



# Strategic Plan 2026–2031

Centre for Excellence  
in Rural Sexual Health  
(CERSH)



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE



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# Message from the Director

I am pleased to introduce the *CERSH Strategic Plan 2026–2031*, which outlines our vision and priorities for the next five years.



This plan is designed to sustain our current initiatives, strengthen our engagement, respond to the increasing demand for services and explore new opportunities – all with the aim of enhancing sexual and reproductive health in the regions we serve.

To ensure our strategy is well-informed and aligned with community needs, we engaged an independent consultant to gather feedback from key stakeholders across the Hume and Loddon Mallee regions, as well as statewide. We were delighted by the strong response, which reflected a broad range of perspectives and reinforced the high regard in which CERSH and its work are held. In addition, we sought valuable insights from our dedicated staff.

The feedback from stakeholders and staff provided a clear direction for this Strategic Plan. There is strong support for our existing work, alongside thoughtful recommendations on how we can refine and expand our services to create an even greater impact.

As a Centre for Excellence, we are committed to identifying, developing and promoting best practice in our field. Over the next five years, CERSH will collaborate with rural health services and like-minded organisations to drive progress and provide leadership in addressing the sexual and reproductive health needs of rural Victorians.

With the continued support of the Department of Health, we are well positioned to build on our success and, in time, explore opportunities to improve our reach.

**PROFESSOR JANE TOMNAY AM**  
Director

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# Who we are

## We are the Centre for Excellence in Rural Sexual Health (CERSH).

Funded by the Victorian Government Department of Health through a service agreement with The University of Melbourne, our program sits within the Department of Rural Health in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences at Shepparton, Parkville and Wangaratta campuses. We also have a partnership with La Trobe University Bendigo campus, where our Loddon Mallee staff are located.

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## What we do

Improving rural sexual and reproductive health is at the heart of our mission. We design, implement and evaluate programs that deliver practical, targeted solutions to sexual and reproductive health challenges in the Hume and Loddon Mallee regions.

Guided by community development principles, we prioritise building local capacity by co-designing solutions that address issues where they arise. The evidence we generate informs best practices and drives service system improvements across broader settings.

While our core focus remains on these two specific regions, we extend our reach through an online platform, offering no-cost, reliable information and resources.

Collaboration is fundamental to our approach. We initiate and sustain strong partnerships with key agencies, networks and individuals to prevent duplication, enhance impact and create lasting, meaningful change.

♥ Improving rural sexual and reproductive health is at the heart of our mission.

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## Our vision

Empowered rural Victorian communities with equitable access to high quality sexual and reproductive healthcare, support and information.

## Our mission

To improve sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing for all rural Victorians through workforce development, collaboration and sustainable, community-led solutions.

