



# **Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program (AYCP) Review**

Victoria Police

Karabena Consulting

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## Glossary of Terms

<b>ACCO</b>	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
<b>ACCHO</b>	Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
<b>ACLO</b>	Victoria Police Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer
<b>AYCP</b>	Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program
<b>CALD</b>	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
<b>KCT</b>	Karabena Consulting Trust
<b>KESO</b>	Koorie Education Support Officer
<b>LAJAC</b>	Local Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee
<b>PALO</b>	Police Aboriginal Liaison Officers
<b>RAJAC</b>	Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee
<b>SOP</b>	Standard Operating Procedure
<b>YSO</b>	Victoria Police Youth Specialist Officer

## Executive Summary

The Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program (AYCP) was established to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people in the justice system through an enhanced cautioning approach developed in partnership with Aboriginal communities. This review examines the program's implementation across Victoria, highlighting its strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. The findings and recommendations are based on consultations with stakeholders, including Victoria Police, Elders, Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Councils (RAJACs), and community members, as well as a thorough analysis of program operations.

The review identified significant strengths in the AYCP, including its focus on early intervention and the involvement of community members and Elders in supporting young Aboriginal people across Victoria. Examples of good practice demonstrate the program's potential to promote positive outcomes for participants. However, challenges were also identified:

- Inconsistencies in implementation of panels
- A perceived lack of awareness of the program panel component across regions
- Reliance on a small number of panel members
- Clarity of roles and responsibilities, referral pathways, and available flexibility in program and panel component setup and implementation
- Capacity building opportunities and support for panel member.

Despite these issues, stakeholders view the AYCP as a valuable initiative with strong potential to expand its positive impact with further support.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the review of the AYCP. These and potential actions for Victoria Police and other stakeholders are contained in Section 4. Implementing the recommendations and the suggested improvements from the regions (Section 3) may help to address operational challenges, promote sustainable outcomes, and strengthen trust between communities and the justice system.

1. **Strengthening governance:** Establish a clear governance framework and oversight to ensure the program remains effective, accountable, and aligned with its intended purpose. Promote the scope and flexibility for local adaptation available within the program guidelines.
2. **Enhancing capability of panel members:** Acknowledge and integrate the lived experiences and cultural knowledge of Elders and other learning opportunities into program and panel practices to promote trust and engagement.

3. **Improve community awareness and engagement:** Develop content to increase understanding of the AYCP among young people, families, and other stakeholders.
4. **Expand support structures and resources for panel members:** Explore remuneration policies to recognise the time and expertise of Elders and community members participating in panels in voluntarily capacity.
5. **Follow-up and ongoing support:** Integrate consent-based follow-ups processes to reinforce positive outcomes and ensure long-term support for young people.

## Report structure

This report has been structured to meet the diverse needs of a variety of audiences, offering clearly defined sections that can be read as a whole or referenced independently for specific insights. The structure is as follows:

### 1. Section 1: Introduction

This section outlines the context and methodology of the review. It highlights the aims and principles guiding the AYCP, such as self-determination, early intervention, and harm reduction, providing a foundation for understanding the program's objectives and challenges.

### 2. Section 2: Summaries from Regional Consultations

This section presents detailed insights from regional consultations conducted across Victoria with RAJACs, LAJACs and VicPol members. It explores the unique operational contexts of the AYCP in each region, showcasing examples of good practice, challenges encountered, and opportunities for improvement.

### 3. Section 3: Findings from the Review

This section identifies key findings, focusing on current operational practices, the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, and barriers to effective implementation. These findings highlight systemic challenges and offer a detailed understanding of the program's strengths and weaknesses.

### 4. Section 4: Recommendations

This section provides practical, actionable recommendations to address the challenges identified in the findings. The recommendations aim to enhance consistency across regions while maintaining the flexibility needed to adapt to local needs and ensuring alignment with the program's cultural safety principles.

## Section 1: Introduction

### Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program (AYCP)

The Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program (AYCP) was developed in collaboration with Aboriginal communities and in accordance with principles of Aboriginal self-determination outlined within AJA4 (Aboriginal Justice Agreement – Phase 4). The aim of the AYCP is to increase and enhance the use of police cautioning through a community-led model, based on principles of early intervention, harm reduction and community involvement, to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal young people in the criminal justice system.

The AYCP model was initially comprised of four main elements:

- Revisions to cautioning policy
- Enhanced localised monitoring of caution decisions
- Internal promotion of the benefits of cautioning
- Opportunities for engagement with culturally relevant support

Initially established as a pilot program in Bendigo, Echuca and Dandenong, the AYCP has now expanded to operate State-wide on an ongoing basis. The initiative was further supported by amendments to the Victoria Police Manual Cautions in 2021, which addressed barriers to cautioning. These changes removed the requirement for young people to admit responsibility for an offence in order to receive a caution and clarified that there is no specific limit to the number of cautions that a young person can receive, provided the circumstances are reasonable.

The AYCP provides young people with an opportunity to be referred to a community-led support panel after receiving a Child Caution. The panel assesses the young person's needs and then supports them to engage with culturally appropriate local services to address the factors underlying their behaviour. In addition, the AYCP promotes monitoring and accountability of cautioning decisions to ensure that Aboriginal young people receive a caution rather than a charge, whenever appropriate.

Since its introduction, Victoria Police has received four years of funding through the State Budget to enhance the AYCP. A review of the AYCP is critical to informing its future direction and the extent to which the current AYCP model is aligned with its objective. Thus, the purposes of this review were to:

- assess the operation of the AYCP against its aim and measure its success in increasing and enhancing the use of cautioning and diversion options through a community-led model. The review focused on how the model, based on principles of self-determination, early intervention and harm reduction, addresses the issue of over-representation of Aboriginal young people in the criminal justice system

- review Aboriginal justice data collection with an aim at improving data, which is essential for establishing an evidence base to measure the outcomes of the AYCP, and secure funding for AJA4 initiative
- produce useful findings to inform future AYCP program design and policy.

Karabena Consulting Trust (KCT) was engaged by Victoria Police to conduct the review of the AYCP. An Indigenous woman-owned and led organisation, KCT has a deep understanding of the cultural implications and sensitivities essential for conducting this review.

While much of the Review consultation feedback centred on the panel component, we note that the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program (AYCP) comprises a broader set of elements. The panel is one element within a larger framework. This report acknowledges the emphasis placed on the panel during discussions, but it also recognises the program's broader intent and structure.

## Methodology

This section outlines the qualitative methods KCT used to conduct the review of the AYCP including the sampling strategy, data collection protocols, data analysis methods, and cultural and ethical considerations that were incorporated in the review strategy. Central to our approach are the recommendations of the 2024 *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy*, developed by the Productivity Commission. This Strategy emphasises the importance of placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at the centre of any review process. To align with this Strategy, the KCT team utilised a number of key Indigenous data collection techniques that provided the cultural context necessary for authentic and respectful engagement with stakeholders.

### Culture-led data collection methods

Indigenous research methods, such as Dadirri and yarning, are deeply embedded in cultural traditions and wisdom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. These and other research methods have been promoted by Indigenous academics the world over. They are not simply ways of collecting data but are important in maintaining the integrity, respect and safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in all elements of a review process. Utilising these methods ensured the community had ownership and control over the data collection process, which is vital in creating a culturally safe and inclusive environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders.

Dadirri, meaning deep, respectful listening and contemplation, plays an integral role in Indigenous data collection. The practice involves non-intrusive observation, waiting, deep listening and learning in contemplative silence. Holding a safe space with patience and respect allows participants to feel at ease and is a powerful tool to garner insights that might otherwise be overlooked or misunderstood.

Yarning, a culturally significant research method, places high value on Indigenous communication methods. It is culturally grounded and recognises the importance of relationships, responsibility, and

accountability in research. It uses storytelling as a primary means of gathering information and generating knowledge and prioritises building and maintaining trusting relationships between researchers and participants.

Purposive sampling, a method of deliberately selecting participants based on specific characteristics or qualities, was used to gain in-depth insights from a targeted group of stakeholders most likely to provide relevant and rich information pertinent to the purpose and outcomes of the review.

### Engaging stakeholders

Using purposive sampling, the forums brought together local police, Aboriginal service providers, Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees (RAJACs), Local Aboriginal Justice Action Committees (LAJACs) and community representatives. These stakeholder groups represent key data sources relevant to the aims of the AYCP.

Victoria Police provided key contacts for each stakeholder group to the KCT team. Victoria Police and KCT collaboratively engaged with the stakeholder groups to set up online consultations through Zoom and MS Teams. Each session lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. These consultations provided an opportunity for deep and respectful conversations. They were affirming, conducted in a safe space, and grounded in Indigenous data collection methods.

The RAJAC and LAJAC stakeholder groups included representatives from Barwon South West, Loddon Mallee, South Metropolitan, West Metropolitan, Gippsland, Grampians and Hume regions. However, we were unable to hold consultations in the Northern Region due to the impact of community emergencies.

A total of seven focus group sessions were conducted. To ensure that each forum was tailored to the unique context of the participating region/site, KCT developed region-specific consultation guides. Each consultation focused on three key review areas:

1. Critical assessment of the AYCP current operating procedures in each region.
2. Critical assessment of the responsibilities of all involved parties.
3. Identifying implementation challenges and potential solutions or opportunities for improvement.

Using a semi-structured question guide (see appendix 1), we sought to identify examples of good practice, collect information on operational challenges, and elicit solutions or opportunities for improvement. The information gathered during these consultations was used to guide and inform KCT's recommendations.

It was also critical to have the support of the Victoria Police, Priority and Safer Communities Division to assist KCT to coordinate the stakeholder consultations and provide advice to the KCT team overall. It

was important to have the direct support of the Child and Youth Portfolio team members who introduced the review of the AYCP at each of the focus group sessions held and provided project support during the review consultations, contributing to the smooth and effective coordination of the process.

Victoria Police (VicPol) conducted a survey among its officers as part of the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program (AYCP) review.

### Data analysis

Data analysis involved a comprehensive examination of the information gathered during the regional consultations. The analysis focused on identifying key themes, including barriers and challenges to the current cautioning practices, the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes of those administering the program, effective strategies for building trust and rapport with Aboriginal youth, ethical considerations in program delivery, and the availability of appropriate support services and diversionary pathways. Participants also shared their perspectives on what they would like to see improved in the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program and had the opportunity to raise unresolved issues regarding its implementation.

This thematic analysis sought to identify critical issues related to the program's effectiveness and cultural appropriateness. The alignment of responses across the regional consultations provided a strong foundation for developing actionable recommendations. These recommendations are grounded in the shared experiences of participants, ensuring they are relevant to enhancing the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program to better meet the needs of Victorian Aboriginal communities.

