Brotherhood
of St Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

Valuing all young people
Submission to the Victorian Government on the Vulnerable Youth Framework discussion paper

Brotherhood of St Laurence

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Summary

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) commends the Victorian Government for placing a higher priority on a better integrated and more effective strategy that will maximise the social and economic participation of all Victorian young people.

The level of risk faced by young people today is far higher than for those from previous generations. The pathway to sustainable paid work for those who do not progress to tertiary studies is much more precarious than ever before, due to technological change and globalisation, resulting in the loss of low paid full-time jobs. Independent living for young adults today has also been delayed because of the imperative of obtaining tertiary qualifications and the shortage of affordable housing.

The complex social context that affects young people's development and learning is significantly understated in the discussion paper. We recommend that the range of the critical influences on young people's development be considered as a starting point both for establishing the directions for better-integrated policy responses and for choosing success indicators. **Only by acknowledging all the factors leading to the social exclusion of young people can we develop a youth service system that is responsive and effective**. Key factors that should be considered include:

- family conflict, breakdown and violence
- parental incapacity, disability and chronic ill-health
- family homelessness and transience
- income poverty (especially of lone parent families)
- mental illness and substance abuse
- social isolation and lack of support networks (including role models)
- tension between cultural beliefs within the family and beyond the family.

The discussion paper correctly identifies prevention as a key focus area. However, preventative approaches must be aimed at the population level through the availability of non-stigmatising assistance and support for young people through their developmental years. We must encourage young people to raise their concerns or ask questions through youth friendly access points—both within schools and post-compulsory learning settings and in the general community. **We therefore recommend that a *Youth Framework* rather than a *Vulnerable Youth Framework* be developed.**

The Brotherhood welcomes a whole-of-government approach developed through the auspices of the four government portfolios. **However, substantive improvements in the transition of disadvantaged young people will only be achieved if governance arrangements are implemented *within* individual departments to ensure mainstream public services are inclusive of all young Victorians.** This requires the development of floor targets for particular indicators to ensure shared accountability for maximising the social and economic participation of young people.

In addition to mainstreaming social inclusion principles as core business for individual departments and portfolios, there is an imperative for a suite of accessible and responsive support services to be available to young people who have been identified as at risk of not realising their potential, and their parents or carers. **We recommend the consolidation of the current fragmented array of referral and assistance programs across portfolios into a single youth support structure.** All young persons or their parents/carers should be able to seek assistance, information or advice. This entry point would also be the gateway to specialist services and support based on individual assessment.

The government has made considerable progress in strengthening both the infrastructure and capacity of schools to improve the completion rates of students. However, further progress towards the goal of a 90% attainment rate of Year 12 or equivalent requires additional reforms that take into full account the social context and related barriers to participation in formal learning.

The school is the critical access point where the first signs of risk or vulnerability become apparent and referrals are made for assessment of learning or behavioural difficulties. Primary teachers are almost always the first to know of emerging student or family issues that may interfere with participation in learning. However, it is also imperative that students who do not develop risk until their later years are also identified.

We therefore recommend the development of a Student Development Service that would bring into a single system the current array of specialist support programs, such as transition support workers, youth pathways, school-focused youth services, Managed Individual Pathways, primary welfare officers, careers advice and student support services. This service would be an integral organisational stream within schools and valued as a key function alongside the teaching staff. After a triage entry process, students with multiple risk factors would receive continuity of support accessible through their learning years, while others would receive 'point of time' support as required by their individual circumstances.

The lower age limit for the scope of the proposed framework is 10 years. Yet it is evident that many risk factors become apparent to primary teachers when children first attend school. However, teachers are too often handicapped by unresponsive and ineffective assessment and support services. **We recommend that the lower age limit be reduced to 8 years to enable a stronger early intervention when it matters.**

We strongly endorse the discussion paper's focus on providing parents with support and skills as an integral part of the preventative strategy. However, we recommend that the focus areas of 'education, training and employment' and of 'tailored responses to particular groups' also include parental support action plans. **We encourage the development of a holistic parental support strategy as a key element of a suite of assistance that should be available to families and students who are identified with significant risk factors.**

The Brotherhood of St Laurence endorses the overall rationale and directions for change set out in the discussion paper. The need for better integration and coordination between governments and across portfolios is evident. While the proposed framework will provide a strong skeleton, it is not the only change required. In addition to stronger drivers for accountability with targets placed on departments to reduce the exclusion of young people and their families, investment of additional resources will be essential to ensure that student support and youth services are able to respond in a timely and effective way to vulnerability through the developmental years.

