



**Hobsons Bay**  
CITY COUNCIL

# **Hobsons Bay City Council Submission to National Children's Commissioner examining intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour in children**

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**MAY 2014**

## Introduction

Hobsons Bay City Council (the Council) is pleased to see that the Australian Human Rights Commission is examining intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour in children. Below is the Council's response.

Hobsons Bay City Council is situated approximately seven to 20 kilometres south west of the Central Business District (CBD), covering an area of 66 square kilometres. The municipality has a population of 87 360 people which is forecast to increase by 17 per cent (14 864) by 2031.

Children and young people make up approximately 25 per cent of the Hobsons Bay population. The Council is aware that addressing the health needs of children and young people is vitally important and different to addressing the health needs of adults.

The Council is currently developing a new Children and Young Peoples Plan 2014-2018 and in recent consultation with children and young people predominant key themes were: lack of health services in the municipality especially mental health services, public transport options, recreational activities and spaces to connect with their community, as well as education and employment opportunities.

The City of Hobsons Bay faces the unique challenges of balancing urban and coastal areas, growth, social disadvantage, infrastructure demands, and lack of services. Local government have limited legislative ability to create substantial or sustainable change in these areas on their own, therefore working in partnerships across the municipality and the region is fundamental; advocating, informing and partnering with national, state, regional and local sectors to meet the needs of our community. This call for submission provides an opportunity for greater understanding around this important issue for the children and young people of Hobsons Bay.

## Children and Young People in Hobsons Bay

The Council's directions are driven by the Hobsons Bay Community Health and Wellbeing Plan 2013-2017 (the Council's Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan) and the Council Plan 2013-2017. Of which children and young people are a key priority area. In addition to this there are a number of organisational policies that directly target opportunities for children and young people, including the Children and Young People's Plan 2014 – 2018 (under development), the Open Space Strategy (under development) and the Play Space Strategy 2013 – 2023.

Alarming data indicates that more young people in Hobsons Bay experience psychological distress and psychiatric hospitalisations than anywhere in the Western Metropolitan Region (WMR). In 2009-2010, the rate of psychiatric hospitalisations for 10 to 17 year olds in Hobsons Bay was 11.2 per 1,000, almost double the rate for the WMR (6.2 per 1,000) and Victoria (6.7 per 1,000). A survey of secondary school students in Hobsons Bay found that 20 per cent reported high levels of psychological distress. This was significantly higher than that reported across the WMR (14 per cent) and Victoria (13 per cent) (DEECD, 2010).

## Why children and young people engage in intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour

Non Suicidal Self Injury (self-harm) is found to be relatively common in young people. An Australian study found that amongst adolescents, 6 per cent of females and 5 per cent of males engaged in non-suicidal self injury (NSSI) in the last 12 months. The median age for the first episode of NSSI was 17 years with depression being a major risk factor. Over 60 per cent of people who engage in NSSI have at some time in their lives been diagnosed with depression (Youth Mental Health First Aid, 2013b). Of the young people consulted who engaged in NSSI, they reported more emotional distress, anger

problems, lower self-esteem, and increased risky health behaviours (such as substance use). NSSI is also associated with an increased risk of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Youth Mental Health First Aid, 2013).

Suicide can be a crisis response to depression and anxiety. The Australian National Survey found that in the previous 12 months, in the 16-24 age group, approximately 3.4 per cent seriously thought about suicide and 1.1 per cent attempted suicide (Youth Mental Health First Aid, 2013a). As stated earlier, depression is a major risk factor for suicide amongst young people. Young people may feel so overwhelmed and helpless that the future appears hopeless, thinking suicide is their only option. This can happen overtime or can be a rapid response to a break up/failure at school, acting on their thoughts quickly and impulsively.

### The incidence and factors contributing to contagion and clustering involving children and young people

The Council's Youth Services team, in particular the Youth Counsellor, highlight that young people with emotional difficulties are more likely to engage in NSSI if they have close friends or peers who have engaged in similar behaviours. This can be seen in the Councils data (see table below) for July 2012 to June 2013.

