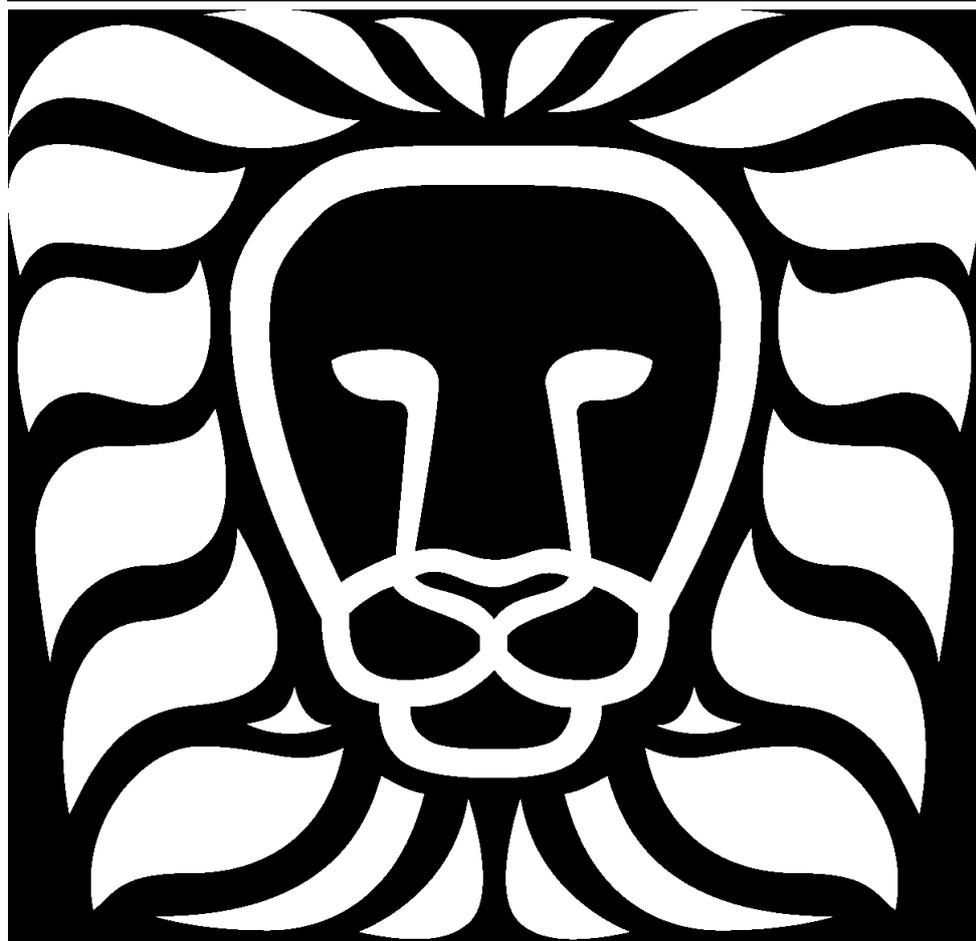


Victorian Government Youth Strategy

Formal submission by Whitelion



WHITELION

courage to grow

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Introduction	3
Who is Whitelion?.....	3
Response to the Discussion paper	5
Response to the Key Discussion Questions	5
Question 1.....	5
Question 2.....	6
Question 4.....	12
Question 5.....	14
Question 6.....	15
Question 7.....	19
Question 8.....	22
References	24

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Acknowledgements

Whitelion acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land on which it is situated and we pay respect to their Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge and respect the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples across the nation. We acknowledge the sorrow of the Stolen Generations and the ongoing impacts of colonisation and dispossession on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. We recognise the strengths and resilience of Australia’s First Peoples and champion a reconciled, just and equitable Australia. We believe in the sovereignty and right of Australia’s First Peoples to determine their own future.



We are passionate about creating a workplace that promotes and values diversity. We are therefore committed to providing a safe environment for all people, regardless of their age, culture, ability, gender, language, racial origin, religious belief and/ or sexual identity.



Whitelion acknowledges the experience of our young people whose lived experience has contributed to our submission.

Executive Summary

Introduction

Whitelion strongly supports the Victorian government's vision to create a Youth Strategy to help address the question, "What matters to young people in Victoria." We have a 21-year history of working with young people at-risk in Victoria and are grateful for the opportunity to share what we have learnt through the lived experience of young people and our workforce via this submission.

We share the vision that the government outlines in its discussion paper to see a Victoria where all young people are healthy, safe, and empowered. And we share the vision that so many other Victorian youth and social sector organisations have where no young person is left behind, where there is a whole of government approach and where there is a focus on collective rather than individual outcomes.

Now more than ever following the COVID-19 pandemic young people need to feel hope about the future. Significant work has already been undertaken related to young people's recovery from COVID-19 and we commend the Youth Affairs Council Victoria's [COVID-19 Recovery Plan for Young People](#) and the National Youth Commission Australia's [Youth Futures Guarantee](#).

As well as this written submission we have put together a video submission to highlight the voices of young people at risk. We spoke to a number of young people to ask them what they see as the greatest challenges for young people in Victoria as well as what matters most to them as young Victorians. References to this video submission are also mentioned throughout the written submission as relevant.

Who is Whitelion?

Whitelion has been working with young people at risk since 1999 and we currently have services in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia. Our vision is, "A world where no young person is left behind. Where all young people have the right to equitable opportunities to reach their potential."

Our purpose is to build positive connections and pathways to work for young people at risk who are aged 14 – 24. We define young people at risk as those who have lived in out of home care, impacted by homelessness, youth justice system and disadvantage. Young people in these systems often leave school early, live with mental health issues and the impacts of trauma, substance misuse and have experienced family violence. Our programs work across five service streams:

- Mentoring
- Employment
- Outreach
- Alternative education
- Intensive support (case management)

Young people are supported by our 98 staff as well as by over 250 volunteers. Below is further information about the support provided to young people in 2019/20.

