



# A climate of fairness

Making Victoria's climate change transition fair & equitable  
October 2019



# About VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria.

VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy.

In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of Victorians experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

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**Authorised by:** VCOSS CEO Emma King

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VCOSS acknowledges the traditional owners of country and pays respect to past, present and emerging Elders. This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.





**Our response to climate change must be urgent and comprehensive. But it must also be fair and equitable - and ensure no one is left behind.**

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# Executive Summary

Climate change threatens the entire planet, its diversity of species and our very way of life. That's not hyperbole, it's science.

Climate change therefore demands an urgent, comprehensive and coordinated response. But that response must also be fair and *equitable*, and ensure no one is left behind.

Responding to climate change in a manner that is inherently *unfair* will punish the people who can least afford it, and who stand to lose the most.

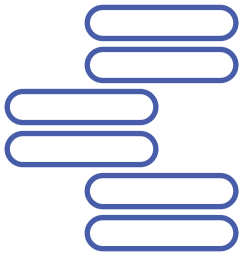
That includes people on fixed or low incomes, social housing tenants, people with a disability or health challenge, Aboriginal people and those living in farming, coastal or rural communities.

This report, *A Climate of Fairness*, adopts a 'climate equity' approach to determine the practical measures Victoria should take to respond to climate change *fairly*.

Climate equity poses a simple question: who should shoulder the heaviest burden when responding to climate change?

The measures we propose fall into six main categories:

1. Ensuring everyone is part of the transition to CLEAN ENERGY, including those locked out of rooftop solar schemes.
2. Making all Victorian HOMES 'healthy homes' with effective insulation and appliances.
3. Equipping COMMUNITIES to be resilient ahead of disasters and extreme weather.
4. Reducing the HEALTH sector's climate footprint, and helping it better support communities as the environment changes.
5. Supporting people to embrace low-emissions vehicles, and prioritising high-quality public TRANSPORT.
6. Building a resilient COMMUNITY SECTOR to help people cope with ravages of climate change.



A truly equitable response to climate change puts the people, communities and organisations that are being hardest hit by global warming at the forefront of decision-making, planning and delivery — and funds them accordingly.

It prioritises support to those individuals and groups who need the most assistance to adapt to the changing climate.

Victoria must decide if it wishes to seize a considerable opportunity.

If our response to climate change is bold and fair, and done in partnership with communities, it will do significantly more than simply assist people adapt to climate change.

It will lead to the development of policies and programs that help all Victorians to thrive and prosper, and build a fairer and more just state for every person.



**Emma King**  
VCOSS CEO

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**Climate equity poses a simple question: who should shoulder the heaviest burden when responding to climate change?**



# Recommendations

**Here are 21 practical ways Victoria can ensure a fair and equitable climate transition.**

## **Clean, affordable energy**

1. Make rooftop solar feasible and affordable for renters living on low incomes by ensuring there is no tenant co-payment under the Solar Homes program.
2. Subsidise access to larger-scale renewables for financially disadvantaged people locked out of renewables, particularly people in social housing.
3. Ensure clean energy through the grid is affordable, through price regulation such as the Victorian Default Offer.

## **Energy-efficient and healthy homes**

4. Expand on the EnergySmart Public Housing and Energy Savvy Upgrades programs.
5. Mandate meaningful energy efficiency standards for rental housing, so that Victorians who are renting have healthy and comfortable homes.
6. Lead national efforts to improve energy performance standards, including under the National Construction Code.

## **Resilient communities**

7. Support the people who are most vulnerable to extreme weather and disasters.
8. Collaborate strategically on disaster resilience, to capture the range of networks, relationships, expertise and knowledge available.



### **Strong and energy efficient health services**

9. Undertake place-based research to better understand the health risks and likely impacts of climate change on services and communities.
10. Develop a health and human services climate change adaptation action plan, based on best-practice models.
11. Support health services to reduce their own greenhouse gas emissions.
12. Acknowledge the significant health impacts of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, as a positive side effect of climate action.
13. Incorporate the impacts of climate change on health and health services into broader policies.
14. Engage the health community, broader communities and leaders to champion action on the health impacts of climate change.



### **Clean, affordable and convenient transport**

15. Support people who cannot afford to transition to low-emissions vehicles to make the switch.
16. Improve public transport in areas where people are financially, socially and physically disadvantaged.
17. Ensure public transport is accessible, particularly for people with a disability.



### **A thriving community sector ready to drive climate equity**

18. Better understand the needs of community organisations in a changing climate.
19. Place vulnerable people, places and community organisations at the forefront of climate change decision-making and planning.
20. Support community organisations with strategies and tools to adapt to climate change.
21. Support community organisations to reduce their carbon footprint by switching to renewable energy and improving energy efficiency.

# Climate equity means a fair future for our most vulnerable people

The impacts of global warming are felt in many parts of people's lives: their health and wellbeing, finances, comfort at home and resilience to extreme weather events. Climate change creates new impacts on our lives and landscapes and stands to exacerbate the existing vulnerabilities and disadvantages that people and communities are facing.

Our response to climate change therefore needs to address critical threats to our wellbeing, and use the transition as an opportunity to lift equality across our community. Approaching this immense task with the aim of 'climate equity' is a way to improve social equity. A climate equity approach 'ensures that all people have the opportunity to benefit equally from climate solutions, while not taking on an un-equal burden of climate impacts'<sup>1</sup>.

Climate equity is about who should be responsible for addressing climate change.<sup>2</sup> An equitable response acknowledges the unequal burden that climate change places on people, whether locally or globally. It recognises that people experiencing poverty and disadvantage are typically not responsible for the causes of climate change, but are more vulnerable to its impacts, and require more support and protection. Conversely, the people who contribute the most to the causes of climate change usually face lower climate-related risks and are often more able to protect themselves from these impacts.<sup>3</sup>

Climate equity puts the people who are most vulnerable at the forefront of decision-making. It aims to reduce the risk of them being hit harder by climate change than their better-resourced friends and neighbours. It addresses the inequities which climate change could entrench. And it embeds fairness in how we mitigate climate change and adapt to the impacts which are already locked in.

It is critical that Victoria's response to climate change is equitable, and protects the people who are most vulnerable. Government, industry, community organisations and communities themselves must be part of the response. There is significant policy paralysis at the federal level when it comes to climate change. The Federal Government must show leadership in this space. While we wait, it falls to Victoria and local communities to lead the charge on challenges such as fair energy and transport transitions, and combatting the risks to our health.<sup>4</sup>

## The impacts of climate change are inequitable

When we talk about climate equity, there are many aspects of people's lives that can make them either more resilient or more vulnerable to climate change.

Victoria needs to be vigilant about how climate change is affecting us, be it our health, finances, family or community wellbeing, physical location and social connectedness. Each of these elements of our lives is intertwined, and each must be addressed in any equitable response to climate change.

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<sup>1</sup> Local Governments for Sustainability USA, Climate Equity, <http://iclei.usa.org/programs/climate-equity/>

<sup>2</sup> W Lynn, 'The ethics of climate change: what we owe people – and the rest of the planet', *The Conversation*, December 8, 2015, <https://theconversation.com/the-ethics-of-climate-change-what-we-owe-people-and-the-rest-of-the-planet-51785>

<sup>3</sup> World Resources Institute, *Climate Equity*, <https://www.wri.org/our-work/project/climate-equity>.

<sup>4</sup> World Health Organization, *COP24 Special Report: Health & Climate Change*, 2018: p 60, <https://www.who.int/globalchange/publications/COP24-report-health-climate-change/en/>.

## Poverty is a climate risk factor

Across Victoria, people's financial wellbeing, or lack thereof, is a key factor in how resilient they are to climate change.

Disasters and extreme weather, which are increasing in frequency and intensity with climate change, expose people's vulnerabilities. Income is a significant factor in how vulnerable people are to disasters, and the stressors that they experience as a result.<sup>14</sup>

Around 774,000 or 13.2 per cent of Victorians live in poverty.<sup>15</sup> Some groups of people are more likely to be living in poverty, including Aboriginal people, people in regional Victoria, women, children and people with disability.<sup>16</sup> People who rely solely on income support are particularly at risk, however 28.2 per cent of Victorians living in poverty do so despite having a job.<sup>17</sup> Poverty truly touches every suburb and every town in Victoria.

Financial disadvantage squeezes household budgets, and can mean people cannot afford to cool their homes to a comfortable temperature, because the energy costs are simply too high.<sup>18</sup> This can have a significant impact on people's health, particularly if they are vulnerable to heat. The risk is increasing as temperatures and heatwaves increase, and can result in multiple deaths as Victoria experienced during heatwaves in 2009.<sup>19</sup>

People with little in the household budget may also struggle to afford to insure their homes and belongings and protect themselves financially. This heightens people's vulnerability to disasters such as floods and bushfires, which are predicted to increase with rising temperatures. Insurers paid out \$1.2 billion in the wake of the Black Saturday bushfires.<sup>20</sup> However, it was estimated that up to 13 per cent of residential properties were not insured.<sup>21</sup> On top of this, many homes were 'underinsured'; that is, insured for less than it would cost to rebuild them.<sup>22</sup>

Transport also has a big impact on people's finances. The average Australian household spends over \$11,000 per year on transport, which is around seven times more than we spend on electricity.<sup>23</sup> Some Victorians rely heavily on their cars because active and public transport are inaccessible. People living in outer urban and regional areas, and people with disability, are at a higher risk of being left behind in the transition to lower-emissions transport.<sup>24</sup> As Victoria moves towards cleaner transport, it is important that we bring all Victorians along.

Income, insurance and transport are some of the key financial factors in people's vulnerability to climate change. If you are struggling to keep up with day-to-day expenses, protecting yourself from the impacts of climate change can be an insurmountable challenge. This is a significant factor in planning an equitable climate transition.

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<sup>5</sup> Climate Change Act, section 6.

<sup>6</sup> Climate Change Act, Part 5 Division 1.

<sup>7</sup> Climate Change Act, sections 10 and 11.

<sup>8</sup> Climate Change Act, Part 5 Division 3.

<sup>9</sup> Climate Change Act, Part 5 Division 2.

<sup>10</sup> Climate Change Act section 22.

<sup>11</sup> Climate Change Act section 24.

<sup>12</sup> Climate Change Act section 26.

<sup>13</sup> Climate Change Act section 27.

