



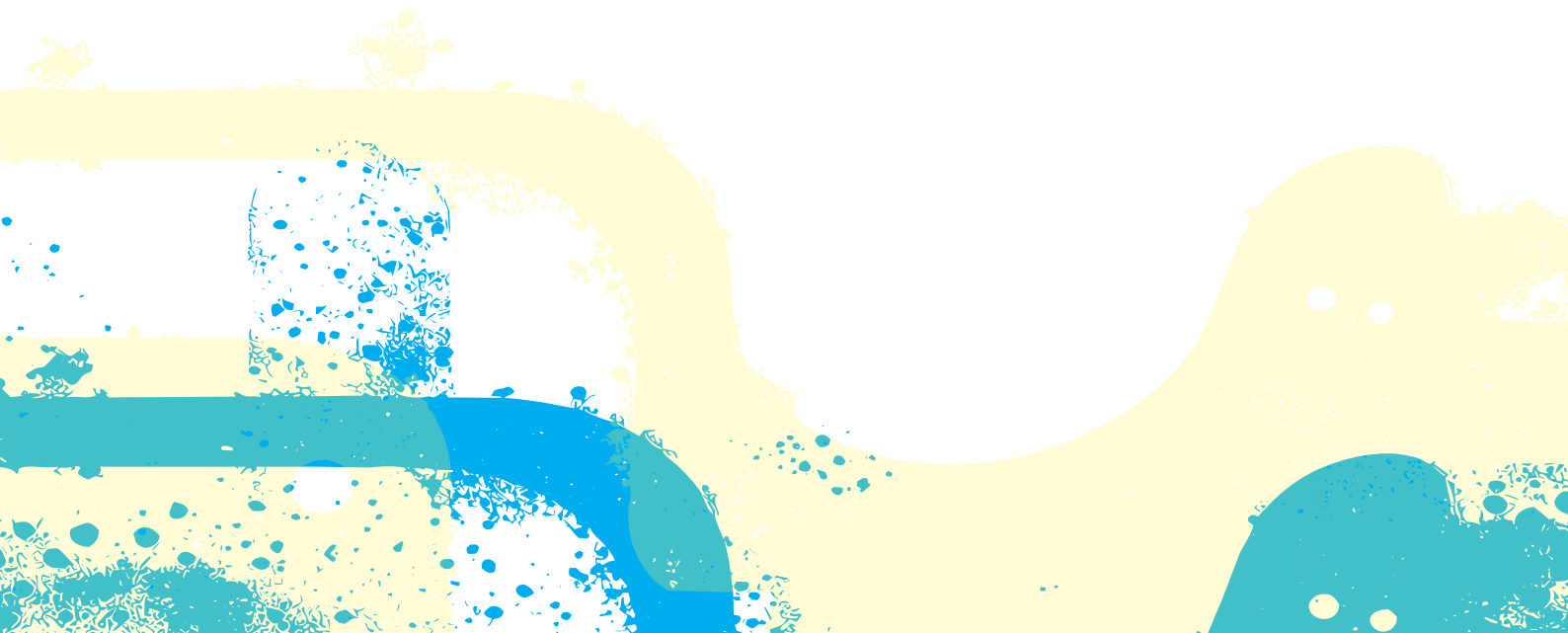
YDHF

yarra
drug & health
forum

ANNUAL
REPORT
2024-25

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**Peter Wearne** | Chairperson - YDHF

CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT

It has been an eventful and challenging year for the Yarra Drug and Health Forum but there has been much to celebrate, recognise and be excited by as the forum approaches its 30th year of championing the reduction of harm created by all types of drug use in the City of Yarra.

At the end of 2024 we said farewell to our Executive Officer Dr Stephen McNally who served in that role for over two years. I wish to acknowledge the great work that Stephen did with the forum in bringing intelligence, knowledge and wisdom as well as evidence-based policy and practice and applying it with great nuance to the community of Yarra. Thank you so much for your leadership and passion Stephen.

