We welcome the government’s ‘Vulnerable Youth Framework Discussion Paper’ and acknowledge the importance of identifying and developing effective policies and practices able to ensure that young Victorians have access to high quality services in Victoria, have their rights recognised so they are enabled to lead full lives.

We begin by addressing 9 issues, make a number of recommendations, and respond to the ‘consultation questions’ that have been identified.

The Discussion Paper could be strengthened by addressing a number of conceptual issues which we outline briefly before developing a more detailed response below.

1. Specification of the policy problem: conceptual issues

The one line definition of ‘vulnerable’ young people offered on page 1 and repeated on page 14 does not adequately describe or spell out a clear policy problem.

While reference is made to ‘vulnerable young people’ as a specific category the Discussion Paper implies that ‘vulnerable youth’ actually includes all young people aged 10 to 25 years (p. 12). In its current form the Discussion Paper relies on a vocabulary and a interpretative framework derived from developmental theory and quasi-bioloigcal models like adolescent brain theory, that maintain all young people are inherently ‘vulnerable’. There are both conceptual and practical problems with this because it excludes no-one and is therefore of minimal as a policy category. Either the policies and services relate to all young people in which case adding the adjective ‘vulnerable’ is meaningless because all are said to be ‘vulnerable’ or it needs to identify what specific factors make some young people ‘vulnerable’ and others not.

The idea of vulnerability implies that people so described may be wounded or hurt and it would be useful to identify what kinds of factors leave some young people open to being harmed in ways that would make them vulnerable.

2. Recognising and bypassing prejudicial stereotypes

It is disappointing to see the Discussion Paper relying on both essentialist and prejudicial stereotypes about young people.

There is too much uncritical reliance in the Discussion Paper on developmental theory. We note that these theories in their various forms are the product of specific historical social and intellectual contexts that are radically different to our own today. The view of adolescence (offered in the introduction and on page 9 for example) are very traditional, essentialist and outmoded accounts that ignore key ideas and new thinking coming out of recent literature on this topic (Gilligan, Ward, McLean-Taylor, 1988) and sits oddly with the acknowledgement in the Report that:

“We can no longer assume that there is a process of ‘normal’ adolescent development and that any ‘deviation’ from this therefore indicates vulnerability or risk” (p.9).
We note too how statements like the one just mentioned contradict other claims in the report—for example:

‘Vulnerability can also be a function of age or developmental stage as the young person moves through a range of significant transition points between the age of 10 and 25 years’.

and

‘The adolescent stage of development is a time of vulnerability...’ (p. 13).

On the one hand we read that we can no longer identify vulnerability or risk or X by observing or measuring deviations from a norm, on the other, we are told that vulnerability is embedded in (a function of) a developmental stage.

Likewise acknowledgement that ‘we can no longer assume there is a process of ‘normal’ adolescent development’ sits awkwardly with other key messages of the Report: that vulnerability can be identified by reference to certain indicators; a practice itself that rests on there being standards, or normative categories.

The account of adolescence offered in the report which characterised young people (10 to 25) in terms of experimentation, risk taking, heightened emotions, impulsive, lacking in good judgment, the testing of boundaries etc is a classic stereotype of ‘the adolescent’ and disappointing to see in an official document in 2008 (pp.1 and 9). It’s a standard generalisation with a heritage going back to the American scientific psychology Professor G. Stanley-Hall who in his book in 1905 called Adolescence in which he depicted the adolescent category in precisely this way: as difficult, often moody and rebellious. Adolescence according to this time honoured stereotype, which was developed in a social context radically different to our own, is a period of ‘storm and stress’, a ‘phase in the life cycle’ when young people are troubled and troublesome and full of anxiety as they make their way through what was described as a ‘precarious transition’ from childhood to responsible adulthood.