Background on the Brotherhood of St Laurence

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s. Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile, the Brotherhood continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty. We undertake research, service development and delivery, and advocacy, with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating the understandings gained into new policies, programs and practices for implementation by government and others. Our work is based on an understanding that the remedy to poverty lies in integrating social and economic policy in order to strengthen the capacities of individuals and communities.

Our research and services focuses on those people at greatest risk at key life transition stages considered critical to their future wellbeing. Two of these are:

- the early years, both at home and into school
- the years through school to work and further education.

The Brotherhood has a long history of research and service delivery (see below) relevant to early childhood, students and the youth transition. Our research record encompasses longitudinal research on children from low-income families (Taylor & Nelms 2008, 2006), location-based research on child poverty (Stanley, Eadie & Baker 2005) and family services (Davies & Oke 2008; Oke, Stanley & Theobald 2007), antenatal and universal early childhood services (Hydon et al. 2005), studies on young people's transition to work (MacDonald 1999) and their position and disadvantages in the labour market (McClelland & Macdonald 1999; Tresize-Brown 2004; Marsh & Perkins 2006), as well as evaluations of the Brotherhood's own services such as PACTS, the transition support service addressed at parents (Bedson & Perkins 2006). This year we have completed a study of the impact of financial hardship on student participation in learning (Bond & Horn 2008). Furthermore, two issues of the Brotherhood's Social Barometer, *Monitoring children's chances* (Scutella & Smyth 2005) and *Challenges facing Australian youth* (Boese & Scutella 2006), present indicators of capabilities and disadvantage that examine how well equipped Australian children and young people are (or are not) to negotiate successfully the transition from early childhood to school and from school to work.

In 2008, we have engaged with the Commonwealth Government to ensure that much needed reform to the provision of employment assistance (including JPET) leads to better transitions for disadvantaged job seekers through a better integrated service system which takes into full account the social context and structural barriers to full participation (BSL 2008).

Our current services in the early years and the youth transition include:

- Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) – an early childhood enrichment program for 4 and 5-year-olds and their parents
- Communities for Children – a federal initiative to engage disadvantaged children and families in universal early childhood services
- Napier Street Child and Family Service and Craigieburn Family Day Care Service, which both provide early childhood education
- Homework Program, Fitzroy – tutoring support
- Transition Program – an early intervention program to assist young people to engage with school or make a smooth transition to other training or employment options

- Parents as Career Transitions Supports (PACTS) – empowering parents to help their children making career and transition choices

- Youth Pathways – a federally funded program providing holistic advice and referrals to young people identified as at risk of disengaging with education and entering long-term unemployment

- Community Services Leadership Program – working within educational settings to support disadvantaged young people to plan and deliver youth-led projects in their community

- Education Development Project – providing case-managed assistance to families of children in Years 8 and 9 who are at risk of homelessness

- Youth Voice – training young people to conduct research with their peers to inform development and planning involving young people

- JPET – case management of young people aged 15 to 21, who are homeless, at risk of homelessness, leaving the juvenile justice system, wards of state or refugees, to assist access to education, training and employment.

- Vocational training – as a Registered Training Organisation, the Brotherhood delivers accredited training through pre-employment programs, providing people with a nationally recognised qualification and the opportunity to continue learning through a traineeship or other educational options. Programs include Furniture Works Frankston, STEP group training and Transition to Work

- an Education Coordinator, who works to build the understanding of poverty and exclusion among students, student teachers, teachers and teacher educators, through workshops and lectures, including work on curriculum design.

We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Government's development of a Vulnerable Youth Framework.

1 General comments

1.1 Principles for a Youth Framework

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) commends the Victorian Government for placing greater priority on a better integrated and more effective strategy that will maximise the social and economic participation of all Victorian young people. We specifically endorse the inclusion of the key transition *into* secondary school in the Framework.

The Brotherhood argues that young people almost inevitably undertake risk-taking behaviour through their adolescent years. However, the level of risk faced by young people of today is far higher than for those from previous generations. For example, the array of designer drugs accessible today are much more potent than alcohol. Similarly, today's cars and motorbikes are much more powerful than those used by young baby boomers.