<sup>14</sup> F Beaini & M Ulubasoglu, *Demographic Profiling: Victorian Bushfires 2009 Case Study*, December 2018, p 8, <https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/file/9308/download?token=OvJpCggz>

## Your home can heighten your climate change risks

The place a person calls home can put them at a greater or lesser risk from the impacts of climate change.

Having insecure housing or no home at all makes you more physically vulnerable to extreme weather and disasters. In addition, people without a secure home can be invisible in emergency planning, preparation and responses.<sup>46</sup> This means people experiencing homelessness face particularly high risks under climate change.

Some Victorians live in areas which are physically isolated, or at high risk of extreme weather or disasters, because these areas can be more affordable. This is particularly true in parts of outer Melbourne and some areas in regional and rural Victoria which are more vulnerable to events like flooding and bushfires. People who are financially disadvantaged can therefore be more exposed to weather events which can endanger their safety, and destroy their homes and communities.

In addition, the longer-term impacts of climate change also affect some communities significantly. For example, droughts, which have been linked to climate change, have major impacts on primary production, and impact regional communities which rely on primary industries.<sup>47</sup> There are also additional challenges in communities where high-emissions industries such as coal-fired power are part of the local economy.<sup>48</sup> The clean energy transition has big impacts in these communities. The Victorian Government has sought to ensure a 'just transition' for some of those communities, such as through the Latrobe Valley Authority's funding of local businesses. A plan for transitioning workers and communities, as well as future jobs and clean energy, is essential.<sup>49</sup> But there is still a risk that Victorians who are already financially vulnerable could become more disadvantaged as the money of old industries leaves town.

## Climate change is a health emergency

Climate change is making people sick. In September 2019, the Australian Medical Association recognised climate change as a health emergency, saying there is 'clear scientific evidence indicating severe impacts for our patients and communities now and into the future'.<sup>25</sup> Some people are more vulnerable to the health impacts of climate change, largely because they have existing ill-health.

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<sup>15</sup> R Tanton, D Peel & Y Vidyattama, *Every suburb Every town: Poverty in Victoria*, November 2018, p 6, <https://vcoss.org.au/policy/every-suburb-every-town/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> VCOSS, *Power Struggles: Everyday battles to stay connected*, August 2017, p 3, <https://vcoss.org.au/policy/power-struggles-everyday-battles-to-stay-connected/>.

<sup>19</sup> I Parise, 'A brief review of global climate change and the public health consequences', *Australian Journal of General Practice*, Volume 47, Issue 7, July 2018.

<sup>20</sup> 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, *Final Report*, July 2010, <http://royalcommission.vic.gov.au/Commission-Reports/Final-Report.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Climate Council, *Waiting for the green light: Transport solutions to climate change*, 2018, [https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/CC\\_MVSA0154-Report-Transport\\_V6-FA\\_Low-Res\\_Single-Pages.pdf](https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/CC_MVSA0154-Report-Transport_V6-FA_Low-Res_Single-Pages.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> VCOSS, *Empowered Lives: Securing change for Victorians with a disability*, p 28, <http://empoweredlives.vcoss.org.au/>.

<sup>25</sup> Australian Medical Association, *Climate change is a health emergency*, *Media Release*, 3 September 2019, <https://ama.com.au/media/climate-change-health-emergency>.

Heatwaves, sustained high temperatures and disasters such as bushfires, storms and floods are dangerous events that are expected to increase as the climate changes.<sup>26</sup> The heatwaves in Victoria around Black Saturday in 2009 are estimated to have killed 374 people.<sup>27</sup> Those most vulnerable to extreme heat include people with heart conditions, older people, pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, and children. Heat is particularly risky for people over the age of 75 years.<sup>28</sup> Some people are vulnerable for other reasons; for example, because they take medication that increases their risk of heat-related illness.<sup>29</sup>

Some of the health risks of climate change are closely linked to the unhealthy air caused by our ongoing reliance on fossil fuels. Air pollution is estimated to kill 3,000 Australians and seven million people globally each year.<sup>30</sup> Climate change and air pollution are predominantly caused by polluting energy systems and facilities such as power plants, mines, factories and refineries.<sup>31</sup> In Australia, people on lower incomes are more likely to live near these polluting facilities, which makes air pollution 'a class and a climate issue'.<sup>32</sup> However, more than half of the deaths in Australia are caused by the air pollution from cars, trucks and buses. This is bigger than the national road toll.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to air pollution, higher temperatures are predicted to cause more allergens such as pollen, fungal spores, indoor moisture and mould, food allergens and stinging insects.<sup>34</sup>

People with existing respiratory and allergic illnesses may face worse symptoms. Despite asthma and allergies being very common in Australia, our monitoring, reporting and forecasting of allergens is relatively poor.<sup>35</sup> This can leave our communities even more vulnerable to events such as thunderstorm asthma, with Victoria having experienced the world's largest epidemic thunderstorm asthma event in November 2016, which resulted in 10 deaths and thousands of people developing breathing difficulties in a very short period of time.

Our healthy water is also at risk. Heavy rainfall events will increase with climate change.<sup>36</sup> These can lead to contaminated floodwater and soil, which can cause bacterial infections and unsafe drinking water.<sup>37</sup> It is also possible that insect-borne diseases could increase as warmer temperatures boost insect breeding.<sup>38</sup> These profound environmental changes will hurt many people.

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<sup>26</sup> Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Victoria's Climate Change Adaptation Plan 2017-2020*, <https://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/adapting-to-climate-change-impacts>.

<sup>27</sup> Victorian Government, *January 2009 Heatwave in Victoria: an Assessment of Health Impacts*, 2012, <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/publications/researchandreports/January-2009-Heatwave-in-Victoria-an-Assessment-of-Health-Impacts>

<sup>28</sup> W Steffen & L Hughes, <http://www.climatecouncil.org.au/uploads/b7e53b20a7d6573e1ab269d36bb9b07c.pdf> cited in Hughes, L and Steffen, W (2013) 'Climate change in Victoria: trends, predictions and impacts', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, 125(1/2): 9.

<sup>29</sup> VicHealth, *Extreme heat: Factsheet for clinicians*, October 2015, <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/Api/downloadmedia/%7B2BB4A63C-A933-4766-928A-FA2BD84EAE2A%7D>

<sup>30</sup> Australian Conservation Foundation, *The dirty truth: Australia's most polluted postcodes*, November 2018, p 2, [https://www.acf.org.au/the\\_dirty\\_truth\\_most\\_polluted\\_postcodes](https://www.acf.org.au/the_dirty_truth_most_polluted_postcodes); World Health Organization, *COP24 Special Report: Health & Climate Change*, 2018, p 16, <https://www.who.int/globalchange/publications/COP24-report-health-climate-change/en/>.

<sup>31</sup> World Health Organization, *COP24 Special Report: Health & Climate Change*, 2018, p 16, <https://www.who.int/globalchange/publications/COP24-report-health-climate-change/en/>

<sup>32</sup> Australian Conservation Foundation, *The dirty truth: Australia's most polluted postcodes*, November 2018, p 2, [https://www.acf.org.au/the\\_dirty\\_truth\\_most\\_polluted\\_postcodes](https://www.acf.org.au/the_dirty_truth_most_polluted_postcodes).

<sup>33</sup> Climate Council, *Waiting for the Green Light: Transport Solutions to Climate Change*, 2018, p 25, <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/transport-climate-change/>.

<sup>34</sup> PJ Beggs, 'Climate change and allergy in Australia: an innovative, high-income country, at potential risk', *Public Health Research & Practice*, 2018;28(4):e2841828, <http://www.phrp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/PHRP2841828.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation and Bureau of Meteorology, 'Climate Change in Australia: Technical Report', cited in Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria, *State of the Environment 2018: Climate Change Impacts – Scientific Assessments Part III*, 2018, <https://www.ces.vic.gov.au/reports/state-environment-2018/climate-change-impacts>.

<sup>37</sup> L Hughes & W Steffen, 'Climate change in Victoria: trends, predictions and impacts', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, 2013, 125(1/2), p 9.

<sup>38</sup> O Omódior & D Becker, 'Is climate change causing a rise in the number of mosquito and tick-borne diseases?', *The Conversation*, 22 October 2018, <https://theconversation.com/is-climate-change-causing-a-rise-in-the-number-of-mosquito-and-tick-borne-diseases-105097>

Finally, our access to healthy, nutritious food is being put at risk by global warming. Australia is projected to be one of the worst affected regions in the world when it comes to agricultural production and exports. Food security could be a critical risk for us. Water scarcity, heat stress and more variable climates can impact agricultural production.

Fresh food may also become more scarce, expensive and lower in nutritional value. In addition to the impacts on agricultural production, extreme weather can also interfere with food supply chains.<sup>39</sup> People facing financial disadvantage already lack access to healthy and nutritious food, with around four per cent of Australians living in food insecure households.<sup>40</sup> Nutritional problems and obesity are among the costs of such impacts.

### **Climate change takes a mental toll**

Given the threats facing our communities, some people are strongly feeling the mental toll of global warming.<sup>50</sup>

Aboriginal people, as the traditional custodians of this land for tens of thousands of years, can be significantly affected by environmental change and extreme weather.<sup>51</sup> Other groups of people are also at high risk of being affected by environmental change and extreme weather, such as those living with mental ill-health or disorders, children, people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people in rural and remote communities, and older people.<sup>52</sup>

Climate change also has non-clinical (psychosocial) impacts on our mental wellbeing. It has been linked to stress, drug and alcohol use, family breakdown, loss of identity, grief at loss of familiar places – known as solastalgia – and social isolation. Communities can experience a lack of cohesion, and increases in criminal offending and aggression.<sup>53</sup>

Victoria has seen the mental toll of extreme weather and disasters first-hand. The trauma and upheaval of the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009 led to an increase in mental health issues, risky alcohol consumption, chronic and non-communicable diseases, family violence and environmental damage. These impacts are estimated to have cost \$3.9 billion, significantly exceeding the direct financial damage of \$3.1 billion.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> W Steffen, M Rice & A Pearce, *Feeding a Hungry Nation: Climate Change, Food and Farming in Australia*, Climate Council of Australia, 2015, p 52.

<sup>40</sup> VicHealth, *Too little and too much: exploring the paradox of food insecurity and obesity in disadvantaged populations*, February 2016, <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/food-insecurity-and-obesity>.

