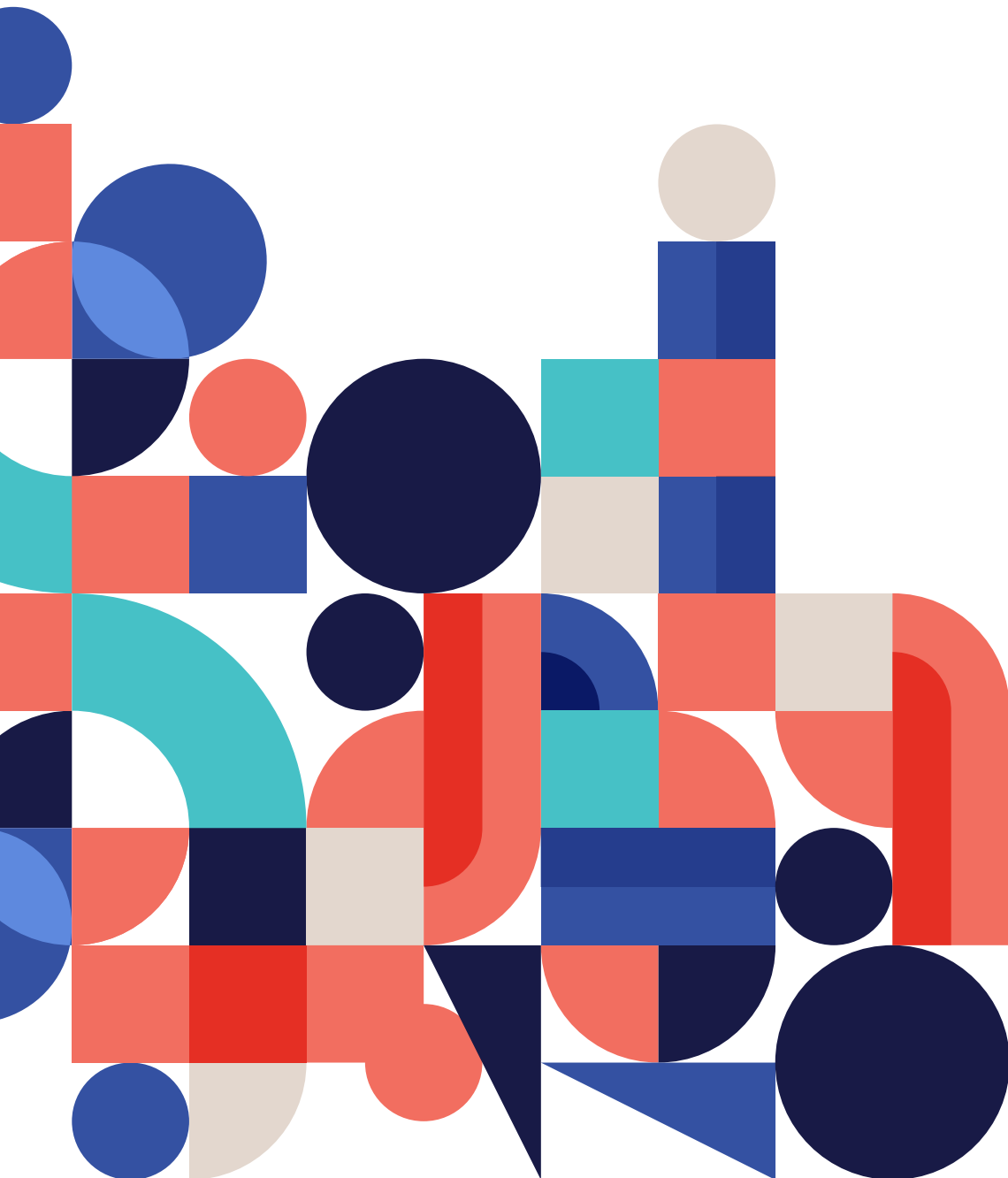


Strategic plan

2025-29



The Ombudsman acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Victoria and pays respect to their Elders past and present.