This dominant account of ‘youth’ or ‘adolescents’ rests on the assumption that ‘youth’/ ‘adolescents’ are a section of the population who all share certain essential features. Its draws on a notion of stadial development (i.e., development through certain cognitive, intellectual, social and moral stages in the life-cycle) (Piaget 1932, Piaget 1953) that rests on the underlying premise that ‘the adolescents’ are substandard adults who will one day hopefully develop into adults. From here it is a small step to saying they are less able to reason, to understand complex ideas or make sophisticated judgments than adults to saying they are irresponsible, dangerous, deviant, ‘anti-social’ etc (Piaget, 1953; Kohlberg 1976). From there it easy to make claims in the ways we talk about youth cultures and sub-cultures like Generation X, Generation Y, or talk about ‘alienated youth’, ‘the selfish’ generation’ and ‘new youth tribes’ that then inform our responses to social problems like crime, homelessness, gangs and drug use.

Yet there is no credible evidence for such claims. We do not accept the essentialist proposition that all young people ought to be or can be described as vulnerable or at risk and thus should continue to suffer the loss of basic human rights justified by assumptions about their deficiencies.

The research that has relied on in the Discussion Paper has been critiqued in ways that demonstrate why its problematic and what the fallacies are in accompanying arguments, yet that research has been ignored. We refer for example to recent national surveys like the Australia’s National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) (2007) that challenges claims that today’s youth are a inherently irresponsible and unreliable in the ways described in the Report. An overwhelming majority of young people want to get a job and be able to support themselves (NATSEM 2007 see also The Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2006, data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey 2004, Australian Electoral Commission, 2005). According to the NATSEM report, the young people surveyed (those born between 1976 and 1991) are more responsible that often thought; they are focused on education and their careers and thinking about their future. According to the Report nearly half of all young people who study full-time also have jobs, while 70% of those who study part-time also work full-time. Moreover, those under 30 years of age spend less money on clothes, alcohol and food than did the age groups who are now aged 30 to 40 at the same age. Indeed as the findings of NATSEM Report reveal:

If we look at some of the generalizations made about Gen Y, they are indeed ambitious, but they do not seek immediate gratification; in fact they are working and studying harder than previous generations at the same age (2007, p.2)
We refer also to the 2006 Mission Australia National Survey of Young Australians which also tell very different story. Rather than tending to be ‘impulsiveness’ and ‘poor decision’ making that research revealed a high level of responsibility evident in various forms including involvement by young people in community and voluntary activities reflecting commitment and engagement. Other surveys show that far from being reckless risk-takers, irresponsible and anti-social most young people actually consider family very important, along with health, and education and 87% who were aged 18 years or older report that they are on the electoral role (Australian Democrats, 2007).

Research like these national independent surveys reveals that we cannot make such generalisations about young people. As the evidence demonstrates, most young people are normal and indeed tend to be like their parents. Indeed as the recent NATSEM report observes (2007) ‘... in many respects, Gen Y is no different to other generations in what they aspire to ...(2007, p. 2). The popular idea of ‘the adolescent’ as transitional period of risk and stress owes much to research that was done on disturbed or problematic minorities of young people; in other words, it relied on an atypical fraction of the entire cohort (see also, Gilligan, Ward, McLean-Taylor, 1988).

The uncritical section on brain development is also of deep concern (pp. 9-11). The complete acceptance of what some experts have claimed in recent years in respect to brain scan technology like MRI’s implies the government’s acceptance as fact that:

- there is something called ‘the adolescent brain’,
- that the part of the ‘adolescent brain’ said to control moral and practical judgment is structurally different from ‘the adult brain’, and
- that this explains why young people under the age of 23-25 are impulsive, risk-taking and irresponsible.

We note how most neuroscientists have long understood simplistic arguments about identifying physical structures in the brain to locate certain capabilities or functions is ill-founded and reject the idea that a single specific brain structure determines complex human cognitive or emotional judgment. As Gazzaniga, Ivry & Mangun (2002: 74) observe:

Major identifiable systems can be localized within each lobe, but systems of the brain also cross different lobes. That is, those brain systems do not map one-to-one onto the lobe in which they primarily reside... (see also, Kosslyn and Andersen,1992, and Damasio 2006)

The fact that large literature and growing literature that critiques the adolescent brain theory on methodological (scientific), ethical, philosophical and social grounds have not been acknowledged is significant.