In addition, the pathway to sustainable paid work for those who do not progress to tertiary studies is much more precarious than ever before, due to technological change and globalisation, resulting in the loss of low-paid full-time jobs. Independent living for young adults today is also delayed because of the imperative of obtaining tertiary qualifications and the shortage of affordable housing.

The reframing of youth policy is therefore vital if we are to assist all young Victorians, especially those with fewer resources and low social capital, to make a smooth transition to independence in a society with heightened risk. The starting point for such reform is a complete understanding of the risk factors faced by young people, especially intergenerational risks from their family's circumstances.

The development of the Vulnerable Youth Framework is a tacit acceptance of current failings of mainstream policy settings and programs to respond effectively to identified vulnerabilities—especially at key stages in the development of children and young people. The discussion paper assumes that the main weakness in youth policy is the lack of coordination of existing effort (p.5). But better integration across government portfolios is only *one* aspect of badly needed reform. We urge consideration and action in the following areas:

- *consolidation* of fragmented service delivery for those with significant risk factors
- robust *drivers for accountability*, with floor targets placed on departments to reduce social exclusion for families and children
- adequacy of service delivery *capacity* to ensure responsive and effective assistance and support to vulnerable young people.

The discussion paper correctly identifies prevention as a key focus area. However, preventative approaches must be aimed at the population level through the availability of non-stigmatising assistance and services for young people through their developmental years. We must encourage young people to raise their concerns or seek assistance through youth-friendly access points both within school and in post-compulsory learning settings and in the general community. We argue therefore for the implementation of a *Youth Framework* rather than a *Vulnerable Youth Framework*.

The Brotherhood supports the vision and principles set out in the discussion paper (p.6), but we would encourage the inclusion of an additional principle: *continuity of support* for young people and their families with significant risk factors.

The current service system generally offers time-limited or reactive assistance in response to presenting concerns or crises. In many cases, the young person's underlying vulnerabilities are not easily resolved and may continue through the learning years. Within individual portfolios, there is currently limited continuity or coordination for young people with significant risk factors. For example, when students are suspended or expelled from school, there is no proactive follow-up and support. In the case of family homelessness, the focus of transitional support is on resolving the housing crisis: children's re-engagement in schooling is not a priority. Continuity of support through the developmental years—up to 25 years on a needs basis—should be adopted as a critical element of an effective response to young people identified with significant risk factors.

2 Understanding risk and vulnerability

2.1 Definition

The operational definition in the discussion paper (p.1) describes vulnerable young people as:

> Young people who, through a combination of their circumstances and adolescent risk-taking behaviour, are at risk of not realising their potential to achieve positive life outcomes.

The Brotherhood believes that this definition serves to problematise young people and therefore underplays the obligation and role of the community, and in particular of public services, to deliver programs and services that respond to the circumstances and capabilities of children and young people. It is imperative that we acknowledge the range of familial and structural factors that contribute to social exclusion and lead to risk-taking behaviours. For example, the loss of low-skilled jobs in regional towns, leading to family hardship and poverty, can result in cost-induced absenteeism from school with serious long-term consequences for children's attainment and skill development.

Almost all young people undertake risk-taking activities: this is one element of their learning and development. We argue that the level of risk for today's young people is much greater than ever before. This puts a stronger obligation on the general community and governments to raise awareness of the risks and to intervene to prevent the circumstances leading to risk-taking behaviour. This in turn requires a holistic conceptualisation of vulnerability that takes into account both individual and family capabilities and structural barriers to participation.

The Brotherhood suggests amending the definition of vulnerable young people as follows:

> Young people who, through a combination of individual and family circumstances and external barriers to participation, are at risk of not realising their potential to achieve positive life outcomes.

2.2 Social inclusion and the youth transition

The section 'Understanding young people and precursors for vulnerability' rightly draws attention to external factors, often outside the control of young people, that impact on their resources and capabilities for full participation in learning and subsequent transition to employment. However, the discussion underemphasises the importance of both social and economic change in increasing the risk of an unsuccessful transition for a significant proportion of young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The loss of entry-level, secure paid work and careers for young people not moving onto tertiary study has all but eliminated a relatively smooth transition from education to employment for this group. At the same time, we have seen the emergence of the *learner-worker* path, with the chronological separation between education and work having almost disappeared. Part-time work is often undertaken at the same time as education and training. Those unable to obtain work experience are increasingly disadvantaged in making a successful transition in the longer term, as they have poor foundational or soft skills, in addition to their lack of qualifications.