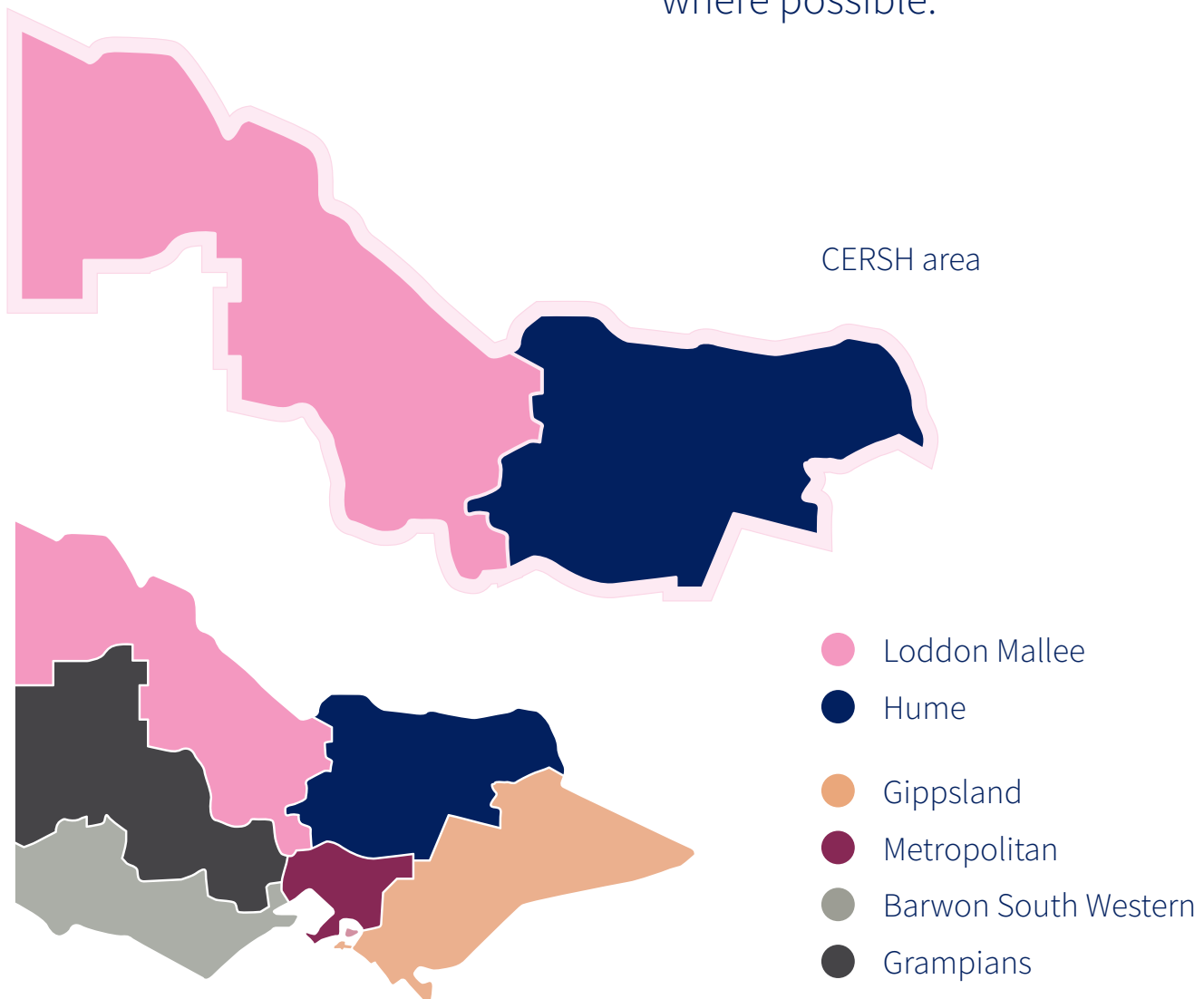
# Our reach

## CERSH primarily operates across two Victorian regions – Hume and Loddon Mallee.

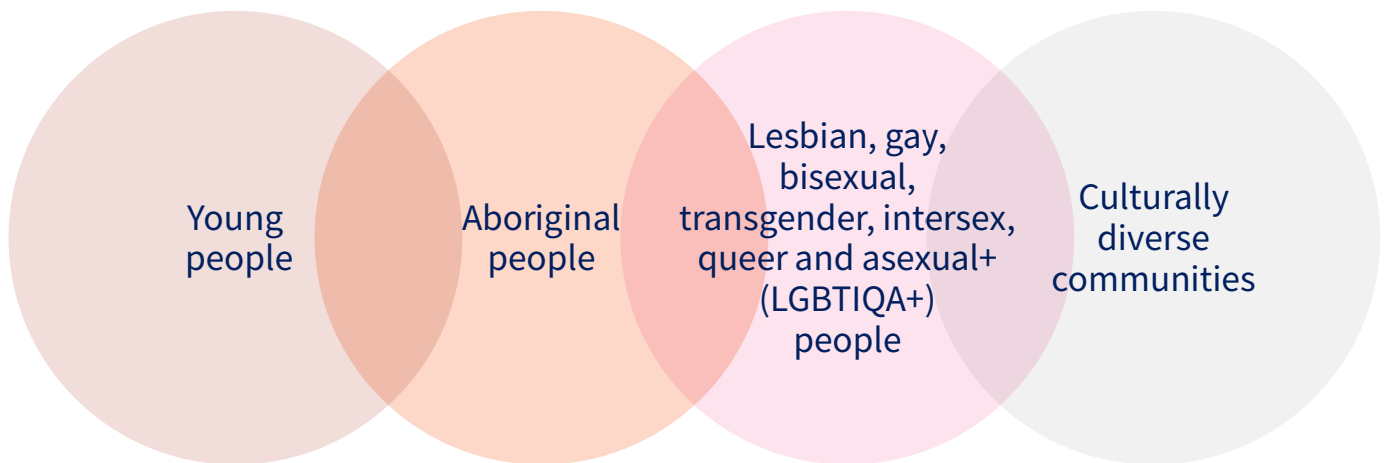
Hume sits in the north east of Victoria, and Loddon Mallee is in the central and north west of the state. Together, in 2024, they had an estimated population of almost 670,000 people and cover nearly 100,000 square kilometres.

