of service delivery and empower communities to drive positive change.