### The barriers which prevent children and young people from seeking help

In Australia, only 49 per cent of young people aged 16 – 24 with depression in the past year received professional help for their problems (Youth Mental Health First Aid, 2013a).

Barriers to accessing services can be due many elements such as the young person feeling embarrassed, having issues around confidentiality, lack of youth friendly services nearby, lack of awareness of services, cost, and travel distance. Despite the high levels of psychological distress being reported in Hobsons Bay, the number of clients and associated number of contacts with mental health services has significantly reduced, which is assumed to be due to issues with accessing services.

The increasing lack of services for young people in Hobsons Bay has resulted in early intervention services being stretched to accommodate complex cases which require additional coordination and management, which services do not have. As such early intervention services are not longer able to do preventative care with other clients with hidden mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety (which can lead to self harm and suicide), missing out. This situation poses a significant risk to the ongoing mental health of our young people and our community.

As indicated in the table below the Council is seeing a fairly stable rate of mental health issues presenting to services, with fluctuations occurring within the presentations of issues with suicide/NSSI.

<b>Time Period</b>	<b>Mental Health % (n)</b>	<b>Suicide/Non Suicidal Self Injury % (n)</b>	<b>Total number of young people seen*</b>
July 2008 to June 2009	<b>23 (50)</b>	<b>1 (2)</b>	<b>217</b>
July 2009 to June 2010	<b>20 (43)</b>	<b>2 (4)</b>	<b>217</b>
July 2010 to June 2011	<b>24 (73)</b>	<b>1 (3)</b>	<b>305</b>
July 2011 to June 2012	<b>19 (51)</b>	<b>4 (11)</b>	<b>267</b>
July 2012 to June 2013	<b>20 (56)</b>	<b>17 (47)</b>	<b>278</b>
June 2013 to May 2014	<b>26 (78)</b>	<b>7 (21)</b>	<b>299</b>

\* Total number of young people seen for one to one therapeutic counseling. (on average young people receive up to 10 X1 hour sessions, some up to 15 sessions)

\*\* Mental Health: depression, anxiety, eating disorders, psychosis

Data, as well as ongoing consultation with our local community, indicates that there is a lack of accessible health practitioners and specialist services in Hobsons Bay. This is increasingly apparent when referring children in their early years to allied health practitioners. In addition mental health services for young people and health services that are inclusive of children and young people's needs, especially those from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds and those who are Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (GLBTIQ) are limited in supply.

### **Programs and practices that effectively target and support children and young people who are engaging in the range of intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviours**

Hobsons Bay City Council has found that Youth Counselling, Peer Youth Mental Health First Aid, Headspace, eheadspace and Orygen programs and practices have been of value within our local community, although currently there is a lack of funding for these services in the municipality with many of our residents having to travel to access the programs.

The Council strongly supports a cohesive multifaceted approach to build the resilience in school communities regarding youth mental health. It is common for young people to seek help from their peers and trusted teachers. Schools can provide an environment by which students/peers, teachers and support staff can work towards resilient young people. However professional development, exposure to resources (including online) and programs need to be able to be embedded.

### **The feasibility and effectiveness of conducting public education campaigns aimed at reducing the number of children who engage in intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour**

In the past the Council has offered free Parenting Information Forums. These have been well received however due to their sensitive nature parents may be reluctant to attend.

## **References**

Hobsons Bay City Council (2013) *Community Health and Wellbeing Plan 2013-2017*. Hobsons Bay

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2010) *Adolescent Community Profile, City of Hobsons Bay 2010*

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Youth Mental Health First Aid, 2013b: Jacobson CM, Gould M. *The epidemiology and phenomenology of non-suicidal self injurious behaviour among adolescents: a critical review of the literature*. Archives of Suicidal Research 2007; 11: 129-47