### Ethical considerations

The information collected was handled according to Karabena's [Data Management Policy based on Indigenous Data Sovereignty Principles](#) ensuring Aboriginal people have control over how they are represented and identified, and that the data gathered ultimately supports self-determination. The rights and wellbeing of stakeholders were our primary concern at all stages of data collection and analysis. All other applicable privacy laws and the Victoria Police privacy policy were followed

## Section 2: Summaries of Regional Consultations

### Introduction

This section presents insights from the regional consultations held as part of the AYCP review. Consultations brought together key stakeholders, including police officers, community members, Elders, and representatives from Regional and Local Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees (RAJACs and LAJACs), to share their perspectives on how the program is operating across different regions.

The summaries reflect regional differences in how the program is structured, delivered, and experienced, and highlight both examples of good practice and challenges identified in each area. They also consider the cultural, logistical, and community-specific factors that influence how the AYCP supports Aboriginal young people in different contexts. These findings have informed the development of practical recommendations to strengthen the program's effectiveness and support its long-term sustainability.

The regions included in this report are:

[Barwon South West](#)

[Gippsland](#)

[South Metropolitan](#)

[The Grampians](#)

[Loddon Mallee](#)

[Western Metropolitan](#)

[Hume](#)

## Barwon South West (BSW)

The BSW region, located in south-west Victoria, encompasses nine Local Government Areas: Colac-Otway, Corangamite, Glenelg, Greater Geelong, Moyne, Queenscliff, Southern Grampians, Surf Coast and Warrnambool. It is home to 4,475 Aboriginal people, accounting for approximately 9 per cent of Victoria's total Aboriginal population (Victorian Government n.d.a).

Crime Statistics Agency data indicates that the number of cautions increased from 30 in 2020 to 120 in 2024. This represents a 300% increase in cautions issued to Aboriginal children (10-17) in the Barwon South West area between across this five-year period.

### Summary of Consultation

- AYCP panels are still in their infancy in the region.
- There was a perception that the public and police officers are unfamiliar with the panel processes.
- Current communication relies heavily on verbal explanations, with limited information on the availability of formal brochures or educational materials.
- Referrals are sparse, often delayed, and face logistical hurdles.
- In-person meetings are held in safe, youth-friendly environments, using informal, conversational approaches like sitting around a fire rather than formal panel settings.
- Panel members are selected based on their understanding of the justice system, youth work, cultural spaces, mental health, mentorship, and expertise in alcohol and drug support.
- A pool of approximately 15 individuals has been identified to prevent overburdening panel members and to provide flexibility in matching expertise.
- The agenda is shaped by the young person's specific needs and circumstances.

### Setup and Operating Procedure

The panel component of the AYCP in the BSW region, particularly in Geelong, has been operational for three months, but the setup has been challenging. Administrative processes pose significant hurdles. The program relies on referrals made to the Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer (ACLO). Referrals have been infrequent and often delayed, with only a small number processed during the initial months.

Meetings are ideally held in person because, as one participant stated, *"It's not appropriate, when trying to [engage] young people to rely on online formats"*. Another stakeholder explained, *"It's best practice if they're there in person, not online because engaging young people often requires visual cues and personal interaction"*. Stakeholders explained that meetings are intentionally informal and held in spaces where young people feel safe: *"We don't want it to be, you know, three people sitting across the table asking questions. We're talking together in a safe environment like meeting at a youth hub, sitting*

*around a fire, or other culturally safe environments*". Stakeholders from the region felt that this strategy helps build trust and reduces the intimidating nature of formal panel discussions. However, logistical issues, such as guardians being *"outside of our region"*, have made attendance difficult in some cases.

Organising panel meetings has also been affected by limited *"public and police awareness of the AYCP"*. There was a perception among stakeholders that with shift work and staffing challenges, *"not many police understand what this cautioning program is,"* nor the processes involved in submitting referrals. For example, some participants were of the view that it is unclear if VicPol officers know to inform the ACLO after hours, and whether a process for this exists.

One stakeholder illustrated the challenges: *"A lot of this stuff is on the fly because too many people don't have the awareness of what we're doing here"*. The absence of *"brochures or flyers or something that we can give out to the public or police"* was also raised. Delays can also happen in setting up meetings with the young person and their family due to the time it takes for guardians to give consent.

While these resources such as brochures or other resources could improve awareness, one participant remarked *"...at the end of the day, it is a police process, and if the police want it to be successful, they need to invest in the resources for that to be possible"*. The importance of Victoria Police leading the resource initiative was also raised by another stakeholder: *"we're not funded for it, but it's a VicPol initiative, and something as simple as the education resources... that's going to make a big difference"*.

### Panel Structure

The region's recruitment process for panel members is guided by the need for diverse expertise. The process involves contacting Team Leaders to select panel members based on the young person's referral. Potential panellists are selected based on their understanding of the justice system, experience with youth, and knowledge of areas such as cultural spaces, mental health, and substance support: *"we want to make sure we have the right person"*. A pool of approximately 15 individuals has been identified to prevent overburdening members and to provide flexibility in matching expertise to each young person's specific needs.

The panel structure is intentionally flexible and informal. For each case, meetings typically involve three selected members who convene half an hour prior to a session to discuss the case. Responsibilities are shared, with one member designated to record actions and outcomes. This format was designed to encourage open dialogue and ensure that the process is supportive rather than punitive. The panel is scheduled to meet monthly but can convene earlier for urgent cases: *"If there's an urgent one, we will meet earlier, if needed"*. The agenda is shaped by the young person's specific needs and circumstances.

Many stakeholders were of the view that improving panel members' skills is important. They suggested that training in trauma-informed practices and community engagement would enhance panel members' ability to support young people during panel meetings. Training on the cautioning program and clear guidance to ensure panel members understand the program's procedures was also suggested.

### Other Issues

Stakeholders suggested exploring the opportunity to collect data on why some young people decline participation or are not referred to panels. Participants were of the view that this may help to understand if there is scope for more young people to be referred to other culturally responsive services. Stakeholders expressed a desire for greater access to cautioning statistics for Aboriginal people in the region.

Feedback also raised issues with the name of the program, with the term 'program' perceived as a barrier. The preference in the BSW region is to rename it 'Next Steps Pathway' to reflect its role as a referral pathway to support services rather than a mandatory program, which carries certain stigmas. VicPol indicated that advice was provided in response to this query in October 2023 explaining that renaming was possible and requested suitable alternatives.

### Conclusion

The implementation of the AYCP in the BSW region over a short period of time has revealed some critical gaps in terms of the panel process and the people involved while also demonstrating its significant potential for positive impact. Stakeholders have identified some key solutions and opportunities to improve the program including:

1. **Education, awareness and resource development:** There appears to be gaps in the understanding of the panel processes. This is also reflected in the community as there is insufficient awareness within the community. Improving awareness of the details SOP could improve and promote both public understanding and police engagement.
2. **Capacity-building:** Panel members could benefit from training in trauma-informed practices, program-specific processes and criteria for eligibility to support their ability to support young people. Maintaining a pool of panellists could prevent overburdening individuals and provides flexibility in matching expertise to each young person's specific needs.

## Gippsland

*“He was petrified. He thought he was going to get rammed. But then afterwards, he was like, I was stressing for no reason [like] that was good, and it was literally just a safe space. Everyone just had a yarn, we had a chat, we spoke about what he did wrong, and asked questions and got him to reflect on himself.”*

The Gippsland region, located in eastern Victoria, includes six Local Government Areas: Bass Coast, Baw Baw, East Gippsland, Latrobe, South Gippsland, and Wellington. It is home to 4,173 Aboriginal people, accounting for approximately 9 per cent of Victoria’s total Aboriginal population (Victorian Government, n.d.b).

Crime Statistics Agency data indicates that the number of cautions increased from 47 in 2020 to 283 in 2024. This represents a 502% increase in cautions issued to Aboriginal children (10-17) in the Gippsland area across this five-year period.

### Summary of Consultation

- Sessions are deliberately held in neutral spaces like Anglicare offices rather than police stations, to avoid making the young person feel judged.
- The conversations avoid attaching “shame” to the young person’s actions.
- Cultural elements are incorporated to reconnect young people with their Aboriginal heritage
- If police officers are present, they are there in uniform as part of their role - the uniform represents personal responsibility and public accountability.
- A pre-meeting with the young person is important to build trust and explain the process so that the young person feels protected.
- Panels are formed on a case-by-case basis. Meetings are informal.
- Everyone gets a chance to talk at the panel.
- Privacy is important, all names are omitted when discussing what happened.
- There is reliance on a few community members, particularly Elders, who are often called upon to participate in panels.
- Young people and their families often don’t know what to expect when they engage with the cautioning panel.
- The AYCP panel component lacks awareness within the community.
- There is a strong preference for individuals with lived experience, community service backgrounds, and/or cultural knowledge to be panel members.
- The program is a referral pathway to connect young people to support services and other programs.

### Setup and Operating Procedure

Referrals from the police or courts to the AYCP panels have taken place in the region. These referrals are dependent on the charges or actions of the young people involved.

Panel meetings are held in neutral spaces like Anglicare offices rather than police stations. This is an intentional decision to avoid making the young person feel judged: *“I know all the kids, or I’ve worked with all the kids. I’ll give mum or whoever a call and just say, hey, in a couple of weeks... are you happy for, like, little one to do this?”*. Depending on the family’s preference and once they agree, *“they either bring the young person in, or I will go pick up the family”*.

Meetings usually last *“anywhere from half an hour to an hour”*, depending on how many people are there, the issues being discussed, and *“how much communication is shared by the young person”*. Panel members aim to *“draw out the gold”* in the young person to encourage young people to reflect on their actions and choices. These meetings might start with a panel member saying, *“hey, this is not who you are. This is not who I know you to be”*. The conversation avoids attaching *“shame”* to the young person’s actions.

During the meeting, participants sit in a semi-circular yarning circle. Introductions are made, especially if the family is unfamiliar with the panel members: *“If mum [guardian] doesn’t know any of us, we’ll obviously introduce ourselves”*. The structure is deliberately informal, with a relaxed tone throughout. If police officers are present, they are there in uniform as part of their role, but the stakeholder pointed out that *“because our kids have that relationship with them, it’s not intimidating”*. However, mixed feelings about the police being present or leading the meetings was expressed by some stakeholders. While their presence is important for accountability, some felt the meetings should be independent of police to make the space feel even safer.

