



**Strong Foundations:  
The next stage of Victoria's work to end  
family violence**

**MAV Submission**

**January 2024**

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*MAV submission to Strong Foundations has been prepared on behalf of member councils, for the State Government on the Victorian Government's third and final rolling action plan.*

*The MAV is the statutory peak body for local government in Victoria.*

*While this paper aims to broadly reflect the views of local government in Victoria, it does not purport to reflect the exact views of individual councils.*

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## **Background: overview of the Victorian Government's Consultation**

In 2015, the Victorian Government established Australia's first Royal Commission into Family Violence (the Royal Commission). The Royal Commission heard directly from the community to find out what is needed to prevent family violence, improve support for victim survivors and hold those who use violence to account.

[Ending Family Violence: Victoria's 10-Year Plan for Change](#) followed in 2016 and committed the Victorian Government to producing three rolling action plans setting out how the 227 Royal Commission recommendations would be delivered.

All recommendations have now implemented and we are at a crucial stage of the reform journey.

A third and final rolling action plan, scheduled for release in mid-2024, must get us closer to achieving a future where all Victorians are safe, thriving and living free from family and sexual violence and abuse.

[The Victorian Government is seeking input to help identify the actions government should prioritise over the next three years.](#)

To guide this conversation, the Victorian Government has prepared [Strong Foundations: Building on Victoria's work to end family violence](#). It outlines what has been progressed so far, seeks feedback on what needs to be done and how the work over the next three years will deliver on five focus areas:

- Drive down family and sexual violence.
- Focus on children and young people.
- Strengthen support for victim survivors.
- Respond to change.
- Understand and demonstrate our impact.

## Introduction

The MAV welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to inform the development of the third rolling action plan to guide Victoria's work to end family violence.

The MAV is the peak representative and advocacy body for Victoria's 79 councils. The MAV was formed in 1879 and the Municipal Association Act 1907 appointed the MAV the official voice of local government in Victoria.

The Victorian local government sector has more than a decade's experience working to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women. Support for this work from the Victorian Government has seen a considerable increase the development and implementation of initiatives and partnerships at the local level. The significant investment through the Free from Violence Local Government Program to support councils and the MAV implement the Local Government Guide for Preventing Family Violence took this commitment to the next level, encouraging whole-of-council approaches to primary prevention across the state.

This submission has been developed in consultation with Victorian councils. It highlights initiatives and sector priorities in each of the focus areas as well as some overarching priorities for the local government sector.

Since the inception of *Ending Family Violence: Victorian's 10-Year Plan for Change*, there has been many individual initiatives that the Victorian Government has funded or facilitated across Government departments and sector agencies. In the third and final rolling action plan, the MAV would like to see an emphasis on the coordination and integration of these initiatives, including a renewed focus on integrated data collection and analysis, to better demonstrate collective impact and progress resulting from the state's large investment into family violence.

Councils and the MAV look forward to working with the Victorian Government, partner agencies and communities on the implementation of the action plan.

## Summary of Key MAV Recommendations

Throughout this submission, the MAV makes a range of recommendations for consideration as part of the Action Plan. Further detail for each recommendation is provided in the body of the submission.

The MAV recommends:

- The Victorian Government establish an interdepartmental committee approach to facilitate greater coordination between the State's various gender equity initiatives.
- That the Action Plan includes continued investment into local government and opportunities for councils and the State to work together to achieve shared objectives.
- That the mandatory induction program for councillors who are elected for the 2024-2028 council term includes gender equality and primary prevention training.
- That the Government provide recurrent funding for candidate and leadership training for women.
- An expansion of the *Baby Makes 3* program across the state so more families can benefit from the support the program offers.
- To support engagement with men and boys, the Victorian Government:
  - Work to recruit and train more male professionals in the response and prevention sector.
  - Fund new and existing partnerships to pilot and test strategies for influencing and engaging men and boys in primary prevention.
  - Support the sector to develop a central mechanism for collecting evidence and sharing reports/resources on what works, and lessons to consider for future initiatives and programs focusing on engaging men and boys.
  - Support continued partnerships between local government, health services and community partners to deliver programs that build the capacity of professionals and community members to become gender equality allies.
- That the Victorian Government:
  - Increase funding for Maternal and Child Health (MCH) service providers to undertake additional family violence consultations, this is particularly important for rural councils due to limited pathways for support.
  - Funding for local level engagement with victim survivors, especially children and young people as experts when developing primary prevention initiatives and programs via focus groups, advisory committees, and co-design workshops.
- That the Victorian Government:

