

A Framework for Young People's Recovery from COVID-19 in Western Australia:



Creating a new normal.

August 2020 Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia

Acknowledgement of Country.

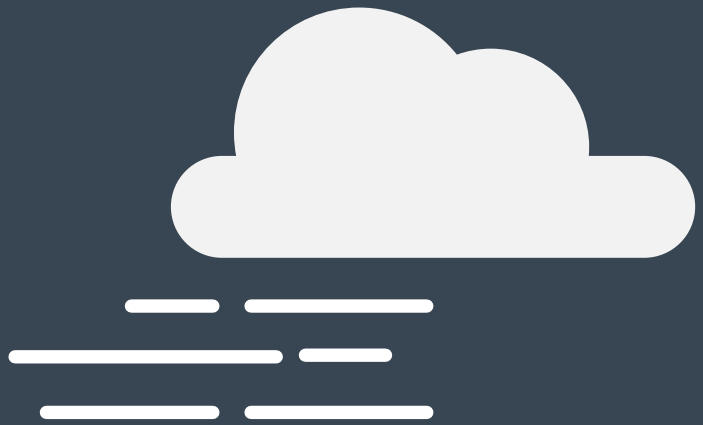
YACWA acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Custodians of this land and its waters. We wish to pay our respect to Elders past and present and extend this to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people seeing this message.

Reading this framework.

This framework, developed in August 2020, is focused on Western Australia's recovery and rebuilding from COVID-19's outbreak. As such, it assumes a continued trajectory towards COVID-19 elimination in Western Australia, and does not account for a second wave of community transmission.

This is intended to provide guidance for the State Government to address immediate wellbeing needs of young people, and prevent long-term consequences from COVID-19's outbreak in an environment where youth services, government support, and workplaces are able to operate without restrictions.

YACWA recommends this framework be read in conjunction with YACWA's State Budget Positioning Paper 2019-20, which contains recommendations for our State Government's upcoming budget to address inequality and support the wellbeing and rights of young people in Western Australia. Many of these recommendations remain relevant in our State's future, and are vital for the wellbeing of young people.



Contributors.

This document would not have been possible without the contributions of young people, who provided their time, expertise and passion to develop a recovery plan to benefit all young people.

In particular, we'd like to thank the members of YACWA's affiliated youth advocacy networks, with special mention to YACWA's COVID-19 Youth Steering Group:

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A message from young people.

During Western Australia's period of social isolation, it was easy to let the mind wander to questions of the unknown and thoughts of the future. Job loss, economic instability, poverty, poor mental health, social disconnection, education disruption, and loss of services during COVID-19 will have a monumental and disproportionate impact on young people for decades. It is difficult, when considering this, to think of a future where we as young people will be able to truly prosper.

However, COVID-19 did not cause many of the issues young people face, but rather unveiled and exacerbated issues that already existed. Young people have felt disillusioned and disregarded for a long time.

Thus, when considering "recovery" from COVID-19, we feel it is vital that we do not return to what was. Young people, especially those who are more vulnerable to discrimination or disadvantage, were not served by Western Australia's previous system.

Under/unemployment, poverty, stagnant wages, unequal education opportunities, psychological distress, homelessness and housing insecurity, environmental degradation and climate change, discrimination, and many other issues have burdened young people in Western Australia's past. These pre-existing issues need to be actively tackled when considering Western Australia's future.

Western Australia must strive for transformative change, where the diverse and multi-faceted concerns and perspectives of young people are continuously addressed in formal processes and legislation. New hardship directly caused by COVID-19 must be addressed, but the system that caused pre-existing disadvantage must be addressed too.

Particularly, young people need to be consulted and given meaningful opportunities to co-design a future for Western Australia, where the inequity and disadvantage faced by vulnerable young people are not perpetuated and young people are not left behind once more.

COVID-19 has severely disrupted the lives and livelihoods of Western Australians, especially young people and young people facing pre-existing disadvantage. If we work together, we have an opportunity to rebuild WA to create a more equitable and prosperous future for us all.

YACWA's COVID-19 Youth Steering Group

Summary of Recommendations

Pillar 1: Capacity Building & Social Support

Growing the youth sector to meet present and future need

What	Lead Agency
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conduct an analysis of the youth sector workforce needs, including size and skills, to provide an evidence-based model of growth over the coming years in order to ensure frontline supports have capacity to meet young people's needs.	Lead Agency: Department of Communities or Department of Training & Workforce Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide a rapid, flexible small grant program to youth services to enable rapid pivoting of service provision to meet emerging needs of young people	Lead Agency: Department of Communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide additional investment into frontline employment and financial counselling services for young people to support them to navigate a radically changed workforce and economy. This should focus on skills development and strengths-based approaches.	Lead Agency: Department of Communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase community mental health prevention spending to 5% of total mental health investment, in line with the Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drugs Services Plan.	Lead Agency: Mental Health Commission
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase access for young people to non-clinical community mental health supports, in line with the Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drugs Services Plan.	Lead Agency: Mental Health Commission
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fund dedicated youth peer support programs for LGBTIQ+ young people, young people from refugee and/or migrant backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and young people living with a disability.	Lead Agency: Mental Health Commission or Department of Communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure the proposed Mental Health Young People Priority Framework is co-designed with young people and addresses both their needs outlined in the Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drugs Services Plan and the pillars and other recommendations in this Recovery Framework.	Lead Agency: Mental Health Commission

Summary of Recommendations

Expanding hardship supports and measures to prevent poverty until wider community recovery occurs

- **Expand and extend debt relief & amnesty programs** to support young people to avoid poverty and hardship, such as the Residential Rent Relief Grant Scheme.

Lead Agency:
Department of Communities
Communities &
Department of Mines,
Industry Regulation and
Safety

- **Extend the Moratorium on Evictions in Western Australia** by a minimum of four months.

Lead Agency:
Department of Mines,
Industry Regulation and
Safety

Advocating through National Cabinet for major reform to Federal employment supports

- Advocate via the National Cabinet to **immediately extend the Coronavirus Supplement payment and JobKeeper** in light of the emerging second wave in other parts of Australia threatening to extend the economic impacts of COVID-19.

Lead Agency:
Department of Premier &
Cabinet

- Advocate via the National Cabinet to **permanently raise the JobSeeker** payment to the level of the Coronavirus Supplement.

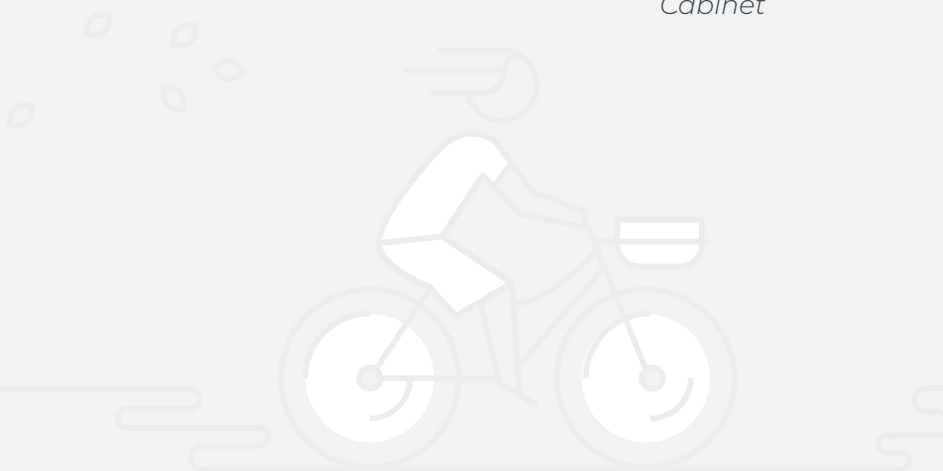
Lead Agency:
Department of Premier &
Cabinet

- Advocate via the National Cabinet to **abolish mutual-obligations requirements and implement recommendations of the Newstart Inquiry.**

Lead Agency:
Department of Premier &
Cabinet

- Advocate via the National Cabinet to **increase the Disability Support Pension in line with increases to JobSeeker.**

Lead Agency:
Department of Premier &
Cabinet



Breaking the cycle of youth homelessness

- **Invest in a Housing First for Youth model** that is specifically designed for young people aged 16-25, aligns with broader Housing First Homelessness initiatives, and enables access to/ integrates wrap around supports such as mental health, AOD and employment and education pathways.

Lead Agency:
*Department of
Communities*

- **Invest in the Embedded Youth Outreach Program;** formalising a partnership between the State Government, youth services and community leaders across the state to effectively engage street present and at-risk young people.

Lead Agency:
*Department of
Communities or
Department of Justice*

- **Ensure direct infrastructure investment has a focus on the construction of additional social housing dwellings** in Western Australia, aligned to meet needs identified by the Department of Communities modelling.

Lead Agency:
*Department of
Communities*

Investing in the wellbeing of refugee, migrant and multicultural young people and families

- **Develop targeted engagement and communication strategies** for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and their families to increase access to information about social supports in culturally appropriate ways, including multiple languages and offline engagement.

Lead Agency: *Office of
Multicultural Interests
(with whole-of-
government).*

- **Provide additional financial relief** for refugee, migrant and international students, recognising the poverty and hardship that has emerged following from COVID-19.

Lead Agency:
*Department of
Communities*

- **Invest in community-led programs to support migrant and refugee young people** to enter into long-term employment, develop skills, receive career mentoring, and address unconscious bias within employers.

Lead Agency:
*Department of
Communities*

- **Invest in a community-led youth employment programs** to support migrant and refugee young people to reduce the barriers and enter into long-term employment.