<sup>41</sup> United Nations Indigenous Peoples Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Climate Change*, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/climate-change.html>

## Aboriginal people are key to climate equity

A focus on Indigenous people is key to an equitable climate transition. This has been highlighted by the United Nations Indigenous Peoples Department of Economic and Social Affairs:

**'[I]ndigenous peoples are vital to, and active in, the many ecosystems that inhabit their lands and territories and may therefore help enhance the resilience of these ecosystems. In addition, indigenous peoples interpret and react to the impacts of climate change in creative ways, drawing on traditional knowledge and other technologies to find solutions which may help society at large to cope with impending changes.'**<sup>41</sup>

Climate change poses a significant risk to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's cultural heritage and relationships with the land and water. Aboriginal people must therefore be centred in Victoria's approach to climate change.

The Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council has reminded us we have ways to learn from traditional knowledge and practices, stating:

Higher temperatures, flooding, erosion and drought threaten to destroy places that have cultural and spiritual importance. These places need protection and management to deal with the impacts of climate change.<sup>43</sup> Traditional owners have significant knowledge of and relationships with the land and water and 'the landscape holds the imprint of thousands of generations of Aboriginal people'.<sup>44</sup> The traditional significance of, and care for, the land and water in the area now known as Victoria is central to any equitable response to climate change.

Victoria's Climate Change Adaptation Plan 2017-2020 states that adaptation policy will engage Aboriginal communities and value and respect the knowledge and perspectives of Aboriginal

**Aboriginal people have been the custodians of the land and water now known as Victoria for at least 40,000 years. Victorian landscapes are imbued with the history and cultural heritage of Aboriginal Victorians, who have sustained the environment and the world's oldest continuous culture for countless generations, through a deep connection with the land...**

**The loss of Aboriginal places and the resulting loss of history, culture and heritage would be detrimental to all Victorians.**<sup>42</sup>

Victorians.<sup>45</sup> The importance of Aboriginal people's role in responding to climate change is clear.

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<sup>42</sup> Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council, *Submission on the Independent Expert Panel: Interim Emissions Reduction Targets for Victoria (2021-2030)* Issues Paper, 30 March 2018, pp 1-2.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Victorian Government, Aboriginal places and objects, <https://www.aboriginalvictoria.vic.gov.au/aboriginal-culture-and-heritage>

<sup>45</sup> Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Victoria's Climate Change Adaptation Plan 2017-2020*, p 17, 2018, [https://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0024/60729/Victorias-Climate-Change-Adaptation-Plan-2017-2020.pdf](https://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0024/60729/Victorias-Climate-Change-Adaptation-Plan-2017-2020.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> VCOSS, Homelessness and emergency management: Victorian perspectives, 2016, <https://vcoss.org.au/analysis/homelessness-and-emergency-management-victorian-perspectives/> .

## Community connections reduce vulnerability to climate change

People who are connected with their communities are more resilient to climate change than those who are socially isolated. This is because they are more likely to be able to access the information, resources, services and other support they need.<sup>55</sup>

People can grapple with social isolation for many reasons. A person may not have the support of family and friends, or they may lack knowledge and capability within their community. They may be new to their community, or from a culturally or linguistically diverse background. People also face a greater risk of social isolation as they get older and less physically mobile. Physical isolation and social isolation can go hand-in-hand.

Community organisations, with their deep local knowledge and networks, play a critical role in keeping communities strong and connected. They see firsthand the risks and challenges people are facing at the local level, and provide critical social and health services to those who need support.

However, community organisations are themselves vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

This can be due to a lack of financial and other resources to build their resilience, and a lack of understanding, expertise and confidence in how to practically address climate change. Community organisations are at their limits just ensuring that they can meet demand and deliver critical services. They have little to no time or resources to respond to the impacts of climate change.

Organisations which have experienced and recovered from extreme weather events or disasters appreciate the importance of building their climate resilience.

The Victorian Government has shown its support for communities to build their own climate resilience,<sup>56</sup> but community organisations need to be part of the Government's climate response. If community organisations don't receive the support they need to be strong and sustainable, they cannot fully support their communities.

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<sup>47</sup> A King, A Ukkola, B Henley, 'Is Australia's current drought caused by climate change? It's complicated', *The Conversation*, <http://theconversation.com/is-australias-current-drought-caused-by-climate-change-its-complicated-97867>; Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, *Victoria's Climate Change Adaptation Plan 2017-2020*, p 14.

<sup>48</sup> ACTU, *ACTU Policy Discussion Paper - A Just Transition for coal-fired electricity sector workers and communities*, 2016, <https://www.actu.org.au/our-work/policy-issues/actu-policy-discussion-paper-a-just-transition-for-coal-fired-electricity-sector-workers-and-communities>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> M Ward, 'Climate anxiety is real, and young people are feeling it', *The Age*, 20 September 2019, <https://www.theage.com.au/lifestyle/health-and-wellness/climate-anxiety-is-real-and-young-people-are-feeling-it-20190918-p52soj.html>; C Fitzsimmons, 'It doesn't feel justifiable': The couples not having children because of climate change', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 September 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/it-doesn-t-feel-justifiable-the-couples-not-having-children-because-of-climate-change-20190913-p52qxu.html>

<sup>51</sup> Royal Australian College of Psychiatrists, *Position Statement 35: Addressing the mental health impacts of natural disasters and climate change-related weather events*, July 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Australian Psychological Society, *Climate change and health*, <https://www.psychology.org.au/About-Us/What-we-do/advocacy/Advocacy-social-issues/Environment-climate-change-psychology/Resources-for-Psychologists-and-others-advocating/Climate-change-and-health>

<sup>54</sup> Deloitte Access Economics, *The economic cost of the social impact of natural disasters*, 2016, <http://australianbusinessroundtable.com.au/assets/documents/Report%20-%20Social%20costs/Report%20-%20The%20economic%20cost%20of%20the%20social%20impact%20of%20natural%20disasters.pdf>

## Victoria is committed to an equitable climate transition

Victoria is showing strong leadership in playing our part to address global warming. The *Climate Change Act 2017* (Climate Change Act) commits Victoria to zero net greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.<sup>5</sup> It does this by mandating a whole-of-government climate change strategy,<sup>6</sup> setting ongoing emissions targets,<sup>7</sup> and requiring government agencies to make emissions reduction pledges<sup>8</sup> and develop adaptation action plans for key sectors (including health and human services, education and training, and transport).<sup>9</sup>

Victoria's response to global warming recognises the importance of resilient communities in mitigating and adapting to climate change. The Climate Change Act's objectives include: building community resilience through effective adaptation and disaster preparedness; supporting communities to adjust to changes, including the impacts of reducing emissions; supporting vulnerable communities; and promoting social justice and intergenerational equity.<sup>10</sup>

Victoria has also embedded equity in the processes for building climate resilience, by committing to a response that incorporates:

- integrated decision-making, including long, medium and short-term environmental, economic, health and social considerations<sup>11</sup>
- equity for current and future generations in policies, programs and processes<sup>12</sup>
- community engagement in decisions, policies, programs and processes, especially those that will affect people who are vulnerable or marginalised.<sup>13</sup>

### Victorians support strong action on climate change

The Victorian Government's ambitious response to global warming through the Climate Change Act is fitting. Victorians care deeply about climate change. Four in five Victorians are concerned about climate change, and say that they are willing to take action and are proud to live in a state that is leading the way on climate change. Approximately 90 per cent of Victorians support action on climate change by state and local governments, industry and individuals.<sup>57</sup>

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55 VCOSS, *Building resilient communities: Working with the community sector to enhance emergency management*, 2017, p 5, <https://vcoss.org.au/policy/building-resilient-communities/>.

56 For example, through the 2019 Community Climate Change Adaptation (3CA) Grants Program, <https://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/adapting-to-climate-change-impacts/community-climate-change-adaptation-3ca-grants-program>.

57 Sustainability Victoria, *Victorians' Perceptions of Climate Change: Key Findings – Social Research on Climate Change Attitudes and Behaviours*, April 2017, <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/About-us/Research/Victorians-perceptions-of-climate-change>.

Victorians rank climate change as the sixth most important issue in their lives. It comes after healthcare, the cost of living, the economy and jobs, education, and roads and transport.<sup>58</sup> However, climate change is having an effect on all of these things and, as a result, on quality of life. This is recognised in the Climate Change Act, which requires diverse sectors of the Victorian community and economy to contribute to mitigating climate change, while also adapting to the impacts which are already locked in.

## **Ecological justice in action at Jesuit Social Services**

**Jesuit Social Services, a social change organisation promoting social justice, has embedded 'ecological justice' in its operations, advocacy and ethos.**

**Ecological justice is 'the unity of social and environmental factors' and 'an expansive lens to relevant contemporary issues'.<sup>59</sup> It is a holistic approach that intrinsically links environmental and social justice. It is a broader view of our environment than the climate equity approach.**

**Jesuit Social Services has run practice ecology workshops for social services workers who support participants in their services. Their participants are people experiencing significant disadvantage. Ecology practice tips for workers and participants include developing a sense of place and identity, care for self, awareness of nature and talking in nature.<sup>60</sup>**

## **Act local on a global challenge**

Looking beyond Victoria, equity is enshrined in international approaches to tackling climate change.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Paris Agreement (Paris Agreement) commits Australia and other countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and ensure that global temperatures do not rise more than two degrees above pre-industrial levels.<sup>61</sup>

Climate equity is embedded in the Paris Agreement in several ways, including:

- Recognising that people can be affected not only by climate change but by the impacts of measures taken in response to it.<sup>62</sup>
- Committing nations to 'respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights'. These include rights related to health, Indigenous people, migrants, children, people with a disability, gender empowerment and intergenerational equity.
- Undertaking that the Paris Agreement 'will be implemented to reflect equity and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in the light of different national circumstances.'<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Jesuit Social Services, *Ecological justice: Expanding the Conversation*, February 2018, 3, <http://jss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Ecological-Justice-Expanding-the-Conversation.pdf>.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> *Paris Agreement*, 2015, <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>

<sup>62</sup> *Paris Agreement*, 2015, Preamble.

<sup>63</sup> *Paris Agreement*, 2015, Article 2.2.