We refer to the attached article for further detail on why this approach is problematic (Bessant, 2008, pp. 347-360).

The claim in the Report that a young person’s brain explains why they (all young people under 25) are unreliable when it comes to things like keeping an appointment with a professional highlights how prejudicial this thinking is. It is but also offensive and illustrative of the dangers inherent in biological determinisitic arguments. Moreover, the will to generalise about something called the adolescent brain is an example of a longstanding historical problem that involves the harnessing of legitimate scientific techniques and perspectives to prejudices that too often lead to quite appalling behavior. Briefly recall for example the use of such scientific talk about the ‘female brain’, the ‘negro brain’ or the ‘Jewish brain’ in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and how that was used to ‘justify’ some deeply troubling policies.

It seems that claims that all young people (10 – 25) can be described by reference to risky transitions, their place in a life cycle-stage and conduct determined by their brains that causes them to act in irresponsible was simply does not stand up to critical scrutiny.
3. Developing Effective Policy Frameworks

Equally it is important to recognise that some young people are vulnerable at various points in their lives from specific factors like poverty, ill-health, disability, abusive and exploitative adults, or insensitive institutions, and poorly designed policies and practices and require support from competent professionals and well designed and resourced services and policies. These young people have particular needs and require support and expertise that are greater than that which their families and informal community networks can or are willing to provide.

The Discussion Paper is generally characterised by a lack of clarity in respect to the key categories like ‘vulnerability’, ‘positive life outcomes’ or ‘risk’. This obscures the kinds of problems that particular groups of young people (or all young people) face and the policy solutions which are needed. It is not evident how identification the five focus areas will remedy ‘the problem’ (re. prevention and early identification, education, training and employment, local youth service planning, tailored responses and effective services and capable people).

In this regard it needs to be noted that support that families and parents can and are willing to provide varies enormously. This has implications for how we can best describe ‘vulnerability’ as a stable or as a changing policy category and how to respond appropriately to young people and their families who fit that category. The uneven spread in terms of the capacities of parents, families and informal networks to provide support various enormously. We refer also to the growing private costs associated with children and young people also has implications for families and parents to provide the basic staples (Mizen 2004, Bessant 2009)

If there is to be a serious and considered policy response to the specific factors that leave some young people open to hurt we need clearer empirical and conceptual understanding of the problems which some young Victorians face. In short, a more precise and descriptive account of the policy problems that the policy and program interventions are intended to address is needed.

This will require greater clarity and precision in identifying the problems with existing youth services and certainly more than fleeting reference to the KPMG Report, and ambiguous references to professional standards.

Clear policy questions need to be asked - like: how youth services and relevant institutions can be strengthened to help meet the needs of vulnerable young people? and also how can young people be supported so they themselves can be an active role in ensuring they lead healthy and full lives?

In its current form the framework focuses on improved coordination and integration of currently available services. This is not enough, nor does it address the problems. It argued for improved coordination between services which has become a standard time honoured policy response. We suggest it for a change in the policy language that moves a way from framing the problem in terms of a lack of co-ordination.

The KPMG report Improving Youth Service Responses In Victoria (2007) identifies the absence of generalist youth services in Victoria as a problem. (Something originally signaled in the YACVic and VCOSS report Who’s Carrying the Can? – a precursor to the KPMG report) It is not clear in Vulnerable report how that will be addressed.

A recommendation in the Who’s Carrying the Can? was to invest in services. We note that the issue of adequate resourcing is recognized as a problem in the Vulnerable Youth Discussion Paper’

We recommend an Investment in generalist youth services and that that be given priority by the State Government.
4. Paying attention to the voice of young people: setting the policy agenda

Understanding and describing the policy problem is critical if solutions are to be developed that will be able to address those problems. Over the last decade, the idea of youth participation has been given prominence in government discussions and has become part of the contemporary political talk in Australia and most western societies. The vulnerable youth framework itself refers to the importance of young participation and consultation.