- Provide more training to MCH service providers and early years educators as part of the Respectful Relationships Education Program.
  - Increase resources to support early years services, schools, and their partners, including local government, to engage parents and address community backlash.
- That the Victorian Government:
- Present the findings from the Orange Door Annual Service Delivery Report and lessons from the review of the Orange Door, as part of a roadshow across the fifteen areas.
  - Continue funding the Mental Health and Wellbeing hubs for children and young people, to enable victim survivors of family violence to be supported when and where they need it.
  - Strengthen these services by collaborating with councils to ensure wide community reach and all services are accessible.
  - Encourage all organisations working with children and young people to prioritise staff training for family violence and ensure all staff are aware of referral pathways.
- The Victorian Government explore regulation and enforce requirements for online providers to address technological violence and adapt these responses as technology evolves.
- The Victorian Government could reduce and respond to the risk of family violence during times of crisis by:
- Providing training to council officers working in emergency management roles to recognise and respond to family violence.
  - Review and update emergency management policy and guidance, including the framework, to ensure family violence is appropriately considered in emergency management planning and service provision.
  - Ensuring emergency responses include a gender equality and intersectional lens, such as the development of a family violence service for emergency situations.
- Increased awareness of elder abuse at a foundational level may create opportunities for the development of family violence prevention, early intervention, or response initiatives with a broadened scope to achieve increased social impact.

## Focus Area 1 – Drive Down Family and Sexual Violence

*Q. What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government takes to build a community-wide approach to preventing family and sexual violence?*

### 1. Progressing Gender Equality

Progressing gender equality is fundamental to reducing family and gender-based violence. The MAV acknowledges the commitment of the Victorian Government to achieving gender equality targets and objectives. Some examples of the State's gender equity initiatives that involve councils include the Gender Equality Act 2020, the Fair Access Roadmap, Respectful Relationships Education, and the Elder Abuse Prevention and Response Initiative.

The Gender Equality Act 2020 has been a catalyst for all Victorian councils to progress gender equality within their communities and workplaces. It is a key piece of legislation which overlaps with many of the State's gender equity initiatives.

The current challenge for councils is delivering on similar requirements across State Government initiatives, with little coordination at the state level. This has resulted in consultation and engagement being duplicative or timeframes clashing. For example, out of sync requirements required for development of Gender Equality Action Plans, and the latter requirement to complete a health check as part of the Free From Violence Local Government Program. This has led to duplication and confusion among some council staff, who have participated in separate internal consultations on similar topics.

As part of the action plan, the MAV recommends the Victorian Government establish an interdepartmental committee approach to facilitate greater coordination between the State's various gender equity initiatives.

Through our Free from Violence resourcing, this is something the MAV will also encourage within councils, because they too would benefit from this kind of integrated approach. It is imperative that these large-scale initiatives are well-coordinated across portfolio areas to achieve their intended purpose.

### 2. Continued Investment in Local Government

The evidence shows that achieving lasting, community-wide understanding and commitment to prevention requires adequate resourcing and time. Local government has extensive reach into diverse communities across the state, with many council services playing a key role in the family violence response and prevention sectors. This unique reach and councils' potential to connect with community and partner agencies has been recognised through significant Victorian Government investment, including the Free from Violence Local Government program.

Funding from the Victorian Government for councils has been crucial to kickstart gender equity and family violence prevention work for those who are in the initial stages of their prevention

journey, particularly smaller rural councils. For councils that have been working in this space for years and some larger metropolitan councils, funding has allowed them to advance their gender equity work. This external funding allows councils to pilot, test and trial innovative approaches to addressing the drivers of family and gendered violence. It provides councils with the opportunity to demonstrate the value of investment in gender equity and family violence prevention, making it easier to make the case for ongoing commitments at the council level.

The MAV recommends the action plan include continued investment into local government and opportunities for councils and the State to work together to achieve shared objectives.

### **3. Local Government Elections 2024**

Initiatives that target leadership within the prevention sector – including local government – will be crucial to the success of Victoria’s efforts to address family violence.

It is recommended the mandatory induction program, as required by the *Local Government Act 2020*, for councillors who are elected for the 2024-2028 council term includes gender equality and primary prevention training.

To achieve the Victorian Government’s 50 per cent target of women councillors and mayors by 2025, as provided for in the *Gender Equality Strategy, Safe and Strong*, it is recommended the Government provide recurrent funding for candidate and leadership training for women.

*Q. What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to support Aboriginal-led prevention?*

The primary prevention sector, including councils, rely on the expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to support their prevention activities on a regular basis, however, many face capacity issues responding to requests from the multitude of agencies that engage in preventing violence to women.