Diagram 1: What we did FY19-20



Diagram 2: Who we supported FY19-20



Of the 1,655 young people who received intensive support in 2019/20 their top five support needs were:

1. Education/training
2. Community connection
3. Mental and emotional wellbeing
4. Employment
5. Housing

Response to the discussion paper

In planning our response to the discussion paper we consulted staff from our Victorian programs and national office teams, as well as young people.

Staff were consulted in a workshop session where questions addressing the paper were posed to small groups and the feedback was collated. Approximately 50 staff were involved in the workshop or providing input via other means.

A call out was made to the young people we work with to submit their answers to two key questions which were:

1. What do you see as the greatest challenges for young people in Victoria?
2. What matters most to you as a young Victorian?

The responses to these questions appear in a video submission accompanying this written document. Four young people provided formal feedback for our video submission. Other young people spoke informally to their youth workers and this has been incorporated into this written submission.

We also referred to several internal documents and research we have conducted to inform our strategy. These were:

1. Whitelion [Strategy 2023](#) - A new beginning
2. Whitelion Annual data: FY19-20
3. Whitelion internal discussion papers on mentoring and pathways to employment
4. Whitelion Annual Plan FY21

Response to the Key Discussion Questions

Question 1

We are committed to creating a Victoria where all young people are healthy and safe, and empowered to contribute to the issues that affect them. We want every single young person to have equitable access to opportunities and support to participate fully in the social, economic and civic life of our state.

Does this statement capture your vision and aspirations for young Victorians? Why or why not?

We believe that this statement reflects the desires of Victorian young people. Young people feel strongly about their health, safety, and social, economic, and civic participation.

In our staff consultation it was suggested that the phrase “issues that affect them” is too narrow and constricting. It is not just the issues that affect young people at this life stage that are important to them. Young people should be afforded the opportunity and encouraged to access conversations that impact their future, such as aged care and climate change. This is particularly pertinent given that future focused problems are those that young people will inherit. We understand that not every young person we work with will have the capacity or desire to think about their long-term future. However, we believe it is our role to encourage and support them to actively shape the world they will inherit.

The statement could also be strengthened with more active language, for example “Every young person should have equitable access to opportunities and support to participate fully in the social, economic and civic life of our state.”

Question 2

Do you think the discussion paper captures the key challenges facing young Victorians and the priorities and issues of most importance to them? Is there anything missing or that needs to be changed?

We support the key challenges as outlined in the paper. We would like to further emphasise key areas that relate to Whitelion’s experience.

In our consultation with staff and young people the following areas of challenge were identified. In our video submission you can hear directly from young people about what matters most to them, including challenges. As well as hearing from these four young people whose words and voices are captured in our video, the consensus from young people was that the greatest challenges for them and their peers was as follows:

- finding somewhere to live
- finding a job
- being able to afford food and
- being safe at home.

In the video you will read words from Olivia who believes the greatest challenge for young people in Victoria is employment. “Sometimes it can be so hard for a young person to get a job with no experience and being so young, some places not giving them a chance regardless if they got the experience or not.” In Brayden’s video we also hear about his experience of work and his request for more help for young people to get jobs. Brayden also describes almost having his fingers chopped off at work and this suggests he had no information about worker’s rights. In a post-COVID world where job competition is likely to be fierce, informing young people about workers’ rights are even more important than ever.

COVID-19

The discussion paper outlines some of the early impacts of both the 2019/20 bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic on young people. Our staff consultations suggest that the young people they work with are experiencing the ongoing impacts of both. Additionally, some young people told us

that during the pandemic lockdown period in Victoria, there was a perception that they had behaved irresponsibly thus spreading the virus, making their own journey through lockdown and recovery more difficult.

We support the Victorian government in ensuring that all responses to the long-term impact of the pandemic, especially financially and socially, include the voices of young people. It has impacted so many life areas and will continue to do so. The young people we have spoken with have stressed the enormous impact on mental health through isolation from friendship groups. Online and in person options for connecting with others are critical to keeping it together during tough times. Our video submission highlights this. In Brayden's video he says that "if I don't have social interactions with peers...I would actually go mentally insane." In Anthony's video he talks about the importance of engaging in youth groups and suggests a wider range of these is not available throughout Victoria. He also talks about the importance of having people to talk to in times that are hard and references his own seven-year experience in out of home care.

Another concern is for those who have been in custody integrating back into the community during and post the COVID-19 pandemic, with added pressures on employment, education, housing, and mental health services. They experience prejudice from being labelled as having been in care systems or having a criminal justice record. These young people are often excluded from mainstream options and require support with key transitions. This need will be even greater in the pandemic recovery period.

Mental health

We agree that mental health is a critical issue for young people. The staff and young people consulted both highlighted it as one of the most pressing concerns, especially considering recovery from the pandemic as outlined above. Government policy and funding needs to apply a more inclusive approach to mental health recognising the full continuum from mental health wellbeing to clinical care. More needs to be done to invest in prevention and early intervention strategies.

Our client demographics reveals that 38% of our clients have a mental health issue (and it is likely to be higher than this due to underreporting). In Mission Australia's annual survey report 2020, we see that mental health remains in the top three most important issues to young Australians and that 34% of the 25,800 respondents reported that mental health was one of their top three personal concerns (the second highest issue raised after coping with stress which is of course inextricably linked to mental health)¹. We support the identification of Aboriginal young people, LGBTIQ+ young people, young people with a disability or in rural and regional areas and newly arrived migrants as being at particular risk.

From our experience, many young peoples' needs are not being met by current mental health services and these young people become the 'missing middle.' Orygen's definition of the missing middle is people who "are often too unwell for primary care, but not unwell enough for state-based services. They may have accessed services in the past year; however, these services were not able to deliver either the duration of care, or level of specialist care appropriate for more complex and serious mental ill-health."² It is imperative that the Victorian government recognises the complexities inherent in working with a highly vulnerable, high risk cohort and that this is matched by adequate funding.