Lead Agency:
*Department of
Communities*

Summary of Recommendations

- **Invest in training for primary care and frontline services providers** to understand and combat institutional discrimination and racism, and improve the care and support they provide to young people experiencing these.
Lead Agency: Department of Communities
- **Develop targeted anti-racism campaigns within Western Australia**, focused on healing and addressing structural barriers within society.
Lead Agency: Office of Multicultural Interests

Pillar 2: Job Creation & Industry Development

Supporting the newly jobless to return to work quickly

What	Lead Agency
• Provide financial incentives for local businesses to immediately employ young workers within the hospitality, retail, and the creative and arts industries.	<i>Lead Agency: Department of Training & Workforce Development</i>
• Implement a youth job creation quota in the public sector workforce and in public procurement processes , ensuring State Government activity directly results in the employment and/or training of local young people.	<i>Lead Agency: Public Sector Commission</i>
• Expand the implementation of individual placement and support (IPS) models of supported employment in all regions of Western Australia.	<i>Lead Agency: Department of Training & Workforce Development</i>

Strategically rebuilding the youth labour market

- **Develop a ten-year Western Australian Youth Jobs Strategy** with the end-goal of full employment in Western Australia. This should be complemented by robust investment to grow industries and employment opportunities in the medium and long-term.
Lead Agency: Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation
- **Invest in growth industries and the renewable energy sector** to provide young people long-term employment opportunities.
Lead Agency: Department of Mines, Industry Regulations and Safety

Summary of Recommendations



Directing industry investment to support social purpose

- **Provide grants or subsidies to support people living with a disability to make modifications to their homes.** A grants or subsidy scheme could provide a significant stimulus to the construction sector, while supporting individuals with a disability to participate in their community and employment.

Lead Agency:
Department of
Communities

- **Direct infrastructure investment to focus on the construction of additional social housing dwellings** in Western Australia, aligned to meet needs identified by Department of Communities modelling highlighting the need for more than 30,000 additional affordable dwellings.

Lead Agency:
Department of
Communities

- **Invest in the community and youth sector to increase job opportunities in the care economy** to meet growth needs already identified by the State Government, such as community mental health initiatives, aged care, disability care, early childhood education, and the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation sectors. With a targeted strategy to increase young employment in the community and youth sector, this will provide employment pathways for young people, including in peer work roles.

Lead Agency:
Department of
Communities

Pillar 3: Job Creation & Industry Development

Aligning education pathways for young people with immediate and future needs

What

Lead Agency

- **Expand the Lower Fees, Local Skills initiative** ensuring TAFE courses to young people in priority and growth industries are fee-free – including renewable energy, Metronet, and the care economy.

Lead Agency:
Department of
Training and Workforce
Development

- **Implement an ‘apprenticeship guarantee’ within priority TAFE streams**, guaranteeing young people roles in high-demand and highly-impacted industries by subsidising apprenticeship fees and training costs.

Lead Agency:
Department of
Training and Workforce
Development

Summary of Recommendations

Reforming our education system to reflect our needs

- **Develop an Inclusive Education Strategy**, with focus on investment to bridge the gap in educational support and outcomes for vulnerable students and those living in areas with the highest educational disadvantage, particularly for young people with disability, young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and young people living in poverty.

Lead Agency:
Department of Education

- Provide additional resources to all public schools to **ensure all students with a disability receive inclusive, individualised support in their education.**

Lead Agency:
Department of Education

- **Ensure access to tutoring and educational resources for young people living in poverty** to respond to the gap in education outcomes created by COVID-19.

Lead Agency:
Department of Education

- **Commit to a statewide digital infrastructure upgrade to ensure schools, communities and young people** have access to technology for digital/remote learning, as part of the *Digital Inclusion in WA Blueprint*.

Lead Agency: *Office of Digital Government and Department of Education*

Investing in regional opportunities and infrastructure to improve participation

- **Fund regional youth advocacy initiatives**, such as the Regional Youth Leadership Development program, supporting regional young people's needs and desires to be heard by decision-makers and local services.

Lead Agency:
Department of Communities

- **Invest in regional telecommunications infrastructure** (in partnership with the Federal Government) to ensure every young person in regional Western Australia has access to reliable and stable phone and internet services.

Lead Agency:
Department of Premier and Cabinet and Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development

- **Expand regional public transportation options, connecting smaller** communities with regional hubs and training and education opportunities.

Lead Agency: *Public Transport Authority*

- **Increase investment in regional arts and entertainment opportunities** and development, focusing on growing local talent.

Lead Agency:
Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries

WHERE ARE WE NOW?



COVID-19 has not created new inequality – it has exposed and compounded pre-existing inequalities within Western Australia.

This section explores how young Western Australians have been impacted by COVID-19, placing the increased hardship in context with pre-COVID levels of disadvantage. It is critical to consider both pre-existing hardship and emerging hardship to ensure our responses do not leave any young people behind and further entrench poverty and barriers to wellbeing.

In preparing this document, YACWA engaged in a series of conversations with young people. These conversations enabled young people to speak in-depth about the impacts of COVID-19 and the pandemic across a diversity of backgrounds, and to shape the direction of our recovery.

Those consulted were:


- **Young people with disability** (in partnership with the Youth Disability Advocacy Network).
- **LGBTIQ+ Young people** (in partnership with the Youth Pride Network).
- **Migrant and refugee young people and those with migrant and refugee backgrounds** (in partnership with the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network of WA).

- **Regional Young people** (in partnership with the Regional Youth Leadership Development group).
- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people** (in partnership with the Aboriginal Health Council of WA).
- **Young people with lived experience of homelessness** (in partnership with the Youth Homelessness Advisory Council).

Young people facing additional barriers and discrimination from COVID-19

There are unique cohorts of young people for whom COVID-19 had unique impacts, and therefore require individualised responses. Not all young people experienced COVID-19 in the same manner, with the effects of class, race, mental health, housing and trauma all affecting their experiences.

These different experiences were not necessarily shaped by their identity as a specific cohort, but by social, legal, cultural, or political discrimination. Many groups of young people did not receive the same access to support as the general population, or pre-existing disadvantage heightened the effects of lockdown. We now see unique needs emerging among different groups of young people, even as we move further out of crisis restrictions.



Our consultation has identified the following groups of young people as being particularly impacted by COVID-19 and requiring dedicated responses going forward to support their wellbeing and equitable outcomes:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people
- LGBTIQ+ young people
- Young people living in regional and remote areas
- Young people living with a disability/ disabled young people
- Young people with experience of homelessness/housing instability
- Young people in the care system
- Young people from refugee and/or migrant backgrounds
- Temporary visa holders (including international students) not covered by social support payments and/or experiencing reduced income.
- Young people with mental health challenges

It is critical that the lived experience of these groups of young people are enshrined in our recovery process, and that initiatives are responsive to their needs and priorities for support. A response to COVID-19 for young people must be as diverse as young people themselves, and recognise the intersectionality between populations and experiences.

Employment



KEY FACTS

- **The youth underutilisation rate in Australia is the highest it has been since the Great Depression, at approximately 60%.¹**
- **National youth unemployment is predicted to escalate to around 30% for young people in their 20s, and 40% for young people aged 15-19 in the next six months.²**

Western Australia faced a youth unemployment crisis prior to COVID-19, with young people's experiences of employment characterised by instability and growing casualisation of work arrangements. In 2017, more than half of all young people aged 15-24 were employed on a casual basis, far exceeding any other age cohort.³

Government lockdown requirements during the pandemic hit industries that traditionally employ large amounts of young people – the arts, retail and hospitality sectors – and in casual and part-time based work. During April 2020, when the outbreak was at its peak, 23% of all jobs lost in Western Australia affected 15-19 year olds.⁴ With increasing casualisation among young workers, this left many with limited options for recourse, and less security in their income.

Historical views of past economic recessions make it clear that young people are often the last to recover from the economic downturn. Environments of high unemployment do not favour young people with limited work experience and developing skills, and drastically reduce the supply of entry-level roles that are vital to gaining this experience. Following the Global Financial Crisis we still see long term deficiencies in employment and economic opportunities for young people and lifelong lower wages. Sadly, this recession is discriminating, affecting young women, young people of colour, and young people with low educational attainment disproportionately. Young people have been the victim of a working landscape that has failed to safeguard their rights and security of income and employment.⁵

From our conversations with young people, job losses have had devastating impacts for many people's wellbeing, with individual job losses and those of their family members both having profound impacts. A pervasive feeling of fear, vulnerability, and hopelessness has been reported among young people we have engaged.

The pandemic highlighted the disparity between those who were eligible for financial support and those who were not. In particular, young people receiving the Disability Support Pension saw no rise in their payments (despite rising costs) and those on temporary visas were not eligible for many forms of income support. For those who already faced systemic employment barriers, for example Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and young people with disability, this was made worse.

Fewer employment opportunities combined with high unemployment creates a risk of 'career scarring' – a situation where those attempting to enter the workforce during a recession face an increased inability to do so, as well as life-long reduced income and standards of living. This is a cumulative structural effect and cannot be mitigated by individual factors such as self-esteem, motivation, or extrinsic work values, and relies on job market mechanisms and supports to address.⁶ With higher unemployment and fewer job opportunities, the market is unlikely to favour young people with limited career experience and employment history.