In considering the transition to work (p.14), a key aspect of risk includes the mental and physical pressure faced by young people who are now routinely balancing the demands of study and paid work. The preventative strategy should include a requirement for employers and schools to realign in ways that support young people to balance these roles. In this regard, we support the work of the Australian National Schools Network in calling for an Intergenerational Compact to support young people. The risk for the majority is not the transition to work, as most young people are working. Rather, the risk is being unable to make the transition to *sustainable work with opportunity for advancement*.

The discussion paper's focus on communication technology with a negative assessment of its impact on social connectedness is misplaced. We would argue that these technology changes are relatively minor compared with the more substantial barriers to a successful transition faced by young people today. In fact, it may be argued that the advent of mobile communications and the Internet have had a positive impact on building young people's knowledge and social capital.

On the other hand, the social context that affects young people's development and learning is significantly understated in the discussion paper. We urge the inclusion of a broader range of critical influences on young people to establish the directions for both better-integrated policy responses and success indicators. Only by acknowledging all the factors leading to the social exclusion of young people can we develop a youth service system that is responsive and effective.

Key factors not included in the Environment section include:

- family conflict, breakdown and violence
- parental incapacity, disability and chronic ill-health
- family homelessness and transience
- income poverty (especially of lone parent families)
- mental illness and substance abuse
- social isolation and lack of support networks (including role models)
- tension between cultural beliefs within the family and beyond the family

These risk factors should be incorporated into the conceptual model of vulnerability to ensure that early intervention is triggered on first disclosure, rather than waiting until they have become worse before providing support. For example, family homelessness is often a culmination of multiple issues that require intervention. The adverse impact of a spell of homelessness on children's health, education and wellbeing is well documented. The disclosure of family homelessness at the child's school should be a trigger for rapid referral and assistance to support services, with an individual learning and development plan devised for the child.

Young people growing up in regions or communities with fewer opportunities or resources, who experience one or more of the above factors, clearly require an appropriate level of support through their learning years. Groups with higher levels of risk include Indigenous Victorians and refugees and asylum seekers. For those assessed with multiple risk factors, this support may well need to be ongoing, This necessitates a youth service system that offers continuity of well-coordinated and flexible assistance based on individual development plans.

A more balanced approach that builds into the framework understandings of social exclusion should include the broader set of risk factors that focus less on individual behaviours and more on the family and external risk factors. We are especially concerned by the generalised assumptions on risk-taking behaviours within the four levels of vulnerability (for example, 'unprotected safe sex sometimes').

2.3   Age-related transitions

The Brotherhood has significant concerns about the overemphasis on chronological age in the discussion paper (p.13). The Vulnerable Youth Framework correctly focuses on early intervention to ensure an effective response to causes of risk-taking behaviour or social exclusion. We support the argument that 'age and independence should not be confused with maturity and resilience'; but we are concerned about using age groups in defining key transitions and associated risks. For instance, the most vulnerable youth include those who experiment with drugs and alcohol well before the age of 15 years.

Specifying age groups implies limits on eligibility for assistance, which should be avoided. If the goal is a youth service system that is more inclusive, responsive and effective, then the key prerequisite is *individual* assessment of barriers and needs, based on development and capabilities rather than age. The importance of age to intervention primarily relates to legislative requirements.

The minimum age for the scope of the proposed framework is 10 years. This age is inconsistent with the government's new Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development in that the middle years development period starts at 8 years (DEECD 2008). A key focus area for action through the framework is engagement in education and training. We would argue that the early primary school years are a critical point when many risk factors are picked up by teachers. The 10 year lower limit is not therefore conducive to an effective early intervention approach. Currently primary teachers are best placed to identify risk factors, such as learning difficulties, parental incapacity or financial hardship, that will affect on student achievement. However, they are too often constrained by unresponsive and ineffective assessment and support services. We strongly recommend that the minimum age limit be reduced to 8 years to enable timely early intervention.

2.4   Data on vulnerability and outcomes for young people

As we discussed above, there is too strong an emphasis on personal behaviour risk factors in the conceptual model. Applying the social inclusion lens to the youth transition points to additional indicators of vulnerability for young people, for example:

- extent of family homelessness and the number of accompanying children experiencing homelessness annually
- level of substantiated reports of child neglect or abuse to Child Protection
- number of students suspended or expelled from school.