In addition to the Paris Agreement, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals acknowledge that 'the poorest and most vulnerable people are being affected the most' by global warming and that it requires a coordinated solution to 'help developing countries move toward a low-carbon economy'.<sup>64</sup> The UN Indigenous Peoples Department of Economic and Social Affairs has stated that climate change poses a danger to Indigenous people, even though they are among the groups of people who contribute the least to greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>65</sup> This exemplifies the inequitable divide between those who contribute to climate change, and those who feel its impacts the most. It highlights the importance of a climate equity approach by governments worldwide.

The community sector also has an important role to play internationally in ensuring equity is on the agenda. For example, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) in the United Kingdom has developed principles for socially just adaptation to climate change. It noted the importance of both government and community organisation involvement.<sup>66</sup>

Victoria is therefore not alone in its commitment to respond equitably to climate change.

### **The UK community sector and socially just climate adaptation**

The UK's Joseph Rowntree Foundation examined socially just climate change adaptation, which it believed was more complex than mitigation. The UK's *Climate Change Act 2008* was a world-first risk-based approach. However, JRF said the Act did not consider wider aspects of social vulnerability.

JRF's resulting report, *Socially just adaptation to climate change*, focused on local authority response to risks such as urban heat islands, heatwaves and floods. It noted that socially just adaptation requires an understanding of who is most vulnerable to climate change impacts and adaptation to meet the needs of these groups.

The study developed just adaptation principles, including:

- taking into account current and future climate change impacts
- understanding what makes groups of people vulnerable
- identifying groups likely to be affected and recognising that vulnerability changes over time
- involving affected communities in adaptation plans and actions
- identifying potential impacts of climate change for vulnerable groups and targeting action to address their vulnerability
- building adaptive capacity, supporting adaptation actions and considering infrastructure and service delivery
- understanding the trade-offs in just adaptation and minimising negative impacts for exposed communities
- assessing all adaptation options and taking the most beneficial in each case.

A key finding from the report's three case studies is that targeted and tailored responses to address the needs of vulnerable communities are important. Trusted service delivery and advocacy organisations – both government and community sector – are 'best placed to engage vulnerable groups and help achieve ownership'.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup> United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals: 13 Climate Change, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/climate-change-2/>.

<sup>65</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Indigenous Peoples, Climate Change, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/climate-change.html>

<sup>66</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Socially just adaptation to climate change*, UK, July 2012, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/socially-just-adaptation-climate-change>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

# Clean, affordable energy is critical for climate equity

The transition to renewable energy is one of the biggest elements of the shift towards a climate-resilient Victoria. Ensuring that everyone has access to clean, affordable energy is a high priority, and an inclusive, equitable transition is the key to achieving this.

The current clean energy transition is a tale of two Victorias. On the one hand, rooftop solar is being rolled out at breakneck speed, as part of the Government's ramp-up of renewables.

On the other hand, people are struggling to pay their energy bills, need support from government and community organisations, and are locked out of the clean energy transition.

Victoria can and should make sure the renewable energy push does not leave behind the Victorians who could most benefit from affordable clean energy. The Government's strategy can be targeted at those who need it most, meaning everyone can share in the benefits of clean energy.

## Renewables need to be brought within reach

Victorians are rapidly shifting to renewable energy. Fifteen per cent of Victorian homes have rooftop solar, and many more are taking up solar power with the help of the Government's popular Solar Homes scheme.<sup>68</sup>

But despite the significant subsidies on offer, rooftop solar can still be out of reach for many people. It is estimated that 30 per cent of Australians are excluded from household solar. This includes people who rent, or are on low incomes.<sup>69</sup>

Meanwhile paying to keep the lights on, cook dinner and keep the home at a comfortable temperature is hard for a shockingly high number of people. Around 180,000 Victorian households, or 7.3 per cent, have persistent difficulty paying their energy bills.<sup>70</sup>

Government subsidy schemes have tended to help those who are already well-placed to take up rooftop solar. It means that Victorians who are unable to pay any upfront costs can be locked into the electricity grid and its rising costs. This can spiral into further financial trouble. Market regulation such as the Victorian Default Offer for electricity therefore continues to be an important protection for people who rely on the grid for their energy.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Solar Victoria, Welcome to the Solar Homes Program, <https://www.solar.vic.gov.au/>

<sup>69</sup> University of Technology Sydney, *Social Access Solar Gardens*, <https://www.uts.edu.au/research-and-teaching/our-research/institute-sustainable-futures/our-research/energy-and-climate/social-solar-gardens>.

<sup>70</sup> VCOSS, *Battling On: Persistent energy hardship*, November 2018, <https://vcoss.org.au/policy/battling-on-persistent-energy-hardship/>

<sup>71</sup> VCOSS et al, *Response to draft Orders in Council on the Victorian Default Offer*, April 2019, <https://vcoss.org.au/policy/a-simple-efficient-and-accessible-energy-deal/>.

### **Make solar for renters affordable**

People who cannot afford day-to-day energy costs are simply unable to shoulder the upfront costs or the significant payback times associated with rooftop solar.

A tenant contribution was not part of the initial rollout of Victoria's Solar Homes program for renters scheme on 1 July 2019, but it is slated for the second phase.

The co-payment forces tenants to pay for an upgrade to a house they don't own, while the landlord scoops up the improved capital value. VCOSS has advocated for the tenant co-payment to be completely removed from the Solar Homes scheme.<sup>72</sup>

People who are financially locked out of solar schemes such as Solar Homes need support to cover the upfront costs, so that they can be included in the transition to renewable energy.

For those who are renting, this means a feasible and affordable scheme for people who are financially disadvantaged and vulnerable to having their power disconnected. Tenants should not have to subsidise upgrades to their landlords' investment properties by contributing to the cost of rooftop solar.

For Victoria to move away from an unfair and unaffordable energy grid, the shift to renewables must include everyone.

### **Subsidise larger-scale renewables**

The Victorian Government can support larger-scale renewables, such as community solar or solar farms, on behalf of people who cannot access rooftop solar. This should be targeted at people who are financially disadvantaged and living in rentals without access to rooftop solar, particularly public and community housing.

The Victorian Government is already putting significant support behind large renewable energy projects (for example, through the Victorian Renewable Energy Auction Scheme).<sup>73</sup> The Government could follow this direction and subsidise access to renewables generated by these schemes for financially disadvantaged people who are currently locked out of renewables.

Subsidising clean energy access for people living in social housing – who are some of the most financially disadvantaged people in our communities – could be a win-win. It could help our most disadvantaged Victorians access affordable clean energy, while contributing to Victoria's zero net emissions goal.

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<sup>72</sup> VCOSS, *Delivering fairness: Victorian Budget Submission 2019-20*, p 18, [https://vcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/DF\\_Online.pdf](https://vcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/DF_Online.pdf)

<sup>73</sup> Victorian Government, *Victorian Renewable Energy Auction Scheme*, <https://www.energy.vic.gov.au/renewable-energy/victorian-renewable-energy-auction-scheme>.

## Solar Garden for people locked out of rooftop solar

The University of Technology Sydney Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF) and Community Power Agency trialled a 'Social Access Solar Garden' to assess whether this model was desirable, feasible and viable. The model would enable people locked out of rooftop solar – due to being renters or on low incomes – to buy or lease solar panels near their homes in Swan Hill, Victoria as well as locations in New South Wales and Queensland.

Researchers found that people would want to be part of the solar gardens if it meant a 20 per cent cut in their electricity bills, and a payback time comparable to rooftop solar (approximately five years). The payback time was two to three times as long as for rooftop solar without a subsidy, or approximately seven years with a subsidy. Savings were approximately 16 per cent for leased panels. The researchers concluded that a subsidy of \$2,400 to \$4,200 would be required to make the model viable in Australia, which could be comparable to existing solar schemes.

The research team recommended that the next step was to work with state governments on a Social Access Renewable Energy program to provide ongoing support for solar gardens and establish equitable support for people on low incomes.

## Make the energy grid fair

The shift to renewable energy is fundamental to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and household energy costs. However, while people on low incomes continue to rely on the electricity grid, pricing regulation such as the Victorian Default Offer provides important protections.

Fair grid energy prices mean that people facing financial disadvantage are not edged out of affordable, clean energy from the grid. Keeping grid energy affordable is critical while Victoria is in the throes of an equitable energy transition.

Victoria can make clean energy affordable if it adapts its current strong trajectory to ensure that all Victorians are part of the transition.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The Victorian Government can do the following to ensure that we have an equitable transition to clean energy:

1. Make rooftop solar feasible and affordable for renters living on low incomes by ensuring there is no tenant co-payment under the Solar Homes program.
2. Subsidise access to larger-scale renewables for financially disadvantaged people locked out of renewables, particularly people in social housing.
3. Ensure clean energy through the grid is affordable, through price regulation such as the Victorian Default Offer.



# Energy-efficient homes are healthy homes

As climate change brings us longer, hotter summers, we need homes that are comfortable, healthy and safe to live in. This means good-quality, energy-efficient homes which are affordable to keep cool. People experiencing financial disadvantage – such as homeowners on low incomes, renters and people living in social housing – face significant risks from high energy bills and poor-quality homes.

Affordable energy prices are one half of the equation for comfortable, affordable living. The other half, which is equally as important, is energy-efficient homes. Energy efficient housing is well-insulated and has efficient fit outs, including cooling appliances. Energy-efficient, comfortable homes are essential for people's physical and mental wellbeing.<sup>74</sup>

## The power struggle is real

As we have seen, climate change can exacerbate people's existing vulnerabilities. And for people facing financial disadvantage, one of the biggest vulnerabilities is managing the cost of living, including energy bills.

People who cannot afford their energy bills face the risk of compounding debts and energy disconnection. This means people resort to reducing their energy use, by not using their cooling, heating, cooking, lighting and appliances. During extreme weather events such as heatwaves, avoiding the use of appliances to cool the home can send indoor temperatures dangerously high. It can make people's homes uncomfortable and unhealthy.