Superannuation of young Western Australians has also taken a profound hit. By 5 July 2020, more than 2.7 million Australians have applied to access their superannuation early⁷. Approximately 455,400 young people aged 30 and under had accessed their superannuation early by May 2020⁸ and some experts have estimated individuals will possibly have \$100,000 less in retirement as a result of compound interest loss. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and workers (particularly women), this is not a new issue. Many of these workers have seen significantly lower superannuation balances than the general population – a result of structural racism and discrimination in employment, among other factors resulting in income instability.⁹

It is vital that we support young people to return to work as early as possible to assist them to recoup these losses. Similarly, it must be noted here that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians face markedly poorer superannuation balances at retirement compared to the general population¹⁰, and will require policy shifts and an interventionist approach to close this gap.

Mental Health & Wellbeing



KEY FACTS

- **Young people have experienced the most significant increase in moderate and severe psychological distress of all age groups during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹**
- **Modelling suggests that the impacts of unemployment, social dislocation and mental health triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic could increase the rate of suicide by up to 25%, and that around 30% of these suicides would be young people.¹²**

In this unstable climate, young people in Western Australia are facing continued threats to their mental health and wellbeing. While COVID-19 restrictions are easing in Western Australia, the risk of dying by suicide and poor mental health remains high – unemployment, uncertainty for the future, trauma, social disconnection, and pervasive hopelessness are all risk factors for suicide that have been identified in numerous community consultations.

Sadly, our mental health system was already ill-equipped to respond to young people's mental health needs. The Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drug Services Plan, published in 2015, identified the need to grow prevention services and increase access to non-clinical and community supports. A dedicated youth stream was also stated as a requirement to meet needs, but remains unrealised. The recent announcement of a Young People Priority Framework may fill some of these gaps, and should follow the principles of recovery outlined in this paper.¹³

YACWA's COVID-19 Youth Survey, conducted in April 2020, found that 88% of all respondents were concerned about their mental health.¹⁴ While mental health was the chief concern for young people in YACWA's survey, this was closely followed by employment, with 78% of young people fearful for the global economy and job market, and linked these concerns to the decline in their overall wellbeing.¹⁵

The mental health of young people was impacted by a variety of factors, ranging from social isolation and the loss of employment, to fear of global uncertainty around the pandemic and their future. Lack of youth-friendly information from trusted sources, such as the government, compounded these fears, as did a lack of information in languages other than English being provided to communicate daily (or more frequently, still) updates on the emerging situation.

As youth services and mental health support shifted to telehealth and online engagement, many found this disruptive and that it did not work for all young people. Speaking about mental health over the phone was hindered by stigma, lack of a supportive home environment, or access to technology and the internet. Many young people reported delaying accessing services during the pandemic out of fear and inconvenience, and felt they had experienced greater harm as a result.

The costs of accessing mental health support also posed a barrier to many young people who were frightened about the potential loss of income during the pandemic, as did uncertainty of their eligibility for services. Accessing a Medicare rebate via a mental health care plan was perceived to already be complicated, and for some this was an insurmountable barrier while navigating the pandemic.



For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, COVID-19 disrupted cultural practices and community connections that support their wellbeing, particularly concerns for the wellbeing of elders and seeing family. This was particularly relevant to funeral ceremonies that occurred during lock down periods. Restrictions on travel impacted many young people in regional areas, or who would regularly travel to different communities and regions. The easing of restrictions has meant that many difficult experiences postponed during COVID-19 have recommenced in higher frequency – one Aboriginal young person noted they were attending one funeral a week, creating additional stress and hardship for them. Many mainstream and highly advertised mental health support services, such as Lifeline WA, were perceived as not culturally safe, and contributed to feelings of helplessness and isolation.

Many young people from East-Asian and Chinese backgrounds reported a marked rise in their experiences of racism during the pandemic, and linked these to isolation and worsened mental health. A survey by the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network of WA found that 29% of respondents experienced an increase in racism and discrimination during COVID-19.¹⁶ For many black and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, the occurrence of the Black Lives Matter movement during the pandemic also led to an increase

in racist comments and behaviour towards them. Our conversations with young people also found support for those experiencing racism were inadequate, with many services unequipped to have meaningful conversations about racism.

All groups reported the desire for greater connection with peers, facilitated by a sense of normalcy and purpose in the interaction, such as playing online video games or participating in a group activity. For some, the uptake of telehealth was a huge benefit and supported them to access services more readily. This was especially true for young people living with a disability, who also felt that an awareness had grown of their needs due to the pandemic.

Education



KEY FACTS

- **Educational gaps have widened amongst young people based on their socioeconomic backgrounds and location in Western Australia. Many young people have lost months of schooling progress as a result of remote education inequities.¹⁷**
- **Many young people reported having to put their higher education plans on hold during the COVID-19 Pandemic, but are now fearful for their prospects with poor employment opportunities to support their income while studying in the future.**

COVID-19 has highlighted the inequity inherent in the education system, as well revealing the breadth of the digital divide in Australia. During the pandemic, schools struggled to substitute in-school resources with online instruction. Distance learning measures adopted by schools were found to be unsustainable in low socio-economic areas with limited technology and internet access, as well as in schools with fewer staff and resources to support the radical shift in approach.

An educational divide that negatively affects our State's most vulnerable young people has been significantly exacerbated by COVID-19, with disadvantaged students further harmed by a rapid shift to remote learning and insufficient support to adapt. Differences in educational attendance through the pandemic were seen across socio-educational areas; in May 2020 across the state, high socio-educational schools had an on-site attendance rate of 95.0%, while low socio-educational schools had a lower rate of 80.1%.¹⁸ Similarly, schools in the North Metropolitan region had the highest on-site attendance rate (92.3%), while the lowest was seen in the Kimberley region (67.5%), suggesting profound inequities emerging across the state.¹⁹

Western Australian children and young people are some of the hardest hit by regional and remote disadvantage and therefore may not have access to the technology, resources and support needed to conduct remote learning. For some young people, this loss in learning will create significant long-term barriers for them to overcome as they move forward into higher education and employment, including potentially lower ATAR scores. Many young

people do not have access to the technology, resources and support needed to conduct remote learning; in 2018 about 87.9% of those living in major cities had internet access at home, 82.7% in inner regional, 80.7% in outer regional and 77.1% in remote areas.²⁰

Compounding this, economic downturns can also disproportionately harm disadvantaged students. They tend to have greater financial stress in the home, which can lead to problems in focusing on their education. During the COVID-19 crisis, where parents may have lost jobs or income, the student's home environment and therefore ability to learn is likely to have suffered.

Our conversations with young people highlighted this issue, with young people having diverse struggles with education. While some thrived in an online learning environment many struggled to stay engaged. In particular, those with English as a second language, those with distracting households, those with larger and multifaceted family structures, and those with limited technology and internet connection struggled. These issues were particularly prevalent in refugee and migrant households and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households. Young people who were also parents or carers struggled immensely with supporting those in their care to maintain engagement in education, while also adjusting working arrangements. Additionally, those in regional areas discussed the difficulties of their inadequate internet infrastructure, one participant mentioned whenever there was a storm forecast, they would have to cancel all meetings and classes planned due to the frequency of outages.

Housing and Homelessness



KEY FACTS

- Previous economic recessions in Western Australia have doubled the number of young people living in housing stress in the years following.²¹
- Referrals to homelessness services spiked early into the COVID-19 pandemic but decreased as service access pathways closed during the height of social distancing requirements.²²

It is critical that in tackling the broader issue of homelessness the unique needs of young people are taken into account. Prior to the pandemic, young people made up a significant proportion (21%) of the homeless population in Western Australia, despite those aged 15-24 only making up 12.6% of the overall population.²³ As of the 2016 census, there were 3,132 children and young people counted as homeless with 1,921 of those being aged 12-24. In 2017-18 young people aged 15-24 who presented alone made up 13% of clients assisted by specialist homelessness services in Western Australia.²⁴

These indicators of youth homelessness in Western Australia are pre-COVID-19 and it is likely that they are greatly worsened by the pandemic. While the health-related impacts of COVID-19 were fortunately well contained and relatively short-lived in Western Australia, the social and economic impacts are much more severe and will impact over the long-term; therefore require a more significant response. Barriers in accessing telehealth services, exposure to unsafe or unsupportive family environments, disconnection from peers and social supports, drastic reductions in job availability/security as well as uncertainty for the future have exacerbated many underlying issues and increased the severity of their support needs.

Many supports were put in place for vulnerable Australians during the height of the pandemic. These included:

- A state-based moratorium on evictions, preventing tenants from being evicted due to financial hardship.

- An increase to the Federal JobSeeker payment through the temporary Coronavirus Supplement Payment, lifting many out of poverty (albeit temporarily).
- Payments to businesses through the Federal Jobkeeper initiative, supporting many to remain in employment temporarily.

However, many of these supports are currently being reduced or scheduled to cease in October 2020, including a reduction to the JobSeeker supplement. This 'snapback' of financial support could see many under & unemployed young people at significantly increased risk of mental distress, rising debt, and homelessness.

This would lead to a drastic and rapid increase in demand for youth services that the sector could struggle to meet; Bed vacancies for youth crisis accommodation remain low in the metropolitan area, and in regional WA, whilst bed vacancies for youth crisis accommodation have increased since the low point seen in early April, they are still low in comparison to historical levels.²⁵ The impacts of COVID-19 have further highlighted the clear need for long-term solutions to rough sleeping and to reduce the strain on crisis/transitional accommodation. It has exposed a long-standing problem of housing options for young people exiting homelessness services or transitioning to independence.

Some youth homelessness services have noted an increased demand for crisis accommodation as young people who were couch surfing were not able to stay in overcrowded premises due to fears around COVID-19, resulting in an increase in street present young people.

New Poverty & Hardship



KEY FACTS

- **More than half of all individuals accessing at least one food pantry during COVID-19 were young people.**
- **Young people are highly mobile in their employment, which has left many ineligible for JobKeeper payments.**

COVID-19 has created new poverty, alongside exacerbating existing hardship. The supports provided during the crisis were not equally accessible, and resulted in many young people missing out.