We recognise the enduring connection of First Peoples to land, water and culture, over which sovereignty was never ceded.

As the human rights complaint handler and investigator, we often see the imbalance of power between individuals and the State. We acknowledge the profound injustices and systemic discrimination experienced by First Peoples, often amplified by this power imbalance.

Through our commitment to fairness and human rights, we strive to listen, learn and advance outcomes that contribute to justice in pursuit of a Victoria that is fair for everyone.

Artwork by Maddison Laws, a proud Yorta Yorta woman from Cummeragunja and member of the Victorian Ombudsman team.



From the Ombudsman

In consulting our people, the community and stakeholders on our new strategic plan, the expectation of what the Victorian Ombudsman should deliver was clear – our role is to ‘level the playing field’ for people in their dealings with public bodies.

The increasing reach of governments and public bodies made distilling that into a simple vision challenging.

After much debate and discussion, we settled on a short phrase to describe what we aspire to – both as citizens and as the Victorian Ombudsman:

Victoria is fair.

When we see our role so simply, it makes the task of directing and organising our often-complex work much easier.

This strategic plan outlines how we will work towards that vision.

We will consider all stages of people’s interactions with government – from preventing complaints to addressing them independently and impartially when they do arise. We will continue to ensure the public sector is held to account and that we are drawing attention to issues of public interest or those that are of significant community concern.

A modern Ombudsman should have a well-developed and resourced prevention and capacity-building function to complement the responsive work of complaints and investigations. Our public sector stakeholders were clear about the need for more support and guidance from us to enable them to improve their services.

We will engage with communities that most need our support and services. We will ensure that our services are well known and accessible to all, whether that is supporting them in their engagement with another public body or standing in their shoes to enable them to get a fair outcome.

We will continue to ensure our people and systems are supported to respond to the expectations of the community and stakeholders. We will invest in our people, assist and encourage them to develop and ensure they can thrive at work. We will explore and consider the use of emerging technologies that can support us to work more effectively and efficiently.

We will learn from our peers and interstate counterparts, consider and implement recommendations from our oversight bodies, and always work to improve our delivery and service.

Our work will continue to be guided by our legislation, the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* and our values. We will continue to work with the community and our stakeholders to understand their changing needs and expectations, and evolve our work to address emerging issues.

We would like to thank all those who were consulted for their engagement, interest and contribution to this strategic plan.

But this is just the beginning – we have much work to do, and we invite the community and our stakeholders to work with us towards our vision that Victoria is fair.

Marlo Baragwanath
Victorian Ombudsman

About this strategic plan

The Victorian Ombudsman is proud to share our strategic plan for 2025-29.

Informed by engagement with our people and stakeholders, the plan sets out our ambitions for the next four years, and our priorities for realising them.

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Accessibility

If you would like to receive this publication in an alternative format, please call 1800 806 314, using the National Relay Service on 133 677 if required, or email vocomms@ombudsman.vic.gov.au.

Who we are

In democracies around the world, the Ombudsman exists in recognition of the imbalance of power between the individual and the State.

In 1973, Parliament established the Office of the Victorian Ombudsman as a mechanism for fairness in what is an inherently unequal relationship and, in this space, our goal is to protect and promote human rights.

While independent and impartial, we are both a voice for the voiceless and a partner in good governance; shining a light on public interest issues and helping the public bodies we oversee improve. Our vision is: Victoria is fair.

What we do

In performing our functions under the Ombudsman Act, we oversee the actions and decisions of more than 1,000 public bodies to ensure fairness, integrity and the protection of human rights.

We use ‘public bodies’ to describe the organisations we can handle complaints about or investigate, including all Victorian state government departments, local councils, prisons, agencies established by legislation (such as WorkSafe, VicRoads and universities), and some private and community service organisations that perform functions on behalf of the State.