It is clearly important that people can keep their homes safe and cool as climate change brings higher temperatures and more heatwaves. However, as VCOSS reported in 2017, for some people whose energy costs are so worrying, 'simply turning the kettle on can cause anxiety'.<sup>75</sup>

**In early 2019, VCOSS surveyed 138 people within Victorian community organisations about their views and experiences related to climate change. Sixty-one per cent of respondents said that they believed climate change will make energy less affordable for their clients, many of whom are already experiencing poverty and significant disadvantage.**

### Less energy for Beth

**Beth has Hashimoto's disease involving temperature sensitivity. The family uses fans and water spray bottles in summer. Hot weather has severe impacts for Beth.**

**'I get almost completely debilitated. My brain stops working quite literally, I can't think, I can't move, I get really swollen and puffy, so it's painful to move, and I get migraines.'**

**Beth uses a small 'expensive to run' portable air conditioner or sits in her air-conditioned car to cool down. She says there is 'a lot of disagreement in the house over summer.' Beth feels like she 'can't function'. 76**

<sup>74</sup> See for example, DS Forcey, MP FitzGerald, MK Burggraf, V Nagalingam, MR Ananda-Rajah, "Cold and Lonely". Emergency presentations of patients with hypothermia to a large Australian health network', *Intern Med J*, 2019 doi: 10.1111/imj.14308, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/30963670>.

<sup>75</sup> VCOSS, Power Struggles: Everyday battles to stay connected, August 2017, p 5, <https://vcoss.org.au/policy/power-struggles-everyday-battles-to-stay-connected/>.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p 14.



## A comfortable home means a healthier life

To stay safe and healthy, people need homes that are comfortable in extreme temperatures. This means homes have insulation, draught-sealing, and cooling systems which are effective and affordable to run. By this measure, many Victorians do not have healthy homes. Australia lags behind other countries in how energy efficient our buildings and appliances are. We are missing an opportunity to reduce our energy bills and greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>77</sup>

A significant number of people are forced to live in poor-quality, unhealthy housing. A Senate Committee inquiry in 2018 found that the people most at risk of climate change due to poor-quality housing are:

- homeowners with energy inefficient homes, who cannot afford to retrofit their house or buy a more energy-efficient home
- renters who cannot convince their landlords to improve their home's efficiency or cannot move to a more efficient home
- people living in public housing.<sup>78</sup>

The Victorian Government has already acknowledged the importance of thermal comfort and affordable heating and cooling in housing. The Government has taken action targeted at the people most at risk in low-quality homes, including:

- For renters, the residential tenancy reforms of 2018, which include requirements for minimum standards for rental properties in future, including energy efficiency standards.<sup>79</sup>
- For public housing residents:
  - replacing unsafe gas heaters in public housing, to 'keep our public housing tenants warm and safe'<sup>80</sup>
  - providing limited energy efficiency upgrades to 1,500 public housing properties, to improve the thermal comfort of people's homes, under the Department of Health and Human Services' EnergySmart Public Housing Project.
- For homeowners who have an illness, mobility issues or low incomes, providing an energy efficiency assessment and subsidies on retrofits under the Energy Savvy Upgrades program.

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<sup>77</sup> R Murray Leach, *The World's First Fuel: How energy efficiency is reshaping global energy systems*, Energy Efficiency Council, 2019.

<sup>78</sup> Senate Environment and Communications References Committee, *Current and future impacts of climate change on housing, buildings and infrastructure*, August 2018, p 82, [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment\\_and\\_Communications/CCInfrastructure](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment_and_Communications/CCInfrastructure)

<sup>79</sup> *Residential Tenancies Act 1997* (Vic) section 65A inserted by *Residential Tenancies Amendment Act 2018* (Vic).

<sup>80</sup> Victorian Government, 'Gas heater replacements on track for winter', *Media release*, 7 May 2019, <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/gas-heater-replacements-on-track-for-winter/>

## **The strains of extreme heat at home in Mildura**

Mallee Family Care (MFC) provides social and health services in Mildura and other areas that experience extreme heat in summer.

During times of extreme heat, MFC staff see a spike in family violence, alcohol and drug use, police and ambulance call-outs, hospitalisation for mental illness and child protection notifications. They are particularly concerned about people living in low-quality public housing without air conditioning.

Some people with existing health conditions are more vulnerable to extreme heat; for example, people taking certain medication to manage serious mental ill-health are more sensitive to heat. A number of public housing properties still lack air conditioning. In some cases, people on medication have made significant efforts to have air conditioning installed, but their requests have been declined or delayed. Some people have been unable to live in their homes, or ended up in hospital.

In addition to the difficulties these people face personally, the time and effort that MFC staff and others spend on applications and advocacy detracts from the direct support they could otherwise give people.

MFC has partnered with the University of Sydney to study the negative impacts of extreme heat on the health and wellbeing of people in Mildura. They are focused on people in public housing who do not have air conditioning.

## **Victoria can make our homes energy-efficient and healthy**

Victoria has made a promising start in assisting people to have healthy homes. But there are still many Victorians who are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change because of the poor quality of their homes. This is due to the historical lack of energy efficiency requirements for rental homes, coupled with the lack of incentives for landlords to upgrade their investment properties.

In VCOSS' survey of community organisations, 66 per cent of respondents said that they believe climate change will worsen the comfort and safety of their clients' homes during extreme weather and disasters. This scenario cannot be left to unfold without meaningful action from Government.

### **Expand on existing energy efficiency subsidy schemes**

The EnergySmart Public Housing program and Energy Savvy Upgrades program for homeowners are both targeted at people who are most at risk from unhealthy homes – that is, people living on low incomes and with health risks. The Sustainability Victoria Healthy Homes program is another initiative testing the impacts of energy efficiency improvements. But the limited scope of these programs means that many Victorians who are vulnerable to extreme temperatures and weather are still living in homes which are a risk to their health.

Increasing the number of vulnerable households with access to these programs, and the extent of improvements that people can make to their homes, would be a huge step in protecting the Victorians who are most vulnerable to climate change.

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See for example, DS Forcey, MP FitzGerald, MK Burggraf, V Nagalingam, MR Ananda-Rajah, "Cold and Lonely". Emergency presentations of patients with hypothermia to a large Australian health network', *Intern Med J*, 2019 doi: 10.1111/imj.14308, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/30963670>.

VCOSS, *Power Struggles: Everyday battles to stay connected*, August 2017, p 5, <https://vcoss.org.au/policy/power-struggles-everyday-battles-to-stay-connected/>.

Ibid, p 14.

## Mandate meaningful energy efficiency standards for rental homes

Energy efficiency standards for rental homes could be a significant step towards guaranteeing people comfort in their own homes.

People living in rental homes are some of our most vulnerable Victorians, particularly people living in social housing. Mandating a minimum standard of energy efficiency counters the lack of incentives for landlords to ensure their properties are energy efficient and comfortable. It would lift the quality of housing stock in Victoria and go a long way to reducing energy hardship. Most importantly, it could significantly improve people's resilience to the extreme weather brought by climate change.

The Government should consider best-practice examples such as New Zealand's Healthy Homes Standards and introduce staged standards for rental homes.<sup>81</sup>

## Support national energy efficiency improvements

By 2050, more than half of the buildings standing will have been built after 2019.<sup>82</sup> This means there is a major opportunity to mandate strong energy performance standards for new residential buildings under the National Construction Code. We can also take timely and systemic action to set ambitious goals and prioritise energy efficiency in existing homes.<sup>83</sup> This approach has the dual advantage of reducing the carbon footprint of housing, and immediately improving people's health and comfort at home.

Victoria can lead the push<sup>84</sup> for improvements to minimum thermal comfort levels for residential buildings under the National Construction Code. This will set us up to address the problems people face through the lack of energy efficiency in their homes, now and decades into the future.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The Victorian Government can do the following to build on its good work and make Victorians' homes more energy-efficient and healthy:

4. Expand on the EnergySmart Public Housing and Energy Savvy Upgrades programs.
5. Mandate meaningful energy efficiency standards for rental housing, so that Victorians who are renting have healthy and comfortable homes.
6. Lead national efforts to improve energy performance standards, including under the National Construction Code.

<sup>81</sup> Energy Efficiency Council, Australian Energy Foundation, renew., Environment Victoria, Yarra Energy Foundation, VCOSS, Northern Alliance for Greenhouse Action, Tenants Victoria, *Successfully Implementing Efficiency Standards for Rental Properties*, July 2019.

<sup>82</sup> Renew et al, *Response to scoping study: Energy efficiency NCC 2022 and beyond*, 8 September 2019.

<sup>83</sup> See renew., *Submission to Trajectory for Low Energy Existing Homes - Draft document for stakeholder input*, 12 August 2019.

<sup>84</sup> Renew, *Consumers speak up on new building standards*, 18 September 2019, <https://renew.org.au/submission/community-response-to-ncc-scoping-study/>.

# Equip communities to be resilient in extreme weather and disasters

Extreme weather events such as bushfires, storms and floods are predicted to increase with climate change. These are the most palpable manifestations of climate change and their devastating effects can be felt deeply in communities, and for a very long time. This is particularly true in parts of regional Victoria which are at higher risk of extreme weather or disasters.

Climate change is also expected to increase the number and severity of heatwaves in Victoria,<sup>85</sup> and we are experiencing sustained periods of hotter, drier weather. The summer of 2018–19 was Australia's hottest on record.<sup>86</sup>

## Extreme weather has extreme impacts

Extreme weather and disasters seriously impact people's social, physical and mental wellbeing.

Disasters have multiple physical effects (from thunderstorm asthma through to spikes in hospital emergency cases and cardiac arrests in heatwaves<sup>87</sup>), as well as causing significant trauma and stress which can lead to mental ill-health and family violence.<sup>88</sup> As the Black Saturday tragedy showed, the health and social impacts of disasters can cost us more than the direct financial damage.<sup>89</sup>

Some people can be particularly vulnerable in disasters, including people with disability which impacts their mobility, people with ill-health and people who are socially isolated. *The Department of Health and Human Services' Vulnerable people in emergencies* policy identifies people with a physical disability as being vulnerable and in need of particular support during emergencies.<sup>90</sup> However, many other people who are also vulnerable in emergencies are not a strong focus in preparedness and response planning.

**A significant number of VCOSS' survey respondents said that they believe climate change will reduce the resilience to extreme weather and disasters of their communities (58 per cent) and clients (61 per cent).**

Where you live is a big factor in how vulnerable you are to extreme weather and disasters. People in some parts of Victoria face heightened risks of extreme weather events. In these areas, strong communities and community organisations can be critical to survival.

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<sup>85</sup> L Hughes & W Steffen. 'Climate change in Victoria: trends, predictions and impacts', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, 125(1/2): 5, 2013.