Critical supports to prevent young people from entering poverty were the JobSeeker and JobKeeper schemes through the Federal Government. However, eligibility criteria for these payments disadvantaged young people disproportionately.

The mobility of young people resulted in many not meeting JobKeeper's 12-month prior employment eligibility criteria, resulting in significant rises to youth unemployment. Similarly, the Disability Support Pension was not subject to the Coronavirus Supplement Payment, resulting in disadvantage as many services essential for young people with disabilities ceased, or dramatically increased in price during social distancing requirements. Young people ineligible for social support payments, such as international students, faced widespread unemployment due to predominantly working part-time in the retail and hospitality sectors that faced heavy job losses. Many of these young people also saw reduced financial support from family during COVID-19 and were reliant on emergency relief to meet basic needs.

The exclusion of the Disability Support Pension from the Coronavirus supplement also created new hardship for young people living with a disability. Social distancing reduced

the availability of care workers and regular supports, with some increasing prices for these services while the Disability Support Pension remained unchanged. Being unable to access support services, such as scribes or regular workers with whom young people are familiar, impacted the ability of many to participate in their studies or go grocery shopping.

In our conversations with young people, the disparity between those who were eligible for social support and those who were not was glaringly apparent. Refugee and migrant families who were not eligible for employment benefits were particularly hard hit, as were young people in casual work who were not eligible for schemes like JobKeeper. The social safety net was difficult to navigate for the majority of young people and there were serious mental health implications for those without financial support and security. There were additional concerns about the long term implications for young people who had withdrawn from their superannuation early.

Additionally the digital divide has played a key role in exacerbating the effects of poverty during COVID-19; with only 46.7% of households in disadvantaged areas in Western Australia having access to the Internet²⁶. Inability to properly access the internet and other technologies can impact on a young person's ability to attend school, search for employment, apply for welfare support and access vital youth services. In this age of technological advancement the State Government must recognise digital connectivity as an essential service.

Youth Services Demand



KEY FACTS

- Youth services have experienced a shift in the needs of young people, with a spike in mental health referrals and concerns.
- Crisis lines and frontline supports are significantly over-capacity, with a 114% increase in unanswered web chats from Kids Helpline.²⁷

COVID-19's impact on young people has drastically changed the population's support needs and therefore the youth sector has been required to rapidly revise their service output, often with significant resource constraints. It is anticipated that, with a significant rise in youth unemployment and future reductions to the JobSeeker/Keeper payments, the youth sector will see greater demand for employment services, financial counselling, and provision of basic amenities. This has implications for youth services across the intervention spectrum. Denial of service due to capacity may exacerbate a young person's needs or present a missed opportunity for intervention, increasing their likelihood of requiring more costly intervention services.

Many frontline youth services were dealing with sustainability issues prior to the crisis, short-term contracting and insufficient resources left many poorly prepared for the increases in demand and costs of service delivery that resulted from COVID-19. Services such as outreach for young people experiencing homelessness are resource intensive and many are unfunded; meaning that due to the economic fallout from COVID-19 they may be unable to continue effective service delivery to match client need. As a result this could create significant service gaps that could have a devastating impact on the health and wellbeing of our state's most vulnerable young people.

Significant increases in demand must be matched by financial and resourcing relief as well as investment in training and development for the youth sector, to ensure they can continue to provide essential support to young people still reeling from the debilitating impacts of COVID-19.

From our conversations with young people and the youth sector, the nature of the pandemic meant that many young people disengaged from youth services, with some yet to re-engage. Particularly for those in regional and remote communities many services have still not begun re-engagement, putting additional stress on local community workers.

Over the coming months it will be more vital than ever for those young people to be re-engaged with those community spaces to prevent drastic increases in presentation for more acute services. Additionally, for some of those with disability who have been able to access services for the first time as they move online it is critical the sector retains the practices and options developed over COVID to remain accessible.

Principles of our State's Recovery Framework

The State's Recovery Plan and Framework must take a systems approach, examining and addressing the barriers, enablers and drivers of wellbeing and economic participation among our community. For young people, this must necessarily include critical investment in renewable energy, mental health, unemployment and education.

Responding to the economic and social impacts of COVID-19 is not an issue that can be solved by job creation measures alone. History and workforce modelling data shows that without targeted interventions and supports, young people will bear the brunt of long-term career scarring associated with a recession.²⁸

The below are **three essential principles** to ensure the success of our recovery.

1. Parity of health & social recovery with economic recovery

There is a moral imperative to support the wellbeing of Western Australians following a natural disaster such as the COVID-19 pandemic, but research increasingly supports the economic imperative to do so as well.

Economic participation and wellbeing are interdependent variables. For young people (who increasingly value the wellbeing of themselves, their families, and their communities above economic growth and outcomes), years of economic growth coupled with stagnant wage growth have resulted

in a strengthening of this interdependence between wellbeing and employment for young people.²⁹

To succeed in economic recovery, our response to end youth unemployment must operate in tandem with our health and wellbeing response. Young people struggling with basic needs, including their mental health, will have reduced capacity to successfully navigate a high-demand job market.

Our response must be holistic and address the exacerbated poverty and hardship of COVID-19 with equal priority to the economic impacts of the past four months. By investing in the wellbeing of young people, our response signals to young people that we genuinely care for their wellbeing and success.

We can achieve this by cross-government collaboration in the development of our recovery strategy, and aligning investment with the WA Youth Strategy, the At-Risk Youth Action Plan, and the Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drugs Services Plan will benefit a holistic approach to wellbeing that balances economic recovery with the social and wellbeing recovery that underpins it.

2. Designing in partnership with young people

Partnership with young people, and involving them meaningfully in solutions, is foundational to our recovery in Western Australia. Young people are the experts in their own experiences, and thus uniquely placed to identify barriers and enablers of success in our response.

Take the example of addressing youth unemployment – this is not just about the number of jobs created. These jobs must be fit-for-purpose and respond to the needs, desires, schedules, and long-term plans of young people in order to be sustainable. We have seen how this fails through mutual obligations requirements, and the failures of Work for the Dole to achieve long-term outcomes³⁰.

Investment in industries which do not meet young people's needs, skills or interests risks merely delaying the impact of the youth unemployment crisis through short-term outcomes followed by widespread attrition from those jobs. Investment that does not align with young people's values and hopes for the future of Western Australia – the arts and creative sectors, the care economy, and renewable energy for example – are likely to compound existing mental health concerns and widespread hopelessness and will therefore not be successful in the short or long term.

To realise the outcomes we seek from investment, our State's approach must affirm and respond to young people's hopes and dreams for their future. Long-term and sustainable careers must be the outcomes we seek from this recovery strategy and will assist in job retention among young people who see and feel value in the industries and roles they enter.

This value goes beyond job creation and industry development and should be reflected in the diversity of opportunities afforded to young people. Employment opportunities must be provided that allow young people to maintain their educational goals, family commitments, and community participation. Flexible, full-time, and part-time working arrangements must be grown in appropriate measures.

Similarly, we must invest in the industries that young people value and hope to see in their future. This includes the desire from young people for strong action on renewable energy & addressing climate change. Growing industries that will not exist, such as oil and natural gas, only further entrenches unsustainable employment pathways.

Instead, we must create sustainable employment outcomes for young people by investing in skills, industries, and pathways that will be required in our state's future. We can achieve this through meaningful and sustained co-design with young people, examining their priorities, their needs, and creating solutions that work for them.

'Young people must be partners in the decisions made about their futures.'



3. No young person left behind

Many young people faced significant hardship and disadvantage prior to COVID-19's outbreak in Western Australia. We have heard many times that **COVID-19 did not create inequality, but rather it exposed the inequality that already existed in our communities.**

COVID-19 has created a new wave of hardship, and much political and community focus is on addressing the newly-jobless, and preventing them from entering entrenched disadvantage.

However, those experiencing disadvantage prior to COVID-19 now face additional barriers to achieving positive outcomes. They must now compete for fewer resources and opportunities among a much larger population of individuals seeking support and employment. Similarly, it is these young people who will be most disadvantaged when the COVID crisis ceases, and the moratorium on evictions and the Coronavirus Supplement payments to JobSeeker and JobKeeper cease. Young people who were already vulnerable in terms of mental health are expected to be significantly more so.

It is critical that we respond early and thoroughly to support the newly disadvantaged, and reconnect young people with support, employment opportunities and education. However, our recovery strategy must also respond to those young people who have been further disadvantaged by COVID-19. These young people will otherwise face deeply entrenched disadvantage, with major costs to our community's wellbeing and our economic response.

4. Creating a new normal

Consultation with young people as part of this document felt a strong disconnect with COVID-19 recovery discourse, and many indicated they did not wish to 'return to normal'. While politicians spoke of resuming life as pre-COVID, the young people we spoke to strongly expressed that life pre-COVID was not a desirable outcome for them. Instead, they wished for a reframed Western Australia that had internalised the learnings from COVID-19, and retained the benefits we had implemented in our crisis response.

COVID-19 undoubtedly caused a great deal of harm to Western Australia and across the globe. It has directly caused a number of deaths, hardship, and uncertainty that we must work to prevent in future and heal from. This is undeniable in examining.

However, our collective response to COVID-19 has indeed created positive changes in our society and the way the public and not-for-profit sectors operate. We must work to retain these positive changes, and not cast them aside in favour of returning to the myth of 'normal'.

