



5 July 2019

Submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's mental health system

This submission is made by the Victorian Division of the Planning Institute of Australia (**PIA**).

PIA is the national voice for planning and the planning profession with more than 5,200 members nationally, around 1200 of whom are in Victoria.

PIA Victoria first wishes to acknowledge that the Commission's terms of reference are primarily directed at the Victorian mental health system and recommendations that can be made by the Committee to reform that system to most efficiently prevent mental illness and deliver treatment, care and support to those in the community who suffer from mental health issues.

However, both the product and process of city planning have been shown to have an influence on mental health and PIA Victoria invites the Committee to consider the potential for urban planning and design outcomes to improve the mental health of all Victorians.

Good urban planning has the potential to address and assist to overcome mental health issues in a number of ways. Possibly the most well recognised ways include ensuring that urban areas:

- include sufficient well distributed open and green spaces;
- facilitate active lifestyles and incorporate design that promotes walking and exercise;
- promote social interaction and natural interactions among people; and
- incorporate design for safety and security.

Recommendations

PIA Victoria submits that the Committee should make the following recommendations to Government:

1. That options be investigated and implemented to incentivise the establishment of mental health services in appropriate locations in Interface Council areas on the outskirts of Melbourne, particularly where there is a known shortage of such services.
2. That the development of an Open Space Strategy for Melbourne be prioritised, giving careful consideration to those areas within Melbourne's existing suburbs where population growth is increasing rapidly, and to the mechanisms for achieving increased open space in those areas where there is an existing or emerging deficit.

3. That support for good urban design in Melbourne's existing and emerging areas continues, both through new development and renewal and reconstruction of existing public spaces, improving their accessibility and safety.
4. That support for active transport infrastructure continues, by ensuring provision of appropriately located active transport infrastructure across existing and new areas of Melbourne.

Context

The roots of urban planning as a profession can be traced to the establishment of land use outcomes designed to support the health of city populations. For Melbourne, the 1929 Plan for General Development recognised how, prior to a Town Planning Act, the Health Act had been used by local government to address overcrowded conditions.

From PIA Victoria's perspective, Victoria is presently facing unprecedented population growth and planning in Victoria is currently predominantly concerned with accommodating this growth. There is a risk that some areas of greater Melbourne are not being developed in accordance with urban planning and design principles necessary to promote the wellbeing of a population's mental health.

For the benefit of the Royal Commission, the land use issues that are of particular relevance to mental health wellbeing, and which are changing as Victoria's population grows, are discussed below.

Provision of open space

Access to open space, and type of open space across Melbourne varies significantly depending upon location.

The 1929 Plan spent considerable resources calculating and mapping open space for Melbourne. In recent years adequate provision of open space for greenfield development areas has generally been well addressed by planning through the Precinct Structure Planning process.

However, this is not always the case - including for redevelopment of land within existing suburbs, where incremental densification of suburbs is often not matched with an appropriate increase in open space. Monetary contributions collected for open space under the Subdivision Act are not always sufficient to provide for appropriately located open space. Land prices and availability make the provision of new open space in large areas of Melbourne difficult and challenging for local government.

The population of the City of Yarra (fortunately located abutting or including substantial historical open space resources) increased by 21% from 2006 to 2016. After this large population growth, the City's proportion of open space to total area of the municipality was 12.3%. By comparison, the City of Glen Eira's population increased by 14% over the same period and is expected to continue to grow in population by over 16% from 2019 to 2036. The City of Glen Eira had the lowest proportion of open space to population in Melbourne at ~3% (varies by source).

Health Effects of Open Space Provision

The recent Parks Victoria document '*Healthy Parks Healthy People: The state of the evidence*'¹ observed that:

"a growing body of evidence indicates that parks and other natural environments can support social cohesion and social capital in communities (227). For example, in the urban context, parks are viewed as a valuable setting for the development of neighbourhood/unity level social characteristics rather than just as settings for leisure or physical activity (228). Interpersonal trust, social cohesion and reciprocity are key features of social capital and are facilitated by the availability of parks (78) and quality open spaces (229). Park specific social interactions (i.e. informal communication) are recognised not only as key mediators of social health perceptions among residents but also moderators of stress through the fostering of social support"

PIA Victoria supports this useful evidence-based summary of the health benefits of open space provision delivering improved mental health to the community through the provision of adequate parks and open space.