Exploring opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and community-controlled organisations to work with and within the local government sector, would be a practical way to strengthen local agency connection. Resourcing a collaboration project between relevant Aboriginal organisations and local government would also open opportunities for individuals and families at risk to be connected to other local activities that councils are involved with. For example, councils could facilitate connections to youth programs, local sporting groups, maternal and child health and other early years programs, depending on the relevant age and needs profile.

*Q. What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to engage men and boys to change attitudes and behaviours that can lead to violence? (optional)*

While everyone has a role to play in violence prevention work, the response and prevention sector workforces are overwhelmingly female, creating a dynamic that can be challenging in generating genuine interest and engagement with men. For example, the MAV hosted a large high-profile prevention-focused event last year, but 95 per cent of attendees were women.

One of the female-dominated areas of councils is Maternal and Child Health (MCH). While these services are offered to fathers, the way the system is structured indicates that these services are only for mothers and children. An option for engaging more fathers is through the *Baby Makes 3* program. It is a unique, evidence-based health promotion and social change initiative, which is run by MCH services as part of new parents' groups. It works with all family members to build understanding, appreciation and mutual respect among first time parents to foster equal and healthy relationships.

The MAV recommends an expansion of the *Baby Makes 3* program across the state as part of the action plan, so more families can benefit from the support the program offers.

Programs focused on men and boys could have a larger focus going forward. Several councils have shared current initiatives engaging men and boys, as well as ideas for future engagement:

- Mornington Peninsula Shire Council received funding from VicHealth and delivered 'Mornington Peninsula Communities Creating Change' to mobilise and engage men and boys in building and promoting healthier masculinities. This included delivering *Unpacking the Man Box* training to whole of community and running Modelling Respect and Equality training to build local change allies.
- Ahead of International Women's Day 2024, Murrindindi Shire Council has shifted the responsibility of planning an internal event to men. This work often falls to women on top of their existing responsibilities. To shift this gendered stereotype, council has opened an EOI for men to register as volunteers.
- The Victorian Government could include messaging focused on men and boys as a stronger theme in the annual 16 Days of Activism campaign.

The MAV recommends the Victorian Government:

- Work to recruit and train more male professionals in the response and prevention sector.
- Fund new and existing partnerships to pilot and test strategies for influencing and engaging men and boys in primary prevention.
- Support the sector to develop a central mechanism for collecting evidence and sharing reports/resources on what works, and lessons to consider for future initiatives and programs focusing on engaging men and boys.
- Support continued partnerships between local government, health services and community partners to deliver programs that build the capacity of professionals and community members to become gender equality allies.

## Focus area 2 – Focus on Children and Young People

*Q. What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to engage children and young people to create generational change?*

The evidence shows that women are at increased risk of experiencing violence from an intimate partner during pregnancy. If domestic and family violence already exists, it is likely to increase in severity during pregnancy. Victorian councils play a key role in reducing family violence through the provision of MCH services. Some councils are already providing additional funding for MCH Family Violence Consultations from their own budgets to resource Family Violence and Safety Practitioner roles as part of their MCH and Early Years services. For example, Brimbank City Council has resourced a full-time worker to lead this important work, which has enabled capacity building and collaboration across council.

The MAV recommends the Victorian Government:

- Increase funding for MCH service providers to undertake additional family violence consultations, this is particularly important for rural councils due to limited pathways for support.
- Funding for local level engagement with victim survivors, especially children and young people as experts when developing primary prevention initiatives and programs via focus groups, advisory committees, and co-design workshops.

There are also opportunities to improve Respectful Relationships Education in Victoria. This program has supported early and age-appropriate education for children from childcare age to young people on personal safety, bodily harm and sexual abuse, gender equality, consent, and respect. The Department of Education has stated that councils and schools have a shared goal of greater local collaboration with schools and community to support awareness and prevention initiatives. We believe this is more evident in regional and rural communities.

The MAV recommends the Victorian Government:

- Provide more training to MCH service providers and early years educators as part of the Respectful Relationships Education Program.
- Increase resources to support early years services, schools, and their partners, including local government, to engage parents and address community backlash.

*Q. What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to provide support for children and young people where, when, and how they need it?*

The Orange Door provides help for people experiencing family violence, including children and young people. While the Orange Door has provided positive outcomes for families, some people have experienced challenges navigating the service, self-referring and accessing culturally appropriate services.

