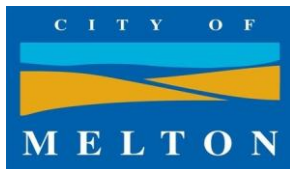




**HOBSONS
BAY CITY
COUNCIL**



We welcome the opportunity to address the Terms of Reference of the Australian Government Senate Inquiry into Domestic Violence in Australia.

VicHealth research reinforces that the underlying causes (key determinants) of violence against women are:

- Unequal power relations between men and women
- Adherence to rigid gender stereotypes
- Broader cultures of violence

As the arm of government closest to the people, local government has a leadership role as a key influencer of environments and culture in the community. Thus Councils can directly affect the public realm and indirectly affect the private sphere (where family violence may be occurring).

Local governments are essential partners in preventing violence against women before it occurs, through their roles as civic leaders, employers, planners, managers of public environments and providers of recreational and community services.

Our response to the specific terms of reference is attached.
Yours faithfully,

**Bill Jaboor, CEO
Brimbank City Council**

**Chris Eddy, CEO
Hobsons Bay City Council**

**Neville Smith, CEO
Moonee Valley City Council**

**Nigel Higgins, acting CEO
Maribyrnong City Council**

**Kelvin Tori, CEO
Melton City Council**

**Kerry Thompson, CEO
Wyndham City**

Terms of Reference

a. the prevalence and impact of domestic violence in Australia as it affects all Australians and, in particular, as it affects:

For Victorian women aged 15-44 years, violence against women is the leading cause of illness, death and disability and is a greater contributor to the burden of disease than physical inactivity, unhealthy body weight, drug and alcohol-related harm and tobacco use.

Reported family violence incidents have consistently increased in the west metropolitan region of Victoria from 2007-2012. While these increases are likely to have been shaped by improvements to reporting systems, confidence in reporting incidents to the police and work undertaken to increase community awareness and help-seeking for experiences of family violence, these increases also demonstrate that family violence remains a serious, pervasive and growing concern in the western region.

In the north west metropolitan region of Melbourne during 2011-2012, there were over 15,000 reported family violence incidents. During the period 2011-2012, the highest rates of family violence for the west metropolitan region of Melbourne include four of the municipalities of:

- Melton (1,166.1 per 100,000)
- Brimbank (972.3 per 100,000)
- Wyndham (925.1 per 100,000).
- Maribynong (766.3 per 100,000)

Notably, three of these municipalities also reported rates of family violence that were higher than the overall rate for Victoria, at 910.3 per 100,000.

The top ten most disadvantaged LGAs in metropolitan Melbourne include four western region municipalities:

- Brimbank (ranked second)
- Maribyrnong (ranked fourth)
- Hobsons Bay (ranked ninth)
- Melton (ranked tenth)

In fact, all seven of the LGAs in the western region of Melbourne are within the top 17 most disadvantaged municipalities in metropolitan Melbourne.

The western region of Melbourne is a culturally diverse and vibrant community. The 2011 Census data indicates that 37 per cent of female residents in the western region of Melbourne were born overseas. This is notably higher than for Victoria (26.4 per cent of females).

Residents of migrant and refugee background can face a variety of challenges that include difficulties negotiating the Australian health care system, language barriers, access to culturally appropriate services, food security, accessing education and employment opportunities and experiences of discrimination and racism.

i. women living with a disability,

Women with a disability often experience significant disadvantage and have poorer health outcomes than does the overall Australian population. Research suggests that women with a disability are more likely to live in poverty, have lower workforce and education participation rates, access to appropriate health services and experience housing insecurity, social exclusion, marginalisation, discrimination and violence.

The 2011 Census data shows that for the western region, women were slightly more likely than men to report a need for assistance with core activities (4.8 per cent compared to 4 per cent). 'need for assistance with a 'core activity' could be interpreted by individuals as having 'unmet' needs for assistance with core activities.

ii. women from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds;

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Australia experience substantially poorer health outcomes than those of the non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. In general, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have a lower life expectancy, higher rates of disability, a lower quality of life and experience higher rates of racism and discrimination.

The poorer health status experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia is largely the result of inequities and unequal access to the resources, opportunities and systems necessary to support optimal health and wellbeing.

According to the 2011 Census data, 0.4 per cent of the female population in the western region identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

For females in the western region who identified as Aboriginal, 42.6 per cent were aged 19 years or under and 42.5 per cent of females in the western region who identified as Torres Strait Islander and 36 per cent of females who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander were aged 19 years or less. In contrast, only 4.4 per cent of the female population in the western region who identify as Aboriginal are aged 60+ years. Additionally, only 20 per cent of females in the western region who identified as Torres Strait Islander were aged 60+ years.

b. the factors contributing to the present levels of domestic violence;

A number of factors can contribute to, **as opposed to cause**, violence against women. These can include alcohol abuse, illicit drug use, childhood exposure to violence, low income, lack of stable employment and low education, lack of social connections and low social capital and poor neighbourhood design.

Violence against women and gender inequity in the public sphere directly influence and reinforce attitudes about the vulnerability and objectivity of women. These attitudes are taken into the home and enacted through personal relationships in the private sphere, which can result in violence against women.