- We aim to:
- provide a timely, efficient, effective, flexible and independent means of resolving complaints
 - identify, investigate, expose and prevent maladministration and improper conduct
 - assist public bodies to improve the quality of their administration and complaint handling
 - educate the community and public sector about our work, and their rights and responsibilities.

We focus on achieving practical and meaningful outcomes to address injustice, based on evidence and in accordance with legislation. Our independence means we do not advocate for members of the public or the public bodies we oversee.

How we work

In our day-to-day work, we exercise our broad discretion to use a range of tools to support our role and purpose.



Facilitating complaints

We speak with tens of thousands of people every year and help where we can. Sometimes this means taking on their complaint ourselves or, where we can't help, pointing them in the right direction.



Making enquiries

Either on a complaint or our own motion, we can make enquiries to decide whether an issue may be informally resolved or should be investigated further. Our enquiries are informal and can involve speaking to the parties, undertaking research, obtaining records or inspecting files.



Conciliating complaints

We can conciliate complaints at any stage of an enquiry or investigation by bringing the parties together in a facilitated and structured setting to find sustainable solutions to problems.



Complaint System Review

We proactively review public bodies' complaint handling practices and processes to help them improve, and ultimately reduce the number of complaints to the Ombudsman about others' complaint handling.



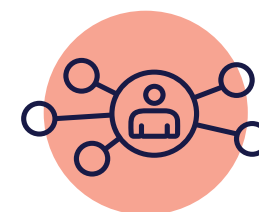
Investigations

Using Royal Commission-style powers, we formally investigate public bodies' actions and decisions and make remedial recommendations for improvement. We investigate complaints (including Public Interest (whistleblower) Complaints) on our own motion, or any matter referred by the Victorian Parliament.



Education

We provide education and training to empower public bodies to improve the quality of their administration and complaint-handling practices.



Engagement

We seek to engage with public bodies to disseminate lessons and integrity insights and inform potential recommendations for improvement. We also engage with diverse communities to help navigate a complicated landscape and make effective complaints that will ultimately be easier for public bodies to deal with.

The impact of our work

We assist in resolving complaints

We provide free, independent and impartial services to help resolve thousands of complaints every year.

As Victoria's human rights complaint handler and investigator, we also address instances where public sector organisations may have breached human rights or not considered them properly.

In 2023-24

18,031

complaints received that were within our jurisdiction

4,327

complaints received that engaged human rights

We investigate complex issues

In 2023-24

19

formal investigations completed

We conduct rigorous investigations to deliver fair and meaningful outcomes. We investigate a range of matters, ranging from specific complaints to systemic issues.

89%

investigation recommendations accepted

We make remedial recommendations for change that serve the public interest, with a high acceptance rate from public bodies investigated.

We promote improved public sector administration

We undertake Complaint System Reviews to support public bodies to operate responsive complaint systems that encourage reflection and identify areas for continuous improvement.

Our education and training offerings support organisations to improve complaint handling, manage conflicts of interest, deal with complex behaviours and employ good decision making.

In 2023-24

100%

Complaint System Review recommendations accepted

70

educational workshops held

An ever-changing landscape

We have identified a number of key drivers that are currently impacting our operating environment. However, we also recognise that our landscape is constantly evolving, and it is expected that these drivers will continue to shift over the next four years, and that other drivers will likely emerge. We will remain open to change and be agile in our response.

Aboriginal self-determination and the Yoorrook Justice Commission are driving changes in how government services are designed and delivered

Self-determination recognises the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to control their futures. In Victoria, there has been significant work towards enabling self-determination through processes of Truth and Treaty. This signals current and future shifts in how government services are designed and delivered to First Peoples, as well as how decisions are made about matters affecting First Peoples.

The Yoorrook Justice Commission is investigating injustices against First Peoples in Victoria since colonisation and may result in recommendations to government for reform, changing how services are delivered and how public bodies are accountable to First Peoples communities.