The forum has always been able to attract highly talented and gifted executive officers. At the beginning of 2025, after an extensive recruitment process, we welcomed Ms Amanda Stone to the role of Executive Officer. Amanda has an extensive and respected history in serving the community of Yarra as a city councillor. Her passion for improving and contributing to the well-being of the community is well recognised. The forum is excited to be working with Amanda in engaging with the broader community to both listen and collaboratively develop local responses and solutions to drug and alcohol-based community concerns.

At the beginning of July this year the YDHF changed its auspice from cohealth to the Fitzroy Legal Service. This ended a three-decade relationship with then North Yarra Community Health Centre and cohealth as the official auspice of the forum. I would like to acknowledge the support and goodwill cohealth have provided for the forum over the past three decades. I am pleased to say cohealth will continue to have a representative on the Executive Committee moving forward. I would also like to acknowledge the great generosity and support that the Fitzroy Legal Service have shown in welcoming the YDHF into its organisational structure. We are excited to be supported by an iconic local Yarra organisation with which the forum shares a rich history of advocacy and activism.

Earlier this year, the Forum was informed by the City of Yarra that our Community Partnership Grant funding would not be renewed in the new financial year. This came as a complete shock to all those connected with the forum. As a result of this decision, the YDHF has lost \$34,000 from our ongoing budget which is a third of our total income. This decision was taken by councillors despite the recommendation of ongoing funding by council officers. As a result of the loss of funding the forum has had to adjust the hours of the Executive Officer position and cut back on some of the activities within our strategic plan. Despite this unexpected setback the forum is committed to working in a collaborative and energetic capacity with the City of Yarra and would like to thank and acknowledge the historical support it has received from Yarra for more than three decades.

As the forum approaches the next year, we have a clear strategic direction and points of advocacy and engagement we wish to pursue. We have a strong commitment to increasing opportunity for the community to be informed and listened to concerning harm reduction and practical approaches to community well-being in relationship to drugs and alcohol within the City of Yarra. We will continue to advocate for our rich and diverse community to have access to culturally appropriate and evidence-based services. We will also welcome all engagement with the broad base of views that are reflected within our community and at the same time put forward solutions that are evidence based and practical.

I would like to acknowledge the ongoing support of the Department of Health, Victoria in providing continued funding for the work of the Yarra Drug and Health Forum. I would also like to thank the City of Yarra for its past financial support. Thanks also to the members of the executive who give their time and wisdom to the work of the forum. It is greatly appreciated and finally thanks to the community of Yarra in all its richness and diversity for engaging so generously with us.

**Amanda Stone** | Executive Officer - YDHF

EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S REPORT

It has been such a pleasure stepping into the role of Executive Officer at Yarra Drug and Health Forum. As a long-term admirer of the Forum's work in seeking local solutions to drug and alcohol-related problems, I can not only continue to serve the wonderfully diverse and dynamic Yarra community, I also get to work with the amazing organisations which make up the AOD service sector and peak bodies in Yarra and beyond.

In doing so, I acknowledge the outstanding work of previous EO, Dr. Stephen McNally in consolidating the YDHF organisational processes and leading its advocacy from his lifetime of experience and leadership in public health.

This city is fortunate to host some of the most skilled and experienced organisations providing leadership, policy direction, advocacy and direct services in alcohol and other drugs. Yarra Drug and Health Forum has the privilege of working alongside them to provide that platform for good faith conversation with the wider Yarra community and to find grassroots solutions to drug related problems.

These conversations have continued with monthly Community Network Meetings over the past 12 months.

Yarra finds itself at the centre of major harm reduction measures including the Medically Supervised Injecting Room in North Richmond, the Sobering Centre in Collingwood and the new Victoria Pill Testing Service fixed site in Fitzroy.

Each measure has been introduced against a strong evidence base and has been, and will be, subject to high levels of accountability and review. Nonetheless there continue to be some local concerns about the impacts of each of these facilities on local amenity and ongoing conversations within the community are needed. To this end, Yarra Drug and Health Forum has provided a platform for information to be provided about these with opportunities for discussion and clarification through Community Network Meetings, with an update on the Public Intoxication Response and Sobering Centre, plans and progress on the improvements to the public space around the MSIR, and an update on the Drug Checking trial.

Our Community Network Meetings have highlighted issues of importance to services – access to administering naloxone for harm reduction workers, addressing the needs of CALD communities in accessing AOD services, and the upcoming Victorian AOD Strategy. And we introduced the already well-known Chief Addiction Medicine Advisor, Dr Paul McCartney.