Our staff consultation also raised the issue of young people with a greater range of neurodiverse presentations becoming more common and the isolation and loneliness that can come with this.

The complexity of mental health issues means that they cannot be viewed or responded to in isolation. For the young people we work with, many who have experienced significant trauma, there is a complex interplay between access to education, employment and housing affordability impacting the presentation and treatment of mental health issues. A holistic and integrated approach is required in new initiatives.

We applaud additional policy emphasis and funding for youth mental health considering the recovery that is ahead from the extended lockdown during 2020. The Victorian Government's budget, November 2020, provides an opportunity to make progress with the system issues in mental health. Whitelion sees the priority is to assist young people to access mental health services – more easily and in a timely way. This requires a more innovative approach than the traditional mental health focused agencies. We support community mental health strategies such as mental health coach model endorsed by Beyond Blue where coaches are trained and work under clinical supervision to offer low intensity cognitive behavioural therapy.³

Whitelion Mental Health Waiting Room solution

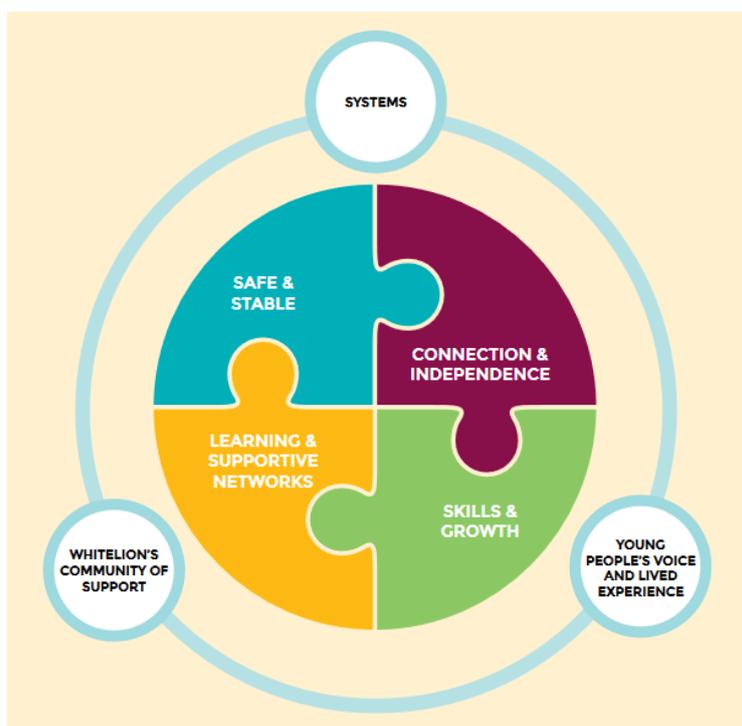
Problems navigating the system, combined with waiting lists at services such as Headspace and private mental health services means many young people are not getting the support when they need it. For this reason, and to assist the missing middle described above, Whitelion is developing a Mental Health Waiting Room project. This will support positive outcomes for young people at risk who are either waiting to access a mental health care clinician, or for those that have already commenced their journey of mental health care and have identified social connection as a goal.

Affordable and Appropriate Housing

It can be difficult for young people who have been in out of home care, the justice system, or disengaged from education and employment to access safe and affordable housing. This is partly due to negative perceptions of young people in these situations. Yet we know that access to safe housing can be the foundation for young people to build a future. As outlined in Whitelion's Service Model (Diagram 3 below) we see safety and stability as a key component in a young person's ability to develop achieve outcomes in the other three areas of our blueprint - connection and independence, skills and growth and learning and supportive networks. We understand safety and stability is required in a range of areas that can become risks for progress if not present, such as family, mental health, and housing. We work with young people to support their outcomes in these four areas within the context of the systems we encounter (family, peers, policy, other service providers), our own community of support (our staff, volunteers, employers, sponsors, donors etc) and young people's own voice and lived experience.

We hope to see more housing accessibility for this cohort of young people via the government's recent Big Housing Build budget announcement. We support YACVic's budget analysis statement: The Big Housing Build must involve young people in the design of the new social housing so that it meets their unique needs. This should be coupled with efforts to address the systemic barriers that prevent young people from accessing social housing, and stronger intervention in the private housing market to make sure every young person has access to a safe, secure and affordable place to live."⁴

Diagram 3: Whitelion's service model



Unemployment/Employment

Pathways to employment for young people is a key objective for Whitelion. Our staff and clients cite COVID related employment issues as exacerbating an existing problem for young people. As stated in the discussion paper, youth unemployment has been high since the last Global Financial Crisis, and young people continue to bear the economic brunt and generational impact of family unemployment. There is a lack of meaningful supported job opportunities for young people.

Development of a range of innovative supported job readiness programs informed by young people is required. This is even more important for young people at risk. Whitelion is also acutely aware that young people were disadvantaged in unemployment figures prior to COVID-19, where youth unemployment was more than double that of the general population in December 2019. Young people tend to work in consumer facing roles such as retail, hospitality, events, fitness and entertainment, which have all been adversely affected by the pandemic. Once the economy emerges from lockdown young people will be competing for these jobs with Australians of all ages due to the overall downturn in job availability". In our experience it was challenging before COVID-19 for many young people at risk to gain and maintain employment and the concern is that this will be exacerbated as this cohort of young people compete in an even more saturated job market. We recommend that consideration be given to the needs of this cohort such as an increase in funding for pre-employment programs. This provides these young people with a pathway to independence, free from welfare dependency.