Rapidly changing technology is impacting the Victorian public sector and the broader community

Advances in technology and increased reliance on digital platforms are transforming how the Victorian public sector operates, driving the need for robust cybersecurity measures to safeguard sensitive data, uphold public trust and meet legal obligations.

There are growing expectations for online customer experience which could enhance our service delivery, but there is a need to stay balanced with customer communication preferences – noting that 60 per cent of complaints we received were via phone in 2023-24. The rise of social media is also reshaping the public service landscape, with more complainants using these platforms to share their experiences with government services. Use of AI will lead to significant changes in the way governments and the community interact in coming years.

There is a need to rebuild trust in government services

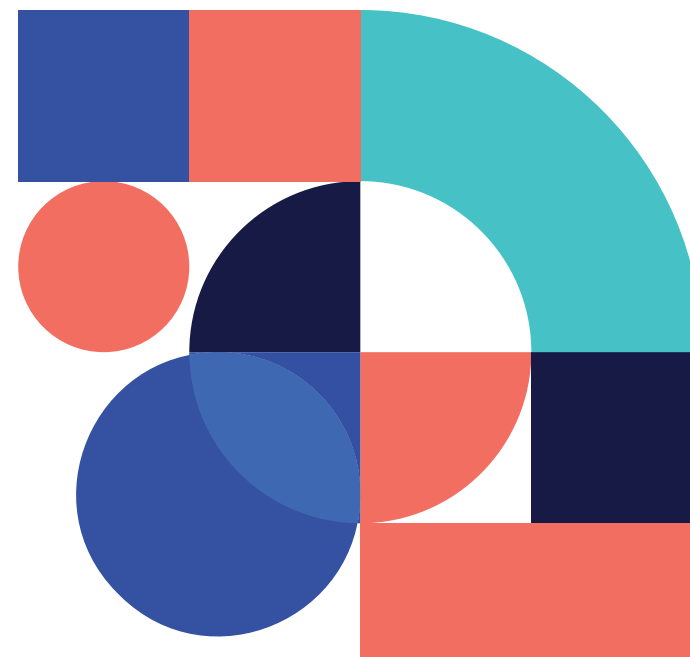
Trust in government institutions has generally declined in recent years. If communities are less trusting of government organisations, they may be more inclined to be dissatisfied with the services they receive.

This also means that enhancing the public's understanding and trust in our distinct role is crucial. In the way we take up our accountability and oversight functions, we have an important role to play in contributing to feelings of trust between public service providers and the communities they serve. Continuous engagement and education will be important to encourage awareness of the services we provide.

Victoria's changing demographics may lead to a change in expectations and volume of complaints

Cost-of-living pressures are placing greater financial stress on many parts of the community. This may lead to increased demand for government support services, including from individuals who may not have previously had a reason to access government assistance. As a result, we could face a higher volume of complaints and changes in expectations of complainants about what assistance government should involve.

Ongoing growth in migrant communities continues to expand the state's cultural diversity. This trend drives greater need for the Victorian Ombudsman to adapt its services to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities. This includes provision of language support services, culturally appropriate complaint handling, and targeted outreach programs to ensure equitable access to our services.



Our strategy at a glance



STRATEGIC THEME

Our prevention

Proactive education and engagement

Why it's important

The best response to unfairness in public administration is to prevent it from occurring in the first place. By demonstrating what good public administration and complaint handling looks like, we can guide public bodies to improve their practices. Active engagement and education with our stakeholders is core to our stewardship role, and to shape improved public service delivery for the community.