Wider community concerns, identified in dialogue with community organisations, and through the NJC Community Advisor Panel, showed that Synthetic Drugs, Vaping, Public Safety and Drug Use, and Supporting Friends and Family (with risky drug use) are a high community priority for further information and harm reduction measures.

These will be the subject of upcoming Community Network Meetings.

Yarra Council's Health and Wellbeing Profile, collated late 2024, highlights the relatively high rates of binge drinking, smoking, vaping, and drug use in Yarra – major risk factors for preventable illness and death.

It is pleasing to see that Reducing the Impacts of Alcohol, Drugs, Vaping and Tobacco is one of 7 priority Areas in the Draft Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan. Our submission to this Plan will urge the council to take a stronger advocacy role on those harm reduction measures in which they have no direct service provision role but which would benefit the Yarra population.

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EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S REPORT *continued.....*

The Forum's **advocacy** on long standing issues especially around drug law reform continued in 2024 -2025 with submissions to these key state and federal enquiries:

- *Inquiry into the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023.* (Victoria Government)

Our submission supported decriminalising personal use of cannabis for adults with a regulated model, and proposed elements that a regulated model could include.

- *Inquiry into the health impacts of alcohol and other drugs in Australia* (Submission to the Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport, Australian Government – inquiry on hold since the election)

Our submission recommended:

A national reference group, and reinstatement of ministerial advisory committees, the legalised regulation of drug possession for personal use, a national overdose prevention strategy, community-based educational programs especially for CALD communities, culturally responsive AOD services for CALD communities, indigenous model of care developed and led by the ACCHO sector and GPs and community-based Addiction Specialists to be financially supported to provide pharmacotherapies to clients with Alcohol Use Disorder.

We continue to benefit from ongoing involvement and partnership with other networks in Yarra. In particular, the Yarra Service Alliance, the Victorian Harm Reduction Network, the Harm Reduction Advocacy Network, St Vincent's Nexus Team and the Yarra Liquor Forum have provided valuable connection and opportunities to share observations, information, trends and successes. I am grateful to them all for the shared endeavour that is so important.

I also acknowledge and thank all those community members and groups who have taken the time to meet and share their observations and insights into the drug-related issues of greatest concern in Yarra.

Finally, it would be hard to not mention the challenges of my first month in this role which saw the Executive decision to transition to a new auspicing body, Fitzroy Legal Service – a positive step- followed by the sudden unexpected withdrawal of Yarra Council funding from the Forum – not so positive. While both provided challenges and occupied considerable time, we have recalibrated in response to the reduced funding and can "do more with less" – for now. Future funding sources will need to be identified. We remain very grateful to the Victorian Government Department of Health for its undertaking to provide at least two more years' funding. And our partnership with Fitzroy Legal Service has so much potential.

The support from peak bodies VAADA and Harm Reduction Victoria has been invaluable during this period of change – much gratitude to them.

The Forum would like to acknowledge its long and positive partnership with cohealth and I particularly wish to acknowledge their support and cooperation in ensuring as smooth as possible a transition to a new auspice in recent months. Our shared focus on maximising the health and wellbeing of the Yarra community will continue to bind us.

Thankyou to the Forum Executive Committee and Chair Peter Wearne, whose professionalism, guidance and valued input has provided a solid foundation during this year of change for us all.

ABOUT THE FORUM

History of Yarra Drug and Health Forum

Yarra Drug and Health Forum (YDHF) has been operating in the City of Yarra since 1996 as a community-based response to local illicit drug issues. The Forum began at a time when there was significant community concern about street-based heroin markets and the resulting high number of overdoses with record number of deaths. For over 25 years YDHF has been widely recognised as the foremost community-based forum that works with a broad range of stakeholders to reduce drug related harms in the City of Yarra.

Our Vision

- The community of the City of Yarra is not harmed by drug use.
- The experience of drug related stigma and discrimination is eliminated.

Our Mission

- YDHF provides a platform to initiate and engage in good faith conversations with the Yarra community in seeking grass roots solutions to drug-related problems.
- To be responsive to alcohol and other drug related issues as they present in the City of Yarra and to be proactive in working with the local community to create a healthy and more just community.