The introduction of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Hubs across the State by 2026, are essential services for children and young people, their families, carers, and supporters, to ensure that no one slips through the gaps. There is an opportunity for councils to closer align their early years and youth services with these local services.

The MAV recommends the Victorian Government:

- Present the findings from the Orange Door Annual Service Delivery Report and lessons from the review of the Orange Door, as part of a roadshow across the fifteen areas.
- Continue funding the Mental Health and Wellbeing hubs for children and young people, to enable victim survivors of family violence to be supported when and where they need it.
- Strengthen these services by collaborating with councils to ensure wide community reach and all services are accessible.
- Encourage all organisations working with children and young people to prioritise staff training for family violence and ensure all staff are aware of referral pathways.

### Focus Area 3 – Strengthen Support for Victim Survivors

*Q. What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to provide all Victorians who experience family or sexual violence with the support they need when they need it?*

The Victorian Government should continue its good practice of public consultations, engaging family and sexual violence service providers, primary prevention organisations and people with lived experiences when developing key statewide documents. The intersectional focus could be strengthened by encouraging institutions and organisations to engage with victim survivors from a wide range of backgrounds, ensuring that there is representation across our diverse Victorian community. Including engaging with:

- LGBTQIA+ communities.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- People with disability.
- Multicultural representatives.
- People from refugee and asylum seekers backgrounds.
- Children and young people.
- Older adults.

Access to adequate funding for agencies to provide immediate support when needed is a large gap that needs to be addressed. This is critical in rural areas where services and options are limited. For example, access to trauma informed counselling and support services is needed to address the shortage of mental health services and long waitlists. Considerable progress has been made to improve crisis response, but currently victim survivors may choose to stay or return to abusive relationships for financial reasons, such as a lack of affordable housing. The Victorian Government must provide additional funding for emergency accommodation to support women and children escaping family violence, to guarantee there is sufficient emergency housing available for those who need it.

Family violence leave entitlements are an important part of an organisation's policies and procedures. Extending family violence leave entitlements to victim survivors, even after the violence has occurred, would be an important consideration that could be encouraged through education and training. While this may be at the discretion of specific employers, a broader understanding of the long-term effects of family violence would contribute to a more supportive working environment.

*Q. What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to continue to shift the focus onto people who use violence?*

It is important that the Victorian Government continues to shift the focus onto people who use violence by:

- Providing programs that work with communications teams to encourage responsible messaging of family and sexual violence framed correctly, eliminating victim blaming and the 'good bloke' narrative.
- Embedding a unified messaging approach to working with people who use violence, through collaborations and partnerships with various organisations, as well as allowing space for pilot programs.
- Ensuring that any initiatives focused on working with people who use violence include education on the unequal balance of power, access to resources and opportunities, gender inequality and the intersectional nature of lived experiences of discrimination and oppression.
- Ensuring that primary prevention and service provision for victim survivors continues to receive an appropriate level of funding and support while initiatives that are focused on people who use violence are rolled out.

*Q. What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to support Aboriginal-led responses for Aboriginal victim survivors and people who use violence?*

Exploring ways to deepen connection with local government will open many opportunities for recovery and support for victim survivors through improved connection and participation with local services and activities. The MAV would welcome the opportunity to explore this further in cooperation with Aboriginal community organisations and the Victorian Government.

## Focus area 4 – Respond to Change

*Q. What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to respond to cultural, social, and technological shifts that impact family and sexual violence?*

It is critical that prevention programs consider cultural, social, and technological shifts that impact family and sexual violence. The Victorian Government should work to ensure an intersectional lens is applied to all new initiatives and programs. Research shows that the use of technology to perpetrate violence against women and children is a rapidly growing problem. Some of the steps the Victorian Government could take to address this include:

- Undertaking work to consider the links between family and sexual violence and pornography, focusing on the role technology plays in fostering sexual violence and the sexual exploitation of children.
- Working with experts across the sector to better understand technological forms of violence.
- Investigating the development of a family violence e-safety website for Victoria, like the Federal Government's e-Safety Commissioner Website.

Local government areas across the state are experiencing an influx of emerging cultural and multi-faith groups. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Melton City Council received funding for bicultural workers to address the social and health messaging needs of their communities. Working with primary prevention service providers, a similar model could be introduced to educate diverse communities on what family violence looks like.

Increasing service partners' ability to employ bilingual workers to reach diverse communities is essential for engagement. Strengthening the capacity of faith leaders to promote gender equity amongst congregations and community is also essential in responding to social change among diverse populations.