The geography covered by these regions combined accounts for more than 40 per cent of the Victorian state.

Our online platform delivers information and resources statewide (and nationally) where possible.



# Our priority populations



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# Our strategic priorities



# Strengthening the capacity of the rural sexual and reproductive health workforce by facilitating best practice training and professional development opportunities

Building a skilled and empowered rural sexual and reproductive health workforce is critical to strengthening the rural service system. A well-supported, multidisciplinary workforce equipped with best practice training and professional development is essential for meeting the sexual and reproductive health needs of rural communities and improving health outcomes.

Effective systems must align with population needs and service demands, ensuring accessible and responsive care. And workforce capacity must be reinforced locally through face-to-face training delivery and statewide via digital platforms, providing flexible and practical opportunities for upskilling in rural areas.

## Objectives

**We will develop, deliver and coordinate tailored rural workforce development initiatives that foster interdisciplinary collaboration and enhance accessibility through flexible learning formats.**

**We will equip practitioners with the skills and confidence to deliver person-centred, culturally responsive and trauma-informed sexual and reproductive healthcare.**

**We will explore and implement innovative communication strategies to strengthen rural primary care, workforce development and health promotion.**

**We will support rural health services to embed sexual and reproductive health into existing care models, ensuring integration with primary, secondary and specialist services.**

## Actions

- Deliver targeted training programs to clinical and non-clinical staff, tailored to their specific roles, community contexts and evolving workforce needs.
- Maintain and expand CERSH online modules accredited by the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners.
- Prioritise training initiatives that support key population groups, including young people, Aboriginal people, LGBTIQ+ people and culturally diverse communities.
- Strengthen the integration of primary care in sexual and reproductive health by enhancing referral pathways and connections to specialist services within a hub-and-spoke network.
- Develop and enhance strategies for knowledge dissemination that facilitate cross-sector collaboration, improve access to evidence-based resources and support best practice approaches.
- Strengthen the rural workforce and inter-agency capacity by fostering collaboration between healthcare providers, community health services and key stakeholders.
- Continuously update and enhance the CERSH website, expanding the online sexual and reproductive health resources hub.
- Explore and optimise social media platforms to increase engagement, reach diverse rural audiences and share key updates, research and training opportunities.
- Improve the promotion of CERSH and its activities, ensuring ongoing visibility and engagement.
- Co-design and implement workforce sustainability strategies that support long-term retention, career pathways, workforce renewal and succession planning.



 Building a skilled and empowered rural sexual and reproductive health workforce is critical to strengthening the rural service system.

# Fostering partnerships and strengthening networks to drive coordinated and impactful sexual and reproductive health promotion

Strong, well-connected sexual and reproductive health networks are essential for driving systemic change and improving service delivery. They remain at the core of our work. These networks support collaboration, professional development and the exchange of best practices while strengthening connections between services.

Ensuring practitioners and the public have access to accurate information is critical to empowering communities and achieving positive health outcomes.