While we acknowledge that the data in Table 1 of the discussion paper is included to illustrate the layers of vulnerability, we believe it is important to have a better balanced depiction of the indicators of vulnerability. This is also critical to ensure that the measures of effectiveness of the action plan developed from the final youth framework are comprehensive.

The outcomes identified for children and young people across the key domains (set out in Figure 2 of the discussion paper) are a more complete set of indicators by which to measure the impact of the proposed youth framework. However, not all the structural or social factors that are a prerequisite to youth transition outcomes are included: for example, there is no mention of stable and secure housing, either in the family setting or independently.

Other outcomes are too narrowly defined, for example 'children attend and enjoy school' fails to acknowledge alternative learning options as a valued approach for those young people whose learning style cannot be easily accommodated within a school context. Mainstream schools have a responsibility to provide a more inclusive and supportive structure and environment which encourages *all* students to actively participate in school learning.

3 Focus areas

The Brotherhood supports the overall focus areas and the general thrust of the actions for change. We make specific comments and suggestions for consideration below. However, we do have concerns about the governance arrangements and drivers required to encourage, support and resource the action plan. There is no clear direction for system reform to ensure departments and programs improve coordination and responsiveness to ensure that all young people with identified risk factors really receive a timely and effective intervention.

We urge the addition of robust mechanisms, such as interdepartmental agreements with floor targets, to ensure that adequate priority is placed on turning the aspirations of the framework into practice.

We remain concerned that the level of reform needed to have a substantive impact on the marginalisation and social exclusion of young people will not be forthcoming without higher level political leadership and accountability. The youth portfolio is currently afforded relatively low status within one department. While it is critical to mainstream more inclusive policies and interventions *within* departments, it is also vital that funding mechanisms and performance targets facilitate cross-portfolio, longer term collaboration.

3.1   Prevention and early identification

The Brotherhood strongly endorses the rationale for a strong prevention and early identification of risk factors and the four actions for change.

The most effective approach is for individual departments and portfolios to take greater responsibility for implementation of effective strategies to deal with the causes of significant risk of young people facing serious disadvantage. This will require resources as well as adequate drivers for reform placed on departments, including targets on key indicators for particular populations.

The critical social problem of family homelessness exemplifies this challenge. Family homelessness is almost always accompanied by children's non-attendance at school for extended periods as well as by poor health and wellbeing. Despite record economic growth, the prevalence of family homelessness has increased, with a substantial proportion of accompanying children aged in their critical primary school years. Yet there are minimal interventions to prevent homelessness and responses to the crisis are inadequate, with long waiting periods for transitional and permanent housing. In addition, children are not entitled to holistic and well-coordinated support as they are not considered as clients by the main assistance program (the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program, OoH). There is therefore no provision for individual plans to ensure timely re-engagement into formal school and catch-up with learning.

The challenge is therefore to strengthen strategies for preventing homelessness, including reductions in family violence and increased availability of affordable housing. Once identified, a far higher priority needs to be placed on ensuring children are rapidly reconnected to school or assisted to stay in school through better resourced and integrated support programs across housing, health and education portfolios. Effective early intervention models do exist—the key ingredients are the drivers to prioritise program reform and interdepartmental collaboration. As examples, we suggest the following performance indicators and targets should be considered:

- The number of children experiencing homelessness annually in Victoria is reduced by 50 per cent within 5 years.
- No families (with accompanying children) and school age young people are turned away from homeless services.
- All school age children and young people using homeless services (as clients) are re-engaged in education or training within 4 weeks.
- Schools follow up all families whose children drop-out of school to refer them to specialist support services.

Parental support

We strongly endorse the discussion paper's focus on the importance of parental and broader community support networks in both identifying and reducing risk factors. In particular, the Brotherhood has developed a range of parental support programs in recognition of the evidence that some parents need assistance and skills development to ensure the education and wellbeing of their children. These include:

- HIPPY – an early childhood enrichment program for 4 and 5-year-olds and their parents

- Brotherhood Homework Program – a learning support program with volunteer tutors for disadvantaged secondary school students

- PACTS (Parents As Career Transition Support) – a support program to give parents the knowledge to assist their children make the right decisions about life after school

We recommend the development of a holistic parental support approach as a key element of a suite of assistance that should be available to families and children identified as having significant risk factors.