Our priorities

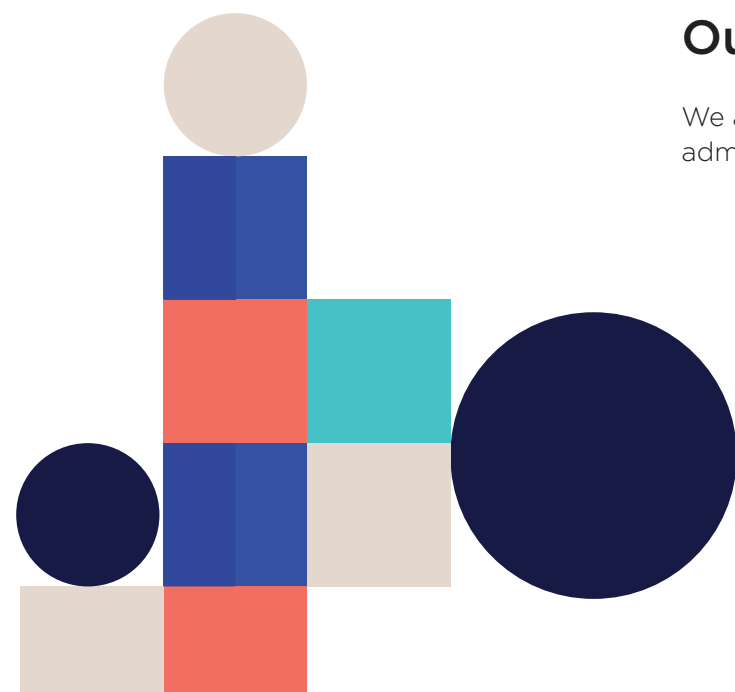
- Strengthening constructive relationships with key stakeholders
- Improving capabilities in administration and complaint handling across public bodies
- Leveraging intelligence to drive improvements

How we'll measure success

- Our stakeholders value our education activities
- More public bodies engage with us for guidance and support in complaint handling
- We see evidence of improved public administration

Outcome

We are respected stewards for good public administration and integrity.



Where we've come from

Councils and complaints

Over a number of years, and through the combined effort of enquiries, investigations, reviews, education and engagement, we have focused on improving how local councils handle complaints. As far back as 2015, we recommended councils be required to have a policy and process for complaint handling. In 2017, we issued our first good practice guide and started offering training to help councils in this space.

In 2020, the Local Government Act was amended to implement our 2015 recommendation, and we updated our guide. As a result, over the last four years we have received 11 per cent fewer complaints about councils' complaint handling.

Where we're going

A program of prevention

We'll develop and deliver a data-led, risk-based program of education, engagement and reviews to assist those public bodies that need it most to improve the quality of their administration and complaint-handling practices. We'll engage more with the public sector to share integrity insights and convince them to love their complaints.

STRATEGIC THEME

Our oversight

Independent and considered approach

Why it's important

Accountable public bodies are an essential component of democracy. Our independent and considered oversight helps to ensure public bodies are accountable to the communities they serve, shines a light on maladministration and breaches of human rights, and provides pathways for issues to be resolved.

Our priorities

- Increasing flexibility in how we use our range of oversight tools
- Highlighting issues that are of community concern, or that we determine are systemic or in the public interest
- Leading impactful investigations and enquiries

How we'll measure success

- Our resolution process is efficient and effective
- Stakeholders believe we are pursuing important matters
- Our decisions are seen as fair and reasonable, and our recommendations are readily accepted

Outcome

We have a lasting impact on fairness, equity and integrity in Victoria.

Where we've come from

Investigation into healthcare for Aboriginal people in Victorian prisons

Healthcare is one of the issues raised most often with the Ombudsman by people in prison and is a particular concern for Aboriginal people in prison.

We undertook an investigation on this matter, contributing to efforts of numerous other bodies over many years to highlight the issue and drive change, working with First Peoples advisers.

Throughout this review, we heard what a huge difference it makes when First Peoples do receive cultural support alongside healthcare needs.

We made recommendations for systemic change that were accepted in principle by government. We will monitor implementation progress closely in the coming years.

Where we're going

Sharpening our focus

We'll identify and publish annual priority areas for our oversight activities, drawing on our data and other intelligence including stakeholder consultations.