Who we are

YDHF is a dynamic, adaptive and educative local network. We build strong relationships with a broad range of stakeholders to help identify and respond to the health and social needs of the community in the City of Yarra.

Our Values

- Supporting broad and inclusive participation
- Listening and respecting a diversity of views
- Encouraging discussion to identify mutually acceptable responses to community issues
- Working collaboratively to achieve outcomes

How we work

- Collaboration
- Advocacy
- Knowledge brokerage
- Community engagement

YDHF partners with people that live or work in the City of Yarra, along with the broader community to reduce the harmful impacts of drug and alcohol misuse by promoting evidence-based, humane and compassionate policy and program approaches. While our focus is City of Yarra, we are open to working with other jurisdictions when invited.

We strive to be an honest broker, bringing together people with lived and living experience of drug use, residents, service providers, policy makers, researchers, and funders to ensure that decisions and investments (policies and programs) respond to locally identified needs to the benefit of the entire community. We do this by holding regular meetings where all interested individuals or services may attend and share their concerns or help codesign solutions. Our work is enhanced by including the voices of people with lived and living experience of drug use in the process of community discourse and problem solving around drug related issues. We seek to develop local solutions by providing a neutral and safe platform that welcomes all communities.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT 2024-25

Over the past 12 months the Forum has hosted public events to highlight and debate locally relevant and statewide issues. These public forums have also played a critical role in supporting our ongoing advocacy work.

July 2024

Progress of the Public Intoxication Reform (PIR)

Speakers: Melissa Donovan (Victorian Aboriginal Health Service), Cleve Hapi (Ngwala Willumbong Aboriginal Corporation), Danny Jeffcote (cohealth), Stephanie Lawrence (Victoria Police).

Speakers provided insights into their organisations' roles in the Public Intoxication Reform process and their progress to date including the establishment of the Collingwood Sobering Up Centre.



August 2024

International Overdose Awareness Day

On 31 August, events are organised globally to bring communities together in remembrance of lives lost and to increase awareness about drug overdose. YDHF recognises the importance of local initiatives in this effort. Our lunchtime BBQ, shared with community members and professionals from the Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) sector, was one of over 1,000 worldwide events. We welcomed more than 70 people to share in this occasion.

YDHF remains committed to advocating for culturally responsive AOD and harm reduction services for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities in Victoria.

Speakers: Dr Shaymaa Elkadi (Foundation House), Dr Paul McCartney, (cohealth) spoke on the need for culturally responsive services for CALD communities in Victoria to reduce the harms associated with drug use and drug overdose.



September 2024

Are Harm Reduction Workers allowed to Administer Naloxone?

Speakers: Professor Paul Dietze (Burnet Institute), Andrea Fischer (cohealth), Shelley Cogger (North Richmond Community Health), Richie Goonan (Youth Projects), Sione Crawford (Harm Reduction Victoria)

This forum addressed the limitations at the time in the revised take-home naloxone program which prohibited harm reduction workers from directly administering naloxone. Successful advocacy by all these organisations and YDHF saw this restriction overturned later in 2024.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT 2024-25 *continued.....*

November 2024

Creating a welcoming space on the NRCH footprint

Speakers: Laura O'Shea, (North Richmond Community Health),
Sarah Hiley, (North Richmond Community Health),
Tim Hart, (Urban Initiatives).

This Forum provided an update from North Richmond Community Health on their progress in creating a more welcoming environment on NRCH grounds. The work underway aimed improve the safety and amenity on the NRCH footprint whilst enhancing community awareness and understanding about balancing the needs of everyone in the North Richmond precinct community and the resources available to continually make improvements. Designs for works to the entrance were provided and the opportunity for discussion was invaluable.



February 2025

Meeting Victoria's Chief Addiction Medicine Advisor

Speaker: Dr. Paul MacCartney

The first Chief Addiction Medicine Advisor for Victoria, spoke about his role as advisor on state drug and alcohol policy and on the opportunities through the forthcoming State AOD Strategy



April 2025

Federal Election Panel

Speakers: Sarah Witty (ALP),
Steph Hodgins-May (Australian Greens)
and Fiona Patten (Legalise Cannabis).