We have shifted our public transport services rapidly to meet the needs of essential workers and those on low income. We have normalised flexible working arrangements and online service access, greatly increasing participation and productivity for people living with a disability. We have reduced traffic congestion and made gains in sustainable living.

'We should not hope to return to our previous ways of working before COVID-19, but rather aim for a new normal, a society that is less damaging to those for whom 'normal' was not equitable or sustainable.'

Our Pillars of Recovery

In order to rebuild Western Australia in a way that works for young people, the State Government will need to take a strongly interventionist approach across the spectrum of risk and intervention. Economic stimulus and job-creation packages must be matched by the investment in frontline supports and community services that keep young people safe and well.

This natural disaster has been like no other. The economic shutdown occurred almost overnight, and continued for months with significant uncertainty as to when it would end. Meanwhile, many Western Australians experienced hardship beyond the economic – disconnection from family, friends, supports, and community exacerbated fear and distress. The impact of this is unknown, and how it may manifest in the coming months remains to be seen.

We must broaden our understanding of recovery beyond job creation and maximising household spend, and into the alleviation of hardship and the building of community resilience and capacity. In past responses to economic crises, a singular focus on the economy and GDP has placed workers in increasingly unfair and precarious conditions³¹.

This Recovery Framework proposes three main pillars of action for the State Government to champion recovery from COVID-19 for young people:



The sections below outline each pillar of our required recovery approach in detail and provide high-level recommendations for investment and policy shifts to make impact. These have been developed following the latest workforce and wellbeing data, consultations with young people, and evidence-based practice across jurisdictions.

Fig 1. Overview of the State Government's role in economy and social recovery



Pillar 1:

Capacity Building & Social Support



Supporting young people, their families, and their communities to be happy and well.

Hardship and vulnerability will not end once social distancing restrictions ease. Data demonstrates high unemployment³², fewer jobs available than the number of jobseekers, and sustained high levels of stress, depression and anxiety among young people.³³

With the needs of young people shifting rapidly, our State must respond by adapting its approach to ensure a rapid and effective systemic response when supporting young people, to manage and prevent escalated hardship or crisis. Our community sector and social support systems are critical to preventing crisis and supporting young Western Australian's early, allowing them to stay happy and well.

This *frontline support* provided by the sector is also key in supporting young people to navigate available services, and to quickly direct them to where they need to be. We saw this clearly during COVID-19, with many young people's needs escalating significantly as social distancing restricted access to youth services.

We also know the clear link between poverty and health, with experience of poverty leading to worse health outcomes (and vice versa)³⁴. Western Australia is, at any time, at risk of a second wave, and a preventative health response therefore naturally includes action against poverty. For many Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander communities with higher rates of poverty and long-term health conditions, this is particularly important to address. Racism and intergenerational trauma pose barriers to exiting poverty, and must be addressed through anti-racist action.

Our community sector requires intelligent investment and focused stewardship to meet the right mix of skills and workforce makeup so that we can respond to the changing needs of our State's young people – now and in the future. Higher incidences of unemployment, mental health difficulties, and anxiety require investment to support these needs, and we must grow this critical workforce sustainably to accommodate demand from our growing population.

Investment in capacity building has strong economic benefits, as our health care and social assistance sector is the State's largest employer; alongside meeting the health & wellbeing needs of the community it would also form a critical part of efforts to solve our employment crisis. Benefits of investment in the care economy outpace those in the construction sector – increasing Australia's spend in the care economy to 2% of the GDP is estimated to create over 350,000 new jobs and raise the employment rate by 2.3%. The same level of investment in the construction

sector would, comparatively, increase the employment rate by only 0.5%.³⁵ Investment and stewardship of our state's welfare and social support system will assist young Western Australians to navigate the coming months and maximise their recovery and potential. Responses to hardship also support young people's capacity for economic participation, allowing them to climb Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

The State Government must act in the early stages of the COVID-19 recovery period to invest in Western Australia's care economy, and build community capacity to navigate the shifts in our community and economic situation over the coming months and years.

Growing the youth sector to meet present and future need.

With shifting needs from young people, our community supports must be resourced to shift in-turn to meet them. The work of frontline services, including doctors, youth workers, disability carers, and social workers, are critical for the functioning of Western Australia, and has been demonstrated by their endurance and high-profile coverage during the COVID-19 crisis.

The needs of young people are expected to be seen particularly within mental health services, financial counselling, and employment navigation support.³⁶ The existing imbalance of the mental health services system has been acknowledged already in the Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drug Services Plan, although these investment recommendations are yet to be realised.

We are already seeing early indicators of increased suicidality amongst young people, with many young people in our conversations expressing desire for more support from services in the coming months. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, further, will require dedicated best-practice, culturally informed and community led responses in order to be effective, with a lack of culturally appropriate mental health services acknowledged widely in consultation and evidence (including the recent Inquiry into Aboriginal Youth Suicide). Whole-of-

community approaches to Indigenous suicide prevention supported by long-term clinical research and skill development have an emerging evidence base, but remain unfunded at scale.³⁷ Recent additional investment in regional Aboriginal suicide prevention is welcome, but must adhere to the principles and recommendations of past reviews.³⁸

The youth and community sectors provide an existing agile workforce capable of swiftly scaling up to meet this need, while simultaneously providing an opportunity for job growth and employment pathways. Investment in these sectors can rapidly transition to immediate service provision, and provide an immediate entry point for young people to receive support. Therefore, we feel it is essential to invest in the care economy and youth sector to meet emerging and projected needs and prevent reliance on more costly intervention services.

Recommendations to start our recovery:

- **Conduct an analysis of the youth sector workforce needs**, including size and skills, to provide an evidence-based model of growth over the coming years in order to ensure frontline supports have capacity to meet young people's needs.
- **Provide a rapid, flexible small grant program** to youth services to enable rapid pivoting of service provision to meet emerging needs of young people
- **Provide additional investment into frontline employment and financial counselling services** for young people to support them to navigate a radically changed workforce and economy. This should focus on skills development and strengths-based approaches.
- **Increase access for young people to non-clinical community mental health supports**, in line with the Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drugs Services Plan.
- **Increase community mental health prevention spending to 5% of total mental health investment**, in line with the Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drugs Services Plan.
- **Fund dedicated youth peer support programs** for LGBTIQ+ young people, young people from refugee and/or migrant backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and young people living with a disability.
- Ensure the proposed Mental Health Young People Priority Framework **is co-designed with young people** and addresses both their needs outlined in the Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drugs Services Plan and the pillars and other recommendations in this Recovery Framework.

Expanding hardship supports and measures to prevent poverty until wider community recovery occurs.

The Federal Government's Coronavirus Supplement schemes, including JobSeeker payment and JobKeeper program have supported many young people across the country to maintain stable living conditions, carry out effective social distancing and meet basic needs during the pandemic. These supports have been complemented by state-based supports, such as the moratorium on evictions.

However these supports are only temporary measures, and with end-dates occurring long before we return to pre-pandemic levels, we will inevitably see much higher rates of hardship across the community. With our economy still recovering, and youth unemployment at record levels, many young people face entry into poverty and potential homelessness. Throughout our consultations with young people, many have expressed significant fear and anxiety regarding the cessation of these critical supports.

Many youth services have also outlined a concern that this will create an overwhelming demand for services that the youth sector will struggle to cope with, resulting in unsustainable service delivery in many areas. Vulnerable young people will face increasingly detrimental impacts to their health and wellbeing without adequate support to help them cope.

The end date to the Coronavirus supplement payments fails to recognise and address realities of the long-term impacts of the pandemic; unemployment and hardship are expected to continue, even past Western Australia's lifting of social distancing restrictions. Damage to our economy has already shuttered many businesses who experienced revenue loss during the outbreak, and the repeal of Federal

initiatives such as JobKeeper may see a second or third wave of unemployment.³⁹ Uncertainty around the future of these payments has further exacerbated anxiety among young people we spoke to regarding their futures.

In order to ensure young Western Australians are able to remain healthy, safe, and housed, it is vital that the State Government must step in to cover the gaps left by the Federal Government by extending hardship support in the coming months until economic recovery is well underway and stability is restored. Stable housing provides support for young people to engage in meaningful job seeking, expand their education, and participate in community. The moral imperative is clear, as is the economic – health and economic independence are key drivers of a thriving economy.

Recommendations to start our recovery:

- **Expand and extend debt relief & amnesty programs** to support young people to avoid poverty and hardship, such as the Residential Rent Relief Grant Scheme.
- **Extend the Moratorium on Evictions in Western Australia** by a minimum of four months.

Advocating through National Cabinet for major reform to Federal employment supports.

Our income support system in Australia should be a lifeline to support people's economic participation, and support individuals to navigate unemployment and into long-term, sustainable working conditions that meet their needs.

However, our labour market conditions are likely to be unstable for some time, and our income support payments must reflect this. Prior to the cessation of JobKeeper and the Coronavirus Supplement, it will be critical that our State Government join calls for an extension to these supports, and a permanently increased rate.

It has long been known that the rate of social support payments such as Newstart are inadequate, and serve to entrench poverty rather than alleviate it. The April 2020 report from the Inquiry into the Adequacy of Newstart (Newstart Inquiry) further found that the current base rate of income support payments (approximately \$282 per week) is itself a barrier to employment, forcing individuals to remain in poverty. Failures of mutual obligation requirements, and the inadequacy of employment programs to navigate labour market trends also have left individuals with little chance of finding meaningful employment, consigning them to long term poverty, housing instability and the societal stigma of ongoing access to welfare support whilst they await favourable economic shifts.⁴⁰

For many on JobSeeker, the Coronavirus Supplement has lifted them out of poverty, and onto a reasonable standard of living – many have reported finally experiencing food and rent security for the first time on the payment.⁴¹ With young people experiencing the highest job losses resulting from COVID-19 through the retail and hospitality sectors, JobSeeker's higher rate has been a lifeline in recent months. The Newstart Inquiry reported in April 2020 that maintaining these supports will be critical post COVID-19 in Australia as we enter a recession and labour market conditions fluctuate.