Whitelion supports the following YACVic budget analysis statement: “A long-term recovery for young people will require the Victoria Government to take another step beyond this budget and create a comprehensive Youth Employment Plan and the concept of a Youth Employment Commission. We also support the Youth Futures Guarantee proposal by the National Youth Commission Australia with employment being a focus of two of the nine pillars. There is an urgent need to support more than 100,000 young people who have lost their jobs since the beginning of the pandemic, and more than 20,000 young people who will graduate from school into the workforce each year.”^{Error! Bookmark not defined.}

Education and training

We support the discussion paper’s understanding that young people who leave school early need to access to alternatives that suit them. Many of the young people we work with have struggled in the traditional school system either with attendance, participation, or both. This is related to complex life circumstances, or social, behavioural or learning difficulties.

The young people we work with tell us that schools are not preparing them with the life skills they require. In the last financial year approximately 16% of our clients requested assistance with financial and budgeting skills and 15% were provided support with independent living skills. Our alternative education programs in South Australia and NSW shows that young people who are disengaged from school and/or have complex needs require intensive support not just in terms of schooling but to also manage the many other challenges they face. Our alternative education programs offer both 1-1 support and group work, and the group work sessions enable young people to learn and often practice life skills together. In our RISE program in NSW, our Coordinator spends just as much time working with young people on life skills and providing intensive support as he does educational attainment. In our Engine Room program in SA, a teacher, and a youth worker both run the program, and additional FLO case managers also support each young person. This ensures that all goals can be worked on – everything from Centrelink appointments, to getting a licence, referrals to mental health services, achieving educational outcomes or getting support into work or another form of education or training.

Continuing to strengthen alternative training pathways to employment that can respond to the diverse needs of all young people is a priority in creating resilient and active citizens.

Technology

Although many young people find technology to be helpful, and this was especially the case during COVID-19, the discussion paper case studies also outline the difficulties many people have with access and use of digital technology. Cyber bullying and trolling via social media impact many young people’s mental health and we would like to see this addressed more explicitly.

Question 3

What needs to change for all young people to be empowered in every aspects of Victorian life – civic, political, social and economic? Consider the many identities and experiences that shape how young people live in the world.

Some responses to this question are captured in other areas of this submission. However, these are key issues we see in relation to inclusion and empowerment.

The issue - young people's self-perception and lack of positive self-regard

Whitelion staff work with a range of young people in complex situations and witness these young people feeling excluded from community life and discussion. For example, our staff report that some young people in youth justice can perceive themselves as less worthy to be involved. These young people face stigma and stereotyping as they move from custodial settings into the community. Many of the young people in disadvantaged circumstances that we work with report feeling powerless or that they do not have a voice.

Solutions

Empowerment

Empowerment of young people requires community acknowledgement that young people have many of the solutions to issues that face them. It also requires the community to understand that many highly disadvantaged young people will need extra support and encouragement to participate. When asking clients for input into this submission, quite a few refused as they felt nothing would come of it, and expressed negative views about the government, saying they have not been supportive.

We believe the Victorian government could take a leadership role by focussing on practical strategies to enhance young participation and empowerment. This could include:

- Requiring evidence of young people's role in decision making in all government and funding and contract agreements with suppliers.
- Introduction of quotas and job targets in government agencies for young employees.

Accessibility

A recurring theme in our discussions with young people is that information needs to be accessible. This means available in a range of formats (visual, written, audio), in plain English and delivered in ways that young people are likely to engage with (from trusted peers). Some young people have literacy issues, and this extends to digital literacy. Not all young people have had consistent access to internet or are able to navigate sites and service that encourage participation. In our 21 years' experience in working with young people we have found that peer and adult mentors can be a trusted source of information and encouragement for young people who are not connected to other community sources of information and have literacy or access issues.

Inclusion of young people's voices

Whitelion supports the discussion paper's strong emphasis for young people to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Government, community organisations, businesses, education, and service providers all need to make a commitment to engage with young people, hear their ideas and opinions and support them to lead solutions. All relevant agencies and services should have built in mechanisms to hear the voice of young people.

Whitelion has recently launched a Youth Engagement Strategy (see question six), but it should not be incumbent upon the youth sector alone to do this. Whitelion's attendance at this year's National Youth Commission Youth Futures Summit highlighted the fact that young people want and need a

voice to government at all levels to ensure they are part of the solutions to the problems they face currently and the issues they will inherit in the future.

We also believe that there is a role for the government in funding peer support models. When undertaking research for our Youth Engagement Strategy, the literature highlighted the importance of peer models. This could range from having peers supporting peers within specific programs, as well as having young people lead youth engagement strategies within organisations. One example is YACVic giving control to young people to lead approaches to tackling youth issues through their [Young Thinker in Residence](#) program. Error! Bookmark not defined. This type of idea could be replicated in multiple sectors and settings, not just within the youth sector.

Question 4

Government, community organisations, businesses, education and service providers all have an important role to play in working with and for young people. *How can we work together to better meet the needs of young people?*

Improved service access and pathways coordination.

A key role for the Victorian government remains to provide policy levers and resourcing to support service coordination. Our staff and the young people we work with report that despite much progress, including recent initiatives such as the Homelessness Emergency Accommodation Response Team (HEART) and the Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM), referral pathways remain complex. An example of this is in the mental health area where the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System Interim report highlighted the system fragmentation and missing steps in the continuum of care. We are supportive of the government's commitment to implement all Royal Commission recommendations and hope to see sufficient funding to best support young people at risk.

We welcome opportunities to work with other organisations to review and improve state-wide service coordination to ensure young people are at the right door the first time.

Promote cultural sensitivity and diversity

Whitelion has many years' experience working with young people from a range of cultural backgrounds and identities. In 2019-20, 24% of the young people we work with identified as Aboriginal and 19% were from CALD backgrounds. One percent of our clients identify as non-binary, transgender or other. Mission Australia's annual survey report 2020 found that since 2019, the percentage of young people rating equity and discrimination as an issue of national importance increased from 25% to 40%, to become the number issue in Australia for young people, according to those surveyed.⁵ The survey showed that those who experienced unfair treatment, 41% was due to their gender and 30% due to their race or cultural background.⁶

As outlined in our response to the Discussion Paper for the Victorian LGBTIQ Strategy (2020), there are actions to take to ensure safe and inclusive services. Prioritising training in government departments and the education system where there is responsibility for young people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Intersex or Queer, provides confidence to these young people to participate in services. Support from government with this training could be made via online learning.