We'll also develop and publish criteria on how we decide to use different oversight tools like investigations, to make sure we're having the biggest impact that we can.

STRATEGIC THEME

Our communities

Trusted and effective services

Why it's important

It is critical that we keep people at the centre of decision making. To ensure we are having the greatest impact, we need to ensure that we are reaching the right people. Every individual who needs us should be able to access our services in a way that is simple, meaningful and valuable to them, and that means some people will need more help than others.

Our priorities

- Increasing engagement with communities experiencing marginalisation
- Tailoring assistance for people who need the most help in seeking a fair outcome from government
- Making it easier to access and navigate the complaint system

How we'll measure success

- Communities have a strong awareness of our role
- A greater proportion of our contacts are from people who need us most and are about things we can help with
- Communities and stakeholders have a positive view of our office and value our services
- Communities and stakeholders have a positive experience/result with our office when engaging our services

Outcome

Our role and services are well known, accessible and valuable.

Where we've come from

Conciliations

We bring complainants and public bodies together through the process of conciliation to achieve informal, tailored resolution of complaints. Our complaints officers identify suitable complaints for conciliation, with a focus on cases where there is an ongoing relationship between a complainant and a public body.

Conciliations, which are conducted by trained Victorian Ombudsman staff, can help get relationships back on track as the process builds on reflection and acknowledgement of the past to look at the future.

We conducted 52 conciliations in 2023-24, with over 90 per cent resolving and over 84 per cent of respondents saying the process was fair.

Where we're going

Providing more help with premature complaints

More than 40 per cent of complaints that we receive that are within our jurisdiction are 'premature' complaints – that is, a complainant hasn't raised an issue with the public body directly before coming to us.

It makes sense for the original public body to try to resolve a complaint first, so we ask complainants to contact them before we consider the complaint. However, some complainants may give up or find it too hard to contact another organisation, and we lose track of these complaints.

We will make a change to accept premature complaints from those who need our help the most and refer them to the original public body. This will make it easier for people to navigate the complaints system but also give us more visibility of what happens to these complaints.

STRATEGIC THEME

Our people and systems

A capable and future-focused organisation

Why it's important

People are at the heart of our success. Our people and teams need the right resources, skills, and support to thrive and grow into future leaders of our office and the sector. By fostering collaboration within our office and across the integrity and oversight sector, we can empower our people to excel. Ensuring they have what they need to succeed also means providing systems and digital infrastructure that work seamlessly and reliably.

Our priorities

- Investing in our people to thrive and continuing to develop emerging leaders
- Building collaboration across our organisation and the integrity and oversight sector
- Enhancing our data analytics and technology capabilities for the future
- Securing independent and sustainable resourcing

How we'll measure success

- We have a sustainable budget
- We have strong staff engagement
- Our staff are satisfied with internal systems and learning and development opportunities

Outcome

We are capable, curious and collaborative. Our systems are resilient and scalable.

Where we've come from

Supporting our people to continue to deliver excellent service

Our frontline staff who interact with the public and take complaints continue to experience challenging behaviour coupled with increasing complexity in our work. In our People Matter Survey in 2022-23, of the 13 per cent of our people who reported experiencing violence or aggression at work, the vast majority identified the cause as a member of the public. This was an increase from the previous year's survey.

During 2023-24, reflecting the feedback from the survey and staff consultation sessions, emphasis was given to psychosocial safety, workplace safety and staff wellbeing. With this focus, we continued to partner to deliver health and wellbeing programs and interventions, invested in building staff and manager understanding and capability in relation to workplace safety, psychosocial safety, workplace behaviours, unconscious bias, and diversity, equity and inclusion.

This year's survey saw improved responses but nevertheless our work in relation to psychosocial safety and wellbeing will continue, with a focus this year on vicarious trauma to further support our people and managers.

Where we're going

A diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace

Through 2025-26, we will focus on developing and commencing the implementation of a comprehensive people strategy.

