

CITY OF GREATER BENDIGO

Submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to the Royal Commission on behalf of the rate payers of the City of Greater Bendigo. Input for this submission has included consultation with City staff and the Greater Bendigo Disability and Inclusion Advisory Committee as well as a review of relevant data, policy and strategy.

The City of Greater Bendigo is located in central Victoria, approximately 150 kms north west of Melbourne. It covers an area of 3,048 square kilometres encompassing urban and rural communities. The current population is approximately 116,000. Whilst not a highly culturally diverse community, it is growing an average of 1.7% per annum due to inward migration.

The City is also the major regional service centre for people living across the Loddon Campaspe region.

Health and Wellbeing

The City of Greater Bendigo Community Plan 2017 – 2021 outlines the Council's vision of "creating the world's most liveable community". A strategic objective of the Plan is Wellbeing and Fairness: inclusive policies, partnerships and projects that improve learning opportunities and health, increase access and build better connections and quality of life for all.

The Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 mandates that Local Governments have a responsibility to protect, improve and promote public health and wellbeing within their municipalities. An outcome of this work is the development of a Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan that identifies goals and strategies to address key health issues experienced by the community.

Similarly to other communities across Victoria, Greater Bendigo residents are experiencing higher rates of mental illness than they have in the past. Whilst Council does not provide direct services to these residents, it does seek to advocate for appropriate levels of high quality services for its residents. However this submission focuses on the role Council can play in preventing mental illness and promoting positive mental wellbeing across the community as well as reflecting on how we work to provide a workplace for our staff that supports positive mental wellbeing.

We recognise that the quality of our health is created in our day to day lives, where and how we live, study, work and play, the health of the environment, our income and education level, and our relationships with family and friends all have an impact on a person's health and wellbeing. Good health and wellbeing is important to everyone and enables people to participate fully in community life. It is essential for a strong economy.

Local government, community organisations, businesses and individuals all have responsibilities and a role to play in supporting improvements to local health and wellbeing. This can be through changes in policy, community action, cultural and individual behaviour change and through improving our neighbourhoods and environment.

In reviewing the determinants of poor mental health it is clear the local government can and has a major influence through initiatives and services such as:

- Leading work focused on improving equity and inclusion and decreasing discrimination experienced by groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Young People, People with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds, People with a Disability, LGBTIQ, People experiencing poverty and other forms of socio-economic disadvantage.
- Provision of Maternal and Child Health services for every child born in Victoria from birth to 3.5 years
- Provision of high quality open space for sport and other forms of physical activity
- Libraries and other facilities for community to meet to learn, connect and have fun
- Support for economic development and inclusive growth
- The delivery of community events
- Emergency management planning and building community resilience to a changing climate

The way we work aims to engage the community and build community connection and pride, all of which contributes to positive mental wellbeing.

We are leaders in facilitating relevant plans and strategies that impact positively on community mental and physical health. As an example the City of Greater Bendigo has the following relevant policies and strategies:

- Economic development
- Public Space Strategy
- Reconciliation Plan
- Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Strategy
- Gender Equity Leadership Statement
- Youth Strategy
- All Ages All Abilities Action Plan
- Community Engagement Policy
- Integrated Transport and Land Use Strategy

These plans recognise the strengthening evidence of the inter-relationship between physical and mental health and their determinants including healthy eating and physical activity.

Community Engagement

Local government also have significant relationships with their communities through a range of advisory and project working groups that can be used as platforms for the promotion of health and wellbeing. In preparing for this submission we undertook a consultation with our Disability and Inclusion Reference Committee (DIRC) whose membership includes community members with a disability as well as local disability service providers and Councillors.

As a group they reminded us that like others members of the community they want to have a sense of hope, control over their lives and a feeling of belonging, all of which contribute to positive mental wellbeing.

In working through the consultation questions the DIRC highlighted the importance of the following:

- Educating the community in a range of settings to help decrease the stigma surrounding mental health, understand the services on offer and encouraging others to reach out for help when needed
- The importance of providing employment, services and other opportunities that are inclusive for all groups within the community
- The need for a more holistic approach from both the health and community sectors to their clients e.g. not just dealing with the disability but also considering physical and mental health
- Similarly to other groups across the community they also noted the limited scope and breadth of services available across the City
- Specifically considering the mental health of people whose disability affects their communication and identifying ways to support them and
- The impact of the introduction of the NDIS on access to services for those who don't meet the disability threshold.

Employer

Local government is a significant local employer, particularly in rural and regional areas. The City of Greater Bendigo currently employs over 1,0000 people, a number that is growing as the City grows. As a workplace we work hard to build a supportive constructive culture based on our agreed values:

- Respect
- Respond
- Lead
- Learn
- Care
- Contribute

Our policy is to support staff through regular communication and feedback. Managers and supervisors are trained to coach and support staff. We have a comprehensive whole of organisation corporate induction and training calendar that includes a focus on workplace behaviours and unconscious bias. We also have a confidential employee assistance program that is accessible for staff and their family members.

Despite these interventions, like many workplaces we are experiencing growth in the numbers of staff experiencing mental health conditions.

A part of the preparation for this submission a workshop was held with staff. An open invitation resulted in more than 50 staff attending. In working through the questions posed by the commission the following emerged:

- Similarly to the DIRC they noted:
 - The importance of educating the community to help decrease the stigma surrounding mental health, understand the services on offer and encouraging others to reach out for help when needed

- The importance of providing employment, services and other opportunities that are inclusive for all groups within the community
 - The need for a more holistic approach from both the health and community sectors to their clients e.g. not just dealing with the disability but also considering physical and mental health
 - They also noted the limited scope and breadth of services available across the City with a particular focus on the gap between primary health type services and acute mental health
- With their local government service provider hat on they talked about:
 - Council as an advocate for the local community with an emphasis on ensuring services are available for vulnerable groups e.g. Young people, ATSI, people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and people living in rural settings
 - Issues such as lack of affordable housing, poor digital access, lack of transport, food insecurity were discussed as determinants or factors exacerbating mental ill-health
 - As an organisation already working on promoting community health and wellbeing they recognised the inter-relationships between family violence, drug and alcohol addiction and mental ill-health

Staff also discussed the challenges of dealing with some members of the community experiencing mental ill-health and how on occasions this is leading to them experiencing occupational violence. They also highlighted their need to develop competencies in this area for both dealing with the public and supporting their peers.

They noted the need for Council to advocate for people with mental illness who are being exploited with examples including being locked into lease or contractual agreements with no way out e.g. caravan park residents, rooming house occupants, high interest short term loans, illegal housing etc...

As a regional Council staff also discussed the obvious impacts of climate change on mental health with the current drought conditions leading to high rates of mental ill-health across rural Australia.

Conclusion

The City of Greater Bendigo welcomes the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. Whilst advocating for strengthened and more coordinated service delivery on behalf of our community, we would like to draw to the attention of the commissioners the important contribution that Victorian local governments currently make to preventing mental illness and promoting positive wellbeing and the opportunities for this to be strengthened to decrease pressure on other parts of the system whilst improving the lives of all Victorians.

We would welcome to discuss our role further if required. I can be contacted on [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

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 City of Greater Bendigo