Everyone gets a chance to talk, and privacy is important, so *“all names are omitted”* when discussing what happened. The focus isn’t on blaming anyone: *“It’s not so much as, like, ‘you’re a bad kid.’ It’s about, ‘this is done. How do we move forward? How do we get you to move forward? What are your thoughts on this?’”*. The young person has a chance to share their perspective. Sometimes they admit what happened, *“usually it’s like, yeah, I, like, I stuffed up”*, and other times they disagree, *“that’s not true what they said”*. Panel members listen to what the young person has to say while understanding that *“not everything is gospel”*. The young person can say, *“Yeah, I did that, but I didn’t do that”*. The main goal is to determine how to help them move forward and make positive changes. According to participants, the young people appear to take on board what is being said to them.

Another stakeholder recounted the story of a young person who, through the program, set personal goals, re-engaged in education, and secured employment. *“He’s at TAFE now, getting an apprenticeship, and just got a part-time job. No further offending”*.

Stakeholder feedback on the panel component was positive, with one noting:

*“I’ve sat in on a few panels, and the feedback that we’ve got from the young people and the parents that have attended, they’ve actually found it effective. The majority of the kids that we’ve had come through, I’ll say half of them haven’t offended again”.*

One of the effective strategies used in the region is a pre-meeting with the young person. This is done to build trust and explain the process so that young people feel protected: *“I always guarantee, when you walk in there, no one’s going to come at you”.*

#### Case study 1: Lisa and her cousin’s journey through the AYCP

Lisa (not her real name), a dedicated professional and a guardian, shared her experience with the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program. Her cousin had been invited to attend a panel after receiving a caution.

At first, her cousin was extremely nervous, fearing a harsh judgment. *“He was petrified. He thought he was going to get rammed”*, she shared. However, the session turned out to be much different from what they both anticipated. It provided a safe space for open and honest conversations where everyone could openly discuss the incident: *“We had a yarn, we had a chat, spoke about what he did wrong, and asked questions to help him reflect on himself”.*

As a guardian, she carried her own worries into the room. Despite being a professional, she found herself preparing for the worst. *“He suffers with some anxiety, so I was like, ‘oh, we’re going to have a breakdown.’ I wasn’t sure how he’d go, so I braced myself”.* But her concerns began to ease as the session unfolded. *“Sitting in there, it was a lot better than I imagined. My cousin told me that I was stressing for no reason. That was actually good”.*

After the panel, *“we were able to sit down and we went through everything that was discussed, what people said to us, how he felt after that, and he really opened up, he’s like, ‘I know that I stuffed up. I never want to do that again. I never want to feel like this. I never want to feel like I’m going to be [you know, rammed by Elders]’.* It was [a] really good reflection for him”, she said.

The experience proved to be a turning point for her cousin. It led to a massive change in his mindset and behaviour. *“Since that incident and everything, he has flourished. He works now. He’s saving up to buy his own house now. Like we’ve had a full 180 turnaround”.*

Looking back, Lisa is grateful for the opportunity the AYCP provided her cousin and the impact it had. *“It was a really, really good, positive interaction and everything for him. So, yeah, we’ve had a lot of positives come from it”.*

The panel meetings incorporate cultural elements to reconnect young people with their heritage. For example, one of the stakeholders described what is said to the young person: *“You’re a warrior, you know, like our people are warriors”.* This helps young people connect with their history: *“it brings back*

*remembrance of identity as well and draws on the history and the makeup of who they are as Aboriginals, and the powerful impact Aboriginal peoples have made over thousands of years”.*

Despite its strengths, the panel component of the program faces hurdles. The community lacks awareness of panel component. One stakeholder shared their frustration: *“I can’t remember the last time we were informed that there would be a panel or there would be a youth coming to participate”.* This lack of communication leads to confusion and missed opportunities for engagement. Some stakeholders in the region, including RAJAC members, appear to lack clarity about what is happening. They had questions about the processes in the region, such as the RAJAC’s involvement, what support it provides. For instance, a stakeholder mentioned that as a respected Elder in the community they would likely be one of the first points of contact regarding youth programs.

However, they could not recall the last time they or other Elders were contacted for updates: *“I don’t remember the last time I was contacted regarding the youth cautioning program panel”.* Other stakeholders expressed surprise and concern, revealing that they are just only learning that meetings within the panel are taking place.

A stakeholder described the challenges in establishing the cautioning panels in East Gippsland. Although the panel component is currently active in the Latrobe Valley area of Gippsland, efforts to adapt and implement it in East Gippsland have faced challenges. The Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer (ACLO) in East Gippsland has been working to set up the program to suit the local community’s specific needs. However, difficulties have arisen in determining the best approach to address these needs.

One key issue raised by stakeholders is that young people and their families often don’t know what to expect when they engage with the panel, as the program is not widely known or understood within the community. Another challenge raised by stakeholders is the reliance on a few community members, particularly Elders, who are often called upon to participate in panels. As one stakeholder noted, *“It’s the same community members [that] are called upon to speak to our young people... and it has become a burden”.* Suggestions were made on reimbursing panel members who participate in voluntary capacity: *“We’re taking time away from their day or whatever is happening in their lives”.*

### Panel structure in the Gippsland Region

Panel members include police officers, Koorie Education Support Officers (KESOs), community representatives, Elders, and other stakeholders. Meetings typically involve the young person, their family, police representatives, and community members. The chairperson, often an Elder, facilitates the discussion.

Panels are formed on a case-by-case basis, depending on the referrals. Meetings are informal and focus on listening to the young person’s story, helping them reflect on what happened, and encouraging them to set goals for the future. *“It’s about how we get the young person to move forward”*, one stakeholder

explained. In some instances, meetings are held every Monday to review cases of young people who have come through over the weekend.

In terms of panel members' experience and qualifications, stakeholders expressed a strong preference for individuals with lived experience, community service backgrounds, and/or cultural knowledge: *"Whoever sits on the panel should understand the challenges Aboriginal people face...know the history and the why"*.

One stakeholder suggested panel members should understand cultural history, and the challenges Aboriginal people have faced in the past and still face today: *"You know, like, the background of that [young] person, of the family. You might not find that out beforehand, but just have an understanding of what challenges Aboriginal people [families] face, what they have faced, and what they still face today"*. Another quality is genuine care: *"You've got to care about the young person. Kids can tell when someone truly cares about them, and that connection can break down barriers"*.

Incorporating past program participants as panel members was also suggested. They have firsthand experience with the program and panel operations, particularly those who have experienced success after engaging with the panel:

*"Previous people have gone through, and you've seen success stories coming up to them, so they know what [other young people] don't know. Someone who's gone through that program—a peer-to-peer too—because you've got similar kinds of stories or similar experiences, so the opportunity to share and learn is really good."*

Panel members face challenges like workload pressures and the emotional toll of working with at-risk youth. A stakeholder suggested that a post-session debrief would help: *"Maybe a debrief with everybody...so we're not walking out carrying it with us."* Ensuring panel members have the necessary cultural and trauma-informed training was also suggested.

### [AYCP as a referral pathway](#)

The program uses referral pathways to connect young people to support services and other programs. For example, a stakeholder recalled how one young person participated in the panel meeting and then voluntarily joined Anglicare's AYJ program. This shows how the panel links participants to further help and resources.

Programs like the Kickback Initiative and Deadly Daughters program offer complementary support, focusing on early intervention, cultural connection, and community engagement. Many young people join these programs on their own, where they receive continued guidance and support. For example, the Kickback Program focuses on helping young people who may be *"at risk of offending or not engaged in education or are looking for cultural connection"*. The program aims to step in early to prevent bigger

problems. Partnerships with organisations like the Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA) enhance the panel component's reach and impact.

Another referral pathway through the program is helping young people reconnect with their culture. Helping participants understand their heritage gives them a sense of identity and belonging. This is achieved through referral to the Koorie Heritage Trust to gather cultural information.

### Conclusion

Although there appeared to be limited awareness and information about the panel component of the Youth Cautioning Program, it is evident that it has made a significant difference for some young people in the Gippsland area. Stakeholders suggested the following improvements to the program:

1. **Targeted communication:** Improving community awareness of the panel component may increase uptake of this option.
2. **Panel members remuneration:** Recognising and compensating panel members (especially Elders or those attending in a voluntary capacity) for their time and contributions may reduce the burden on the limited number of available individuals. This does not apply to those attending as part of their paid work duties.
3. **Panel members pool:** The pool of panel members could be widened to include those with lived experience and peer-to-peer connection.
4. **Follow-up sessions:** Children may benefit from follow-up meetings to check on their progress and provide ongoing support.

## Southern Metropolitan

The Southern Metropolitan region, located in Melbourne's south, includes 10 Local Government Areas: Bayside, Cardinia, Casey, Frankston, Glen Eira, Greater Dandenong, Kingston, Mornington Peninsula, Port Phillip and Stonnington. It is home to 7,264 Aboriginal people, accounting for approximately 15 per cent of Victoria's total Aboriginal population (Victorian Government n.d.d).

Crime Statistics Agency data indicates that the number of cautions increased from 19 in 2020 to 83 in 2024. This represents a 337% increase in cautions issued to Aboriginal children (10-17) in the Southern Metropolitan area across this five-year period.

### Summary of Consultation

- Some of the consultation attendees had limited insight into the current structure of the AYCP in the region. The feedback provided has been written to acknowledge this context
- The southern metropolitan region was part of the trial site at the inception of the AYCP program.
- Operations were significantly disrupted by the pandemic (COVID) however, the pilot program showed clear success in reducing youth justice numbers.
- There are concerns about the transparency and structure of the current panel
- A clear and structured recruitment process for selecting members, including formal selection criteria and implementing an expression of interest is required.
- Consideration be given to defined fixed term limits on panel membership.
- The panel could also benefit from younger members, including those with lived experience and have a strong understanding of social media and its impact on young people.

### Setup and Operation in Southern Metropolitan

The youth cautioning program in the Southern Metropolitan region began as part of a trial. A stakeholder described how they were *"heavily involved in lobbying for one of the trial sites, set up the terms of reference and then try and engage community representatives"*. Operations were heavily disrupted when COVID hit and paused the program. The COVID-19 pandemic caused major disruptions to the program, limiting participation, halting panel meetings, and impacting data collection. Despite this, the pilot still showed clear success in reducing youth justice numbers in the Southern region. Following a review of these outcomes, the Chief Commissioner announced the program would be expanded statewide.

The AYCP panel component is currently operating in the region, however, it appears that some attendees at the consultation were not fully informed about how it works.

A stakeholder shared their concerns about the lack of community awareness of the panel component of the program: *“I don’t even know whether the community knows very much about it, because I’ve never seen it advertised or a pamphlet of any sorts like that. I’m sure parents would like to know that too”*.

### Current Panel Structure

Some of the consultation attendees had limited insight into the current panel structure, hence the feedback provided has been written to acknowledge this context.