Recent polling has found the majority of Western Australians support a permanent increase to JobSeeker – almost 75% of respondents agreed that the rate of JobSeeker must be permanently raised above the poverty line⁴². Our social safety nets must be bolstered as we navigate our recovery period. Utilising its place on the newly formed National Federation Reform Council (National Council), the WA State Government can play a critical part in advocating for this increase and strengthening a united approach from all States and Territories to ensure that the Federal Government acknowledges the overwhelming evidence for raising the rate and the need to shift its long term approach to supporting Australia's most vulnerable communities.

Additionally, convoluted eligibility requirements within Services Australia mean that many young people cannot access payments and support when they need it most. Many young people report that eligibility requirements are out-dated, and fail to recognise the many reasons why a young person may need to be independent from parents, such as homophobia or transphobia.

For regional young people seeking to move to the Metropolitan region, the already difficult requirement to accrue savings in order to be classified as independent will be an insurmountable barrier in the post-COVID recession. For those from farming backgrounds, often the high assets of their family will prevent them from accessing JobSeeker, despite the fact that the wage of their parents may mean they aren't able to actually be supported.

Reports from the think tank PerCapita and the Australian Unemployed Workers Union provide pathways forward to redesigning these services to truly meet need and end unemployment.

Recommendations to start our recovery:

- Advocate via the National Cabinet to **immediately extend the Coronavirus Supplement payment and JobKeeper** in light of the emerging second wave in other parts of Australia threatening to extend the economic impacts of COVID-19.
- Advocate via the National Cabinet to **permanently raise the JobSeeker** payment to the level of the Coronavirus Supplement.
- Advocate via the National Cabinet to **abolish mutual-obligations requirements and implement recommendations of the Newstart Inquiry.**
- Advocate via the National Cabinet to **increase the Disability Support Pension in line with increases to JobSeeker.**

Breaking the cycle of youth homelessness.

Western Australia has an unparalleled opportunity to end youth homelessness, as key levers and stakeholders in areas of governance and service delivery have been galvanised in a way that has never occurred before. We need a coordinated approach to action, both at a governance and service delivery level and this means that we must resource communities to build their capacity for collaboration, and break down the barriers between the State Government, youth and private sectors to foster a united approach to a common goal of ending homelessness.

Our approach to youth homelessness must be to immediately move the young person into safe and secure housing with wrap-around support. Any response to homelessness that does not do this risks causing lasting negative consequences for the young person. Homelessness itself is considered a form of trauma, with a strong interdependent relationship with mental health, employment, connection, and wellbeing.⁴³

The main factor influencing a person's poverty status is housing, with approximately half of all people living in poverty in private rentals.⁴⁴ Stable housing and support can build individual capacity, and acts as a protective factor against unemployment, mental illness, trauma, and economic participation for young people.

With unprecedented levels of unemployment, reduced income, and mental health difficulties among young people, our first response must be to keep young people in their homes and prevent entry into homelessness. This provides both a moral imperative, to spare young people the trauma of homelessness, and an economic one, given the high cost of homelessness to the State.⁴⁵

Importantly, this urgent need is not new and will remain even following complete recovery from COVID-19. Modelling undertaken by the Department of Communities' in 2017 indicated unmet demand for an additional 61,000 dwellings for very low, low, and moderate income households⁴⁶. Stimulus in social housing can also meet construction and

energy needs by ensuring additional builds are low-carbon, environmentally friendly builds as well as create employment opportunities for young people working in construction and/or a trade profession.

The State Government's recent investment into Housing First initiatives across the State is to be commended, and a welcome step towards ending homelessness. However, this announcement included no specific allocation for Housing First for Youth programs. Evidence shows that homelessness models must be modified to meet young people's needs in order to be effective.⁴⁷ For this reason, it is critical that the State Government prioritise dedicated investment for a Housing First for Youth model.

Recommendations to start our recovery:

- **Invest in a Housing First for Youth model** that is specifically designed for young people aged 16-25, aligns with broader Housing First Homelessness initiatives, and enables access to/integrates wrap around supports such as mental health, AOD and employment and education pathways.
- **Invest in the Embedded Youth Outreach Program;** formalising a partnership between the State Government, youth services and community leaders across the state to effectively engage street present and at-risk young people.
- **Ensure direct infrastructure investment has a focus on the construction of additional social housing dwellings** in Western Australia, aligned to meet needs identified by the Department of Communities modelling.

Investing in the wellbeing of refugee, migrant and multicultural young people and families.

Physically, COVID-19 does not discriminate by race, ethnicity or country of origin. However the social impacts of COVID-19 have disproportionately impacted young people of colour and their families.

Prior to COVID-19, many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds faced structural barriers and inequalities in accessing opportunities and services. Experiences of structural racism, community discrimination, and a lack of cultural competency in services dedicated for young people have been rife, along with the regular challenges associated with migration and language barriers.⁴⁸ Experiences of sinophobia in particular were reported to increase.⁴⁹

The quality of information provided for our diverse Western Australian community has also been exposed. Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds reported difficulties in accessing information during COVID-19.⁵⁰ Information regarding social distancing requirements were complex, and changed on a near-weekly basis, creating difficulties for those speaking English as a second (or more) language. Many young people were required to act as interpreters for their families and communities to ensure they stayed safe and avoided being penalised for not following restrictions, to navigate government supports and to understand daily changes in the community. Similarly, many individuals found difficulty accessing information online, and reported that updated requirements and developments on the pandemic were not posted in accessible locations within communities.

The exclusion of temporary visa holders from JobSeeker and JobKeeper has also increased hardship during this time. Anecdotal reports from organisations such as the Centre for Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Detainees (CARAD) indicated that over half of those accessing their foodbank service were young people from migrant backgrounds, pointing to high levels of food insecurity and poverty. Supports for migrants and individuals on temporary visas has instead been relegated to the not-for-profit sector through a Federal funding package.⁵¹ Funding through charities, and not through targeted community investment, is ultimately a crisis response and does not address the fundamental barriers and systems which perpetuate disadvantage.

In our conversations with young people from refugee, migrant and Indigenous backgrounds we have heard that many frontline and primary care service providers do not understand the impacts of racism or institutional barriers to health and wellbeing outcomes (including employment). They've expressed a desire for more programs that support these workers and care providers to understand racism and more effectively advocate on their behalf within these systems. Many young people already face systemic issues such as language

barriers, discrimination and racism, and a labour market that does not value their skills. Additionally, they may be routinely acting as advocates on these issues on behalf of their friends, families and communities.

Similarly, while some existing employment programs saw short-term outcomes, they felt that they often failed to address unconscious racism within employers, which often meant employment gains were short-term. It is critical that programs and supports for refugee and migrant young people do not place the onus entirely on these young people, but actively address individual and systemic racism that creates these inequities. Proactive anti-racism action is, in many respects, investment in mental health, health, employment and education.

In order to recover and support equitable outcomes, we must invest in measures that address these barriers, and immediately respond to poverty and inequities created through COVID-19. These must include social support, action to address racism within the community, and co-designed initiatives to build employment pathways and connection among migrant communities.

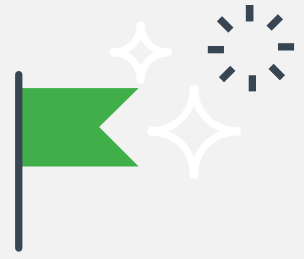
Recommendations to start our recovery:

- **Develop targeted engagement and communication strategies** for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and their families to increase access to information about social supports in culturally appropriate ways, including multiple languages and offline engagement.
- **Provide additional financial relief** for refugee, migrant and international students, recognising the poverty and hardship that has emerged following from COVID-19.
- **Invest in community-led programs to support migrant and refugee young people** to enter into long-term employment, develop skills, receive career mentoring, and address unconscious bias within employers.
- **Invest in a community-led youth employment programs** to support migrant and refugee young people to reduce the barriers and enter into long-term employment.
- **Invest in training for primary care and frontline services providers** to understand and combat institutional discrimination and racism, and improve the care and support they provide to young people experiencing these.
- **Develop targeted anti-racism campaigns within Western Australia**, focused on healing and addressing structural barriers within society.



Pillar 2:

Job Creation & Industry Development



Creating sustainable jobs that build futures for young people.

Western Australia has the opportunity to build a local workforce and labour market that is world-class in its approach to youth employment. By aligning investment with young people's needs and focusing on the creation of entry-level employment with long-term career pathways, we can build a youth labour market with a goal of full employment for decades to come.

In the immediate future we must support the newly-unemployed population to return to work swiftly, with support for businesses highly impacted by the shutdown. The speed of our efforts here is vital to prevent long-term impacts such as career scarring and allow industries with high levels of youth employment to remain stable.

In the medium and long-term, our job creation efforts must be responsive to young people's needs, including their future dreams, current schedules, and available education options. Partnering with young people to understand their views and requirements will support our recovery approach to ensure jobs are fit-for-purpose and are accessible to young people in the years ahead.

Investment to address youth unemployment will not succeed if there is no consideration for the broader barriers faced by young people, and in the intersection of race, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander young people in particular face unique barriers to employment in Western Australia, as historical disadvantage, racism and barriers accumulate to entrench poverty. The reality is that historical racism can not be addressed by blanket approaches – only anti-racist policy and intervention can undo this damage.