Given this we are very surprised and disappointed to see no evidence of consultation with young people in the development of this discussion paper.

The participation of young people matters because it allows policy makers the opportunity to access the meanings young people who are vulnerable and who use government and agency services give to those experience of the conditions in which they live. There may also be evidence that young people use a various strategies to secure what they need. ‘Outsiders accounts cannot deliver in this regard.

Involving young people not only benefits policy-making and outcomes because it provides information needed to know about the problem in ways that allow for the development of intervention that actually alleviate the problems, it is also important for reasons that relate to the right to participation in decisions that directly effect you.

Needless to say young people, particularly those deemed vulnerable need to be enabled to achieve this right.

5. Recent policy regime changes: social impact of policy

There is a strong case to be made that many of the problems which some young people now experience are a consequence of major shifts in social and public policy over the past few decades (Pusey 1991; Mendes 2008). Drawing on Esping-Anderson’s (2004) work on policy regimes we can point to a strengthening of economic liberal themes, motives and vocabulary in Australia’s political and policy-making communities in the 1970’s and 1980s (Pusey 1991). As many critics observed this had a devastating impact on the capacity and willingness to provide civic staples such as decent and publicly available education, health and welfare system – and a strong labor market and a relatively equitable distribution of income. The emergent policy consensus in Australia hosted a rapid increase in the number of new agencies and institutions with a brief to mimic private sector practices and to promote ‘new’ values like the ‘user pays’ principle.

Being reflexive about the current policy context would point to the scale and complexity of the transformative process that has taken place in respect to young people. Some recognition of the current socio-legal and political context and the changes that have taken over the past 25 years would assist policy makers to acknowledge the altered status of children, adolescents and adults. We refer for example to fundamental changes in the youth and general labour market, the impact of immigration on the demographic and cultural shape of the society, the state of family life, the physical shape of cities all of which have altered the very experience of being young and the ‘project’ of assuming adult status.

The consolidation of a neo-liberal policy framework failed to equip or support young people to respond effectively to the larger even global transformations taking place in the labor market and the economy. Policy makers failed to equip young people and their families to ‘manage’ or ‘negotiate’ as ‘individuals’ other significant seismic transformations taking place in family structures and the labour market. In short, at precisely that time in Australian history when young people required policies and social institutions that supported and protected them from the negative effect of major socio-economic changes taking place, those resources were steadily withdrawn. It is also worth noting how this had a compounding effect given that Australians aged 12 to 25, (like young people globally), are also disproportionately affected by poverty, housing crisis (homelessness), poor health (ABS 2008, AIH&W 2007).

Despite the popular assumption that young people can and ought to transit into adulthood in their late teens to mid 20s, the social context has changed in ways that mean attaining the traditional markers of adulthood (ie., independent living, employment, income etc) are now out of the reach of many by that age. We refer to changes based not only on the emergence of new social
sensibility, but also significant alterations that have occurred in respect to key modern institutions like education, training, the emergence of a precarious labour market, access to affordable housing etc. This is well documented in the literature, is missing from the ‘Vulnerable Report’ (ie., Settersten et.al 2005). It also sits incongruously with claims in the Vulnerable Report that: ‘Evidence shows that young people are entering adulthood younger...’ (p. 11)

The point of these observations about the effect of policy regimes can be made when we turn to certain omissions in the Discussion Paper.


The Discussion Paper fails to address or acknowledge serious deficiencies in current policies and programs like Victoria’s child protection system in its various forms- (foster care, residential care, kinship care, contingency care and permanent care), the youth justice system or the schooling system allowing again the impression to go unchallenged that the only problem are the deficiencies of young people. The numbers of outstanding child protection notifications is too high. Follow up notifications take on average one to two month, cases are often closed without full and proper investigation if its deemed the young person’s life is not in danger. Case work load are excessive (up to 40 to 60). We suggest they should be on average 8 – depending on the complexity of the cases. We have heard reports of staff not being paid overtime. These factors partially explain why staff turn over is so high and why the government is paying large amounts of money to relocate workers and their families from the UK to fill DHS positions).