Concerns were raised about the transparency and structure of the current panel in the region. Some community members felt there was a lack of clarity around how panel members are selected and who is involved, raising questions about fairness and representation. It was suggested that panel membership should reflect a broader cross-section of the community.

On the qualities and experience required, it was suggested that panel members should have a *“[reasonably] stable personal and family life and be good role models”*. It was also important to participants that panel members be open about personal circumstances to ensure trust and credibility. While prior experience in Youth Justice was not seen as essential, stakeholders were of the perception that panel members demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility, accountability, and an understanding of the challenges faced by families, including issues like dysfunction, alcohol, or drug use.

There was a suggestion that there should be a clear and structured recruitment process for selecting members, including formal selection criteria and implementing an expressions of interest process. It was also noted that the recruitment process could follow an endorsement process, similar to how Elders are endorsed to join other panels, to ensure a fair and transparent approach that upholds the panel’s integrity and effectiveness.

A suggestion on tenure or time limit was raised. Some stakeholders were of the view that there should be a fixed term for being on the panel, such as *“twelve months or two years so other people have opportunities to join”*. Others suggested including younger members with lived experience, because they could bring valuable perspectives. However, they warned that this *“could be tricky and create discomfort if a young one comes in there and sees one of his comrades... sitting across the other side of the desk”*.

### Conclusion

The Southern Metropolitan Region is an area that experienced positive benefits from the AYCP.

It appeared that many attendees at the consultation were not fully informed about how the AYCP currently operates in the region. As a result, only limited information could be provided about its current setup, operations, and panel structure, insights that could have been more detailed if those currently involved in the program had attended. Despite these limitations, one key consideration that could guide improvements to the AYCP within the region is:

1. **Panel structure:** Specific selection criteria could ensure panel members are qualified and representative of the community. An Expressions of interest process may help attract experienced and knowledgeable individuals to the panel. Including younger people with lived experience on panels may further strengthen its capacity. Introducing fixed terms for panel membership may also help ensure regular renewal of members and create more opportunities for broader community participation over time.

However, any move towards fixed terms should be approached with caution, particularly considering whether such changes would maintain respect for cultural authority, long-term sustainability and diversity of panel membership.

## The Grampians

The Grampians region, located in western Victoria, is home to 3,164 Aboriginal people, accounting for approximately 7 per cent of Victoria's total Aboriginal population. The region includes 11 Local Government Areas: Ararat, Ballarat, Golden Plains, Hepburn, Hindmarsh, Horsham, Moorabool, Northern Grampians, Pyrenees, West Wimmera, and Yarriambiack (Victorian Government n.d.d).

Crime Statistics Agency data indicates that the number of cautions increased from 11 in 2020 to 104 in 2024. This represents an 845% increase in cautions issued to Aboriginal children (10-17) in the Grampians area across this five-year period.

### Summary of Consultation

- There are variations in the establishment and operation of panels across locations.
- Concerns about the lack of awareness and transparency in panel processes.
- Some difficulties in gaining consistent engagement from local police.
- Meetings were initially held regularly but later reduced to occur when there is a referral.
- There is a pool of 10 people available to be panel members in some locations
- Panels typically consist of Elders, Youth Justice workers, and VicPol ACLO officers.
- Cultural knowledge, experience in the justice system, and community connection are important attributes for panel members.
- Brokerage fund could support elder participation or travel
- Trauma-informed training for panel members

### Setup and Operation in the Grampians

Stakeholders in the region described variations in the establishment and operation of panels across locations in the Grampians: *"Ballarat did have one running ... but Horsham has never had one. The Stawell one ran for about 12 months"*.

In Stawell, some positive outcomes occurred despite limited panel activity, however, the panel's operation faced challenges when key personnel left.

*"We did have one young person come through at a time ... we did the whole meet as a group. The ACLO did a bit of work in getting the mum engaged and things like that. We had a generally positive outcome because the Aboriginal youth justice worker was heavily involved"*.

*"Even when there was no youth cautioning panels, [a staff member] would send out an email just to touch base ... give an update about what's happened with this young fella"*.

The challenges were attributed to a lack of certainty concerning roles in the set up and operation of the panels with stakeholders expressing frustration in gaining consistent engagement from local police.

Despite these challenges, positive outcomes were also achieved. One stakeholder shared an example of the vital role Elders play in mentoring young people: *“One Elder travelled to Bacchus Marsh to support these kids”*. Another example from Ballarat was shared, where a young person successfully met with the panel and, in a strong show of support, the magistrate acknowledged their progress by clearing their record and personally congratulating them. These examples demonstrate the potential of the panel operations when properly supported and implemented.

### Current Panel Structure

The structure of the panel is flexible and varies with people coming together as needed. There is a defined Terms of Reference: *“We have 10 people available for the panel, and whoever can make it on the day will go out with Victoria Police”*. Responsibilities are shared among Elders, youth justice workers, and ACLOs. Panel meetings occur only when a caution is referred, unlike initial fortnightly meetings that were deemed unsustainable.

A major challenge is the lack of support for panel members as panels are reliant upon community participation. Participants indicated Elders’s desire for brokerage money to mentor the youth, take them out on Country, or even just cover travel costs: *“Elders had to go out all the way to Bacchus Marsh on their own money to support these kids”*. Another stakeholder suggested that this issue could be addressed by providing *“...petrol vouchers for the Elders who are volunteering their time and money”*.

Stakeholders were of the view that cultural knowledge and lived experience are critical for panel members. However, it was raised that many panel members including newcomers often struggle without clear guidance. In terms of improving the capacity of panel members, stakeholders were of the view that panel members would benefit from trauma-informed care and counselling training: *“Sometimes you hear something triggering, and you don’t expect it ... having trauma-informed training would be good”*.

Many members of the community appreciate the panel element but expressed frustration due to a perceived lack of structure and resources: *“It’s a good setup, but there’s no real guidance or funding to make it work properly”*. Additional feedback provided by stakeholders on the perception of the community is that there is the need for greater awareness about the panel: *“Families don’t even know what to expect when they’re going to a meeting ... there’s no flyer, no information about what the program is or why they’re sitting there”*.

### Conclusion

The findings highlight inconsistencies in the establishment and operation of Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program (AYCP) panels across locations in the Grampians region. While some areas experienced positive outcomes, issues such as awareness about the panel, staff turnover, and uncertainty concerning local governance from Victoria Police have hindered the implementation of panels. Stakeholders were of the view that the following will guide improvements to the program in the region:

1. **SOP awareness among panel members:** This would explain their roles, what's expected of them, and how the panel works, making things clearer and more consistent.
2. **Provision of brokerage money for Elder travel and engagement activities:** Financial support for travel and engagement would enable greater participation of Elders and recognition of their important contributions.
3. **Improved awareness about the panel operations:** These would explain the program and panel component in simple terms, helping families understand what it's about and how it works.

## Loddon Mallee

The Loddon Mallee region, located in north-west Victoria, encompasses ten Local Government Areas: Buloke, Campaspe, Central Goldfields, Gannawarra, Greater Bendigo, Loddon, Macedon Ranges, Mildura, Mount Alexander and Swan Hill. It is home to 6,702 Aboriginal people, accounting for approximately 14 per cent of Victoria's total Aboriginal population (Victorian Government n.d.e).

Crime Statistics Agency data indicates that the number of cautions increased from 75 in 2020 to 350 in 2024. This represents a 367% increase in cautions issued to Aboriginal children (10-17) in the Loddon Mallee area across this five-year period.

### Summary of Consultation

- Since COVID-19, the region has experienced inconsistent panel participation
- Personnel changes have led to the loss of many valuable community contacts. Rebuilding these connections requires time and effort.
- The panel component is perceived as ineffective in the region.
- Young people seem to lack fear of receiving a caution, treating it as something to embrace rather than take seriously.
- Some stakeholders were unfamiliar with the SOP and unaware it could be adapted to local needs
- Panel participation varies across regions, with some struggling with resources and consistency.
- Recruiting passionate, knowledgeable panel members, including Elders, remains a challenge.
- Panel members, particularly Elders are not compensated for their time and cultural expertise.

### Setup and Operation in Loddon Mallee

Prior to the establishment of the AYCP, a cautioning program operated in the region and *“when this first came out, it was run by Victoria Police itself”*. The program involved an engagement officer and the ACLO, who worked closely together. These two individuals went into the community, dealt directly with the young people being cautioned, and helped identify programs for them to get involved in. They also managed all the paperwork: *“It was done very, very well, spot on. It operated like a mini Koori court”*.

One participant described how they would regularly catch up with young people who had been issued with a caution, *“more or less every week. We got them on their feet and made sure that other people were involved in all that sort of stuff. But it was every week. It was just passionate because, you know, we just wanted to get our kids not to be in trouble, yeah, and to guide them properly. We would go down to the parks, have a yarn with them, shout them a drink and all that sort of stuff, and just sit down, have a yarn. If the kids didn't want to go anywhere, we'd just say, well, we're going to stay here”*.

Now that AYCP is in operation, participants shared concerns during consultations about how the panel component is currently functioning in the region. They felt it was not always operating effectively. The recent retirement of a Youth Resource Officer was said to have resulted in the loss of valuable community contacts, and rebuilding these, according to participants, will take time and effort.

A stakeholder described efforts being made to revamp the panels and implement ideas that can create meaningful traction. They noted the Youth Resource Officer has initiated activities such as taking young people out to the lake for fishing with police officers, which they felt was a positive step. However, resource shortages and achieving consistent engagement particularly in maintaining consistency with panel members continues to remain as the significant hurdle in the Swan Hill location.

There were concerns about variations in practice across locations in the region: *"We've got Swan Hill and Echuca, and representation in Bendigo now. The inconsistency across the region is an issue. Like we just heard [how things are different] from two different locations, we need a consistent approach"*. Further, some stakeholders stated a robust communication structure between police, Elders, and service providers could address a potential gap in follow-up support for young people as some stakeholders felt uncertain about how to connect young people with the support they need.

During consultations, several issues were raised about how the AYCP Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are being used. Some participants said they had never seen the SOP or didn't know much about it. One Elder also said the program used to be quick and simple but now has too many steps. They were worried this might cause young people to lose interest.

Others said the SOP is helpful but didn't always match what was possible in their area. They felt that if the SOP is followed too strictly, the program and panel operations become too hard to run properly, especially in places with fewer services or support. All areas have been encouraged from the beginning to adapt the SOPs as they see fit. However, consultations showed that some stakeholders were not only unfamiliar with the SOP itself but also unaware that they had the flexibility to adjust it to suit their local needs.