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## Objectives

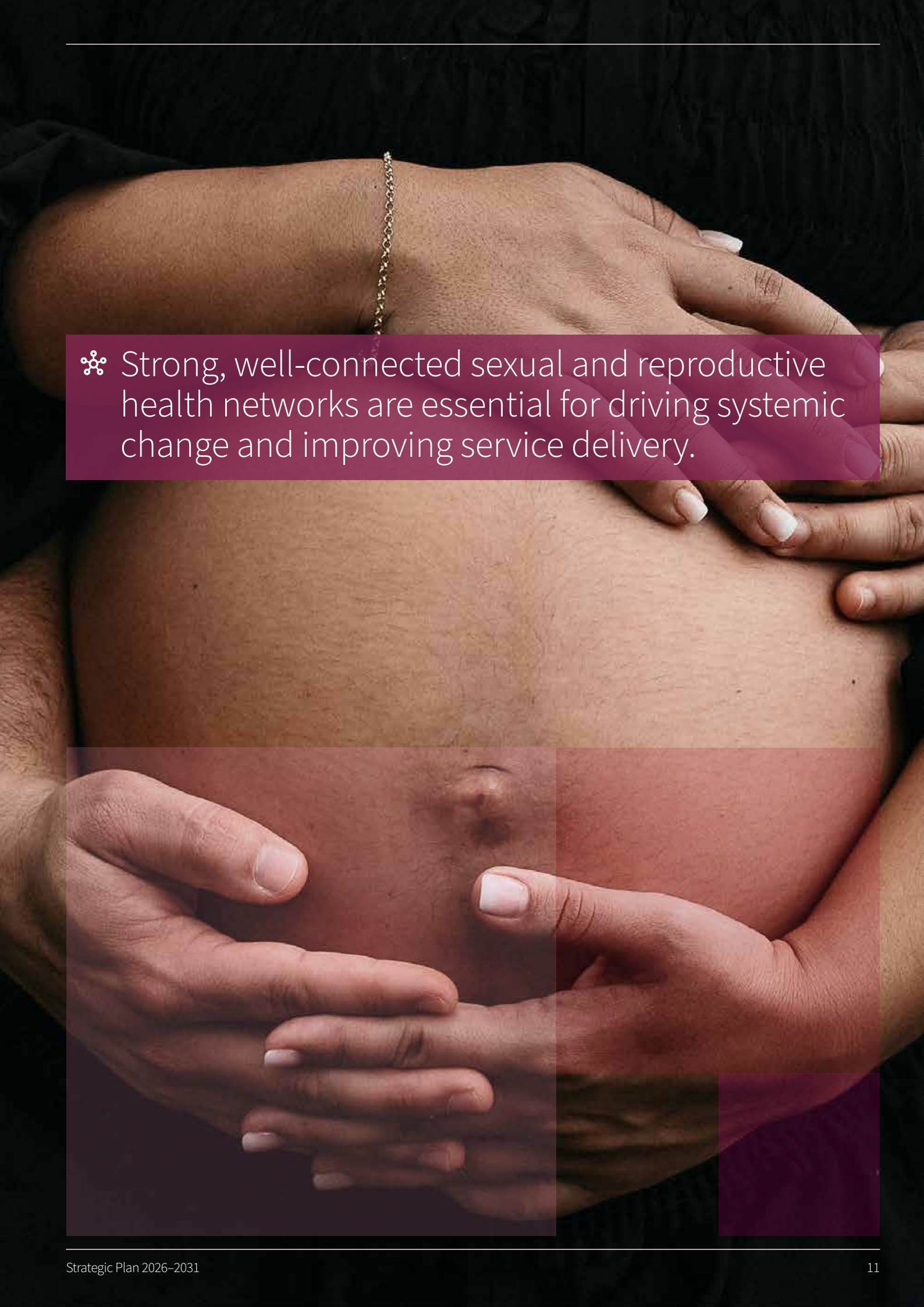
**We will build and strengthen partnerships across healthcare, community services, academia and government to maximise resources and enhance service coordination.**

**We will regularly consult and engage with rural communities to ensure our efforts are responsive to their needs and concerns relating to sexual and reproductive health.**

**We will facilitate knowledge-sharing and professional development in collaboration with training partners and professional bodies to drive best practice capability development.**

## Actions

- Establish and maintain influential networks at local, state, national and international levels to drive improvements in rural sexual and reproductive health.
- Strengthen partnerships with local, state and national youth services to integrate sexual and reproductive health promotion into youth-focused settings.
- Facilitate and continue to expand the rural Communities of Practice in sexual and reproductive health.
- Develop and implement comprehensive sexual wellness action plans through a co-design process, incorporating evidence-based strategies, community feedback and ongoing evaluation.
- Develop and disseminate inclusive health promotion collateral that promotes optimum sexual and reproductive health, embraces intersectionality and ensures that messaging resonates with diverse rural audiences.
- Deliver a biennial rural sexual health conference to showcase emerging research, policy developments and best practices.
- Partner to organise forums and other knowledge-sharing events that disseminate critical information, provide professional development opportunities and facilitate open dialogue on sexual and reproductive health.



❁ Strong, well-connected sexual and reproductive health networks are essential for driving systemic change and improving service delivery.

# Delivering practical, innovative and flexible initiatives tailored to address the unique and diverse needs of rural communities

Targeted local initiatives, including health promotion, education and service capacity building, are essential to addressing sexual and reproductive health needs, especially for disadvantaged groups.

New approaches or enhancements to existing effective practices must be co-designed with rural communities to ensure they are culturally appropriate, accepted and sustainable.