We recognise that the needs of young people who identify as Aboriginal or are from CALD backgrounds are represented in the discussion paper. For example, in 2018–19, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (aged 10 to 17 years) in all Australian states and territories were detained in youth detention facilities at a higher rate than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.⁷ We support ongoing training for the Victorian workforce who interact with these young people as a continuing priority to increase cultural competency and raise awareness of the issues young people face, especially post Covid-19.

Justice system

Whitelion is part of the Smart Justice for Young People coalition, working to create change for young people who come in contact with the justice system. The current focus of this coalition is the [Raise the Age](#) campaign to change the age of criminal responsibility and the age of incarceration. The raising of the age of criminal responsibility from 10 years of age up to 14 years as recommended by International Human Rights law, is a national issue but needs strong support and advocacy from the states.⁸ The impact of a juvenile record can prevent young people getting employment and participating equally in community life.

Business involvement incentives – paid work

From our long-term experience working with major donors and businesses we understand that any policy and tax levers government can provide to incentivise business participation is important, including in volunteering in youth initiatives. We acknowledge that the government has implemented a Social Procurement Framework and policy statements supporting this include young people at risk. Incentivising businesses to offer paid volunteer work/ internships will improve young people's employability. Research from the Foundation for Young Australians showed that paid work experience is a key factor in employability.⁹

Community awareness

We support wider community education regarding the disadvantage faced by the vulnerable young people we work with including those in the child protection system, out of home care and the juvenile justice system.

Part of enhancing this involves focussing on the portrayal of young people in the media. While we want the community to understand in young people's words the issues they face, (as evidenced by our video submission), we also need to see positive stories of youth resilience and youth entrepreneurship in solving the issues they face. Our staff report that too often they see misrepresentations in the media, for example images of young people taken initially for a positive story but then used in negative story.

Question 5.

If you could change one program, initiative, or policy in Victoria, what would you change?

Whitelion staff offered a range of options that would make a considerable improvement in the life of young Victorians, especially our client group. We list the top three below but focus on Affordable and Safe Housing for young people as the most important initiative the Victorian government could undertake.

Our top priority- Affordable and safe housing

Young people have repeatedly told us of the importance of safe, secure, and affordable housing. As mentioned earlier, stable housing is the foundation for vulnerable young people to engage fully in community life.

For our clients who are looking to engage in alternative education or other pathways to employment, housing is a critical need. Many young people unable to live at home couch surf, move between dwellings frequently, sleep rough or are in out of home care. When housing is insecure, it disadvantages young people looking for employment. They may not have consistent or private spaces to eat, sleep and prepare for job interviews. They have no fixed address for correspondence and may have nowhere to clean clothes and maintain hygiene. This cycle of housing insecurity and poverty continues as they find employment harder to obtain and then keep. Although we are not a housing service, we believe every young person has the right to access secure housing, and that this is vital, so they can participate more equitably in the job market and break what could become a lifetime cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement.

Changes to Public transport policy, policing, and fines

Access to local, free public transport would improve accessibility for young people in outer suburbs to jobs, services, and entertainment. It will improve outcomes across a range of indicators and allow them to engage more fully in community life.

Conversely fining young people who do not pay fares on public transport is ineffective as a deterrent and can lead to them being unnecessarily drawn into the criminal justice system. Vulnerable young people on limited incomes are unfairly punished for not having money for fares.¹⁰ We believe more training (especially on mental health and trauma informed responses) is required for Protective Service Officers in their engagement and approaches with young people at risk.

Increasing the Criminal Age of Responsibility

As mentioned earlier, Whitelion supports the Raise the Age campaign and the Smart Justice for Young People campaign to change the age of criminal responsibility and the age of incarceration.

Question 6

What is working well that the Victorian Government could build on to improve outcomes for young people? *Consider initiatives in other states, territories or internationally.*

Structured and supported mentoring programs

Mentoring programs to develop positive connections and pathways to work are a priority focus area for Whitelion.

Mentoring relationships have been found to be effective in pro social role modelling and assisting young people to remain in education and develop strong community and employment connections. Mentoring programs are a valued form of volunteering that can also assist the community in developing a deeper understanding of the disadvantage some young people live with.¹¹

While there is a long history of general adult-youth friendship mentoring models, research has found them to have a small to moderate impact. Targeted programs with adults mentoring young people at risk (or with a deficit of skills in job seeking) and helping them to seek and maintain employment are demonstrably more effective.¹² This is the area in which Whitelion has made an impact, with young people agreeing that their mentor relationship had helped them gain employment or return to school (3.5/5 agreement), were doing better at school or work (3.7/5 agreement) and had more access to service (3.9/5 agreement).¹³

Mentor programs at Whitelion provide an effective base as pathways to employment due to our experience in managing the human resources involved. Our programs, including the Community Integration program, RAMP and Better Futures in Victoria, and Breakthrough mentoring and mentoring support in NSW and SA, are effective because of the recruitment and matching processes. Mentors are selected and matched by a youth worker who understands the young person's needs and mentors' strengths and capabilities. Mentors commit for a period of 12 months, but many continue beyond this. Our role in facilitating the match is a crucial component to the programs' effectiveness for both mentors and mentees. From a volunteer survey, 82% of our mentors stated the experience had met or exceeded their expectations and 81% agreed it had a positive effect on their emotional, mental, or physical health.¹⁴