<sup>86</sup> Bureau of Meteorology, *2018–19 was Australia's hottest summer on record, with a warm Autumn likely too*, 1 March 2019, <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/updates/articles/a032.shtml>

<sup>87</sup> Victorian Government, *January 2009 Heatwave in Victoria: an assessment of health impacts*, 2012, <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/publications/researchandreports/January-2009-Heatwave-in-Victoria-an-Assessment-of-Health-Impacts>

<sup>88</sup> Deloitte Access Economics, *The economic cost of the social impact of natural disasters*, 2016, <http://australianbusinessroundtable.com.au/assets/documents/Report%20-%20Social%20costs/Report%20-%20The%20economic%20cost%20of%20the%20social%20impact%20of%20natural%20disasters.pdf>.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, *Vulnerable people in emergencies policy*, February 2018.

The community sector, through its deep community knowledge and networks, has an important role during extreme weather and disasters. This needs to be bolstered by government commitment to supporting community organisations to help the people who need it most.

### **Balmoral Fire Connect: A fire-safety message from your local community nurse**

Southern Grampians and Glenelg Primary Care Partnership's Balmoral Fire Connect project tracked the flow of targeted fire-ready information via the local bush nursing centre in south-western Victoria.

This information was intended to reach the most vulnerable people in the community, which required a detailed understanding of the community networks of the district nursing staff and their service users. The project delved into the social networks of four key staff and how they took on fire-safety information without becoming 'experts', then integrated that information into informal conversations. It also involved a 'pass the parcel' of formal information throughout the community, based out of the nursing centre.

The project showed the value of the existing, trusted relationships of nursing staff in sharing fire safety information.

## **Victoria can boost community resilience to extreme weather and disasters**

While there have been significant efforts to prepare for extreme weather and disasters and protect people from their impacts, there is still much to be done to understand who is most vulnerable and how to best support communities and community organisations to build resilience. VCOSS made in-depth recommendations to government for improving disaster preparedness, response and recovery as part of the Inspector General of Emergency Management's 10-year review of emergency management.<sup>91</sup>

### **Support the people who are most vulnerable to extreme weather and disasters**

It is important that government, the community sector and other sectors embed an understanding of community and individual vulnerabilities in emergency planning and responses. Community organisations work closely with many people who are more vulnerable in disasters, such as people with disability and culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Government should partner with the community sector to ensure planning is inclusive and appropriate.

### **Collaborate strategically on disaster resilience**

All levels of government, local businesses and community organisations have their own networks, relationships, expertise and knowledge in relation to climate and disaster resilience. But community organisations experience a lack of connection with local emergency management. This is despite the fact that they are closely connected with people who can be most vulnerable in disasters.<sup>92</sup> Governments should put in place stronger strategic planning, which formally recognises and supports the role of community organisations and draws on their expertise and connections.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The most effective ways to protect vulnerable people and communities from increased risks of extreme weather and disaster are to:

7. Support the people who are most vulnerable to extreme weather and disasters.
8. Collaborate strategically on disaster resilience, to capture the range of networks, relationships, expertise and knowledge.

<sup>91</sup> VCOSS, *Submission to the IGE Review of 10 years of emergency management reform*, September 2019.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.



# Health services must respond to climate change

The threats that global warming poses to our health and wellbeing are among the most critical dangers we face. While the risks are still emerging, it is clear that extreme heat and drought, unhealthy air and water, and the mental toll of changing environments can significantly affect our health and wellbeing. This has led the Australian Medical Association to declare that climate change is a ‘health emergency’.<sup>93</sup>

Our health and community services need to reduce their impact on climate change and adapt to the change in global temperature that is already locked in.

The health sector makes up seven per cent of Australia’s carbon footprint, and Australia’s healthcare emissions are the second-highest per capita in the world.<sup>94</sup> The health sector has an important part in reducing the causes of climate change. It needs to be supported to take up opportunities to reduce its impact, such as improving energy efficiency and buying renewable energy.

Ensuring health and social services can cope with new and greater needs for their services is a significant responsibility for the Victorian Government, in partnership with the community sector. New challenges require new ways of planning and operating, and sufficient resources to enable services to be responsive. Working together, the Government and community sector can respond most effectively.

Victoria needs a health system that is not a big contributor to climate change and understands and responds to its risks to our health and to the demands on services. We need a cohesive plan to protect our health as the climate warms. There are existing approaches that Victoria could draw on to strengthen our health services in the face of these significant challenges.

## Climate change poses many risks to our health and wellbeing

Climate change will exacerbate things that already pose risks to our health and wellbeing. Some people are more vulnerable to these risks than others.

Health and community services are already grappling with some of these problems, while some will emerge more clearly as global warming increases. We face significant health risks, from heat stress and rising injuries through to increased transmission of vector-borne diseases and the flow-on risks to our mental health and wellbeing.<sup>95</sup> The vulnerability of our health system to those impacts was exposed during Melbourne’s deadly thunderstorm asthma event in 2016.

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<sup>93</sup> Australian Medical Association, ‘Climate change is a health emergency’, *Media release*, 3 September 2019, <https://ama.com.au/media/climate-change-health-emergency>.

<sup>94</sup> A Malik, M Lenzen, S McAlister, F McGain, ‘The carbon footprint of Australian health care’, *Lancet Planetary Health*, 2(1): e28, 2018; M McNerney, ‘Greening Healthcare forum – cutting one percent of a hospital’s energy use is a lot of carbon saved’, *Croakey*, 30 September 2019, <https://croakey.org/greening-healthcare-forum-cutting-one-percent-of-a-hospitals-energy-use-is-a-lot-of-carbon-saved/>.

<sup>95</sup> World Health Organization, *COP24 Special Report: Health & Climate Change*, 2018, <https://www.who.int/globalchange/publications/COP24-report-health-climate-change/en/>.



## Deadly thunderstorm asthma in Melbourne

In November 2016, Melbourne experienced the world's largest, most catastrophic thunderstorm asthma event. A large number of people suffered severe asthma attacks on a day that saw a combination of high pollen levels, strong winds, hot temperatures, high air moisture and a cold front.

Ten people, aged between 18 and 57, died during or soon after the event. Ambulances struggled to respond to more calls than at any other time in history – 2,232 calls in 12 hours – and 12,272 people presented to hospitals. There was a 672 per cent increase on the expected presentation of respiratory-related problems.

After the event, the Victorian Coroner concluded that public health and safety could be improved through more research on thunderstorm asthma, to improve understanding and predictions, improve public awareness, and engage health professionals in preventative action.<sup>96</sup>

## Mental health impacts of the Hazelwood coal mine fire

In early 2014, the Hazelwood open-cut coal mine in the Latrobe Valley caught fire during hot weather and burned for 45 days. Mines such as this are a cause of both air pollution and climate change.

The smoke and poor air quality meant that government authorities warned people in Morwell to stay indoors, and children were billeted to schools out of town. An inquiry later found that air pollution from the fire caused 11 people to die.

Mental health organisations observed a spike in mental health issues as a result of the fire. During and after the fire, people with pre-existing mental health issues experienced stress and trauma, which exacerbated some people's conditions significantly. Other people who had never experienced mental illness began to access mental health services. Despite the increase in demand, local organisations reported that there was no additional funding for mental health service organisations to deal with this.<sup>97</sup>

As the health risks of climate change compound, health and community services could face more significant service delivery challenges and their own internal concerns.

## Victorians are unaware of the risks but governments are responding

Despite the significant health risks of climate change, Victorians have a low understanding of the significance of the problem. Thirty-eight per cent of Victorians are concerned about the impact of climate change on their health and quality of life, but they generally have fragmented information.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>96</sup> C McGinn, 'Climate change could bring fatal asthma thunderstorms to Australia', *news.com*, 7 December 2018, <https://www.news.com.au/technology/environment/climate-change/climate-change-could-bring-fatal-asthma-thunderstorms-to-australia/news-story/5543a0b38810d05fdbadd7ab5f5b516f> [https://www.asthmaaustralia.org.au/ArticleDocuments/1144/Summary\\_Coronial\\_Inquest\\_2018.pdf.aspx](https://www.asthmaaustralia.org.au/ArticleDocuments/1144/Summary_Coronial_Inquest_2018.pdf.aspx); PJ Beggs, 'Climate change and allergy in Australia: an innovative, high-income country, at potential risk', *Public Health Research & Practice*, 2018;28(4):e2841828, <http://www.phrp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/PHRP2841828.pdf>.

<sup>97</sup> VCOSS, *One year on: Morwell and the 2014 Hazelwood Mine fire*, June 2015.

<sup>98</sup> Sustainability Victoria, *Victorians' Perceptions of Climate Change*, April 2017, p 8, <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/About-Us/Research/Victorians-perceptions-of-climate-change>; Sustainability Victoria, *Climate change and health – do people understand the link?*, March 2019, p 6, <https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/About-us/Research/Health-and-Climate-Change-Research>.

While people are unlikely to make a solid link between climate change and health, when they are shown the link between the two, they are more likely to believe that it is important to address climate change.<sup>99</sup>

The significance of the health risks of climate change is, however, well-recognised internationally. United Nations member states have agreed that, when addressing climate change, they must consider the health impacts of their actions and respect the human right to health.<sup>100</sup>

The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated:

*Climate change is the greatest health challenge of the 21st century, and threatens all aspects of the society in which we live. The severity of the impacts of climate change on human health are increasingly clear, and further delay in action will increase the risks.*<sup>101</sup>

The WHO has confirmed that ‘the poorest and most vulnerable populations will suffer the greatest health impacts’ of climate change,<sup>102</sup> but that the health gains of climate mitigation would more than outweigh the financial costs in some developing countries.<sup>103</sup> It has recommended that countries incorporate health implications in economic and fiscal policy, remove barriers to climate-resilient health systems and facilities, empower the health community to advocate for climate action, and mobilise local leaders to champion climate action, resilience and health.<sup>104</sup>

Victoria’s Climate Change Act requires the health and human services sector to have a climate change adaptation action plan by 2021.<sup>105</sup> The Department of Health and Human Services has stated that climate change is a ‘complex and emerging threat to health’ that warrants ‘attention at all levels and across sectors’. However, the sector is not required to make a pledge to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>106</sup> Despite this, the *Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2019–2023* identifies ‘tackling climate change and its impact on health’ as a priority, and commits to strategic actions including:

- Continued emphasis on understanding and assessing the risks of climate change to public health.
- Promoting community adaptation to the public health risks associated with climate change.
- Assessing the health co-benefits of measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> United Nations, Paris Agreement, 2015, p 1, [https://unfccc.int/files/meetings/paris\\_nov\\_2015/application/pdf/paris\\_agreement\\_english\\_.pdf](https://unfccc.int/files/meetings/paris_nov_2015/application/pdf/paris_agreement_english_.pdf); Climate Change Act, sections 17 and 24.