### Current Panel Structure

The panel structures and locations are not centralised in the region, with some being run from Bendigo, Echuca, Mildura, and Swan Hill: *"It's too big to have one panel sit in the whole LMR"*. It was acknowledged *"that local cultural knowledge is what you need,"* as well as the availability of services specific to each local area.

Another stakeholder stated that the current approach relies on a small group of local individuals who volunteer their time when they are available. Typically, the panel consists of the ACLO, a community member, and a support worker, whether from MDAS or another social support organisation. While these panels conduct meetings and follow-up as needed, the process can be slow. Remuneration for

sitting panel members was also raised, particularly for Elders who are involved in a voluntary capacity and not as part of their employment.

When asked about the qualities and knowledge of panel members, stakeholders noted the value of being passionate and supportive individuals. One participant raised the importance of *“having the right Elders that's going to be there who's going to be passionate”*. They noted that being a panel member is not a passive role: *“That's not a job where you're going to sit down and put your toes up. It's a job that if you're really passionate, yep, and can give them support”*.

In terms of recruiting panel members, a stakeholder suggested that the focus on recruitment should not be limited to the Aboriginal community alone: *“involving the right police officers too, who are passionate, who want to do it, who are not there just to tick the box”*. Participants advocated for individuals who demonstrate genuine care and authenticity, explaining that *“real people are better off when they call straight out”*.

Stakeholders also agreed that justice-related knowledge should not necessarily be a prerequisite for panel members. Instead, opportunities could be provided for panel members to learn and understand justice-related processes, which would improve how they carry out their responsibilities: *“It is good for them to fully understand what justice is all about”*.

Specific training and support were identified as important for future panel members. Suggestions included *“understanding the VicPol process,”* and using *“case studies of times that [things] have worked really well, or as a sort of a guide for panel members to be aware of this is what we did on this one occasion”*.

While acknowledging that *“obviously, everyone's going to be different,”* these examples can *“spark some ideas, saying, oh, well, I can do that, and I can provide that sort of support, but in this sort of way, just something that might work”*. In addition, *“cultural awareness training”* was raised as an essential component to ensure panel members are equipped to engage effectively and respectfully.

### Other Issues

The community generally supported the program when it was running effectively. However, there were concerns about misuse of the program and attending panels, with claims of some non-Aboriginal youth falsely identifying as Aboriginal: *“We're hearing about kids telling their non-Aboriginal mates to say they're Aboriginal, so they'll get off lighter”*.

Some stakeholders mentioned existing programs that could complement the youth cautioning program. These include local initiatives such as Anglicare's Youth Support Service (YSS) program, which provides youth with support in education, employment, and daily activities, and after-hours basketball programs.

## Conclusion

Despite some challenges, there is compelling evidence to support further progress and success. Issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, inconsistent panel participation, lack of awareness and flexibility to adapt the SOP, young people perceiving a caution as something to embrace rather than take seriously, and perceived misuse of the program by non-Aboriginal young people have created challenges for the program's operations in the region. However, participants believe the following measures will guide the program's improvement:

1. **Ongoing reflection and responsiveness:** Some participants emphasised the importance of keeping the AYCP responsive to changing needs and local contexts. They felt that regular reflection on how the program is operating could help ensure it remains effective, culturally safe, and sustainable over time. While no formal offence criteria govern participation in the AYCP, stakeholders valued opportunities to review and refine how the program supports young people, particularly in light of evolving community needs and service delivery challenges.
2. **Using case studies as guidance:** Case studies of successful outcomes can help panel members by providing ideas and guidance. Even though every case is different, these examples can spark new ways to support young people to meet their specific needs.
3. **Remuneration** for sitting panel members particularly for Elders who are involved in a voluntary capacity.
4. **Improved awareness on the SOP and flexibility to adjust it to suit their local needs:** While this flexibility is already available, participants were not always aware of it. They felt that clearer communication and support would help regions make better use of the flexibility to strengthen the implementation of the AYCP.
5. **Regular follow-ups with young people:** Regular follow-ups, support and connections with young people who have received cautions help them stay on track and move forward.
6. **Broadening support options:** Stakeholders discussed the importance of connecting young people to a range of locally available support services, including cultural activities, sports programs such as football, basketball, and swimming, and other community-based resources. While Aboriginal corporations play an important role in providing culturally safe services, stakeholders felt that drawing on the full range of local supports to meet the diverse needs of young people is vital.

## Western Metropolitan

The Western Metropolitan region, located in Melbourne's west, includes six Local Government Areas: Brimbank, Hobsons Bay, Maribyrnong, Melton, Moonee Valley and Wyndham. It is home to approximately 5,183 Aboriginal people, accounting for around 11 per cent of Victoria's total Aboriginal population.

Crime Statistics Agency data indicates that the number of cautions increased from 16 in 2020 to 84 in 2024. This represents a 425% increase in cautions issued to Aboriginal children (10-17) in the Western Metropolitan area between across this five-year period.

### Summary of Consultation

- AYCP has been running in the region for about two (2) years.
- When a young person attends a police station, an internal notification is received by the AYCP team. A team member contacts the young person or their family to see if they are interested in being involved with the panel.
- Sometimes parents are more interested than the young person.
- Panel meetings are convened at community locations rather than at police stations.
- Conversations focus on supporting young people to reflect on their behaviour and think about ways to make up for any harm caused.
- Cultural connection is a key part of the consent-based plan of action.
- Families (including the young person) are informed and consent given before any information is shared.
- There are opportunities to improve the relationship between Victoria Police and the community.
- Creating engaging video content could make the process more approachable and relatable.
- Limited panel members: currently there is a pool of 4.
- Meetings are held in a circle rather than around a table to make it less confronting.
- There is a challenge of short notice for panels, making it hard for everyone to attend. Communication mostly happening through emails.
- Panel members do not always have a clear understanding of their roles.
- There is uncertainty regarding the recruitment process and criteria for becoming a panel member.
- The panel would benefit from having people with expertise in key areas that support young people.
- Stakeholders expressed a desire to remunerate Elders who participate in voluntary capacity as panel members. This does not include those participating as part of their paid employment.

### Setup and Operation in the West Metropolitan Region

The AYCP runs out of Werribee in the west and has been running for about two (2) years. When a young person attends a police station, a team member of the AYCP program is notified. The young person or members of their family are contacted to see if they are interested in being involved with the panel: *“there’ll be leaders and community Elders available to support them and connect with them and also connect them with their culture”*. However, there were concerns that sometimes *“the parents are more keen than the young people to be involved”*. In order to improve engagement, the region has now started using a new approach of having Elders or community leaders approach the families instead of police, which has been *“a bit more successful”*. Another improvement is moving the panel meetings away from the police station.

Another stakeholder gave a detailed description of what goes on during the meetings: *“First, we talk briefly about what’s brought them to the panel, which helps them reflect on their behaviour and think about ways to make up for any harm caused, and we talk about who’s been affected by it. Like, one case involved an older sister who gets called into the police station at odd hours of the night; she’s got a baby of her own. It’s important to talk about the impact on the family and the broader consequences of their actions. Then, with input from the young person and their parent, guardian, or worker, we come up with a plan to try and address those sort of things”*.

The plan includes specific steps to follow: *“We look at substance use, education, family, community and home, health, culture, other areas, and a future engagement plan. We break those down and look at how we can support the young person in each of those criteria. It’s sort of like a contract, and the panel includes a plan to offer support where needed. Finally, the young person and the panel sign the plan, making a commitment to follow through”*.

The age of young people in the region accessing the AYCP is under 18. When asked if there is a common pattern with certain age groups, one stakeholder shared that they recently had a 12-year-old boy attend a panel, but most participants tend to be between 16 and 18 years old. The stakeholder also recalled a case where they ran two panels for the same young person who was in residential care. Eventually, this young person faced criminal charges and was referred to the Koori Court, which then referred them back for another panel. The stakeholder highlighted the benefit of this continuity, explaining that the young person had already engaged with a panel member, who maintained ongoing contact. This allowed the panel to check in on their progress over time, creating a more supportive and consistent experience.

When asked about the mechanisms in place to protect young people's confidentiality during the process, a participant explained that *“there is a confidentiality form for panel members, which also covers any conflicts of interest. This is important because, in some areas, personal relationships between young people and families are complex and can influence the process. Participation is entirely voluntary, and the young person must give their consent before any information is shared. Without their consent,*

*no details are disclosed, and their information is handled with the same level of confidentiality as anyone else going through the policing process framework". A stakeholder involved in the AYCP in the region also described how it operates locally: "We've got some of the Elders to go out and approach the families to see if they wanted to participate. I asked them if it was okay to share their information before that happened". This approach ensures that families are informed and have given their permission before any information is shared, respecting their privacy and involvement in the process.*

A key strategy included in the process in the region is focusing on cultural connection:

*"connection to culture is the most important thing with these young people. During the panel meeting we ask them about whether they know much about their mob or where they're from, and we found that many young people are interested but don't know much about their heritage. One of the things that we're trying to implement out here is we run an Aboriginal cultural experience. It's an opportunity for young people and their families to connect with their culture and land. It's a very good program for our young people, because the families and carers can come along for the day, and they gain a lot from it. At the start of the program, we used to give them a boomerang, which they paint with their life story. The young people become very attached to these boomerangs. They don't let that out of their sight because it represents their journey and is deeply meaningful to them".*

Although the program does not currently include a healing part, *"we can always make room for that"*, recognising that many young people need support to heal.

The youth cautioning program panel component is making progress in the region and is recognised as an important initiative to support young people. However, one participant pointed out the importance of follow-up and referral pathways: *"whilst I think the youth cautioning program is great and there's a need for it, I think there's got to be those connections and those referrals out [there], and having the ACCHOs and ACCOs step up to actually support further so that we are not setting those young people up to fail."* This can help young people stay on track and avoid further problems, giving them a better chance to make positive changes in their lives.

One suggestion was for *"a dedicated resource for following-up all the support needs identified during the panel"* and the importance of acting quickly: *"a 48-hour turnaround for maybe a dedicated resource to go out and connect with families and young people in a place that's comfortable for them"*.

Stakeholders were of the opinion that establishing these connections early could help build trust and ensures that the support identified during the panel is provided.

Strengthening the relationship between police and the community was also raised as an important factor: *"the connection between VicPol and community has a little bit of work to do"*. They suggested practical steps, such as officers wearing *"a polo shirt that had some Indigenous design would be a great icebreaker,"* and introducing food during meetings to create a more welcoming environment.

