



Brimbank City Council Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

About Brimbank

The City of Brimbank is located in western and north-western suburbs of Melbourne, between 11 and 23 kilometres west and north-west of the Melbourne GPO. With approximately 191,100 residents, Brimbank is the second most populous municipality in the Greater Melbourne area and the largest in the western region.

Diversity in Brimbank

Brimbank is home to a diverse range of families and households. The municipality has developed as one of the most culturally diverse areas in Australia. In June 2011, the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that:

- There were 913 Aboriginal and Torre Strait Islander residents, who made up 0.5% of the total Brimbank population.
- 46.1% of Brimbank residents were born overseas (31.4% for Greater Melbourne); 43.0% in mainly non-English speaking countries (24.2% for Greater Melbourne).
- The top overseas country of birth was Vietnam, with 9.8% of residents indicating in the 2011 Census they were born in this country.
- The Vietnamese-born population has continued to increase but, between 2006 and 2011, the largest increase was for residents born in India (4,719). There were decreases in the number of residents born in Greece, the United Kingdom, Croatia, Italy, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Malta. Although just outside the top 10 countries of birth, there was an increase of 957 residents between 2006 and 2011, indicating they were born in China.
- Faith and religion factor feature strongly in the lives of many Brimbank residents, with eight out of 10 residents indicating a religious affiliation. Over the last five years, there have been significant increases in the number of residents affiliating with Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism.

Families-with-children continue to be the most significant household type. However, there have been increases in couples without children, lone person households and group households. Brimbank is the second most socio-economically disadvantaged municipality in the Greater Melbourne area and the third most disadvantaged in Victoria. The level of socio-economic disadvantage is also unevenly spread throughout the municipality.

This diversity brings with it challenges in addressing family violence locally. Our communities represent diverse cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds, and whose views and understanding of gender equity can vary significantly.

Family violence in Brimbank

- In the four year period from 2009/10 to 2012/13, the rate of reported family violence increased by 32% in Brimbank. This was lower than for the North West Metropolitan Region (53%) and Victoria (63%).
- In 2012/13, 1,940 reports of family violence were made in Brimbank. Of that number, children were present in 30% of cases and charges were laid in 47% of the 1,940 cases.
- The reported rate of family violence in Brimbank was 1,004 per 100,000 population in 2012/13 and rose to 1098.9 per 100,000 in 2013/14.



It is important to note that violence against women is one of the most under-reported crimes, thus data on family violence reports is considered an under-estimate of actual incidents. There are many reasons why victims of family violence may not report the violence to police or seek assistance from support services. Some reasons include fear of repercussions from the perpetrator, fear of losing children to the Department of Human Services Child Protection, financial dependence on intimate partners, lack of confidence in the legal process, lack of alternative accommodation, cultural and religious beliefs and community attitudes toward women.

Family violence has broad ranging financial implications on women and families. These can include:

- reduced financial independence due to access to family finances being possibly withheld (economic abuse)
- reduced income and superannuation due to time out of the workforce dealing with health, legal and housing matters arising from family violence
- a lack of stable employment and education to increase earning potential if multiple relocations are needed to escape a violent (ex) partner
- legal and housing costs associated with separation, divorce and property separation; and
- limited availability of affordable housing options, particularly for women with children.

Women in Brimbank

Employment

- Compared to other local government areas in the west, women in Brimbank are less likely to be employed- 44% of women compared to 29.3% of men were not employed.
- Women in Brimbank were more likely to report being in part-time employment - 18.9% of women compared to 11.9% of men.
- 8.5% of men have an individual weekly income of greater than \$1,500, compared to 2.7% of women

Housing

- Brimbank residents experience housing stress and affordability problems with 43.2 % of households spending at least 30 % of their household gross income on rent in 2011.
- Women constitute 84.3% of the single parent population in Brimbank.
- 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.