With the onset of COVID-19 and the resulting loss of both the mechanisms to offer our services in person and employment opportunities for young people, there is a renewed interest in e-mentoring. This type of digital mentoring has been used successfully with young people with disabilities, where physical meetings are not possible and with some young people with mental health issues.¹⁵ Digital or e-mentoring via any number of platforms and types of engagement (e.g., Skype, Facebook or via text or email) provides scope for a broader array of mentors to be involved. It is often used as a supplement to face to face meetings and can increase the longevity and therefore the effectiveness of mentoring relationships.¹⁶

While there are concerns about the accessibility of e-mentoring for Whitelion clients who differ in levels of written and digital literacy, we believe that we need to consider all options moving forward. We would like to explore models that have worked with other client groups, such as young people with a disability. We encourage the Victorian government to consider and invest in practice models in e-mentoring and other online services for young people. This has the dual benefit of engaging with current and future technologies young people will need to use in the workplace and provide a safety net access if there are ongoing disruptions to face to face services in Victoria.

An international program that provides an example of best practice in mentoring for a similar target group to Whitelion is *My Brother's Keeper (MBK)* which was launched by President Obama in the USA in 2014. Its aim is to address the gaps for young men of colour “where they feel valued and have clear pathways to opportunity”.¹⁷ Black, American Indian and Hispanic boys and young men are less likely to finish school, live in poverty and be employed, incarcerated and victims of violent crime. The program is now under the auspice of the Obama Foundation with the aim of closing the education and labour force gaps. The MBK Alliance has a cornerstone of mentoring (including *The Mayor's Mentoring program* in large US cities) but importantly also includes whole community approaches in place focussed initiatives. There are now 250 areas (cities, towns, tribal nations) across the USA involving local government, not for profits, corporates, philanthropic, community leaders and schools with young people actively steering conversations and priorities in each area. Successful policies, interventions and stories are shared across areas. This program has the advantage of scale and large private sector investment.

More therapeutic residential units

Whitelion has been working with West Justice on an in-care legal clinic pilot for young people living in residential care in the western metropolitan Melbourne. The concept is based on the principle of taking wrap-around services to the young person's home rather than make them go into traditional office settings. The legal component serves as an entry point where young people can seek advice about legal matters. We know that legal matters are simply the tip of the iceberg and therefore, the model offers wrap around services by specialist workers such as social worker, housing and employment. Whitelion will form part of the multi-disciplinary team offering a range of our services. Whitelion would play a role in this team regarding support for pathways to work and positive connections.

Pathways to work for young people who have been in detention

In 2018, Whitelion employee Georgia King received a fellowship from the International Specialised Skills institute, and with support from Jobs Victoria and Whitelion, completed a research project in the USA. She “investigated the intersection between disadvantage, community place-based initiatives, enterprise skills and entrepreneurship.”¹⁸

In her visits to programs aimed at connecting people to work and reducing recidivism, Georgia found that some had been incredibly successful. For instance, the Prison Entrepreneurship Program in several Texan cities had reduced recidivism to 7.5% compared with a national rate of 50%. Around 94% of the men reported gaining a job, upon leaving prison compared with 43% of formerly incarcerated men nationally.

Key learnings from researching the best practice models were as follows:

- “Review policy and consider removing stigmatising language
- Investments need to be made in soft skill development across a person's life span to protect against automation and digitisation
- Technology provides an opportunity to scale service delivery and should not solely be considered as a threat

- Peer to peer support models need to be embedded throughout service delivery, providing those with lived experience an opportunity to mentor others
- Investments in self-efficacy has the capacity to reduce recidivism.
- Industry needs to be engaged to help strengthen place-based solutions to unemployment
- Maximising 'human capital' functions as a protective mechanism in the changing world of work
- Entrepreneurship and the investment in building enterprise skills plays a crucial role in assisting people experiencing disadvantage build confidence, connect with the labour market and achieve self-sufficiency
- Service access points need to be simple and place-based to ensure sustainability of engagement”¹⁸

The other programs visited included:

- Comin' Up, Boys and Girls Club, Fort Worth,
- 3 Day Start Up, Capital Factory, Austin, Texas
- Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES), Harlem, New York
- Defy Ventures, Los Angeles

Employment Pathways for young women impacted by Justice

A recent report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare identified that the number of women in prison is increasing, in Australia, and globally.¹⁹ However, programs designed for those in or at risk of engagement with the justice system are historically biased towards men. There is a gap in transition services including gender specific and trauma informed programs focusing on women's employment. As stated in the Victorian Government's Women's Policy for the Victorian Corrections system, (p22) "For women, low levels of education and employment involvement and achievement as a criminogenic risk factor is also distinctive. This is due to the particular gender-based barriers and discrimination women face in the employment market as well as the pressures associated with performing key caregiving roles within a family such as parenting."²⁰ Barriers include gendered issues such as family violence, insecure, unsafe housing and the casualised and insecure nature of female employment.

Most women who are at risk of or are engaged with corrections are from disadvantaged backgrounds experiencing a combination of domestic violence, childhood trauma, poverty, and disengagement from education. These factors along with community exclusion make finding sustainable employment incredibly challenging. Additionally, women and young people have been the most affected by the economic ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the last six months Whitelion has held 3 discovery and design workshops with government, service providers and businesses to consider how we can design an effective program for an often-overlooked cohort of young women. We brought together a group of ten policy makers, law enforcers, specialist service providers and employers to find a long-term solution to a complex issue and co-designed a pilot program in response.

This program will take a place focused approach working with a minimum of 36 young women aged 16-24 over the course of three years. Collaborating closely with established specialist services the Living Free Project and Flat Out, Whitelion will provide specialist employment support to women engaged with case management services in Melbourne's south east region. In line with Whitelion's

mission, the program aims to build positive pathways into work and community, and break what may become a cycle impacted by disadvantage and engagement with the justice system. Whitelion will work with local industry and government to ensure that both employers and participants are supported to create outcomes that benefit the women and the community.