The Forum heard details of the drug and alcohol policies of candidates in the federal election.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT 2024-25 *continued.....*

May 2025

Drug Checking Trial Update

Speaker: Sarah Hiley, former YDHF Executive Member, now Drug Checking Director at The Loop Australia.

Sarah provided an update on the successful implementation trial of drug checking at music festival over the summer in Victoria. Minister Ingrid Stitt has stated that the drug checking will continue and the trial aims to identify best practice. Sarah outlined the process and protocols used, lessons learned, the invaluable data collected which led to some drug alerts, and opportunities for valuable harm reduction conversations.



June 2025

Everything you want to know about synthetic drugs

Speakers: Liana Rawlings (ADF), Julia Daly (ADF), Jesse Colling (peer worker, Dance Wize, YDHF Executive)

The increasing prevalence of synthetic drugs and the community's lack of knowledge about them was identified as a priority topic through many community channels. Liana and Julia from Alcohol and Drug Foundation provided a strong foundation of information on a range of substances, data of trends and an overview of harm reduction. Jesse Colling, YDHF Executive member, provided unique insights into harm reduction conversations and approaches.



HIGHLIGHTS 2024-25

Naloxone

Yarra Drug and Health Forum, in collaboration with Harm Reduction Victoria, released a publication addressing the legal barriers preventing Victorian Harm Reduction workers from administering naloxone in the workplace. The paper, entitled 'Access to the Take-Home Naloxone Program - Ensuring Harm Reduction Workers are Insured to Administer Naloxone', alongside a focused Community Network Meeting held in September, played a significant role in effectively advocating for policy reform with government stakeholders.

Police however are still not able to administer naloxone. As often first responders to the scene of an overdose, this anachronism has been the subject of much debate and will require further advocacy.

Cannabis

Our advocacy on law reform around the sensible personal use of cannabis continued in 2024-2025. YDHF wrote to the Premier and Attorney General urging the government to acknowledge the ongoing harms to drivers who lose their licence when using medicinal cannabis, a prescribed medicine, and consider pausing prosecution while the medicinal cannabis driving trial was underway.

The Forum's submissions last December to the Inquiry into the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Regulation of Personal Adult Use of Cannabis) Bill 2023 supported decriminalising personal use of cannabis for adults with a regulated model, and proposed elements that a regulated model could include.

While the reforms sought are yet to arrive, the release of the Pennington Institute's Pennington Cannabis Control Plan is a welcome and impressive step in the long term advocacy for sensible law reform on cannabis for personal use.

Witnessing an overdose

The Forum supported NRCH to obtain a grant to develop a program of support for people who have witnessed an overdose.

Drug overdose can leave a significant impact on people who have witnessed and/or have intervened in a drug overdose and the trauma can be significant and long lasting.

This grant has enabled the employment of a worker to develop a model for the program and take it forward with the guidance of a project committee. The Forum will report on the progress of this project via a future Community Network Meeting.