Education

- A higher proportion of women (3.5 %) than men in Brimbank did not attend school. A higher proportion of residents in Brimbank did not attend school than in the western metropolitan region.
- 12.2% of women in Brimbank reported their highest year of schooling is year eight or below, which is significantly higher than the western metropolitan region.
- Women in Brimbank were less likely than women in the western metropolitan region to have attained post-school qualifications of a graduate diploma, bachelor degree or postgraduate degree.

Transport and perceptions of safety

- Over a quarter (27.6%) of women in Brimbank experienced difficulties in utilising transport in 2011, such as disability access and the costs of public and private transport.
- In 2011, only 22.7% of all females in Brimbank felt 'safe' or 'very safe' walking alone at night in their local area, compared to 63.9% 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).



Brimbank response to the Royal Commission

Brimbank City Council appreciates the opportunity to respond to questions put by the Royal Commission into Family Violence. Please see the Council's responses to specific questions below.

Which of the reforms to the family violence system introduced in the last ten years do you consider most effective? Why? How could they be improved?

Brimbank City Council recognises the following reforms as having had the most effect in addressing violence against women:

1. The *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022*. This is because the plan:
 - identifies key outcomes in addressing violence against women at a national level;
 - is supported by four, three year Action Plans that are flexible enough to be adopted by the State and Local governments;
 - identifies key actions and how these actions will be achieved; and
 - has process and impact measures to evaluate the extent to which objectives have been achieved.
2. *A Right to Respect: Victoria's Plan to Prevent Violence against Women 2010-2020* as the Plan:
 - focusses on primary prevention of violence against women (that is, stopping violence before it starts);
 - provides prevention strategies that target key settings (education, local government and community Services, sports, media and popular culture, and workplaces) in order to build skills and promote attitudes and cultural values that reject violence against women; and
 - provides a short and long term strategy to address violence against women in Victoria.

Brimbank City Council recommends that both the National Plan and the Victorian Plan should clearly outline a short-term and a long-term strategy to engage men and boys in prevention of violence against women.

If you or your organisation have been involved in programs, campaigns or initiatives about family violence for the general community, tell us what these involved and how they have been evaluated.

Brimbank City Council has actively worked to advance gender equity and prevent violence against women in the municipality. Over the last few years, the Council has played an active role in preventing violence against women through the implementation of Brimbank *Family Violence Prevention Action Plan* (2010-2013). The Action Plan outlined a whole-of-Council approach to create a respectful, gender equitable and violence-free community in the municipality. Key achievements of the Plan included:

- Development of a family and domestic violence clause in Brimbank City Council's Enterprise Bargaining Agreement and associated policies. The Council recognises that its employees can face situations of violence or abuse in their personal life and provides support to any staff who experience family violence
- Partnered in the development and endorsement of *Preventing Violence Together: The Western Region Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women in* partnership with key



organisations in the Western region of Victoria. This Action Plan identifies service coordination, organisational capacity building and partnerships as key strategies to maximising the impact of addressing violence against women in the community

- Distributed cards identifying family violence support services for women and men across community facilities in the municipality
- Established the Brimbank White Ribbon Working Group to lead local White Ribbon campaigns and raise awareness of violence against women
- Endorsed the **Victorian Local Government Women's Charter**. The Council supports the following three principles articulated in the charter:
 - Gender equity: That women and men have an equal right to be representatives in local governments, committees and decision-making positions
 - Diversity: The inclusion of different experiences and perspectives in local governments and community decision-making strengthens local democratic governance and helps build cohesive communities. Councils and communities encourage and welcome the participation of all women
 - Active citizenship: Local governments will work with the community to increase the numbers and participation of women in public life,
- Partnered in successful funding applications for the ***Gender Equitable, Safe and Inclusive Communities and United*** initiatives to build organisational capacity to prevent violence against women
- Coordinated 25 leadership training programs facilitated across the municipality with an average of 60% of participants being female
- Achieved greater representation of women on Council advisory and reference groups to inform local government decision making. For example 14 of 32 members of the Brimbank District Safety Working Group and 19 of 42 Community District Resource members are female.