Expansion of life skills programs

Independent living skills and help with finance and budgeting are both within the top 10 support needs identified by 405 young people that Whitelion supported in FY19/20. Over time, Whitelion has run numerous life skills programs and currently runs the 'I Depend on Me' program in the young women's unit at Parkville Youth Justice Centre. This program equips young people with self-advocacy skills required to live independently. Topics covered include goal setting, money matters, job seeking skills, food preparation, time management, health, social connection, service navigation, housekeeping, housing, personal appearance and hygiene, and interpersonal skills.

We know these life skills are crucial for young people at risk, but we also believe they are beneficial for all young people and encourage a stronger focus on some or all these life skills in the education system.

Finance and budgeting skills are particularly critical for our clients. Yet financial literacy is acknowledged to be poor in Australia with only 28% of teenage boys and 15% of teenage girls able to answer three out of five basic financial literacy questions correctly on a standard survey.²¹ This is important because young people are required to make more complex financial decisions, such as entering mobile phone contracts, earlier than previous generations and financial systems have become increasingly complex and jargonised.

There is uniform financial literacy education offered in Australian schools at age 15. The evaluation undertaken of these programs also suggest financial literacy levels are lower than desirable for all teenagers. Young people identifying as Aboriginal, living regionally or from a low socioeconomic household had poorer financial literacy than other young people.²² This can create and entrench cycles of disadvantage and poverty.

Given that our clients are often early school leavers, or from high-risk groups we need to consider how to meet this gap creatively for young people who are out of school or in alternative education. This includes providing information being sought by young people. For example, a US survey found that more young people in detention wanted to learn how to file a tax return than young people who were not, going against the consensus of program designers.²³

We recommend expansion of available financial literacy programs for young people, including those available through TAFE (Certificate 1 in Financial Services) and local learning centres and creating new options, especially in the post COVID-19 environment. As such we have identified this as a priority need and are investigating complementary resources to support our programs.

Funding for peer support models / peer consultants

Peer support is another structured relationship involving mentoring/support by peers/staff who have a lived experience similar to the mentee²⁴. The mental health sector in Victoria has used the peer support model to great effect.²⁵ Our staff see a role for the expansion of the mental health peer support model to youth services, specifically for young people with complex disadvantages

As mentioned in our response to question 4, Whitelion recommends that the government fund more peer support roles within the youth sector

Funding for programs such as the Youth Thinker in Residence Program in a variety of sectors should also be considered.

One example of where funding peers has been effective is where the Department of Health and Human Services has provided funding for consumer and carer consultants in the adult mental health system for many years. The Whitelion Director of Operations has seen first-hand from working in this sector the positive impact that employing consumers and carers has for all – not just service users and their carers and families, but also staff. It's the principle of 'nothing about us without us', of 'doing it with us not for us.'

Many youth agencies such as Whitelion have well intentioned strategies and plans to ensure the voice of those with lived experience informs everything they do, but this is challenging to achieve without any additional funding. Our experience has taught us that philanthropists and corporate funders are not usually interested in funding peer workers or Youth Councils, and we therefore feel that government has a stronger role to play in this.

Question 7

What role can you or your organisation play to improve the lives of young Victorians?

Whitelion staff offered the following responses.

Mentor support programs

Whitelion has refocused in our [Strategy 2023: A new beginning](#) to delivering two key areas-pathways to work and positive connections for young people at risk.

As part of our approach to positive connections, Whitelion has extensive experience in mentoring programs for young people. Support from trusted community members gives young people access to a broader range of community options. It also utilises the skills and passions of Victorians who wish to see young people flourish. These types of volunteer program create and support the fabric of civil society.

There are options to continue and expand mentoring in Victoria with an even stronger link to pathways to work. We will be piloting a current NSW program, Breakthrough Employment Mentoring, in metropolitan Melbourne in 2021. This is an individualised mentoring program that helps young people plan for, gain, and retain employment. The program is offered to 16-25-year old's who lack exposure to positive adult role models with experience in the work force – namely young people from entrenched disadvantage and multigenerational unemployment. Mentors receive a unit of TAFE training and are then matched one-to-one with young people and use their personal experience and professional networks to assist the young person to find employment locally.

Whitelion believes strongly that given the right support, young people are best placed to find positive solutions to the challenges they face. We recently developed our first Youth Engagement Strategy and Action Plan to ensure that the voice of young people with lived experience guides and shapes our organisation. Whilst Whitelion has involved young people in the past in a variety of ways, this strategy provides a more formal and structured approach – it commits us to clear deliverables. Key features of this strategy are as follows:

- Participatory youth practice (PYP) will be rolled out across Whitelion to ensure young people are engaged at an **individual level**.
- Young people will play a critical role in informing program design, review and evaluation of performance and impact. This may include young people helping to design new programs, redesigning current programs, participating on interview panels for new staff and being involved in relevant working groups. This will ensure young people are engaged at a **program level**.
- We are currently recruiting eight young people with lived experience from the four states where we operate for a Whitelion Youth Council (WYC) who will be called WYC Advisors. This will ensure young people are engaged at an **organisational level**.
- As well as youth engagement occurring at three levels (individual, program and organisational), diagram four highlights our three-pronged approach which has been designed to provide flexibility and easy access to young people’s voice and lived experience as far as possible.
- Young people will be paid \$30 an hour when they are formally engaged.