The Open Space network in Melbourne was mapped by the Victorian Planning Authority in 2017 following the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council's Metropolitan Melbourne Investigation on 2011. PIA is not aware of an overall Metropolitan strategy for the provision of open space in Melbourne that would address the multitude of important issues around provision of open space in existing residential areas is underway or planned.

Good Urban Design

The mental health of city dwellers has been reported in many sources to be significantly at greater risk than that of their country cousins. The causes of this are not well understood. It is being recognised that good urban design has a role to play in ameliorating the level of mental illness expressed by city dwellers. Good urban design has become an integral part of good planning practice over the last 20 years due to the observed benefits of delivering better design outcomes. The Design Council in Britain recognises that urban design opportunities should be optimised to help provide a city environment for good mental health. They recognise the importance of accessibility to green spaces in the course of people's daily routines, the integration of activity into people's daily routines, the creation of pro-social spaces, and safety and security as the key factors to deliver this.

Good urban design delivers public places that provide for:

- planned and opportunistic personal interaction with public seating and interesting surrounding urban environments;

¹ Townsend et al, 2015, Deakin University prepared for Parks Victoria, at page 30.

- safe, enjoyable connection between places of interest and homes;
- active street frontages (no long, blank walls); and
- opportunities to recognise the importance of the place and building forms of interesting design and co-location.

It is a natural fit with good town planning, enhancing the human experience and providing a continuous opportunity for fortuitous meeting with friends and public interaction at an individuals' level of comfort. The need for good urban design is specifically recognised in the existing Victorian Planning Provisions and the Urban Design Guidelines for Victoria.

Active transport

Active transport includes non-motorised transport that involves physical activity, principally walking or cycling. Increased awareness of the physical benefits of active transport has prompted many local governments to provide for additional infrastructure to encourage cycling and walking. There is some evidence that increased walkability of any area improves social cohesion. Along with cycling, walkable communities increase the likelihood of an individual engaging in physical exercise, shown to improve mental health wellbeing.

Land Use Zoning

The *Interface Councils Liveability Snapshot Report* (September 2017) confirms that residents living in the Interface Council areas on the outskirts of Melbourne have the highest rate of psychological distress across the State, with 13.55% reported having high / very high rate of psychological distress. Through this research, PIA Victoria is aware that there is a growing shortage of psychologist and counselling services in the new growth area suburbs (interface council suburbs) to provide the support required for people suffering from mental health issues.

The Victorian Planning System in its current form only has a limited role it can play in encouraging such crucial services into a specific area as the Victorian Planning Land Use Zone Controls determine specific 'as of right' and Permit required uses across the State. The difficulty lies beyond this where, for example, the zone of the land allows for a medical centre but the planning controls do not specify what type of services will, should or must be provided in such medical centres.

PIA Victoria suggests that the Commission investigate tax deduction options to recommend to Government as a way of incentivising such businesses to a new suburb. Alternatively, it may be possible to consider introducing a new VicSmart Provision or other alternative Particular Provision into the Planning Scheme which provides a streamlined approval pathway for this specific type of medical service, similar to Clause 53.17 (Residential Aged Care Facility) and 52.22 (Community Care Accommodation) as a way of incentivising and encouraging medical practitioners in this field into a specific area, particularly where there is a known shortage. This may require amendments to the land use definitions within the Planning Scheme and other mechanics that will need to be worked through to enable this change. PIA Victoria would be happy to provide support to inform this change if required.

Next steps

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's mental health system. It is appreciated that town planning may seem distant to the reform of the mental health system as delivered in Victoria. However, PIA Victoria submits that the issues raised in this submission impact mental health outcomes for Victorians and have the capacity to improve the mental health of at-risk members of community and those already suffering poor mental health within the community.

If you wish to discuss any aspect of this submission, please do not hesitate to contact the Victorian Executive Officer, Carmel McCormack or myself on 03 9654 3777.

Yours faithfully,



Laura Murray
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Planning Institute Australia