## Objectives

**We will strengthen the decentralised model of sexual and reproductive health by enhancing capacity, co-designing solutions and linking specialist providers to local groups.**

**We will prioritise empathetic, confidential and culturally sensitive support for people seeking sexual and reproductive health services to reduce stigma and reticence.**

**We will deepen our understanding of local populations and their specific vulnerabilities to challenges, including sexually transmissible infections (STI) and blood borne virus (BBV) outbreaks, by engaging communities and using data-informed approaches to ensure rapid, effective responses and reduction in health inequities.**

**We will emphasise preventative strategies through a comprehensive interventionist approach to address community-specific issues while considering the social determinants of health.**

**We will promote respectful, safe sexual relationships and informed reproductive choices, using a gender lens and taking a life-course approach.**

## Actions

- Avoid service duplication by developing a clear, transparent approach to identifying gaps and capitalising on opportunities based on local needs.

- Foster collaboration with organisations and practitioners at local, state and national levels to improve access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services across rural communities.
- Advocate for the integration of sexual and reproductive health services into primary healthcare settings.
- Leverage technologies such as telehealth, mobile clinics, vending machines and digital tools to expand access to services and build digital literacy among rural health practitioners.
- Develop and disseminate stigma-reducing health promotion materials.
- Integrate sexual and reproductive health stigma reduction into medical training and rural clinical placements.
- Support rural health services in creating safe, inclusive spaces for sexual and reproductive healthcare.
- Tailor interventions to meet individual needs at each stage of life, and to meet the needs of priority groups.
- Collaborate with rural Aboriginal leaders to ensure Aboriginal perspectives and cultural values are prioritised across initiatives.
- Strengthen and sustain the capacity to respond effectively to local STI and BBV outbreaks through established systems, training and a coordinated regional approach.
- Explore ways to value-add to settings-based programs relating to sexual and reproductive health.
- Design and implement targeted prevention programs that address social determinants such as access to healthcare, to reduce disparities within rural communities.
- Facilitate and coordinate educational campaigns that promote healthy, respectful sexual relationships, focusing on consent, communication and safety at different life stages.
- Facilitate training opportunities for service providers on integrating a gender lens into sexual and reproductive health services to ensure that all individuals, regardless of gender identity, receive informed, equitable care.

# Enhancing the rural sexual and reproductive health system by providing leadership and workforce renewal, building research capacity and promoting sustainable practices

As a Centre for Excellence, we are dedicated to driving leadership, innovation and workforce renewal in rural sexual and reproductive health.

By fostering collaborative partnerships, advancing research and promoting sustainable practices, we aim to address disparities in sexual and reproductive health outcomes in rural areas.

## Objectives

**We will continue to develop the next generation of rural sexual and reproductive health leaders.**

**We will voice and represent the rural Victorian perspective on sexual and reproductive health in policy discussions and decision-making forums.**

**We will develop and implement systems that uphold best practices in data collection, knowledge management and resource dissemination, supporting informed decision-making across regional Victoria.**

**We will strengthen the rural evidence base in sexual and reproductive health, building stakeholder capacity for quality research and evaluation.**

**We will secure the financial resources necessary to expand and sustain rural sexual and reproductive health initiatives across rural Victoria.**

## Actions

- Deliver high quality sexual and reproductive health education for medical students and clinicians in rural and metropolitan areas.
- Promote the importance of integrating sexual and reproductive health training into medical school curricula to ensure all future healthcare professionals are equipped with essential knowledge and skills.
- Develop and support the coordination of a mentorship program for healthcare professionals in rural areas, focusing on sexual and reproductive health leadership.
- Regularly submit rural perspectives and data to national consultations on sexual and reproductive health policy.
- Support the development of standardised processes for sexual and reproductive health data to ensure consistency and reliability.
- Facilitate training opportunities to enhance the use of data collection systems and knowledge management platforms.
- Facilitate partnerships with academic institutions to conduct research focused on rural sexual and reproductive health issues.
- Build long-term partnerships with philanthropic organisations to support sustainable funding for rural health initiatives.
- Partner to develop and submit funding proposals based on identified need to support reach and expansion of rural sexual and reproductive health initiatives.