A stakeholder suggested that while flyers (promotional materials) are useful, social media and videography are not being used enough to engage young people. They pointed out that *"kids learn through their phones now,"* and creating engaging video content could make the panel process more approachable and relatable. They proposed featuring familiar faces to make young people feel comfortable and welcomed. Using videos could help break down any fears or misunderstandings about the panel operations, showing that *"there's no shame getting in this space"*, and making it clear that attending is not an admission of guilt or failure.

During the consultation, it became clear that some stakeholders were uncertain about how the program operates in the region. This was highlighted when one stakeholder asked, *"How many times can young people be cautioned? Is there a set limit?"*, indicating a lack of clarity and awareness around how the caution process works. The decision to caution or charge remains at the discretion of police. As outlined in the SOPs, the eligibility criteria align with the *Victoria Police Manual – Cautions*. The current policy does not set a specific limit on the number of cautions, with the aim of giving young people every opportunity for support and intervention.

#### Case study 2: Strengthening Family Connections

An AYCP panel member shared the following account of the program's ability to create intergenerational links.

*Jason\** (not his real name), a young person involved in the program panel process, was supported not only by the program facilitators but also by their family, including carers, mums, and a grandfather, who attended the panel. The stakeholder said it was *"really great"* to have family members like *"carers or mums or grandfathers"* sit with the young person during the panel and understand *"what was happening for them there"*. This involvement allowed the family to better understand the circumstances and challenges the young person was experiencing.

The work did not stop after the panel. Once the siblings gained an understanding of what was happening with Jason, they became actively involved in supporting him through whatever he needed to do to move forward, further strengthening the family unit. He was not navigating his challenges in isolation but rather with the collective support of his family and the community: *"we can't work in isolation, it's important to help everyone if possible"*.

Without the panel and the involvement of family members, things could have turned out very differently. The stakeholder shared that they are *"still in touch with that young person now"*, and without the panel, *"these opportunities would have been lost"*. They believe the program has played a key role in creating important family connections: *"it's been really valuable, fantastic"*.

### Panel Structure in the West Metropolitan region

The panel usually includes Elders, police officers, youth workers, and sometimes a parent or guardian. It consists of a pool of four people. The meetings are held in a circle rather than around a table to make it “less confronting”.

When asked about the composition of the panel, one participant stated that:

*“It's better to have a more diverse group of people with different experiences though. Sometimes, if they're engaged with a youth worker, or if they've got another worker, a backup worker, or somebody, then they can come along as well. We aim to have [a] diverse group in place to ensure the young person is supported from different perspectives. Having a mix of Elders, leaders, and support workers provides a more holistic approach to addressing the young person's needs”.*

Stakeholders mentioned challenges such as short notice for panels, making it hard for everyone to attend: “Once you've got the young person to say yes, then I'll try and book it in the next week,” but not everyone is available at such short notice. Although the program has been running for two years in the region, communication mostly happens through emails among panel members.

In terms of the panel roles and responsibilities, a stakeholder explained that they are responsible for organising the panel and bringing in the young people. Currently, the panel runs two back-to-back sessions in the afternoon, scheduled at one and two o'clock: “I'll chair the meeting, do the welcome, and introduce everybody.” For a more comfortable environment, the panel recently decided to sit in a circle instead of around a table, making the setting “less confronting.”

Another challenge is that panel members do not always have a clear understanding of their roles, despite the existence of a role and responsibility-terms of the reference. One participant described the situation when panel members are not able to attend meetings: “sometimes they suggest someone else who might not fully understand their responsibilities”.

Stakeholders also pointed out that the young people involved often have complex issues, and “sometimes, you know, we're not set up to help them achieve success”. This can affect the consistency and effectiveness of the panel process. A stakeholder suggested preparing a brief about the young people before the panel would be useful for community Elders: “some preparation, maybe a brief of the young people would be really helpful prior to the meeting.”

Stakeholders expressed a desire for more information regarding the recruitment process and criteria for becoming a panel member. It was suggested that a potential strategy to recruit more panel members could be to invite people who are interested in being mentored to become panel members. One stakeholder recommended creating an application form that could be shared with the group and Caucus members to help attract new panel members, especially in areas where recruitment is challenging.

Although this process has not been used before, it could be introduced if the region supports the idea. It was further suggested that the application process could be modelled on the existing process used for police members who apply to become Police Aboriginal Liaison Officers (PALOs). This approach would provide a structured and familiar way to recruit new panel members.

In terms of the composition of the panel, several stakeholders supported a diverse approach because *"young people respond to different people"*. They shared that some young people prefer not to face an Elder who might *"shame them up about their grandmother that [went to the dreamland] 10 years ago"*. Instead, they think that *"for different people, it's a different response"*, having a variety of panel members could be more effective and there might be someone who can connect with a young person in a way that an Elder cannot. Some participants stated they have *"stopped referring to the panel as Elders. We now describe them as community leaders"*.

For the panel to be effective, stakeholders stated it needs members with the right skills and experience: *"I think if you got people with backgrounds in the key areas like, you know, someone who can put referrals in for medical, someone who can do education, someone for recreation and culture"*. Having members with knowledge in these areas ensures that young people receive the right support and guidance in different aspects of their lives.

Another stakeholder supported this point by reiterating the importance of utilising the West Metro Caucus, which includes Aboriginal representatives from government departments as well as local organisations. They explained that the Caucus provides a valuable network of individuals who can contribute to the panel. This means that even if a Caucus member, who has many responsibilities, is not available to participate directly, they can delegate the role to someone else who can contribute. The region is working towards involving all frontline Aboriginal staff in the cautioning program panel component.

When asked whether panel members required knowledge of the justice system, most participants felt that panel members *"don't have to have a detailed knowledge of the justice system or anything like that. What matters most is that they are willing to volunteer their time and be part of the panel, follow up with the young person and their family, and have a valid Working with Children Check"*.

Boosting the capacity of panel members was seen as an important step, with a suggestion that they would benefit from training on youth justice support. This training could equip them to better support young people in reflecting on who the crimes affected, understanding their actions and taking responsibility for them. It would also provide panel members with the skills to guide young people in how they could make up for the harm they've caused.

Most of the panel members are volunteers and try as much as possible to make themselves available when required to do so. One participant suggested that *"Elders be reimbursed for their time because they share their wisdom, their cultural knowledge and take time away from their families"*. They pointed out that many Elders are *"in caring roles themselves, and going above and beyond, so it would be fair to*

*pay them for their time. Elders should also have the option of upskilling in training as many are interested in learning not just for the young people they support, but also for their own families”.*

### Conclusion

The input from the Western Metropolitan region has demonstrated that the area is well-positioned to be a leader and role model for the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program (AYCP) across the state. Stakeholders believe that these additional improvements will further enhance the program's effectiveness and impact.

1. **Consent-based action plan:** Given that participation in the AYCP is consent-based, for any young person who agrees to take part in a panel meeting, it is encouraged that a clear action plan is created at the end of the meeting. This plan could support addressing the key issues that led to their involvement in panel meeting and act as a shared agreement with clear steps to support the young person.
2. **Videography and social media engagement:** Increasing the use of social media and videography can help make the AYCP more relatable and accessible for young people. Many young people learn and engage through their phones, so creating video content with familiar faces can make the panel component feel more welcoming and less intimidating. This can help clear up any fears or misunderstandings, showing that participation is not an admission of guilt but an opportunity for support and connection.
3. **Panel recruitment:** Adopting a recruitment process like the one used for police members applying to become PALOs can help attract new panel members with valuable skills and experience. It was suggested that a formal application form can be introduced to create a clear and accessible pathway for individuals interested in joining the panel. Young people respond to different people and having a diverse group of members can provide better support and connection.

## Hume

The Hume RAJAC region encompasses 12 Local Government Areas: Alpine, Benalla, Greater Shepparton, Indigo, Mansfield, Mitchell, Moira, Murrindindi, Strathbogie, Towong, Wangaratta, and Wodonga. The region is home to an Aboriginal population of 5,662, accounting for approximately 12% of Victoria's total Aboriginal population.

Crime Statistics Agency data indicates that the number of cautions increased from 58 in 2020 to 233 in 2024. This represents a 302% increase in cautions issued to Aboriginal children (10-17) in the Hume area between across this five-year period.

### Summary of Consultation

- The panel component in the region was established in February 2022.
- A detailed spreadsheet is used to track various aspects of the program, including a list of young people referred from caution, their offenses, and whether they were approved or not and follow up actions.
- Panel members engage informally, visiting homes or meeting youth in casual settings. There are no mandated formal panel meetings.
- The informal conversations aim to make young people think about the dangers and consequences of their actions while guiding them to make better choices.
- Young people and their families struggled to trust the panel component in its early days.
- Some older people in the community take advantage of younger people to commit crimes. There was a perception that this exploitation contributes to a cycle of crime that is difficult to disrupt.
- The program is helping young people stay out of trouble.
- The program's success relies heavily on community connections to engage youth.
- Early intervention is a key strategy in the region, described as the need to act quickly when a caution is issued to help young people avoid negative influences.
- There is a pool of 13 panel members from various organisations.
- Responsibilities are assigned based on expertise.
- Cultural awareness training is a key priority, especially for non-Indigenous panel members.

### Setup and Operation

AYCP in the region was established in February 2022. At the start, the main focus was on creating a panel. The region's AYCP program coordinator explained, *"We thought, how do we get this panel together? So what I did is I went along to our LAJAC and invited Aboriginal members...to be part of the panel"*. Initially, six people joined, and they met monthly to talk about young people who were eligible to be supported.

Organising and tracking the progress of the youth cautioning program is a key responsibility of the program coordinator, who uses a detailed spreadsheet to track various aspects of the program and panel operations, including a list of young people and their offenses and whether they were referred. The spreadsheet also includes details of the status of the referral, the follow-up actions taken, and provides insights into patterns and outcomes. For example, the coordinator noted how many young people are first-time offenders and how often individuals reoffend. This data helps the region track its impact, with the coordinator saying, *"It paints me a picture"*. This detailed tracking system has become a key tool for ensuring the program and its panel operations runs smoothly and addresses the needs of the young people involved.

Before each meeting, the program coordinator shares a *"list of eligible kids to the panel"* and asks members, *"Are any of these kids already engaged with your program? If so, can you reach out to them? Or if they don't, are you able to take this kid on?"* By the time the panel meets, much of the groundwork is already completed. This ensures meetings are *"short and sweet"*. The focus is on ensuring that *"the kids are covered, we know that they've been referred to someone, and somebody can reach out to them"*.

Instead of mandating that young people must attend formal panel meetings, panel members engage informally, visiting homes or meeting youth in casual settings: *"They'll go [to their] home, have a coffee, or grab them and take them down McDonald's"*. This approach builds trust and encourages participation. The conversations with young people focus on addressing the issues directly and encouraging the young person to think about their actions.