Diagram 4: Whitelion’s three-pronged approach to youth engagement

	1. Whitelion Youth Council (WYC)	2. ‘Ad hoc’ engagement	3. Secondary consultation
Description	8 young people with lived experience attend bi-monthly meetings.	Involving young people in multiple and varied ways in a once-off or time-limited way.	Accessing the voice of young people and their lived experience through external advisory groups and councils supported by other organisations.
Key features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Young people to input into organisational-wide issues. - A forum to develop and build capability of young people to participate in engagement activities within their states. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partnering either with WYC advisors or engaging with other current service users. - Less formal than WYC - Are most often paid but some are unpaid e.g. surveys. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expert advice from a specific cohort of young people. - Helps Whitelion to not reinvent the wheel - Young people are already trained and supported.
Level of engagement	Organisational	Mainly program, sometimes organisational	Organisational and program

Advocacy and changing perceptions of young people

Our work is funded by donors, business, the philanthropic sector, and government and a key role we play in these partnerships is providing a link to the lives and concerns of young people most at risk. We work to counter negative or inaccurate perceptions of young people and build community awareness. Whilst we are not an advocacy organisation per se, we participate in relevant campaigns and opportunities such as this submission, to ensure the needs and the voice of young people at risk are known and considered. As a service provider, we have a responsibility to ensure that our practice wisdom informs systemic change. In the past financial year, we have written advocacy submissions for the Royal Commission into Victorian Mental Health Services, The Victorian government's LGBTIQ strategy, the Parliament of Victoria's Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers and the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales' Protocol for Homeless People in Public Places.

A strong focus on outcomes and evidence

Whitelion is currently implementing significant pieces of work to ensure our services are focused on outcomes and impact, including ensuring the voice of young people informs this. We have a new Outcomes Framework and Evaluation Framework, and all programs are working towards having program logics. We are transitioning to a new client information system where outcomes will be recorded. We are re-evaluating our evaluation methods to collect more data and will be involving young people in the development of new surveys. By understanding more systemically about the outcomes and impact we are having, we will be able to improve our services for all young people.

A strong focus on long term partnerships

We recognise that Whitelion's impact is greater when we work with others. For this reason, we are engaged in local, regional, and state partnerships and consortiums.

We engage with government in forums as opportunities arise. Our CEO is on the Ministerial Task Force for Victorian Volunteer Strategy and we are a member of the Working for Victoria Youth Coalition.

Regionally we work with Wyndham Council on a place focused response for at risk young people. We are a partner to the YSAS led Pivot program in the southern region which addresses offending behaviours and recidivism of at-risk young people.

We also engage with corporates for the benefit of young people, with supported job placements and sponsorship including with KFC. These long-term partnerships bring stability and benefits to both Whitelion and our partners as new opportunities to work together in different ways emerge.

We believe a Victorian government strategy to engage regularly with the youth sector would be an effective way to seek input, coordinate knowledge, and enhance outcomes for young people.

Question 8

Do you have anything else you would like to add to inform the youth strategy?

Engaging with at risk young people requires new approaches and is urgent.

Many of the young people we work with are deemed “too complex”. We want to work with the Victorian government to ensure that all young people have the same opportunities.

The government needs to continue to reach out and share opportunities with young people and be active in information sharing and building relationships, and not expect that all young people will be open to seeking opportunities. There is a need for a diverse way of engaging with youth, utilising different tools and innovative methods.

This is in line with input from our clients. Many young people have lost faith in the government. They may come from families experiencing intergenerational disadvantage and mistrust of authorities. However, they may also have come to this conclusion on their own. A widespread distrust of “those in charge” is evident. Please refer to our video submission.

Opportunities and challenges arising from COVID-19

COVID-19 has brought to light some of the inadequacies in our systems, such as Centrelink payments and responses, which could lead to positive outcomes for young people and greater community understanding. Whitelion supports the [Raise the Rate](#) campaign to ensure that young people have financial access and support to rebuild their lives.

Equally our staff are concerned that there is the potential for young people to be exploited in a post lock down world with a great number of people competing for jobs. Again, Whitelion commits to work with the Victorian government to ensure that the next few years are navigated for the benefit of all young people.

A whole of government approach to the youth sector

We would like to see more opportunities for services to collaborate and work together – a no-wrong door approach - and funding for non-competitive service delivery. For too long, services have been pitted against each other to deliver sometimes unachievable outcomes and the best value for money.

More secure and longer-term government funding for contracts would also help provide more stability in the sector and to staff. Whilst the recent budget continues investment in the youth sector, we support YACVic’s budget analysis statement: “The Government should commit more long-term funding to a range of community-based generalist and targeted youth work programs, to meet existing and projected increases in demand for services over the next decade. Such an investment in prevention and early intervention youth work would allow young people’s issues to be identified and addressed early, rather than spiralling out of control and costing more in the long run.”²⁶ Error! Bookmark not defined.

We strongly support YACVic’s recommendation for government support to develop a strong youth sector.²⁶ Youth services provide an important prevention and early intervention service to the Victorian community and are being heavily relied upon in 2020. Demand for Whitelion’s services has increased because of the COVID-19 pandemic, yet our ability to respond is limited by the investment of funders including government. We need to build a robust and reliable workforce and

infrastructure, but government funding is generally programmatic. Many organisations like Whitelion anticipate staffing and service issues when the Job Keeper subsidies finish in 2021.

For organisations like Whitelion who work with young people who have experienced multiple disadvantages, it is our observation that government programs do not always consider the lived experience of this target group. For example, from Whitelion's experience the Jobs Victoria Employment Network program funding does not allow the flexibility required by young people at risk, as described in elsewhere this submission.

Adopting a Common Outcomes framework

We know that outcomes developed without the input of young people often end up becoming the measures that we are required to work towards with our clients and this is often unsatisfactory. Not all young people will meet their goals, even those they have set and are committed to. We want to improve in how we measure outcomes, to understand and tell the story of *why* things happen and to be supported by government funders to do so, especially when goals are not realistic or achievable.

We therefore support the development of a common outcomes framework to measure improvements in the lives of young Victorians. This will ensure government and the youth sector work collaboratively with unified purpose.

In conclusion, we commend the Victorian government for this work and trust that as we move forward into a post COVID-19 world the Victorian Youth Strategy will be a guiding and living document for all young people, services, and the community.

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