Rather than address youth justice, schools and child protection we limit our response to the later to illustrate the point.

It is fair to say there is now a wide spread recognition that child protection in Victoria is not working well. In respect to Out of Home Care urgent attention needs to be given to quality and capacity of service providers against the numbers of children and young people in care, and their experiences and the typically complex nature of their needs. We are talking about a particularly vulnerable group which by December 2007 involved 5,422 young Victorians most of whom were aged between 5 and 14 years of age.

We note also the room for improvement in respect to interventions for older young people (16 to 18) as well as the provision of adequate support once a young person is old enough to leave state care.

We ask whether the government has aspirations or ideas about developing a long term strategy that will better support and meet the needs of children and young people who have been removed from their parents by statutory protection services for reasons that relate to abuse and neglect? It is our view that the Budget of $134m. for 2007/08 for out of care services was inadequate.

It is our view that Victoria is in urgent need of a full review and major reform of the state’s child protection system and that this should be identified as an urgent and major problem in a government report on vulnerable young people. In terms of resources, these are inadequate for meeting basic placement demands, or to provide proper residential care services or the meet the needs of care providers. There are also insufficient resources to reimburse liabilities for care givers and to establish a viable and effective kinship care support system.

Beyond resources attention also needs to be given to operational issues like:

- Staffing. We now face a major shortage in this area. So much so that significant outlays are being made to import workers from other countries. This is a shame given the capacity of our own workforces - and youth workers in particular - to deliver quality care if we had an effective and truly caring system. The high turn over of staff in child protection also reflects the detrimental nature of the workplace on workers.
- ensuring there is clarity in respect to priority outcomes,
- what therapeutic care models are most suited for the young people concerned (and so we have staff trained to deliver such services)

Adequate funding in conjunction with quality professional training for youth workers and allied workers and support for carers is one way of securing the best interest of this highly vulnerable group. This is so not only in terms of securing opportunities to enhance their development, but
also to reduce the unacceptable numbers of ‘critical incidents’ that are now occurring in domains such as residential care. We refer to the current unacceptable levels of self harm, suicide attempts, child prostitution, substance abuse, sexual and other physical assaults, and missing person incident reports.

We also consider it an indictment of our system that service providers have to resort to contingent care (ie., hotels and caravan parks) to accommodate young people who are clearly in need of proper care and support.

If we are serious about supporting vulnerable young Victorians then this issue ought to be in the report.

7. A Human Rights Based Approach?

The absence of any reference in the Discussion Paper to a conceptually and ethically comprehensive framework provided by the new Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities (2006) is also extremely disappointing.

The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities provides the basis of a ready made framework and one which has the full backing of the Victorian government able to inform a transformative approach to children and young people. It is noteworthy that the Norwegian government avails itself of this rights based framework by embedding the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) into its domestic legislation. There is a very good case for Victoria to adopt this approach; it is because rights and obligations is fundamental to both the well-being of young people, and the task of professional standing).

We observe also how good youth policy begins by acknowledging the question of power differences, and the moral status of young people as human beings with full human rights entitlements. As we argue in this response, achieving this is not a simple task because it means recognizing and successfully challenging aged based prejudices that young people are subject to. We refer for example to stereotypes that ‘they’ are risk takers, ethically and intellectually incompetent, incomplete adults and for those reasons should not exercise basic rights. We argue that a fiduciary duty towards young people exists which obligate older people to act in ways that help secure young peoples rights, and that this is a duty of care.

A rights-based approach to youth services in Victoria matters because it helps remedy vulnerability. A rights based approach helps focus attention on the resources young people need to protect themselves, rather than relying exclusively or in large part on others protecting them.

The extent to which a young person is disadvantaged, vulnerable, weak or marginalised, influences their likelihood of being subject to exploitation, abuse, neglect etc. Vulnerability due to age, status, experience etc relates to the fact that many young people lack the knowledge, socio-economic and legal resources necessary to protect themselves.