For example, one panel member shared a story about a car accident involving a young child as a passenger. The child's name ended up in the system as a co-offender because *"this other one who's got a bit of a history, dragged this little one along"*. The panel member described the approach they'd take: *"Hey, this is serious trouble. How did you think you would get a pass when you were in that crash? People nearly died. So what are you going to do? You going to jump in another car with them [children]?"* These conversations aim to encourage young people to think about the dangers and consequences of their actions while guiding them to make better choices.

One of the biggest challenges in the early stages of the panel operation was building trust and engagement with families. Efforts to connect were often met with hesitation or avoidance, as the presence of police sometimes led families to disengage or avoid contact. This made it difficult to reach young people and their families, limiting early opportunities for support and intervention.

Another challenge identified was how to manage repeat offenders who frequently returned eligibility for panel meeting. In some cases, young people received multiple cautions, raising concerns about whether there should be a limit and how many chances are appropriate. Some stakeholders found it difficult when young people showed little interest in changing their behaviour or engaging with support.

Consultations highlighted concerns about the exploitation of young people by older individuals in the community, which contributes to an ongoing cycle of offending. It was reported that some adults encourage children to commit crimes such as shoplifting, car break-ins, and burglaries, knowing that younger offenders are likely to receive more lenient consequences. These adults often avoid penalties themselves by using young people to carry out illegal activities, making it harder to break the cycle of crime. Stakeholders noted that even when young people have no prior criminal history, being involved in these situations places them under increased police attention, leading to long-term monitoring.

Despite these concerns, stakeholders highlighted several successes. They reported that the ability to be referred to the panel has significantly reduced the number of young people reoffending, showing that it is helping kids stay out of trouble. Stakeholders also noted that many young people who participated after a single incident have not reoffended—describing them as *"one-offs"*. This was seen as a positive outcome and evidence that the program is making a meaningful difference. This success was attributed to community connections to engage youth. The connection in the community allows panel members to leverage existing relationships. For instance, even if a young person is not already connected to a service, *"panel members feel comfortable reaching out to that family"*.

Early intervention is a key strategy in the region, described as *"the need to act quickly when a caution is issued to help young people avoid negative influences"*. One stakeholder explained, *"Every time I get one of those caution notifications, I'll send it straight out to the panel... Can you reach out as soon as possible before the influencers get in their kids' ear again?"*. This approach ensures that someone from the panel connects with the young person as soon as possible, providing support and guidance before others with harmful intentions can have an impact.

The region works closely with restorative justice initiatives like *"Salvo Care"*, which brings over 20 years of experience. This partnership combines cultural perspectives with professional support to better assist young people. The goal is for the AYCP to operate as a *"wraparound service"* that provides comprehensive support for kids and their families.

### Hume Region Panel Structure

Since 2022, the panel has expanded to include 13 members from various organisations. They include representatives from the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-Op, VACCA, Department of Justice and primary care connect youth workers. This diverse group brings together a wide range of skills and knowledge. Responsibilities are distributed based on expertise. The panel meets monthly but may skip meetings if cases are resolved in advance. Agendas focus on discussing eligible youth, with follow-ups on engagement efforts.

In terms of who becomes a panel member, the region focuses on recruiting people who genuinely care about the community: *"We want people who are there for the right reasons, not for swagger on your resume"*. Trust and understanding are also very important qualities for panel members: *"They need to*

*be able to connect with families and young people in a way that builds trust and makes them feel supported”.*

The region is exploring the use of Police Aboriginal Liaison Officers (PALOs) as panel members and taking steps to improve the recruitment process. Efforts are being made to promote the role of PALOs and highlight their importance within the community. A stakeholder explained that anyone interested in becoming a PALO in the future, will now need to attend RAJAC meetings. This gives candidates the opportunity to explain why they want the role and what they hope to achieve: *“It’s not just about adding it to your status as a PALO. Instead, this process allows Aboriginal community members and others to ask candidates questions like who they are, what they stand for, and what they are trying to achieve by becoming a PALO”.*

This ensures that candidates are committed to the role and genuinely want to make a positive impact. It is not *“just giving them that status, no, but also making sure that when Aboriginal people, including young people, walk into a police station, they feel culturally safe. This is especially important if they have to bring along their young son, nephew, or another family member”.* The goal is to create an environment within the police and justice systems where Aboriginal people feel welcome and supported and that they can trust these institutions.

In terms of the feedback from the community on the AYCP, it has been limited but generally positive: *“I’ve never had any negative feedback from the community itself. Families seem to trust the panel’s approach. They feel comfortable to call me anytime.”*

When asked how the capacity of panel members can be improved or any specific training or support required, stakeholders highlighted training in cultural awareness as a key priority, especially for non-Indigenous members: *“People need to understand cycles...why our people get involved in these things”.*

## Conclusion

Although challenges exist that are not only unique to the region, the Hume region has demonstrated that implementing clear, documented procedures enhances the clarity and effectiveness of AYCP setup and panel operations. Stakeholders believe these recommended improvements will further strengthen the program’s impact across the board and could be adopted across other regions.

1. **Record keeping practices:** Effective record-keeping practices are essential for ensuring the smooth operation and success of the AYCP. A structured system for tracking key data such as participant details, actions taken, and outcomes achieved, provides transparency and enables informed decision-making.
2. **Leveraging relationships:** Building on existing community connections strengthens the program. Panel members use their relationships with families and local services to engage young people more effectively, even if they are not already connected to support systems. Acting quickly after

a caution is issued ensures that support is provided before negative influences can take hold. These strong relationships and timely actions create a better support system for young people and their families

## Input from Victoria Police - Survey

The Victoria Police (VicPol) conducted a survey of police officers as part of the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program (AYCP) review.

### AYCP Review VicPol Staff Survey

The survey aimed to gather insights into the program's implementation, challenges, and areas for improvement. Participants provided feedback on various aspects, including the duration of the AYCP in their respective areas, the program's setup, and the operational structure and responsibilities of panels. The survey also explored challenges faced in the panel process, such as setup, member selection, and availability, examined the frequency of panel member meetings beyond their official duties, collected suggestions for improving panel functions and capacity, and sought feedback from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, including workers and families, regarding panel effectiveness. This comprehensive approach aimed to ensure a thorough review to enable the program's impact across the state to be strengthened.

The survey attracted 25 responses. Survey analysis showed that there is a perception among Victoria Police staff that the panel component of the AYCP has experienced different levels of success in various regions. While some areas have made progress, many others have struggled or paused the panel component. While the program's goal of supporting Aboriginal young people to engage with culturally relevant support has been effective in some areas, it has not been fully realised in other areas.

### Implementation and Current Status

In some areas, the AYCP panel component was yet to commence or was paused. Some respondents were uncertain about its status. This uncertainty may be due to the short time spent in the area.

Efforts to reestablish the panels are happening in some places. For instance, one respondent shared, *"Some great work is currently being done by our ACLO and Youth Specialist Officer (YSO) to get it back up and running"*. In Ballarat, the program has restarted with some success: *"With the new ACLO in place, the program has recommenced and is having good success"*.

The survey analysis identified challenges that have prevented the panel component from working as intended. Respondents highlighted a need for training for both police and panel members. One respondent stated, *"There have been problems from the start, lack of training for the police members and the panel members"*. Another added, *"Panel members change roles regularly and need to be replaced"*.

### Positive Outcomes and Success Stories

Despite these difficulties, there were many positive outcomes. The program is voluntary (consent-based) in all locations, and this voluntary nature has contributed to its success as stated by a respondent: *“The voluntary nature of participation is key to success because the individuals who do engage are generally motivated to disengage from crime”*.

Positive relationships with the community and stakeholders also helped in some areas.

*“We generally had a very workable relationship with the stakeholders and Elders”*.

*“A representative of the community who attended to support four youths through the AYCP process after a burglary was very positive towards it”*.

### Suggestions for Improvement

Many respondents provided ideas to improve the program, with better training a common suggestion:

*“Educate police officers about the program and how to promote it with young people”*

*“Provide training and induction for panel members regarding their roles and expectations”*

*“Increase the number of panel members to make it easier to organise meetings”*

*“Hold meetings online to improve accessibility”*

### Conclusion

The survey highlighted how the AYCP operates across regions from Victoria Police staff perspectives. Some areas reported strong community ties and effective panels, while others faced challenges with implementation, training, and awareness. The success of panels varied, underlining the need for ongoing support, clear communication, and targeted training for police and panel members.

The program’s voluntary nature was seen as a key strength, helping motivated young people access culturally relevant support. However, there is a need for clearer panel roles, better coordination, and more resources, especially in areas where the program is not fully running.

Overall, while the AYCP has delivered benefits in places with strong local leadership and engagement, there is room to expand its reach. Strengthening training, raising awareness within Victoria Police, and re-establishing paused panels could improve its impact. This feedback provides a guide for refining the program to better support Aboriginal young people and their communities.

## Section 3: Review Findings

This section presents the key themes that emerged from consultations with stakeholders involved in the AYCP. While earlier sections focused on regional experiences, the following findings draw together the broader insights shared across regions, highlighting common strengths, challenges, and suggestions for improvement.

These findings reflect participants' perspectives on how the program is currently operating, the roles and responsibilities of those involved, and practical issues affecting its implementation. The voices and experiences of community members, Elders, service providers, and Victoria Police staff have shaped these insights, providing a collective view of what is working well and what could be strengthened.

### AYCP Review

- **Confidentiality measures:** The AYCP panel component is set up and run with clear confidentiality requirements across all regions. All information is handled with the same confidentiality standards as other police processes to protect young people's privacy and trust.
- **Neutral meeting spaces:** Holding sessions in neutral locations, such as community offices, helps avoid making young people feel judged or intimidated. This practice helps reduce the stigma and anxiety that can come with formal settings like the local police station.
- **Informal meetings:** In some locations, panel members engage informally, visiting homes or meeting youth in casual settings. There are no mandated formal panel meetings
- **Importance of pre-meeting:** Stakeholders identified pre-meetings with young people as an effective strategy for building trust and ensuring participants feel supported. These sessions allow facilitators to explain the process, address any concerns, and help young people feel protected and prepared for their first panel session.
- **Record keeping practices:** Effective record-keeping practices are essential for ensuring smooth operation. A structured system for tracking key data—such as participant details, actions taken, and outcomes achieved provides transparency and enables informed decision-making.
- **Consent-based action plan:** Creating a clear action plan at the end of panel meetings is a key step to ensure a committed and accountable system. The plan addresses the main issues that brought the young person to the AYCP panel meeting and outline clear steps to support them.
- **Secondary follow-up:** After young people receive a caution and attend the panel, they are often given specific goals or actions to work on as part of their accountability process. A secondary follow-up provides an opportunity to understand where the young person is in their journey, identify any challenges or barriers they are facing, and offer additional support where required.
- **Community awareness gap:** The panel component of the program is not widely known within the community, leaving many young people and their families unsure about what to expect when engaging with it.
- **Resource shortages:** Access to brochures and other promotional tools can improve both public awareness and understanding of the AYCP and police engagement.