Our people strategy will be designed to deliver a diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace; an expert workforce who continue to have the right skills and attributes; a supportive and safe work environment that values the health, wellbeing and safety of our people; a high-performance culture that is an exemplar of integrity and accountability; and a place where leaders can emerge, develop and thrive.

Addendum: 2026-27 Financial, asset and workforce outlook

As per section 2.2.2 of the government’s *Resource Management Framework*, the information below is the Victorian Ombudsman’s current financial, asset and workforce outlook, and asset plan over the next four financial years.

Financial outlook

The confirmed funding for FY2026-27 is \$24.44m which includes lapsing funding of \$0.33m. The table below is the four-year financial outlook.

	\$ million			
	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29	2029-30
Output funding appropriation	24.309	24.639	25.224	25.823
Sale of services	0.135	0.135	0.135	0.135
	24.444	24.774	25.359	25.958

Source: Output appropriation forward estimates as provided by the Department of Treasury and Finance (DTF).

Asset investment outlook

2026-27 asset plan for maintaining, renewing, and investing in our assets to enhance productivity and access to our services for Victorians. Current plan doesn’t include funding needed to deliver our prioritised system replacement programs across multiple years. The table below is the four-year asset investment outlook.

	\$ million			
	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29	2029-30
Asset renewals	0.200	0.200	0.200	0.200
Asset enhancements	0.100	0.100	0.100	0.100
	0.300	0.300	0.300	0.300

Source: Minor capital works through depreciation equivalent funding.

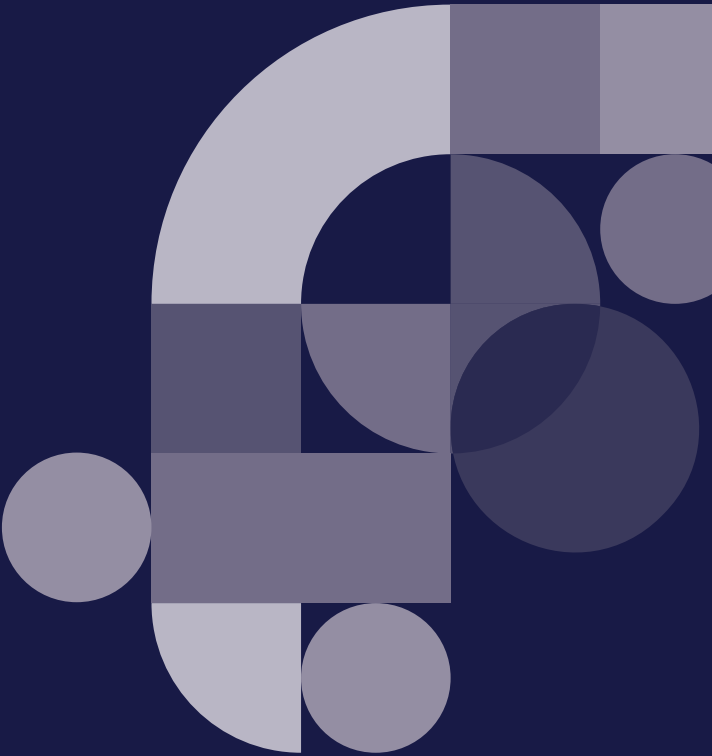
Workforce outlook

As part of the *People strategy 2025-28*, the Victorian Ombudsman has developed a comprehensive workforce plan that:

- ensures skills, capability and workforce mix supports operational priorities (subject to budget)
- identifies evolving workforce requirements aligned to our *Strategic plan 2025-29* and informs capability needs.

Implementation of the plan will commence in 2026-27.

The Victorian Ombudsman continues to advocate for sustainable ongoing funding. The funding provided to date has not been sufficient to fully support delivery of our legislative mandate and strategic priorities or the wellbeing of our people. While we continue to find more efficient and effective ways of delivering our services, without an ongoing increase in funding, the workforce outlook remains challenging.



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