One way vulnerability/risks/harm a young person experiences can be reduced is by respecting their full human rights and citizenship. If young people have clearly specified rights identified eg., in a Bill of rights like Victoria's Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities (2006) they will have their rights respected which will means that young people themselves will be in a better position to protect themselves. They will also be protected by those right by virtue of the fact that negative right like the right to be free from abuse and positive right like the right to safe and secure accommodation will go some way towards preventing them from becoming vulnerable in terms of exploitation, abuse and neglect.

We would also like to see a more formative approach adopted by relevant state departments and agencies to legislation affecting young people. According to the Victorian Charter, Bills before the House need to be vetted to ensure they are compliant with the Charter and will need to be accompanied by a ‘Statement of Compatibility’ issued by the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee. One way of getting a measure of our capacity to secure young peoples well being by safeguarding their rights would to know what our record in this regard is. Research on this matter by the Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and by the Australian Center for Human Rights Education at RMIT on this matter suggests that current prejudices about young people are simply embedding discriminatory attitudes and judgements into this vetting for
compliance rather than transforming the treatment of young people by acknowledging their human rights.

Section 44 of the Charter requires the Attorney-General to review the Charter in 2011. This review has some promise of enlarging the breadth of rights covered in the charter and thereby improving our capacity to prevent age-based discrimination and promote more inclusive relationships in our community.

A human rights based framework would also draw attention to the adequacy of Centrelink income and allowances and the youth wage. For the young people who pass the harsh eligibility requirements for youth allowance they receive a paltry $177.70 per week, a sum that cannot cover the basics to support a most adequate standard of living. (We note also the eligibility criteria itself problematic because it assumes parental support etc which is simply not available for many young people). We note also that Article 26 and 27 of the UNROC stipulate the right to adequate social security benefits and an adequate standard of living.

Having said that, we also recognise that simply appealing to human rights is not enough. This is partly because while rights **obligate they do not specify who has the obligation to recognise and promote the right**. Given this, we argue that the accompanying obligations need to be articulated in tandem with young people’s rights. this we suggest will help prevent moral failures lack of clarity about resources and action in respect to relations between government, professionals, other adults and young people. As O’Neill observed, clarity about our obligations is required because it acknowledges that obligations are owed by adults to all young people and can help make clear where specific obligations lie (O’Neill, 1989).

A focus on the basic rights of a vulnerable young person that includes basic rights like the rights to safe and secure accommodation, an education, significant relationships such as family, identity is one sure way of securing their well being and acting in their interest. Such a focus requires more than the articulation of those rights, it also requires a commitment to provide service and professional practice that ensures the realisation of those rights. If vulnerable young people are able to enjoy the right to secure accommodation, basic income, nutrition etc then it is highly likely that they will become less vulnerable. This certainly would be the case in respect to homeless young people, those subject to abuse/family violence etc.

**8. Enhancing Young People’s Capacity to Help and Protect Themselves**

Most of the mainstream literature on adolescence and youth continues to be framed by biomedical models and assumptions and to a lesser extent by a modernist social science framework which operate of structuralist premises.

These two interpretive traditions privilege a ‘naturalist’ disposition which treats young people as inherently defective. Theoretical or empirical narratives on themes like vulnerability, risk or neglect overlook the effects of these discursive frames about ‘adolescence” or ‘youth’ on the subjectivities of young people themselves and **how these work to weaken a young person’s capacity to protect themselves.** What we are suggesting here is that young people –like all people- take on aspects of the narratives that are told of them and in this way internalise accounts of them as weak, dependent and incompetent in a number of domains when in fact that may bote be the case if they are afforded opportunities and support to see themselves and to act in ways that demonstrate their capacities and inform a self identity as one who is confident enough to play a stronger role in helping to protect themselves.

There is value in explicitly recognising the interplay of power and interests operating in the dominant narratives about adolescence, which form the content of relevant medical and social scientific disciplines and allied professions.