For example, a dedicated Aboriginal Youth Jobs Strategy (alongside a mainstream youth jobs strategy) presents an opportunity to direct activity with the intention of addressing these systemic inequities and building pathways into employment for all young people. Partnership with young people and communities experiencing discrimination and barriers in employment is critical in this process, both in the sharing of information and identifying priorities, but in ceding power to community-designed and led solutions that work.

In this regard, investment entirely in job creation without consideration for need, motivation, and its place in our economy will be insufficient, and will fail young people by being inaccessible and only seeing short-term employment gains. The State Government's investment approach must look longer-term and take a more sophisticated approach that considers investment alongside community wants and needs.

Supporting the newly jobless to return to work quickly.

Economic hardship will not resolve instantly. Many businesses will see slower returns to pre-COVID employment levels. With the cessation of JobKeeper in the coming months, there is a high risk of a second wave of youth unemployment in Western Australia as businesses with impacted revenue lose support to retain staff.

Industries with young workforces – the accommodation, tourism, hospitality, and retail sectors – are predicted to see continued hardship over the coming months. In Western Australia, these sectors combined have already lost more than 60,000 employees.⁵²

Short-term, our priority must be returning these young people to employment to prevent career-scarring, and disengagement. Longer periods of unemployment are associated with career-scarring and poorer employment outcomes, as employers favour those with more recent work histories.⁵³ Previous economic recessions have shown underemployment spikes have become entrenched, which must be prevented in Western Australia to avoid long term harm.

An interventionist approach to support employment in highly-affected industries will prevent a second wave of unemployment and reduce the impact on frontline community services. The success of the Federal JobSeeker initiative has supported many businesses to retain staff, supporting the adoption of a similar localised response directed towards areas of need in Western Australia. Our enviable position with no documented community transmission puts us many months ahead of any Federal response, meaning we must act locally and early.

Individual placement support (IPS) is an evidence-based model of supported employment that blends vocational assistance with clinical mental health support. IPS focuses on competitive employment and individual career and personal goals to ensure employment is fit-for-purpose⁵⁴. Evaluations of the IPS model within Australia and internationally show great success in building the skills and confidence of young people with mental health difficulties to navigate adverse workforce environments, and entering into sustained employment.⁵⁵

With rising mental health difficulties in Western Australia, and a competitive labour market expected to continue long-term, there is an opportunity to implement the IPS model across Western Australia and within youth and youth mental health services. Existing programs of IPS in Australia are seeing promising results, however, have significant scope for expansion to ensure high fidelity vocational support is accessible to larger numbers of young people, particularly in Western Australia.⁵⁶

Individual placement support (IPS) models of supported employment are evidence-based models that blend vocational assistance with clinical mental health support. IPS focuses on competitive employment and individual career and personal goals to ensure employment is fit-for-purpose⁵². Evaluations of IPS models within Australia and internationally show great success in building the skills and confidence of young people with mental health difficulties to navigate adverse workforce environments, and entering into sustained employment.⁵³

With rising mental health difficulties in Western Australia, and a competitive labour market expected to continue long-term, there is an opportunity to implement IPS models across Western Australia and within youth services. Existing programs of IPS in Australia are seeing promising early results, but have significant scope for expansion to ensure they are high-fidelity models and accessible to larger numbers of young people, particularly in Western Australia. IPS models implemented at-scale and embedded within youth services present an opportunity to expand our mental illness prevention funding while addressing our unemployment crisis. Learnings from the WA Association for Mental Health's current IPSWorks model should be considered in the implementation of these programs.

Recommendations to start our recovery:

- **Provide financial incentives for local businesses to immediately employ young workers** within the hospitality, retail, and the creative and arts industries.
- **Implement a youth job creation quota in the public sector workforce and in public procurement processes**, ensuring State Government activity directly results in the employment and/or training of local young people.
- **Expand the implementation of individual placement and support (IPS) models** of supported employment in all regions of Western Australia.



Strategically rebuilding the youth labour market.

The State Government's early recovery work, collated into the WA Recovery Plan, are welcome first steps to our economic recovery. However, this approach is reliant on individual investment projects, and does not represent the broader shifts in the delivery and planning of government services that are necessary for recovery.

Traditional views of labour market investment focus on the number of jobs created per dollar spent, aiming simply to improve labour market conditions in the short-term. However, this approach is limited when examining youth unemployment, as it fails to take into account the educational and experience gaps of young people, and instead benefits only small sections of the population while risking a career scarring effect on young people and long-term issues.

Young people's recovery requires partnership in its design, and for multiple government agencies with impacts upon young people to come together and coordinate activity. This also helps to ensure an appropriate mix of entry-level jobs are created, and that there are pathways within industries for young people. A co-design process for this Strategy must identify young people's career aspirations, employment needs, and desires for a future Western Australia in order to guide investment in a sustainable manner.

A cross-government strategy is an absolute requirement in order for efforts to reduce youth unemployment to be successful. This strategy can opportunistically align with the upcoming WA Youth Strategy, and must be developed in partnership with young people across Western Australia, youth service providers, and industry representatives.

The initial investment from the State Government via the recently announced Green Jobs Plan is an excellent first step in this regard, recognising the significant growth and change our economy and workforce will require to

address climate change. Investing in the renewable energy workforce would align to the long-term decarbonisation of Western Australia's economy, while responding to our workforce needs. The Lower Fees, Local Skills initiative is a prime opportunity to align education pathways with a growth industry.

It is critical to our future workforce to decarbonise, while providing hope for the future among a younger generation profoundly concerned and passionate about climate change.

Recommendations to start our recovery:

- **Develop a ten-year Western Australian Youth Jobs Strategy** with the end-goal of full employment in Western Australia. This should be complemented by robust investment to grow industries and employment opportunities in the medium and long-term
- **Invest in growth industries and the renewable energy sector** to provide young people long-term employment opportunities.
- **Provide educational pathways to ensure our workforce grows the skills required to implement a shift towards renewable energy and growth industries**, including fee-free VET courses.
- **Develop a framework for the private sector to employ more young people** through 'Youth Inclusion Plans', supporting organisations to:
 - Meet youth employment targets;
 - Develop long-term employment pathways for young people; and
 - Foster safe work environments for diverse young people.

Directing industry investment to support social purpose.

There are many unrealised opportunities in Western Australia to create jobs while simultaneously addressing disadvantage within our communities. COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of supporting individuals to participate in the community and the economy, while shining a spotlight on where many of these barriers for Western Australians lie.

We have seen this in the disproportionate impacts COVID-19 and lockdown has had on young people with a disability, young people without access to technology, young people sleeping rough or experiencing housing instability, and more.

Government investment can be directed to address these barriers, lifting many out of hardship while improving economic participation and creating jobs – particularly in the construction industry and the care economy. This could reduce the significant wait times experienced by families and young people seeking social housing. This stimulus investment should ensure additional builds are low-carbon, environmentally friendly builds to meet our climate crisis needs and reduce ongoing living expenses for occupants, similar to already announced investment in social housing builds.

For example, our housing system in Western Australia has much opportunity for targeted investment to improve living conditions for diverse Western Australia. This includes upgrades to accessibility that we've heard are vital from our conversations with young people living with a disability, increases in our social housing supply (demonstrated from Department of Communities' modelling), and our ever-escalating climate crisis. Investment in home renovations for social good could improve the living conditions of many while promoting economic growth. Similar calls for

improvements to social housing builds have been championed by Shelter WA, WACOSS, and the economic think tank Per Capita, demonstrating the economic benefits of such an approach.

Recommendations to start our recovery:

- **Provide grants or subsidies to support people living with a disability to make modifications to their homes.** A grants or subsidy scheme could provide a significant stimulus to the construction sector, while supporting individuals with a disability to participate in their community and employment.
- **Direct infrastructure investment to focus on the construction of additional social housing dwellings** in Western Australia, aligned to meet needs identified by Department of Communities modelling highlighting the need for more than 30,000 additional affordable dwellings.
- **Invest in the community and youth sector to increase job opportunities in the care economy** to meet growth needs already identified by the State Government, such as community mental health initiatives, aged care, disability care, early childhood education, and the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation sectors. With a targeted strategy to increase young employment in the community and youth sector, this will provide employment pathways for young people, including in peer work roles

Pillar 3:

Education, Training & Community Connection



Supporting young people to thrive.

In order for recovery and job creation efforts to have an impact, they must be complemented by activity to ensure young people are able to access these opportunities, and are supported to succeed in them. Traditionally, this takes the form of a 'job readiness' approach, engaging young people in education and training.

Sadly, this approach to job readiness is now outdated, with young people more likely to be highly educated, but less likely to be in full-time employment.⁵⁷ The relationship between education and employment is no longer as strong as in Australian history, and has been eroded through entrenched insecure employment. Job readiness measures can fail to garner meaningful skills or increase employability for young people, especially when there is no strategy to align the education sector with growth industries and public expenditure.

Similarly, with higher education opportunities operating at cost to students, these risk benefiting only young people from middle-class backgrounds, and are unfavourable to young people for whom higher education is not an affordable or appropriate option.

Our approach must focus on reducing the barriers to participating in our communities, our economy, and in the opportunities inherent in our state. This includes education reform, local infrastructure, and breaking down financial barriers to participation. Investment in programs that provide mentoring and guidance to young people to meet skills shortages that fit their needs are one such example of how community development might be directed in order to boost our economy, with local examples outperforming Federal mutual obligations approaches.⁵⁸

By investing in industry mentoring, career guidance, and placement support initiatives, we can support young people to avoid the trap of mutual-obligations requirements of the Federal Government that filter young people into cycles of insecure and low-wage employment. Instead, we can build young people's skills and employability in line with the industries facing skills shortages and in need of growth in the coming decades, as in Pillar 2 above.