<sup>101</sup> World Health Organization, *COP24 Special Report: Health & Climate Change*, 2018, p 10, <https://www.who.int/globalchange/publications/COP24-report-health-climate-change/en/>.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, p 21.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p 60.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, p 5.

<sup>105</sup> Climate Change Act, section 34.

<sup>106</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), *Victorian public health and wellbeing plan (2019-2023): Consultation Paper*, May 2019, p 3.

<sup>107</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, *Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2019–2023*, August 2019.



There is also movement in other parts of Australia, as health systems respond to climate change. This includes Queensland's *Human Health and Wellbeing Climate Change Adaptation Plan*,<sup>108</sup> Western Australia's inquiry into the impact of climate change on health<sup>109</sup> and New South Wales' conceptual framework for climate change, health and wellbeing.<sup>110</sup>

## **Adapting Queensland's health sector to climate change**

The Queensland Government released its Human Health and Wellbeing Climate Change Adaptation Plan for Queensland (H-CAP) in 2018. The H-CAP was brought together by the Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA) and the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, through extensive consultation with stakeholders. It reflects the CAHA framework for a national strategy.

Its priority measures for adaptation of the health and wellbeing services sector are:

- Leadership and governance, to implement responsible, evidence-based, local climate action.
- Building the preparedness of the sector and communities to respond to health threats.
- Specific public health measures targeting vulnerabilities in the population, to reduce mortality and death.
- Managing risk and legal liability in operational and strategic plans of facilities and services.
- Research, data and evaluation to understand risks, vulnerabilities and effective strategies and guide policy and decision-making.
- Economic and financial decisions that consider the health costs and benefits of climate change adaptation.
- Collaboration between sectors, agencies, peak bodies, industry and professional associations.
- Education and capacity building in the sector, government and wider community.
- Policy, regulation and legislation that provides certainty for services, sectors and industries.
- Infrastructure, technology and service delivery investment, to avoid delayed costs and ensure service integrity.

<sup>108</sup> F Armstrong, S Cooke, D Rissik & F Tonmoy, Human health and wellbeing climate change adaptation plan for Queensland, Queensland Government, 2018, [https://www.qld.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0022/64237/h-cap-qld.pdf](https://www.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0022/64237/h-cap-qld.pdf).

<sup>109</sup> Health Minister, 'Inquiry into the impact of climate change on health in WA', *Media release*, Western Australian Government, 31 March 2019. <https://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/McGowan/2019/03/Inquiry-into-the-impact-of-climate-change-on-health-in-WA.aspx>.

<sup>110</sup> N Hime, A Vyas, K Lachireddy, S Wyett, B Scalley, C Corvalan, 'Climate change, health and wellbeing: challenges and opportunities in NSW, Australia', *Public Health Res Pract.* 2018;28(4):e2841824, <http://www.phrp.com.au/issues/december-2018-volume-28-issue-4/climate-change-health-and-wellbeing-challenges-and-opportunities-in-nsw-australia/>.

## Health professionals are laying the path for Australia

The Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA) and Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA) are health sector organisations that have promoted strategies for governments and the sector to transition to a hotter climate.

The DEA recommends new federal bodies focused on air, water and climate mitigation, and encompassing human health and the environment.<sup>111</sup> The *CAHA Framework for a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-being for Australia* provides a roadmap for the Federal Government to protect Australians' health and wellbeing, and to meet our Paris Agreement obligations.<sup>112</sup> The key tenets of the CAHA framework include emissions-reduction policies, emergency and disaster preparedness, supporting healthy and resilient communities, education and capacity-building, and a sustainable and climate-resilient health care sector, backed by research and data.<sup>113</sup>

We therefore have well-established frameworks to respond to the health risks of climate change. Governments require only the will and commitment to transition our health sector to a more sustainable and resilient future.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Important steps in achieving climate-responsive health services include the following:

9. Undertake place-based research to better understand the health risks and likely impacts of climate change on services and communities.
10. Develop a health and human services climate change adaptation action plan, based on best-practice models.
11. Support health services to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.
12. Consider the health impacts of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, as a co-benefit of climate action.
13. Incorporate the impacts of climate change on health and health services into broader policies.
14. Engage the health community, broader communities and leaders to champion action on the health impacts of climate change.

<sup>111</sup> Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA), *Policy: Action on Climate Change and Health; Governance and Strategy*, 2018, p 1, <https://www.dea.org.au/dea-policy-action-on-climate-change-and-health-governance-and-strategy/>.

<sup>112</sup> Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA), *Framework for a National Strategy on Climate Health and Well-being*, June 2017, p 4, <https://www.caha.org.au/national-strategy-climate-health-wellbeing>.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.



# Clean, affordable and convenient transport is equitable transport

Transport is the second highest source of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions after energy, accounting for 18 per cent of our emissions.<sup>115</sup> Australians rely heavily on our cars and roads, with eight out of 10 Australians travelling to work by car. Victorians on average drive approximately 14,100km per year – the highest average of any Australian state or territory.<sup>116</sup> Transport is therefore second only to energy on the list of Victoria's biggest climate change challenges.

Low-emissions vehicles and improved public transport and active transport are necessary to drive people away from car-reliant lives, and the emissions and pollution they cause. But there are significant challenges to reducing our transport emissions while ensuring that people are not left behind.

## Cars are bad for our health, finances and the climate

Australians make long commutes, particularly in the cities. Our reliance on cars means that traffic congestion, accidents and running costs have a heavy toll on health and wellbeing, relationships, work and finances.<sup>117</sup> Australian households spend on average more than \$11,000 a year on transport.<sup>118</sup>

Australia is at the back of the pack when it comes to healthy, affordable transport. It is one of the few countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) without greenhouse gas standards and fuel efficiency standards for cars.<sup>119</sup>

## Public transport is an equity issue

Public and active transport can significantly mitigate the causes of climate change and air pollution, and also have important social and health co-benefits. A person can save an estimated \$5,500 to \$9,400 per year by taking public transport instead of the car.<sup>120</sup> People who use public transport are less likely to be overweight and more likely to be physically active.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> J Cooper & J Corcoran, *Journey to Work in Australia*, 25 May 2018, <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0.55.001~2016~Main%20Features~Feature%20Article:%20Journey%20to%20Work%20in%20Australia~40>; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 9208DO001\_1202201810 *Survey of Motor Vehicle Use, Australia, 12 months ended 30 June 2018*, 20 March 2019, <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/9208.0>; Climate Council, *Waiting for the Green Light: Transport Solutions to Climate Change*, 2018, pp 25-26, <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/transport-climate-change/>.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, Climate Council, p 3.

<sup>116</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 9208.0 - *Survey of Motor Vehicle Use, Australia, 12 months ended 30 June 2016*.

<sup>117</sup> Climate Council, *Waiting for the Green Light: Transport Solutions to Climate Change*, 2018, pp 23, 26.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p 26.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p iii.

<sup>120</sup> Climate Council, *Waiting for the Green Light: Transport Solutions to Climate Change*, 2018, p 26, <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/transport-climate-change/>.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, p 23.

**Australians  
who drive  
to work...**



**79%**

**Average  
distance a  
Victorian  
drives  
each year**



**14,100km**

**Victoria's ranking  
in Australia on  
average distance  
driven each year...**



**Average  
Australian  
household  
spends**



**\$11,000+  
on transport each year**



**1,700  
Australians die  
each year due to  
air pollution from  
cars, trucks &  
buses<sup>114</sup>**

However, Australians take relatively few trips by public transport and government spending on public transport is low compared to roads.<sup>122</sup>

The problem is that switching to public transport is not a viable option for many Victorians. For people on low incomes, affordable housing is often in outer urban, regional or rural areas without accessible, reliable and frequent public transport. Because of the long distances and lack of active transport infrastructure, cycling and walking options are also limited.

For people with disability, public transport may not be close enough to where they live or need to go, or is otherwise inaccessible.<sup>123</sup> Accessibility audits, public monitoring and enforcement of disability standards and accessibility improvements<sup>124</sup> are all critical now and in the future, to ensure people with disability benefit in the shift to better public transport.

The lack of public transport options for many Victorians means they are locked into their cars. Prior to the 2018 state election, Victorian Labor undertook to build an underground suburban rail loop linking the outer suburbs.<sup>125</sup> Such initiatives will be critical to reducing our reliance on cars.

Expanding public transport options in areas where a significant number of people are facing financial disadvantage, such as some parts of outer Melbourne, is important to ensure that people on lower incomes can reduce their carbon footprint while remaining connected to their work, families and communities.

## Victoria can shift gears on transport

Victoria needs to shift from its heavy reliance on cars as part of the transition to low-emissions transport and, similarly to the energy transition, needs to bring everyone along. This could mean subsidies for people who may struggle to afford to switch to lower-emissions vehicles.

Public transport is a key part of the transition. Accessibility, particularly for people in regional areas and for people with disability, is important for Victoria's transition to be an equitable one.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Victoria can take the following steps to equitably transition to cleaner transport:

15. Support people who cannot afford to transition to low-emissions vehicles to make the switch.
16. Improve public transport in areas where people are financially, socially and physically disadvantaged.
17. Ensure public transport is accessible, particularly for people with a disability.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, p 10.

<sup>123</sup> VCOSS, *Empowered Lives: Securing change for Victorians with a disability*, p 28, <http://empoweredlives.vcross.org.au/>.

<sup>124</sup> As recommended in VCOSS, *Empowered Lives: Securing change for Victorians with a disability*, p 28, <http://empoweredlives.vcross.org.au/>.

<sup>125</sup> Premier, 'Underground suburban rail loop to connect Victoria', *Media release*, Victorian Government, 28 August 2019, <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/underground-suburban-rail-loop-to-connect-victoria/>.

# A resilient community sector is central to climate equity

Community organisations have an important role in supporting people who are affected by the impacts of climate change. They provide critical health and social services. They assist before, during and after disasters and extreme weather events. They link people with their communities and the services they need.