- **Inclusive and supportive discussions:** The focus is on constructive dialogue rather than blame during panel sessions. Young people are encouraged to share their perspectives, admit their actions when appropriate, acknowledge the harms to themselves and others, and dispute inaccuracies.
- **Parental engagement:** Parents and guardians tend to be more eager to engage with the AYCP panel than the young people themselves.
- **Unlimited cautions:** While the policy does not place a specific limit on the number of cautions, the escalating nature of youth crime is undermining the program's effectiveness.
- **Disparities across locations and regions:** There are disparities in the setup and operations of the AYCP panels across locations and regions.
- **Brokerage support:** There is a desire for Elders who participate as panel members in voluntary capacity to be remunerated.
- **Youth perceptions:** Stakeholders reported that some young people do not take receiving a caution seriously, treating it as something to embrace rather than as a meaningful intervention.
- **Criminal exploitation:** It was reported that adults within some communities were taking advantage of children to commit crimes. This exploitation contributes to a cycle of crime that is difficult to disrupt.
- **Training and capacity-building:** Panel members would benefit from training in trauma-informed practices and community engagement to support young people's needs.
- **Role clarity:** Despite having a standard operating procedure, panel members in some regions do not always have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities.
- **Reliance on community members:** A small group of community members, particularly Elders, are often relied upon to participate in panels, leading to concerns about overburdening them.
- **Personnel change and staff turnover:** When key personnel leave, panel operation continuity may be impacted.
- **Transparency in recruitment:** There is uncertainty about who is responsible for selecting panel members and how interested individuals with relevant skills can join.
- **Formalised recruitment process:** A formalised recruitment process with defined selection criteria would ensure panel members are qualified and representative of the community.
- **Preferred panel members:** There is a strong preference for panel members with lived experience, community service backgrounds, or cultural knowledge. Stakeholders believe these individuals bring practical insights and a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by young people.
- **Past participant involvement:** Including past participants as panel members was identified as a valuable strategy. Those who have successfully engaged with the program can offer meaningful perspectives and serve as role models, demonstrating the panel component's potential for positive change.
- **Police presence and engagement:** The presence of police officers in uniform during meetings is intended to reinforce accountability and demonstrate Victoria Police's commitment to the program. Some participants welcomed police involvement and felt it was an important part of

the program in that it helps build trust and maintain accountability, while others argued that their presence may deter open and honest communication.

- **Value of mentoring:** Mentoring was reported as an effective strategy for achieving positive outcomes.
- **Scheduling of panel meetings:** Most panel meetings do not follow a set schedule and are convened only when a caution is referred. Regular meetings have been deemed unsustainable in some regions due to resource and logistical challenges.
- **Attendance challenges:** Panel meetings often face issues with attendance due to short notice, making it difficult for all key participants to be present.

### Other Findings

- **COVID-19 pandemic:** Operations across many regions were significantly disrupted when COVID-19 hit, causing activities to come to a halt.
- **Misuse of the program:** There was a perception that the program was sometimes utilised by non-Aboriginal young people falsely identifying as Aboriginal. Concerns were raised about some non-Aboriginal youth being advised by their Aboriginal peers to claim Aboriginal identity, with a belief that it would result in lighter consequences.
- **Cultural connection:** Cultural connection elements are being introduced into the activities of the panel. It was reported that giving young people and their families chances to reconnect with their culture and land helps them feel a sense of belonging and identity.
- **Unclear RAJAC role:** There is a lack of clarity regarding the Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee's (RAJAC) role in the program. This ambiguity creates confusion about their responsibilities and the level of support they provide, potentially impacting program implementation and coordination.
- **Referral pathways:** AYCP serves as a referral pathway, connecting young people to support services and other beneficial programs.

These findings highlight both the challenges and opportunities within the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program, offering a detailed view of its current operation and areas where improvements can be made. These insights provide the basis for the recommendations that follow, which focus on practical strategies to strengthen the program and ensure it continues to meet its objectives, while remaining responsive to the diverse needs of Aboriginal communities across Victoria.

## Section 4: Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on insights shared by stakeholders during the review. They focus on supporting the effective, culturally safe, and locally responsive delivery of the AYCP. While recognising that many processes are already in place, these recommendations reflect areas where participants felt further clarity, support, or awareness could enhance program outcomes.

Implementing these strategies will strengthen the AYCP's capacity to support Aboriginal young people, reduce their overrepresentation in the justice system, and promote community-led solutions. They represent pathways for improving the program's effectiveness, sustainability, and alignment with its core principles of self-determination, early intervention, and harm reduction.

These recommendations are also supported by a series of potential actions designed to translate strategic goals into practical initiatives. These steps ensure that the implementation process is aligned with the overarching aim of the Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program (AYCP). These steps also include important insights to guide how the AYCP can be improved and adapted in the future, making sure it stays effective and meets new challenges.

### Recommendation 1: Strengthen Governance

Establish a clear governance framework and oversight to ensure the program remains effective, accountable, and aligned with its intended purpose. Promote the scope and flexibility for local adaptation available within the program guidelines.

#### Potential actions:

- Develop a formal Expression of Interest (EOI) process for panel recruitment, that prioritises lived experience, community service backgrounds, and/or cultural knowledge to strengthen engagement and cultural safety for young people.
- Where feasible, encourage regions to establish and maintain a list of panel members.
- Clearly define roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities for Victoria Police and panel members.
- Work with panels to incorporate region-specific practices and priorities.
- Circulate a concise summary, host short information sessions or webinars for regional teams to discuss how SOPs can be locally tailored.

### Recommendation 2: Enhance Capability of Panel Members

Acknowledge and integrate the lived experiences, cultural knowledge of Elders and other learning opportunities into program and panel practices. Regional adaptations should reflect the specific cultural and social dynamics of the community.

**Potential Actions:**

- Identify training and capacity-building options in each region.
- Work with panel members to develop case studies of successful outcomes that can be incorporated into training sessions for panel members.
- Establish an induction process for all new panel members to ensure consistency in knowledge and expectations.
- Provide training on trauma-informed practices to strengthen culturally safe and responsive engagement with young people.

**Recommendation 3: Improve Awareness and Engagement**

Develop content to increase understanding of the AYCP and its panel component among young people, families, and other stakeholders. This content could include regionally tailored materials such as brochures, social media content, and other resources to reflect local needs and cultural protocols.

**Potential actions:**

- Develop accessible materials, such as brochures and videos, tailored to regional contexts, to increase participation and understanding of the program's purpose and processes.
- Increase AYCP's digital presence by using online platforms to engage young people.
- Create video content featuring relatable faces to ensure the program feels welcoming and accessible.
- Launch targeted communication campaigns to raise awareness of the AYCP among young people, families, and service providers.
- Promote awareness among police officers and community partners.
- Develop a simple flowchart or visual guide to assist officers and stakeholders in understanding how referrals should be made

**Recommendation 4: Expand Support Structures and Resources for Panel Members**

Explore remuneration policies to recognise the time and expertise of Elders and community members participating in panels in voluntarily capacity. This policy could consider travel reimbursements and other financial support.

**Potential action:**

- Explore options for brokerage funding to remunerate panel members (in voluntary capacity) for their time and expenses.

### **Recommendation 5: Follow-up and ongoing support**

Integrate consent-based follow-ups processes to reinforce positive outcomes and ensure long-term support for young people.

#### **Potential Actions:**

- Explore the option of introducing a consent-based follow-up sessions with young people after their initial engagement with the panel.
- Create a standardised action plan template for each young person, outlining clear steps and responsibilities.
- Choose appropriate meeting places in spaces where young people feel safe to build trust and reduce intimidation. Meetings could be held in neutral spaces rather than police stations to promote a more supportive and welcoming environment.

## Conclusion

The Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program (AYCP) represents a critical step toward reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people in the justice system through culturally safe, community-led interventions. This review has highlighted the program's strengths, including its focus on early intervention, restorative practices, and the valuable contributions of community members and Elders. However, it has also identified significant challenges in implementation, including inconsistencies across regions, gaps in awareness, and limitations in program resources and support.

Addressing these challenges requires a commitment to balancing statewide consistency with regional flexibility, ensuring that the program can adapt to the diverse needs of Aboriginal communities across Victoria. The insights and recommendations provided in this report offer a clear pathway to improve the program's design, delivery, and impact.

Key priorities include enhancing communication and referral pathways, strengthening cultural safety through training and support, recognising and compensating the contributions of panel members, and building greater community awareness and engagement. The AYCP has the capacity to serve as a model for culturally appropriate, community-led justice initiatives. With sustained effort and meaningful investment, it can continue to grow and evolve into an effective and enduring program that supports positive change for Aboriginal young people and their families.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 AYCP Review Consultation Guide

#### **CONSULTATION OBJECTIVES**

1. *To critically assess the current operating procedures in each AYCP site represented at the forums*
2. *To critically assess the responsibilities of all involved parties at each AYCP site represented at the forums.*
3. *To identify implementation challenges and suggest solutions or opportunities for improvement of the AYCP tailored to each site.*

#### **The current operating procedures at each AYCP - PROCESS**

1. How is the youth cautioning program set up and run at [location]?
2. What are some challenges you face when implementing the youth cautioning program in the way it's been set up and run?
3. Can you share any success stories or examples of positive outcomes from the program?
4. What actions/strategies have been most effective in engaging young people in this program?
5. In what ways might the program be improved?

#### **The responsibilities of all involved parties at each AYCP - PEOPLE**

6. What do you look for when recruiting people into your panel? What experience and knowledge are important?
7. What's the structure of your panel and how are responsibilities distributed among panel members?
8. What are the challenges faced by the panel and panel members? How are they addressed?
9. How do you think the capacity of panel members can be improved-any specific training or support required?
10. How often does the panel sit and what determines the agenda of the meeting or the cases they take on?

#### **Final Thoughts**

11. What kind of feedback do you receive from the Aboriginal community on the use of cautions for young people?
  - a. *The VPM or SOPs do not actually stipulate specific offence criteria. However, we have received feedback from Aboriginal communities in some areas that they feel the model may actually be too lenient in some cases and that young people are receiving multiple cautions without any change in their behaviour.*
12. Are there existing/other programs AYCP can learn from?
13. Is there anything from your example/experiences that we can include?