

Acknowledgment

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands across Victoria that we work on, and pay our respects to their Elders, both past and present and to their children and young people, who are our future Elders and caretakers of this great land. We acknowledge the Stolen Generations, those who we have lost; those who generously share their stories with us; and those we are yet to bring home.

Note on Language

We use the term 'Aboriginal' to describe the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Clans and Traditional Owner Groups whose traditional lands comprise what is now called Australia. We use the term 'Indigenous' as it relates to Indigenous peoples globally as well as in the human rights context. The terms 'First Peoples' and 'First Nations' are employed in the Australian context, by recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the First Peoples/First Nations of this land, it directly relates to their inherent un-ceded sovereignty.



Introduction

██████ welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft of Victoria's 30-year Infrastructure Strategy by Infrastructure Victoria. We note that consultation has taken place with Aboriginal communities and ACCOs and this is reflected in the Draft. It is pleasing to see the objective "Aboriginal people have self-determination and equal outcomes to other Victorians," and the two recommendations falling under this objective: to invest in secure homes for Aboriginal Victorians and to fund better health and wellbeing infrastructure for Aboriginal Victorians. ██████ also welcomes many of the recommendations that Infrastructure Victoria included in the Draft, such as the recommendations to build more social housing, run more bus and coach services in regional Victoria, invest in community health facilities, build more alcohol and drug treatment facilities, and better use prisons.

On top of this encouraging body of work by Infrastructure Victoria, ██████ has several recommendations to ensure that the Strategy is able to fulfil the objective that Aboriginal people have self-determination and equal outcomes to other people in Victoria, and to ensure the Strategy aligns with the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework (VAAF) and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Our response includes several types of feedback. Firstly, we will outline how three of the existing Draft recommendations could be strengthened to increase accountability to the Aboriginal community. Secondly, we raise several additional recommendations that we hope to see in the final Strategy. We end with feedback to improve the impact of the Strategy for Aboriginal people in Victoria.

Aboriginal people have the right to access Aboriginal-led services.

Given that infrastructure must necessarily precede the provision of services and programs, Infrastructure Victoria have a responsibility to guide the Victorian Government with a Strategy that specifically and explicitly includes infrastructure for the Aboriginal community. Access to Aboriginal-led social programs and services, education, healthcare, and justice facilities is a core aspect of self-determination and access to these services is highlighted in the VAAF. As stated on page 74 of the Draft, the Aboriginal population is growing at a greater rate than the general population and there is an urgent need to build more Aboriginal community-controlled infrastructure to meet the growing demand. With the information detailed in our response we hope that Infrastructure Victoria can ensure the Victorian Government is held to account to deliver critical infrastructure to Aboriginal people in the State.

Strengthen draft recommendations

This section outlines how three of the Draft recommendations could be strengthened to best meet the needs of the Aboriginal community.

Aboriginal early childhood services

Draft recommendation 2: Facilitate markets and invest in kindergarten infrastructure

We recommend that Infrastructure Victoria include investment in Aboriginal kindergartens, child and family centers, and multifunctional Aboriginal children's services within this recommendation in the final Strategy

Early childhood education supports a child's development, improves their readiness for school, and promotes social and emotional wellbeing across the lifespan, especially for vulnerable children.¹ There is growing evidence that Aboriginal-led early childhood education and care are particularly successful at engaging Aboriginal families and are best placed to support the wellbeing and development of children and their families.² However, there are currently only 6 Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) and two Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFS) in Victoria but there is no mention of building more Aboriginal facilities in *Draft recommendation 2*. Investing in Aboriginal community-controlled early childhood education infrastructure is an important part of closing the early outcomes gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and including this within *Draft recommendation 2* will guide much-needed Government investment.

More recreational and sporting facilities for Aboriginal communities

Draft recommendation 3: Build libraries and aquatic centers for Melbourne's growing communities.

Ensure that recreational, cultural and sporting facilities for Aboriginal people are included in the Strategy; this may fall under Draft recommendation 3.

ACCOs provide several essential services such as emergency relief, social services support, education and training programs, legal support, health and mental health services and more. Yet, ACCO infrastructure is chronically underfunded. Investment in ACCOs through the establishment of new multipurpose service facilities will allow them to expand provision of accessible cultural and recreational programs, activities and groups. Multipurpose facilities could also be used as gathering places and youth hubs; infrastructure that the community is calling for. For many Aboriginal people, ACCOs play a crucial role in connecting them to community and culture in addition to providing essential services.

¹ Elek, C., et al. (2020). Can early childhood education programs support positive outcomes for Indigenous children? A systematic review of the international literature. *Educational Research Review*, 31. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100363>ildren

² Elek, C., et al. (2022). An opportunity for our little ones: Findings from an evaluation of an Aboriginal Early Childhood Learning Centre in Central Australia. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 50, 579-591.

Aboriginal people participate in sport and physical recreation less frequently than non-Aboriginal people due to reported participation barriers such as access to transport, travel times, and racism.³ Therefore, the development of more culturally safe and accessible sporting infrastructure could improve engagement in sports and recreation for the Aboriginal community, which correspondingly improves social, emotional and physical health and wellbeing.

Increasing recreational, cultural, sporting and other ACCO infrastructure could be incorporated within *Draft recommendation 3* or added as a standalone recommendation.

Aboriginal community-controlled transitional housing for people exiting prison

Draft recommendation 21: Better use prisons and invest more in health facilities and transition housing

Explicitly state in this recommendation the need to repurpose prisons for Aboriginal community-controlled transitional housing, proportional to the numbers of Aboriginal people exiting prison.