Aligning education pathways for young people with immediate and future needs.

Higher education no longer provides the clear cut link to higher earnings and employability that it once did in Australia. While Australia is ranked 8th internationally in the proportion of workers with high skills and more young people are achieving university degrees, almost 40% of workers aged 25-34 were in a casual, fixed-term or part-time job in 2018.

As a major provider of education, our State must consider where it can align education opportunities and access with our workforce needs - both now and in the near future.

One such opportunity lies in control over the Vocational Education and Training sector. While Australia is ranked 8th internationally in the proportion of workers with high skills, we rank only 29th in the proportion of intermediate skilled workers.⁵⁹ This low comparative proportion suggests that our VET sector is not meeting the needs of young workers - either through poor perception of the opportunities afforded by TAFE and VET, or through VET being at odds with the realities of our labour market's needs.

One such barrier lies in ongoing increases to TAFE fees in Western Australia. Before the fee freeze in 2017 TAFE fees had increased by up to 510%, resulting in 27,152 fewer enrolments in general industry courses since 2013. Given that young people under 25 had the weakest wage growth of any age demographic between 2010-15⁶⁰ as well as the stagnation of the welfare rate since 1990, it is clear to see that these increases have directly affected the accessibility of TAFE for young people experiencing poverty and hardship.

While recent freezes on TAFE fees and increased subsidies for select courses have alleviated some of this problem, it is a slow-burn solution to a significant increase in the financial cost of TAFE; which may put off many young people who are seeking immediate employment. Western Australia's recent announcement of limited Free TAFE Short Courses is highly welcome, and a great first step. Further expansion of this should occur in consultation with industry and continue through the coming years to align with infrastructure spend and major public workforce development (such as through the care economy).

Recommendations to start our recovery:

- **Expand the Lower Fees, Local Skills initiative** ensuring TAFE courses to young people in priority and growth industries are fee-free – including renewable energy, Metronet, and the care economy.
- **Implement an 'apprenticeship guarantee' within priority TAFE streams**, guaranteeing young people roles in high-demand and highly-impacted industries by subsidising apprenticeship fees and training costs.

Reforming our education system to reflect our needs.

COVID-19 has shone a light on the inequities in our education and employment systems, and how in their current format they fail much of the population. For young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, with limited travel options, and a lack of access to technology, their employment and education journeys have been set back significantly.

Research from The Grattan Institute highlights how restrictive governance and ways of working in our education system have failed to adapt to meet changing technologies, address community needs and bridge the growing educational/digital divide.⁶¹

Many of the young people who were already disproportionately affected by a growing educational divide prior to COVID-19 saw limited support to mitigate its impact on their educational experience. The existing achievement gap prior to COVID-19 was 10 times greater than the gap created by restrictions imposed due to the pandemic.⁶²

International students, students from refugee and migrant backgrounds, and students with disabilities were some key cohorts most impacted in the March to May period, and yet experienced a distinct lack of support. This included exclusion from (or delayed) Coronavirus Supplement payments, slow or insufficient access to supports (e.g. translated information, disability access requirements)⁶³ and insufficient access to digital technology and data.

The educational issues in remote areas were also greatly exacerbated by COVID-19, with students facing on average the highest levels of educational disadvantage in the state; having less access to pre-school, lower attendance levels and lower performance in literacy and numeracy testing⁶⁴.

This has meant that despite a positive intent, due to the rapid nature of the shift there has been limited progress towards a culture of inclusive education for various cohorts of greater need⁶⁵. Rather than a narrow focus on the impacts of COVID-19, recovery efforts must tackle deeper long-term problems that are entrenched in our education system, overwhelmingly disadvantaging our most vulnerable students. Our approach to educational recovery must focus intensively on bridging the educational gap for disadvantaged students, rather than broad investments in infrastructure that equally benefit the most affluent as well as the most disadvantaged.

Additionally, this effort must tackle the segregation and exclusion of young people with disability from the mainstream education system. There is no evidence that segregated education benefits young people with disability.⁶⁶ In fact, a fully resourced, inclusive education system that can cater to the needs of all students will benefit far more than just students with disability.

To reverse poor outcomes created by educational disadvantage, we must look to innovative solutions and a more individualised curriculum and schooling structure that caters to the unique needs of the student. **COVID-19 has laid bare the lack of access and opportunity for disadvantaged students in the Western Australian education system; we cannot afford to neglect the opportunity the current post-COVID climate provides us to eliminate the education gap and digital divide that has had significant long term ramifications on the life trajectory of disadvantaged young people in Western Australia.**

Recommendations to start our recovery:

- **Develop an Inclusive Education Strategy**, with focus on investment to bridge the gap in educational support and outcomes for vulnerable students and those living in areas with the highest educational disadvantage, particularly for young people with disability, young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and young people living in poverty.
- Provide additional resources to all public schools to **ensure all students with a disability receive inclusive, individualised support in their education.**
- **Ensure access to tutoring and educational resources for young people living in poverty** to respond to the gap in education outcomes created by COVID-19.
- **Commit to a statewide digital infrastructure upgrade to ensure schools, communities and young people** have access to technology for digital/remote learning, as part of the *Digital Inclusion in WA Blueprint*.

Investing in regional opportunities and infrastructure to improve participation.

We heard resoundingly through our conversations with regional and remote young people that a lack of infrastructure and opportunities at school has impacted their lives for many years. During COVID-19, this came to the forefront as telecommunications infrastructure failed to bridge the gap in their school supply chains, hindering access to essential supplies, and young people struggled to connect with available services.

As we return somewhat tentatively to normalcy, many young people have noted that the impact on their regional hubs and communities has continued, and has hurt many small businesses. Regional entertainment opportunities remain limited, as travel and distancing restrictions have hindered entertainers from returning to perform.

The vitality of our regions is integral to the wellbeing of young people living within them, and in the vibrancy and recovery of Western Australia as a whole. Regional investment should take into account the gaps in our regional infrastructure laid bare by COVID-19, and build a more robust system to support connection and wellbeing.

Recommendations to start our recovery:

- **Fund regional youth advocacy initiatives**, such as the Regional Youth Leadership Development program, supporting regional young people's needs and desires to be heard by decision-makers and local services.
- **Invest in regional telecommunications infrastructure** (in partnership with the Federal Government) to ensure every young person in regional Western Australia has access to reliable and stable phone and internet services.
- **Expand regional public transportation options, connecting smaller** communities with regional hubs and training and education opportunities.
- **Increase investment in regional arts and entertainment opportunities** and development, focusing on growing local talent.

Putting Ideas Into Action

To implement the recommendations above we must take a truly collaborative approach to recovery in both the short-term and long-term. A single State Government department does not hold the levers required to create change at-scale. The newly-released WA Recovery Plan acknowledges this in the scope of its investment.

Similarly, the release of Our Priorities: Sharing Prosperity was welcomed by YACWA in 2019 as a cross-government to meet community-level outcomes with measurable targets. This commitment to public accountability and transparency in government was integral to creating public trust and supporting a partnership with the community sector to achieve these goals. It successfully aligned thinking among disparate portfolios, and we saw new levels of partnership between departments emerge swiftly.

COVID-19 has now upended the landscape on which these original goals were set, and our investment and public policy needs have shifted. While many of the targets in Our Priorities remain important, additional barriers have emerged that will prevent us from attaining them.

Now is the time to set a whole-of-government focus on our recovery efforts and reinvigorate these targets under the newly-released WA Recovery Plan, including tangible targets for addressing youth unemployment, mental health, and social and affordable housing in our community.

The WA Recovery Plan needs to be a living document, but it can provide a sound set of goals and a clear endpoint on our COVID recovery journey. It is our ambition that this plan cement a focus on youth wellbeing across all areas.

We recommend embedding measurable targets for recovery under the WA Recovery Plan, and in line with the focus of this document. Young people deserve a State Government that is taking measurable action on improving their wellbeing and livelihoods.

We recommend the following targets be set:

- **End the youth unemployment gap:** reduce the youth unemployment rate to match that of the general population in Western Australia.
- **Support regional youth employment opportunities:** increase the number of young people in regional areas engaged in education, training or employment.
- **Address schooling disparities:** increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people attaining a high school qualification or equivalent to match that of the general population, with a focus on reducing regional disparities.
- **Improve youth mental health:** Reduce the levels of psychosocial distress among young people, and reduce the number of deaths by suicide among young Western Australians.
- **Create a liveable, carbon-free future:** Reach 100% renewable energy in Western Australia with ambitious interim targets.

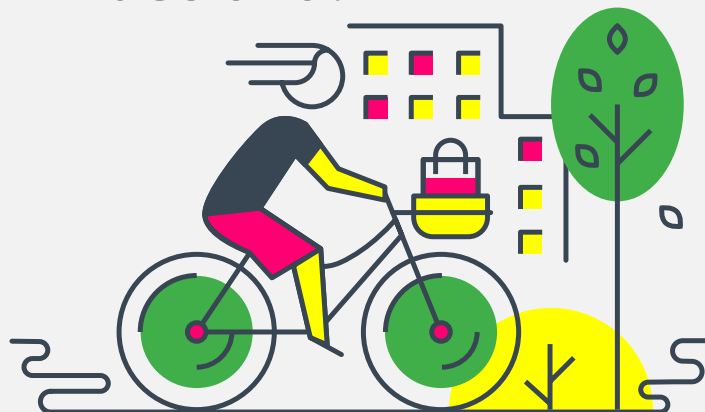
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