Community organisations are uniquely placed to help people cope with change and stress, and to empower communities. They are embedded in communities and understand their diversity, needs, strengths and vulnerabilities.<sup>126</sup>

Community organisations feel this role and its responsibilities deeply. They also consider climate change through their work.

Communities that are more vulnerable to global warming need to respond in targeted and tailored ways. Public and community service and advocacy organisations are best placed to engage groups of people who are vulnerable.<sup>127</sup> However, to do this, community organisations must themselves be resilient, resourced and prepared.

**Thirty-six per cent of VCOSS survey respondents said that they think about climate change in their work frequently or always. However, a relatively small number have taken practical action in line with their concern on climate change in the past 12 months.**

The community sector faces financial constraints, operational challenges, immediate needs and service delivery, and not being clear on what the people they support want them to do about climate change.

The Victorian Government has an important role in supporting organisations to act on climate change challenges.

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<sup>126</sup> VCOSS, *Building resilient communities: Working with the community sector to enhance emergency management*, 2017, p 6.

<sup>127</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Socially just adaptation to climate change*, UK, 2012, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/socially-just-adaptation-climate-change>

## Community organisations feel the impact of disasters acutely

Community organisations are a source of support for people and communities when they are at their most vulnerable.

The strength and importance of community organisations, as well as the impact of disasters and emergencies on them, were obvious in the aftermath of Victoria's 2009 bushfires, when:

[C]ommunity sector organisations mobilised, and were relied upon, to an extent never before seen...

[I]t is clear to see that these organisations were flexible and creative in their response. Some had to put aside their own operations to assist, while others had to add dealing with bushfire relief to responsibilities already stretched by limited resources.

And in many cases, community sector volunteers and staff, having lost their own relatives, friends or homes, rallied to assist those around them.<sup>128</sup>

Community organisations, particularly in areas at risk of extreme weather and disasters, are vital in building community and personal resilience however, despite their strong contribution to the community, organisations themselves can be at high risk during and after disasters.

Australia's community service organisations are, in reality, very vulnerable to climate change and extreme weather. One study found that 25 per cent of small and medium-sized organisations may never recover if disaster caused major damage to their premises, and 50 per cent would still be out of operation one week after the event.<sup>129</sup>

**Community organisations in Victoria are already feeling the impact of extreme weather and disasters. In VCOSS' survey of Victorian community organisations, 44 per cent of respondents said their organisation had been affected by extreme weather or a disaster in the past 12 months.**

The most common impacts reported by these organisations included:

- staff transport was interrupted (50 per cent)
- clients access to services was affected (46 per cent)
- demand for services increased (42 per cent)
- staff were absent from work (37 per cent)
- staff health was affected (25 per cent).

Some respondents also reported that their premises or assets were damaged or destroyed, that they needed to temporarily close or relocate, or that they needed additional staff.

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<sup>128</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, *There when needed: Victoria's responsive community organisations – case studies*, 2010, p 6, <https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/sites/dhhsproviders/files/2017-09/There-when-needed%20%28word%29.doc>.

<sup>129</sup> K Mallon, E Hamilton, M Black, B Beem & J Abs, *Adapting the community sector for climate extremes: Extreme weather, climate change & the community sector – Risks and adaptations*, National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, 2013, p 4, [https://www.nccarf.edu.au/sites/default/files/attached\\_files\\_publications/Mallon\\_2013\\_Adapting\\_community\\_sector.pdf](https://www.nccarf.edu.au/sites/default/files/attached_files_publications/Mallon_2013_Adapting_community_sector.pdf)

The increased need for services during these times means that the economic impacts of disasters on the community sector can be very different to the impacts on other local industries. For example, in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires, incomes fell by between 12 and 31 per cent in industries such as agriculture, retail, hospitality, transport and professional services. However, wage bills in the health and social services sector increased by 8 per cent, as communities faced an increased need for help with financial, health, family and other problems following the disaster.<sup>130</sup>

Community organisations that experience extreme weather and disasters can therefore grapple with an increased need for their services while facing significant barriers to delivering those services.

## **Community organisations need tools, governance on climate change**

Community organisations are not typically involved in climate change adaptation policies and programs, partly due to their lack of resources and skills, and these activities not being 'core business'. These organisations have to prioritise service delivery and immediate needs. They are unlikely to be able to bear the additional work and costs of taking the lead on climate change.

Community organisations also have varied knowledge of the risks and impacts of extreme weather events, particularly if they have not experienced them before, or are small organisations.<sup>131</sup>

One of the major gaps in building the resilience of community organisations is the lack of evidence-based understanding of what they need to do to adapt to climate change and support people experiencing poverty and inequality.<sup>132</sup> This means there is a need for stronger awareness of the risks, impacts and opportunities of responding to climate change.

This is a particular concern in light of the growing awareness that company directors who do not address the climate risks of their organisation may be personally liable for failing to meet their directors' duties. While this is predominantly a concern for large corporations (such as those in operating in resources, transport and related industries such as finance) and public authorities, legal risk is another element for the governance bodies of community organisations to consider.<sup>133</sup>

A strategy and set of tools are therefore needed for community organisations to respond to climate change. The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) Resilient Community Organisations tool is particularly well-adapted and useful. It is an approach to building resilience to disasters and emergencies, but also applicable to climate change more broadly.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> F Beaini, M Ulubasoglu, *Demographic Profiling: Victorian Bushfires 2009 Case Study*, Report 44.2018, p 12, <https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/publications/biblio/bnh-5214>.

<sup>131</sup> See K Mallon, E Hamilton, M Black, B Beem & J Abs, *Adapting the community sector for climate extremes: Extreme weather, climate change & the community sector – Risks and adaptations*, National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, 2013, 4-5.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, p 138.

<sup>133</sup> Centre for Policy Development, *Public authority directors' duties and climate change*, January 2019, <https://cpd.org.au/2019/02/public-authorities/>; N Hutley SC, *Climate change and directors' duties: Memorandum of opinion*, 7 October 2016, <https://cpd.org.au/2016/10/directorsduties/>.

<sup>134</sup> VCOSS, *Climate change adaptation and resilience building: Tools and resources for community sector organisations*, August 2019.

## Resilience tool for community organisations

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) provides a Resilient Community Organisations online tool for community organisations to build their resilience to disasters and emergencies.<sup>135</sup>

The tool assists organisations to self-assess and get a 'resilience score', then get information on how to strengthen the organisation. The six steps to improving resilience using the ACOSS tool are:

- **Leading resilience:** 'It is particularly important that the leadership of community organisations steps up to the role of leading their organisation's disaster preparedness.'
- **Building networks:** 'People who are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of disasters need to be linked to these networks.'
- **Knowing your risks:** 'Examples and scenario planning are a great way of getting the idea of what's involved in 'what if' thinking.'
- **Managing your risks:** 'This Step highlights some of the core elements of a Disaster Plan.'
- **Preparing others:** 'Being disaster resilient means being prepared to help keep people safe and get them back on their feet after a disaster or emergency.'
- **Learning and inspiring:** 'A key part of improving plans is being well connected and up to date so it is important to participate in local events... and to share what you have learned with others.'<sup>136</sup>

## Community organisations need support to shift to renewables and energy efficiency

Community organisations have begun the shift towards renewables; however, they face a number of barriers, particularly financial.

**Fifteen per cent of respondents to VCOSS' survey said their organisations have rooftop solar but 44 per cent had never considered it. Reasons for not having rooftop solar included the fact that organisations are renting premises, are unable to afford the investment, and physical restrictions on buildings (such as highrise, heritage or shade).**

**The VCOSS survey found that some organisations have taken action on energy in the past 12 months. This included reducing their energy use (18 per cent of respondents), making efficiency upgrades (12 per cent) and buying renewable energy (8 per cent).**

There is significant opportunity for more community organisations to transition to clean energy and become more energy efficient. Subsidy schemes for organisations could significantly boost the sector's ability to be part of the clean energy transition.

<sup>135</sup> Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), *What is Resilient Community Organisations?* <https://resilience.acoss.org.au/>.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

## **Victoria can build the climate resilience of community organisations and vulnerable people**

Community organisations play a central role in supporting people who are more vulnerable to climate change, and in ensuring an equitable climate transition for Victoria. They can be bolstered and empowered to continue this work by government and the community sector.

### **Understand the needs of community organisations**

Many community organisations are acutely aware of the risks of climate change, but not the specific impacts for their organisations or the vulnerable people they support. A better understanding of their operating environments and needs – by both Government and the sector itself – would lay the groundwork for improved climate resilience and responses to climate change.

### **Place vulnerability at the forefront of decision-making and planning**

It is clear that some people, places and organisations are particularly vulnerable to climate change. Placing the people and communities who are most vulnerable at the centre of decision-making and planning (and funding them accordingly) is critical to any equitable response. This means placing the organisations and services which support local communities at the forefront.

### **Support community organisations with adaptation strategies and tools**

Practical tools such as ACOSS' Resilient Community Organisations tool help community organisations to understand their own vulnerabilities to disasters, and to build their resilience. Broader strategies and hands-on support for implementing tools to build resilience to the varied impacts of climate change are an important part of supporting organisations. This could be via workshops and facilitated networks which support organisations to understand their own vulnerabilities and build their resilience.

### **Subsidise community organisations to switch to renewables and improve energy efficiency**

Programs supporting small businesses and community organisations to switch to renewables and improve the energy efficiency of their premises enable the community sector to reduce its own greenhouse gas emissions and contribute to climate change mitigation. As with household renewables, rooftop and large-scale solar, as well as energy efficiency improvements, will enable community organisations to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and energy bills.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Community organisations can be bolstered and empowered to build community resilience to climate change in the following ways:

18. Better understand the needs of community organisations in a changing climate.
19. Place vulnerable people, places and community organisations at the forefront of climate change decision-making and planning.
20. Support community organisations with strategies and tools to adapt to climate change.
21. Support community organisations to reduce their carbon footprint by switching to renewable energy and improving energy efficiency



[vcoss.org.au/climatefairness](https://vcoss.org.au/climatefairness)

**Victorian Council of Social Service**

Level 8, 128 Exhibition Street  
Melbourne, Victoria, 3000

[vcoss@vcoss.org.au](mailto:vcoss@vcoss.org.au)  
03 9235 1000

[@vcoss](https://twitter.com/vcoss) [f/vcoss](https://www.facebook.com/vcoss)