There is also value in considering the proposition that some young people are vulnerable because for so long they have been positioned that way by adults who have interest in securing the status quo. Sometimes that interest in power is expressed in exploitative and abusive practices sometimes it is expressed as paternalist and well-intentioned interventions which nevertheless re-enact the condition of vulnerability.
To overcome the problems that arise when a group is relatively disadvantaged by lack of access to various resources measures are needed that secure their rights and critical processes that identify and challenge ageist assumptions and practices. To be effective this needs a well articulated set of citizenship and other human rights which include social economic and cultural rights buttressed by genuine commitments to secure these rights.

One additional measure that will ensure that the risks/harms/vulnerabilities some young people may experience might be reduced is to establish reporting procedures that take their complaints seriously, that are respectful of young people, and are not intimidating. Currently complaints procedures in key institutions and youth agencies such as schools, universities, youth justice, the police, child protection, children’s hospital do not meet these criteria.

9. Missing Focus: strengthening Workforce Capability and Professionalisation

One way to strengthen the Discussion Paper is to consider the transformative role played by a capable and professional workforce. As Grabosky (1989) argued nearly twenty years ago professional training, regulation and effective governance is a precondition for quality service delivery. This point is high lighted if we consider the revelations of abuse and neglect at the hands of carers in government supported and funded agencies (see for example, Coldrey 1993; Stokes 1994; Wood Commission 1997; Commission of Inquiry 1999). One essential precondition for improving the quality of youth services is the progressive professionalisation of the sector. Providing effective and competent professional practice is the essential foundation on which high quality youth services can be built.

Youth workers are trained to practice specifically with young people (12-25), yet they receive fleeting mention at best in the report. Given that youth work graduates have the knowledge base and skill base required to meet the specific needs of young people in all their diversity, it seems logical that consideration be given to their role in securing the well being of vulnerable young Victorians.

The education and training of youth workers and related skills shortages are critical for the delivery of effective services and yet that issue is largely overlooked in the Discussion Paper. So too is the role of effective leadership and supervision in the sector. Competent leadership at executive, senior and middle management levels along with clearly defined accountability mechanisms are critical for building and maintaining a capable workforce and quality service delivery.

Given the research the has recently been commissioned about skill shortages in this area we are somewhat surprised by this omission (eg., Precision et.al 2007, ACOSS 2007).

We recommend that consideration be given to the implementation of legislation akin to the Education and Training Reform Act 2006 requires that all teachers register with the Victorian Institute of Teaching (The Institute) before they can be employed in any Victorian school. We recommend there be similar requirements in respect to professional youth workers in the state of Victoria.
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That further work be carried out to clarify the empirical and conceptual basis of the category of 'vulnerable young people' that helps to identify specific sources of economic, social, political, cultural, medical or legal vulnerabilities but does so without relying on essentialist or damaging stereotypes of young people.

2. That in developing any framework of policy for young people that serious and sustained deliberative consultation with young people inform all such processes. We observe the right of young people to participate in policy making they have a direct interest in. We recommend that this be done in ways that are supportive and that enable them to exercise the right to participate.

3. That in assessing the relevance and quality of social and public policy for young people agencies undertake a rigorous and reflexive assessment of the positive and adverse social impacts of such policies using an explicit framework of human rights based and ethical criteria.

4. We recommend adequate Investment in generalist youth services and that that be given priority by the State Government.

5. That relevant state departments and community service organisations adopt a more formative and/or transformative approach to recognising and promoting the human rights of young people when assessing the compliance of new legislation affecting young people with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities, and that the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee of Parliament adopt a non age-based discriminatory framework when assessing legislation.

6. That in developing a policy framework for children and young people, the Victorian Government give consideration to embedding UNCROC into domestic legislation.

7. That urgent attention be directed to addressing the most serious problems with the current child protection system.

8. That consideration be given to the transformative role played by a capable and professional workforce. Specifically we recommend the implementation of legislation requiring that youth workers to register with a state body or professional association before being employed as a youth worker in the state of Victoria.
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