Identification of vulnerability

It needs to be acknowledged that professional workers in public services already can and do identify children and young people who have risk factors that may impact on them achieving their potential. Most will seek to make referrals where appropriate to specialist services unless bound by confidentiality or privacy provisions.

The key gap is timely assessment of needs and subsequent effective support. For example, teachers who recognise learning or behavioural difficulties for new students will make a referral to school support services. Currently, teachers in some schools may have to wait for several months for a specialist assessment to be undertaken. A standard across the system for all specialist assessments should be a maximum of 4 weeks.

Youth-focused service system

The Brotherhood strongly endorses the development of a continuum of youth-focused services that support prevention and early intervention. The government has made considerable progress in strengthening both the infrastructure and capacity of schools to improve the completion rates of students. as summarised in the discussion paper (p.22). However, further progress towards reaching the goal of a 90% attainment rate of Year 12 or equivalent requires additional reforms that take into full account the social context and related barriers to participation in mainstream learning. These include:

- recognising that some students need more flexible alternative learning approaches, including off-site, community learning environments, work experience
- giving equal status in secondary schools to vocational pathways
- ensuring that financial hardship does not preclude full participation in learning
- timely assessment of student learning or behavioural difficulties and barriers to participation
- availability of sustained specialist support services for children and their families.

We believe there is scope for consolidating the range of service responses available to young people through open access entry points within the community (such as one-stop shops) and via key public facilities including schools. This approach would enable a non-stigmatising environment that many young people would utilise for advice or assistance. It would also deliver efficiencies through better coordinated assessment of individual needs and subsequent ongoing support for those with multiple risk factors and complex issues. A key element would be the continuity of support, based on an agreed plan. This consolidation of the current array of services would also reduce the number of case workers involved with individual young people over time. The discussion paper acknowledges the array of support programs in place for students 'at risk' within and beyond the school environment. We outline below an approach for a more effective and efficient Student Development Service based in schools (see 3.2).

3.2   Engagement in education, learning and training

The Brotherhood supports the focus on completion of education and skills development as a critical pathway to positive life outcomes, and strongly endorses the four actions for change. School is the access point where the first signs of risk or vulnerability become apparent and referrals can be made for assessment of learning or behavioural difficulties or other barriers. Primary teachers are often the first to know of student or family issues that may interfere with participation in learning.

Our assessment of the current school environment is that teachers are having to spend too much time on managing students with learning or behavioural difficulties, mainly because of the lack of support services. Teaching staff need to be freed up to focus on what they are trained to do best: teach.

We therefore recommend the development of a Student Development Service that would bring together into a single system the current array of specialist programs, such as transition support workers, youth pathways, school-focused youth services, Managed Individual Pathways, primary welfare officers, careers advice and student support services.

Following referral by a teacher, a triage process would include an initial assessment of immediate needs and risk factors. A prompt referral to specialist services would follow for assessment of, for example, specific learning or behavioural difficulties. A performance benchmark of a 4-week assessment period would be mandated on these services.

For students assessed as having significant barriers to learning or other risk factors, an individual development plan would be agreed, leading to an appropriate level of support according to needs. The Student Development Service would be accessible by students (and their parents or carers) through their learning years and be portable between schools within the education system and across service systems. This would ensure continuity of support over time and a more efficient, client-centred response. While the level of risk factors eligible for ongoing support would need to be determined, it is considered that the existence of significant risk factors would be a reliable predictor of the need for long-term support for students and/or parents.

A key challenge is to ensure that there is sufficient capacity within specialist support services to respond to student needs, both for assessment and ongoing support. Additional investment in support services such as integration aides within schools is clearly needed. Access to external specialists, for example speech pathologists, is also required.

We envisage that the Student Development Service would be an *integral organisational stream* within schools and *valued as a key function alongside the teaching staff*. This structure would give a teachers a simpler, more transparent and accountable referral point to coordinated support services through the student's learning years. Currently when a student is suspended or expelled there is too little follow-up or transfer of the student's history to the next school. The new Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development (p.21) commits to the introduction of transition plans for Year 6 children entering secondary schooling. Similarly, we recommend that the individual development plans be transferred with vulnerable students to improve the chance of an effective re-engagement in learning at the new school.