The Royal Commission will be considering both short term and longer term responses to family violence. Tell us about the changes which you think could produce the greatest impact in the short and longer term.

Brimbank City Council believes that a focus on prevention and gender equity is a highly effective approach to both short and long term reduction in the number of people who experience family violence. To achieve gender equality, change must happen within organisations themselves and in the wider society.

Gender equality is closely linked to institutionalised power, that is, those rules (stated and implicit) that sustain women's unequal position in societies. Therefore, every organisation must commit to institutional transformation by implementing specific actions that challenge those gender-related norms that perpetuate inequality between men and women within the organisation. Organisations must also commit to work with communities to address those patriarchal norms, beliefs, values and practices that perpetuate gender inequity and family violence in the society.

In 2014, the Council used the lessons learnt from implementing the ***Family Violence Prevention Action Plan*** (2010-2013), and evidence in the literature to develop the ***Brimbank City Council's Plan to Prevent Men's Violence Against Women: Towards Gender Equity (2015-2019)***. This new Plan sets out a bold and innovative approach for the delivery of Council's actions to enhance gender equity and primary prevention of violence against women in the municipality. The Plan outlines Council's commitment to preventing violence against women, directed by the vision that: 'Brimbank is a gender equitable city where women live free from violence'. The new Plan is guided by the following principles:



- Violence against women is a violation of human rights: women have the right to live free from violence.
- A focus on primary prevention: we can prevent violence against women by addressing the underlying causes, such as gender inequity.
- Evidence-based approaches: actions to promote gender equity and prevent violence against women are supported by a strong evidence base.
- Collaborative partnerships: recognising the specific role of local government, and that partnership with external agencies and the community are essential in promoting gender equity and preventing violence against women.
- Empower and actively engage women and men in the community: everybody has a role in promoting gender equity and preventing violence against women.
- Leadership: local government takes a lead role in promoting gender equity and preventing violence against women through sharing knowledge, demonstrating best practice and community strengthening.

Key themes to guide Council's action to tackle the underlying causes of violence against women over the next four years are:

- promoting equal and respectful relationships between women and men
- promoting non-violent, gender equitable and inclusive organisational, cultural and social norm
- promoting a culture of non-violence

Priorities for action over the next four years have been determined based on where Council is best placed to act to prevent violence against women. The priorities include:

1. Undertake strategic advocacy at the local, state and Commonwealth levels that supports and promotes gender equity and the prevention of violence against women.
2. Undertake research, monitoring and evaluation of policy and programs to ensure continuous improvement.
3. Establish effective partnerships across government and non-government agencies to promote gender equity and prevent violence against women.
4. Promote an organisational culture that is welcoming, inclusive and respectful of women, **and supports women's leadership at all levels.**
5. Undertake a gender analysis of Council policy, planning, programs and services.
6. Explore training opportunities to support staff understanding the underlying causes of violence against women.
7. Implement a communication campaign to promote gender equity and raise awareness of violence against women.

Conclusion

Brimbank City Council recognises that family violence, including violence against women and children, is a serious and pervasive issue in Australia. The health, social and economic costs of **family violence are profound. To address men's violence against women**, the Council identifies that it is best positioned to influence change by focussing on the underlying causes of family violence at both the community and organisational levels. The seven key priority actions of the ***Brimbank City Council's Plan to Prevent Men's Violence Against Women: Towards Gender Equity (2015-2019)*** will enable the Council to focus its activities and resources to promoting equal and respectful relationships between males and females in the municipality in the next four years. The Council has developed indicators to monitor the implementation of each action in Plan. This **will enable evaluation of the Plan in preventing men's violence against women in the municipality.**



The Council continues to explore ways of improving its response to preventing violence against women in the municipality. To this end, the Council commends activities of the Royal Commission and looks **forward to reading the Commission's report in order to better understand** gaps, problems and possible solutions in the response to family violence in Victoria.