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# Strategic alignment

The *CERSH Strategic Plan 2026–2031* aligns with the following strategic documents:

[Fifth National Sexually Transmissible Infections Strategy 2024–2030](#) ↗

[Ninth National HIV Strategy 2024–2030](#) ↗

System enabler plan 2022–30

Victorian sexual and reproductive health and viral hepatitis strategy 2022–30

Victorian sexually transmissible infection (STI) plan 2022–30

Victorian women’s sexual and reproductive health plan 2022–30

Victorian HIV plan 2022–30

[Victorian hepatitis B plan 2022–30](#) ↗

Victorian hepatitis C plan 2022–30

Victorian Aboriginal sexual and reproductive health plan 2022–30

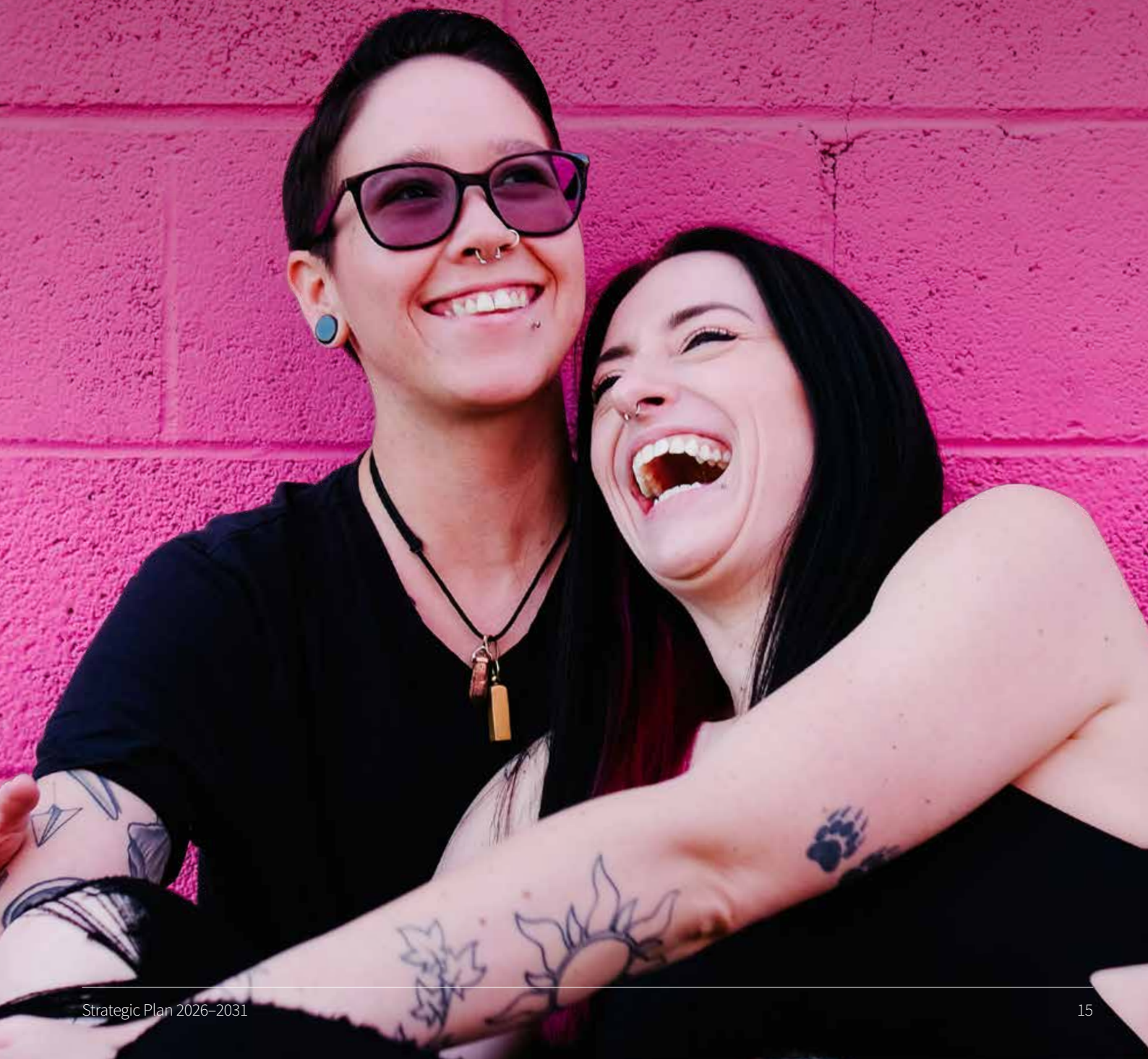
Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2023–27

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# Measuring achievement

Our annual work plan will detail the implementation of our actions and measure progress against key deliverables.

Report on progress of actions in the *CERSH Strategic Plan 2026–2031* will be via the CERSH annual report.





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## Contact us



Get to know us better  
in your own time

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