No one should be exited from prison into homelessness, yet this occurs frequently to Aboriginal people in the justice system. In 2023-24, 69% of people exiting prison needed support to obtain accommodation, and 28% of these people were Aboriginal.⁴ This is especially concerning given the recent significant changes to the *Bail Act 1977* which will see more Aboriginal people remanded. As framed in the Draft, the provision of transitional housing between prison and re-entry into the community saves government money and improves community safety by decreasing the risk of reoffending. Given that Aboriginal people are overrepresented in both the homelessness system and the justice system, the provision of culturally safe and supported transitional housing for women, men and children leaving prison is urgently needed. We recommend that the language in *Draft recommendation 21* is strengthened to explicitly state the need to develop Aboriginal-led transitional accommodation proportional to the numbers of Aboriginal people exiting prison.

Additional recommendations

We provide the following two recommendations to be included in the final Strategy.

Recommendation:

Include a recommendation for family violence transitional and crisis accommodation infrastructure.

³ Mansell et al. (2024). How community sport and recreation affect the health and wellbeing of Indigenous people: A qualitative systematic review and meta-aggregation.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212657024000187>

⁴ AIHW. (2025). Specialist homelessness services annual report 2023-24. Retrieved from:
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/clients-exiting-custodial-arrangements>

The most significant gap in the Draft is the lack of infrastructure for people experiencing and escaping from family violence. There is a significant intersection between family violence and homelessness: family violence is one of the primary reasons that people present to specialist homelessness services and leaving a relationship is one of the most dangerous times for people escaping violence. Yet, there is a lack of short and long-term housing options available, meaning that affected family members are more likely to remain with violent partners. Aboriginal women are particularly vulnerable, they are 25 times more likely to be injured or killed as a result of family violence than non-Aboriginal women.⁵

While increasing the overall housing supply will support more people to safely escape from family violence, supported accommodation will always play an indispensable role in the early response to family violence. Recognising this, Housing Australia recently launched the National Housing Infrastructure Facility - Crisis and Transitional (NHIF CT) program which allocates \$1billion in funding towards youth experiencing homelessness and women and children experiencing family violence; Victoria will be eligible for \$250million of the fund. Given Aboriginal women and children are disproportionately impacted by violence, it is crucial that they have access to culturally safe, ACCO-led services in metro and regional areas across Victoria where they may seek safe accommodation and other supports to re-build their lives. As the availability of federal funding may make this a more approachable recommendation for the Victorian Government to accept, we strongly recommend that Infrastructure Victoria include this lifesaving infrastructure in the final Strategy.

Recommendation:

Restate the recommendation for an Aboriginal community-controlled infrastructure plan.

Despite the inclusion of the recommendation for a standalone plan in the 2021 iteration of the Strategy and the subsequent announcement of the Victorian Government's agreement in principle, an Aboriginal community-controlled infrastructure plan has not been delivered. While *Draft recommendation 23*, fund better health and wellbeing infrastructure for Aboriginal Victorians, addresses some of the Aboriginal community's infrastructure needs, it does not include all of them: education, sports and recreation, climate resilience, justice, social services, and Treaty related facilities are not captured within this recommendation.

A standalone Plan must reflect the needs of the Aboriginal community at local, regional and state levels, directly align to the priorities within the VAAF and Victoria's Implementation Plan of the National Agreement and have an accountability mechanism built within it. A standalone Aboriginal infrastructure plan coupled with a culturally safe Strategy from Infrastructure Victoria are important to achieve Aboriginal self-determination.

⁵ State of Victoria. (2017). *Balit Marrup: Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing framework 2017-2027*. [Weblink](#)

Further feedback

Self-determination for Aboriginal people in regional and rural areas

Recommendation:

Ensure sufficient housing, services, roads and transport infrastructure are built in regional and rural Victoria so that Aboriginal people in the regions have choice and agency about where they live.

There are greater proportions of Aboriginal people in regional and rural locations, and they have the right to access affordable housing and essential services in the areas in which they want to live. Historically and continuing to the present day, the colonisation of Australia has displaced Aboriginal people, impacting their connection with their family, community and country. The Strategy should allow Aboriginal people individual self-determination regardless of their income, giving them the choice and agency to live where they want to live and to avoid unwillingly relocating homes due to availability of affordable housing or critical services.

Affordable homes near existing infrastructure

Recommendation:

Draft future option “mandating more affordable homes near existing infrastructure” should be a core recommendation, not a future option.

This recommendation is one of the most inexpensive and one of the least complex recommendations available to Government, yet one of the most important to people with low incomes, with the effects felt daily. It is well explained throughout the Draft that close access to public transport, jobs and services is important for people’s wellbeing and productivity and reduces fossil fuel emissions and traffic congestion by reducing the number of cars on our roads. This should be a core recommendation because people on lower incomes should not be excluded from the benefits of compact cities. Too often, lower-income households are pushed further and further away from city centres due to the cost of housing, which may impact their ability to remain connected to jobs, essential services and recreational facilities. To defer this mandate to five or more years from now will further entrench the pattern that homes in well-connected areas are too expensive for many people, and it may become increasingly difficult to reverse. Given that Aboriginal households are more likely to have lower incomes than the general population, the failure to mandate affordable housing near existing infrastructure will disproportionately impact Aboriginal people and has the potential to have serious flow-on effects on health, wellbeing, and income because it reduces access to essentials such as medical facilities, schools, social services and jobs. Changing this ‘future option’ to be one of the formal recommendations of the Strategy will allow for better town planning and aligns well with the overall messaging of the Strategy.