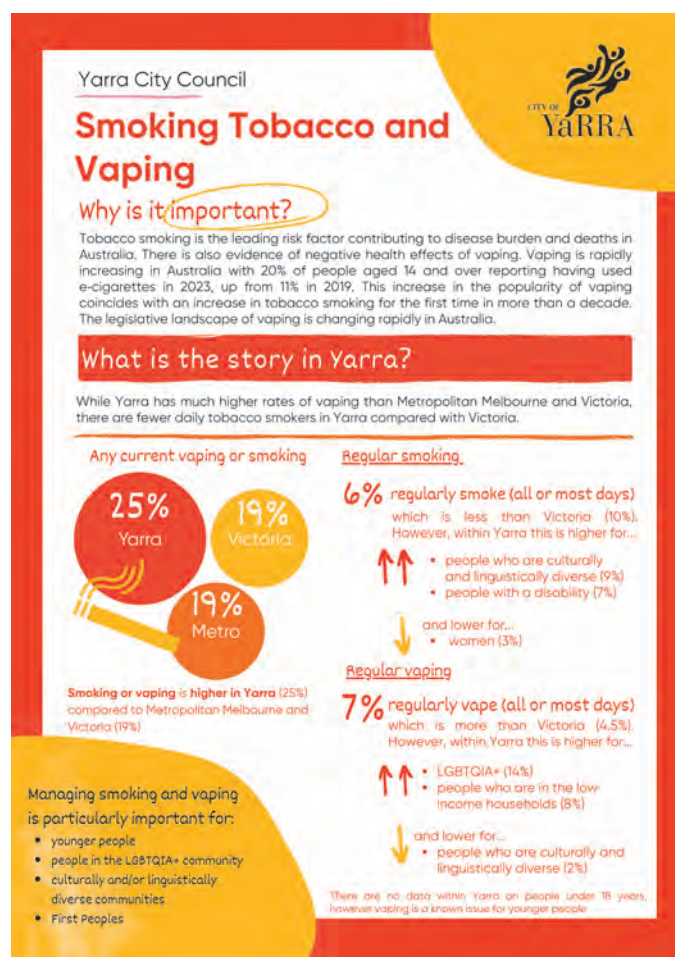
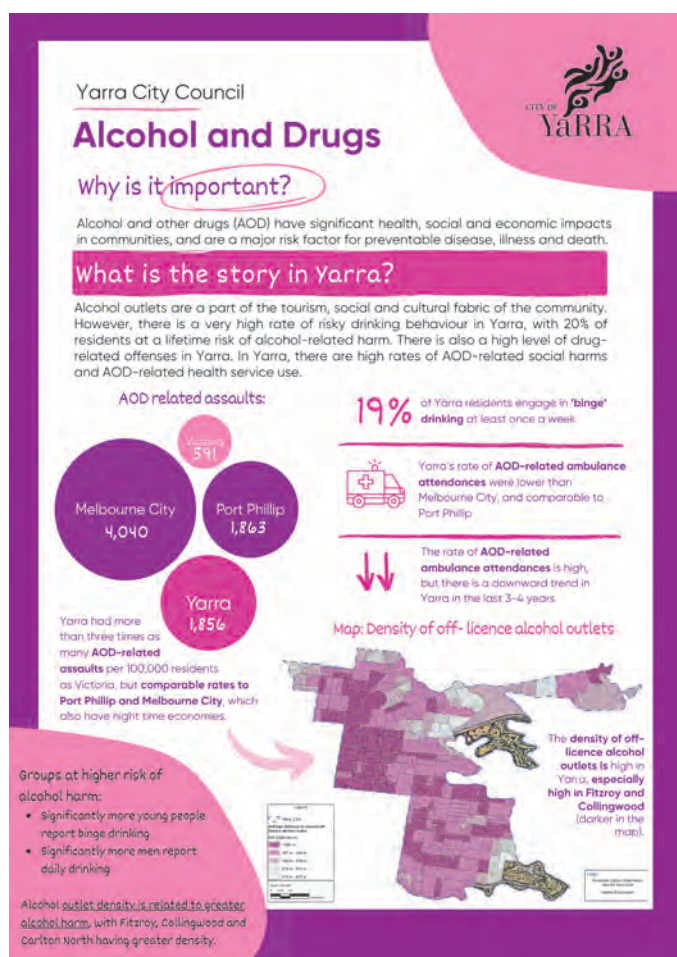
HIGHLIGHTS 2024-25 *continued.....*

Yarra Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan

YDHF participated in Yarra Council's Health and Wellbeing Expert Reference Group which led to the development of the draft MPHWP for 2025 to 2029.

The Plan is informed by the [Yarra Health and Wellbeing Profile](#), aligned with requirements of the [Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008](#) and involved wide public consultation. Given the broad remit of the Plan, it was pleasing to see **Reducing the Impacts of Alcohol, Drugs, Vaping and Tobacco** is one of 7 priority Areas in the Draft Plan.

Of particular concern within the Health and Wellbeing Profile is the data on less visible groups within the Yarra population: the high rates of risky drinking among older residents, higher rates of vaping within the LGBTQI+ community and high rates of smoking in CALD communities. These will be a focus of the Forum into the future.