Effective prevention and response measures must be put in place at all levels of society to ensure that women and their children can live free from violence and fear of violence. However, local governments also need support from state and federal governments regarding legislation and other contributing factors that are outside the scope of local government.

Violence against women (family / domestic violence) creates a set of norms for male-female relations in the community. Thus, women are more afraid in public due to their experiences at home. Gendered violence and inequity in public is also perceived as normal and deserved when it is a continuation of violence and inequity in the home.

c. the adequacy of policy and community responses to domestic violence;

Councils enjoy unrivaled reach and access across their local communities, with more than 130 council services connecting with some aspects of people's lives. Councils are on the frontline of whole-of-life service delivery and are responsible for a range of services and functions including roads, parks, waste, land use planning, local laws, urban planning, recreation, community development, health promotion, early years, services for young people, personal and home care, emergency management, building and maintaining assets and advocating for community needs.

Given that Council staff work closely with individuals, families and community organisations, means they are ideally situated to promote whole-of-community efforts to address the key determinants of violence against women.

Preventing Violence Together demonstrates how a regional and coordinated approach can work effectively in tackling the underlying causes of violence against women.

d. the effects of policy decisions regarding housing, legal services, and women's economic independence on the ability of women to escape domestic violence;

Australian women have made considerable progress in the area of health and education and some progress in economic participation. However, there has been very little success and in fact a decrease in women's participation in the political arena.

The 2013 Global Gender Gap Report identifies the four pillars that are most relevant to achieving gender equity and reducing violence against women:

- Equal economic participation and opportunity
- Equal political empowerment
- Equal education attainment
- Equal health and survival outcomes.

Educational level represents an important determinant of health and wellbeing within populations. In particular, low levels of schooling hold significant implications for employment opportunities, financial security and social connectedness.

Female residents in the western region were more likely than male residents to report they did not go to school at all (1.9 per cent compared to 1.3 per cent).

Across the western region, women report a lower individual weekly income than their male counterparts. Given this, it is imperative that we develop and implement strategies that strengthen women's access to education, employment and higher income opportunities within their respective municipalities.

As women have lower weekly incomes than men, housing stress is likely to have significant impacts for women on lower incomes, particularly single parent households.

Community Indicators Victoria (CIV) notes that perceptions of neighbourhoods as safe places serve to improve the social participation, community connectedness, and the health and wellbeing of local residents and visitors. Women and men experience safety and the use of public spaces, community facilities and infrastructure, very differently.

The way in which community spaces, services and infrastructure are designed present significant implications for women's community participation and experiences of safety. Poorly maintained infrastructure (such as poor lighting, low levels of natural surveillance, cracked footpaths and graffiti) can greatly influence how women both perceive and experience safety in their local area.

For example, in 2011, only 22.7 per cent of all adult females in Brimbank felt 'safe' or 'very safe' walking alone at night in their local area, compared to 63.9 per cent of males. Women in Brimbank reported the lowest perceptions of safety for the entire north west Metropolitan region (including feeling safe when walking alone during the day or night in their local area and feeling safe when being at home alone during the day or night).

Women also experience transport infrastructure differently. Women are less likely to have access to a car and are more likely to walk and use public transport.

It is imperative that local governments design and maintain community infrastructure and public spaces that are inclusive, safe, and responsive to the needs of women. This includes taking into account the differing needs of women – particularly those with dependent children, women with a disability and older women.

When considering community safety it is also important to note that women are most at risk of violence in the home. Evidence suggests that most violence against women is perpetrated by men known to them, including their partners or relatives. It is therefore imperative that we undertake strategic work to support community safety and accessibility as well as working specifically to redress violence against women.

e. how the Federal Government can best support, contribute to and drive the social, cultural and behavioural shifts required to eliminate violence against women and their children; and

Investment in local government, the Municipal Association of Victoria and the Victorian Local Government Association will enable consistency in sector development and capacity building and greater awareness and understanding of evidence based impacts and innovation in local government.

Commonwealth investment in a workforce development strategy will better enable local governments, which employ much of the Australian workforce to understand and engage in primary prevention of violence against women. Systematic ongoing participatory evaluation of this strategy is essential to contribute to the emerging evidence-base and improve systems and structures.

The Australian Human Rights Commission 2010 Gender Equality Blueprint's 15 recommendations provide an important framework for action to redress gender inequity. Strategies include:

- Traineeships and recognition of prior learning as additional pathways for women
- Initiatives that support women to enter into traditionally male dominated sectors and industries
- Support and retention of women in leadership roles
- Improved parental leave opportunities
- Flexible work options for women and men as part of the workplace culture
- Increase of government benefits, affordable, accessible and quality child care, carer support and increase and maintenance of the disability insurance scheme (with a gender lens applied).

Achieving gender equality requires our elected political representatives to drive and champion the policy reforms that are needed to build a stronger, more productive and fairer Australia for all.

f. any other related matters.

A greater focus on the underlying cause of violence against women including gender inequity, is needed. This is consistent with the evidence documented in the local and international literature. Ensuring that gender is embedded within all federal policies is essential, particularly in policies related to social determinants such as education, employment, housing, health services, transport, infrastructure, and income.