We encourage the development of parental support programs, community-based tutoring programs, mentoring, alternative learning environments and other support services among the options available through the Student Development Service. These programs would also be available through direct referral from other services, such as housing assistance, health and community-based youth services.

In addition to these improvements to the role of welfare and support services, we favour stronger drivers for behavioural change to ensure that schools take full responsibility for enrolled students in the compulsory years. This includes developing a more inclusive and supportive school environment; access to high-quality alternative learning suited to students with learning difficulties; and professional development for teachers and school staff about how disadvantage contributes to vulnerability, with consequent impact on participation and attainment. Schools must be further encouraged to open their doors to the broader community by developing partnerships for flexible learning packages using their resources to support vulnerable young people to remain engaged with education. Targets for reducing the number of suspensions and expulsions should be introduced and school performance reported annually.

3.3   Local planning for youth services

The Brotherhood supports the rationale and general directions that underpin the proposed actions for change in respect of local planning. As discussed above, we consider there is scope and a need for consolidation and better coordination of youth services in Victoria. We support the imperative for localised planning with effective consultation with the community, including young people themselves. This effort should be coordinated with the planning work of Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs). But we recommend that a single integrated youth service structure is first required to ensure more efficient, effective and equitable provision of assistance against clear objectives and priorities.

Consultation at local community level—giving young people a meaningful voice—would shape priorities within the higher level strategic objectives set by government.

Young people and their parents should be able to access the full suite of advice, information and specialist services via an assessment process through non-stigmatising, accessible entry points in the community. Advice and support should be made available for those local community groups, such as sporting clubs, which provide activities that involve vulnerable young people.

The proposed youth support service structure would be linked to the proposed Student Development Service, which we have suggested to be established within schools, to enable coordination of assistance to vulnerable young people.

We suggest that such a consolidated framework for coordinating youth services would deliver significant benefits including:

- accessible entry points both within schools and the community for all young people and their parents to obtain help
- more efficient assessment for and delivery of specialist services for those at high risk of exclusion
- increased availability and use of secondary consultations for those working with young people
- stronger evidence base on unmet needs, responsiveness and effectiveness of youth services
- improved collaboration between schools, specialist support services and the general community through individual plans with agreed responsibilities to ensure continuity of support
- enhanced opportunities for young people who are attempting to re-engage with formal education

- better learning outcomes for young people, leading to a successful transition to independence
- overall benefits to the community through stronger social cohesion with reduced costs of more expensive tertiary and crisis services (including housing, health and justice).

While we support the development of local planning processes that lead to priority activities for meeting local community needs, it will be critical to get the governance arrangements right. Lessons learnt through the implementation of LLENs in Victoria provide ample evidence of the potential lost due to delays in developing accountability arrangements that accord with the policy direction. We consider that local government authorities are best placed to lead and coordinate the development of local youth plans. However, there needs to be a combination of incentives to achieve agreed goals and performance targets to ensure activities and outcomes fit with the strategic directions of the youth framework.

The development of local youth plans should be guided by:

- direct consultations with young people in their communities, including those from identified particular population or needs groups
- consultations with other planning networks including LLENs
- analysis of community indicators of disadvantage and social exclusion
- identification of infrastructure and service requirements.

4 Drivers for change

The Brotherhood welcomes the whole-of-government approach being developed through the auspices of the four government portfolios. However, substantial improvements in the transition of disadvantaged young people will only be achieved if governance arrangements are implemented *within* individual departments that place far higher priority on mainstream public services becoming inclusive of all young Victorians. This requires the development of appropriate targets to ensure accountability against the shared commitment to maximise the social and economic participation of young people.

If the government is serious about making substantive gains in the successful transition of young people and a reduction in levels of low attainment and subsequent exclusion, the current inadequacies in the capacity of services for young people must be addressed. Consolidation of services into a youth service system will achieve efficiencies; however, as a core principle minimum benchmarks should be established to ensure responsive and timely assistance. This will require investment of additional resources as part of the reform package, both within departmental portfolios and to support the implementation of coordinated local youth plans.

The Brotherhood believes there is a strong case for increased investment in Victoria's youth that will deliver long-term benefits through improved levels of social inclusion and cohesion, increased productivity through better skilled young workers and reduced demand on health, welfare and justice services.

The discussion paper sets out a strong skeleton for a more effective approach to maximise the inclusion of all young Victorians. The challenge will be to add the muscles and organs to make it happen through effective governance arrangements and sufficient resources.

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