(Yarra Council (2025), *Health and Wellbeing Snapshots*, [Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan | Your Say Yarra](#))

FINANCE

FINANCIAL REPORT

YARRA DRUG HEALTH FORUM

Finance Year 2024/25

Jun 2025

cohealth ltd

ABN 57 167 212 302

The net financial result for the Financial Year 2025 is a breakeven position, as illustrated below.

Funding received is \$103,677. This funding included indexation received throughout the year. Funding was received from:

- Yarra City Council: \$33,463
- Department of Health: \$70,213

The balance on 1 July 2024 of funding from prior years that hadn't been utilized with the Yarra Drug Health Forum, was \$19,696. With Year-end adjustments, cohealth was able to utilize current year funding to support operations due to the reduction in costs while leaders changed over in the program around January 2025.

	Jun-25	YTD Jun-25 \$	FY25 Budget \$
Income from continuing operations			
Yarra City Council	8,711	33,463	33,468
Department of Health	5,771	70,213	69,162
Prior Year Funding Utilised in FY25 (DOH)	0	0	0
Total Income from continuing operations	14,482	103,677	102,630
Expenses from continuing operations			
Salaries & Wages	9,270	73,709	79,594
Service delivery expenses	1,240	4,076	4,800
Administration expenses	4,001	25,919	28,131
Total Expenses from continuing operations	14,509	103,704	112,525
Surplus/(deficit) from operations for the year	(28)	(28)	(9,895)

Based on this, \$19,696 may be invoiced from Fitzroy Legal Services, to cohealth, to utilize this funding in FY26.

Cohealth has valued working with Yarra Drug Health Forum over the years, advocating for those vulnerable in the community. Thankyou Fitzroy Legal Services for the smooth transition of this auspice.

Kind Regards,

Elissa Doolan.

Commercial Manager

STAKEHOLDERS

APOD Family Support

Belgium Ave & Collingwood
Neighbourhood House

Burnet Institute

City of Melbourne

City of Yarra

cohealth

Department of Health

Department of Family Fairness and Housing

Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria

Family Drug Support

Fitzroy Legal Service

Harm Reduction Victoria

Islamic Council of Victoria

Jesuit Social Services

Legalise Cannabis Party Victoria

Lifeline Australia

Medically Supervised Injecting Room, NRCH

Ngwala Willumbong Aboriginal Corporation

Neighbourhood Justice Centre

Nexus – St Vincent's Hospital

North Richmond Community Health

North Richmond Precinct Committee

North-Western Melbourne PHN

Penington Institute

Royal Melbourne Hospital
Addiction Medicine Department

Sacred Heart Mission

Smart Justice for Young People

St Vincent's Hospital

Turning Point

The Greens Victoria

Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS)

Victoria Police

Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA)

Yarra Mental Health Alliance

Yarra Service Alliance

Youth Support + Advocacy Service (YSAS)

Youth Projects

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Forum wishes to thank cohealth, previously North Yarra Community Health, for its long term auspicing and support. We look forward to a continuing strong and productive partnership.

Thankyou to Neighbourhood Justice Centre for providing valuable input to our planning through their Community Advisory Panel, and for co-hosting a Community Network Meeting.

North Richmond Community Health allow us to use their Community Room and smaller library room for our regular meetings for which we are ever grateful.

VAADA, Harm Reduction Victoria, the St Vincents Nexus team, and our two community health services – cohealth and NRCH, for their ongoing partnership and support in a time of transition for the Forum

Finally, a sincere thankyou to Fitzroy Legal Service for agreeing to host Yarra Drug and Health Forum as an auspicing body. We look forward to strengthening our partnership and shared values in the coming years.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Peter Wearne (*Chairperson*)

Andrea Fischer (*cohealth representative*)

Sarah Hiley (*until January 2025*)

Belinda Bravo (*from February 2025*)

Saade Melke

Adam Willson

Jesse Colling

Hieng Lim





yarra drug & health forum

The Yarra Drug & Health Forum (YDHF) is a dynamic, adaptive and educative local network committed to identifying and responding to the health and social needs of the community in Yarra.

The Forum aims to ensure health and community relationships are minimally harmed by drug use in the City of Yarra – this includes the impact of drugs on individuals, families and friends, residents and visitors to the area and local businesses.

For more information visit www.ydhf.org.au