*Q. What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take respond to new forms of family and sexual violence?*

The Victorian Government should regulate and enforce requirements for online providers to address technological violence and adapt these responses as technology evolves. This could include requirements for devices to have protective functions to reduce tracking to protect victims.

*Q. What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to embrace technology in how we prevent and respond to family violence?*

Evidence suggests a significant increase in the utilisation of GPS tracking apps on smartphones among people in relationships. This highlights the importance of education in schools around respectful relationships to tackle new forms of stalking and coercive control. The Victorian

Government could utilise social media platforms and influencers to share prevention messages that empower young people to recognise and act on red flags in relationships.

*Q. What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to reduce and respond to the risk of family violence during times of crisis?*

The evidence shows that the risk of family violence significantly increases before, during and after a crisis. Across Victoria many communities have been severely impacted by flooding and bushfires in recent years, in addition to the impacts of COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis. This is proving to be a stressful time for many people, and for communities and individuals already in a vulnerable position. In developing the action plan, the Victorian Government needs to take a holistic view of the social, economic, and environmental impacts that communities are experiencing, as well as committing to further action to specifically address increased risk of family violence in disasters.

Collaboration across services and organisations at times of crisis is key. For example, Wodonga City Council facilitates a program that is linked to Maternal and Child health and offers financial counselling for families.

[Casey City Council partnered with Gender Disaster Australia](#) to develop training and checklists to assist emergency management professionals to apply a gender lens to their work. The emergency management team also developed a role specifically for emergency and gender inclusion that will be available to respond in the set-up of an evacuation centre.

The MAV contributed to DFFH's [Family Violence in Emergency Management Framework](#) (the framework) in 2018. After five years of significant disasters, it would be timely to review the framework to ensure it reflects best practice.

The Victorian Government could reduce and respond to the risk of family violence during times of crisis by:

- Providing training to council officers working in emergency management roles to recognise and respond to family violence.
- Review and update emergency management policy and guidance, including the framework, to ensure family violence is appropriately considered in emergency management planning and service provision.
- Ensuring emergency responses include a gender equality and intersectional lens, such as the development of a family violence service for emergency situations.

## Focus area 5 – Understand and Demonstrate Our Impact

*Q. What steps would you recommend the Victorian Government take to strengthen how we measure impact?*

The MAV recommends the Victoria Government takes the following steps to strengthen how we measure impact:

- The MAV seeks to collaborate with the Victorian Government to develop useful data sets for Victorian communities, where data is available at the municipal level. For example, Victorian Crime Statistics data and National Community Attitudes Survey data.
- Determine the impact and benefit of state-funded services and programs, in a way that is sensitive to the people that use the services and programs e.g., the Orange Door.
- Providing funded organisations with evaluation tools and resources at the beginning of a program, as evaluation must be considered at the program design stage e.g., the Free From Violence Local Government Program.

*Q2. What steps would you recommend the Victorian government take to increase opportunities for Victorians to help us improve the system? (optional)*

The MAV recommends the following steps be taken to increase opportunities for Victorians to help improve the system:

- Making de-identified local Orange Door data available.
- Consideration of the creation of an anonymous online feedback channel on easily accessible websites.
- Promote consultation widely to Victorians, as announcements on the Victorian Government website only reach a limited number of Victorians.

## Our Overarching Principles

*Q. Lived Experience: How do you think people who have experienced family violence can be involved in developing policy, services, and activities in the next stage of Victoria's work to end family violence?*

Victorian councils are aware that incorporating lived experience is essential and needs to be done in a sensitive way. People with lived experience are already involved in some council working groups, advisory committees and community consultations, and there is a strong interest to work more closely with people with lived experience at the local level.

It is crucial to acknowledge that people with lived experience are often consulted extensively without appropriate remuneration. If an organisation is using someone's lived experience, it is vital to define appropriate support for them, as reliving experience/trauma is a lot to ask of people. This includes recognising the value of their contributions and remunerating appropriately.

*Q. Intersectionality: What steps can the Victorian Government take to ensure the next stage of Victoria's work to end family violence addresses the diverse needs of different communities and peoples in our community?*

The response and prevention workforce must reflect Victoria's diverse community. This is a challenging but important component, as organisations need to develop trust with communities, and this is not possible if the community doesn't identify with the workforce and services that are provided. Ways that the Victorian Government can address the diverse needs of different communities include:

- High quality, robust Gender Impact Assessments which take a clear intersectional approach should be applied to all Victorian Government initiatives and shared as best practice to other entities covered under the Gender Equality Act 2020.
- There is a need to collect and analyse data in a more sophisticated way. Services and organisations collect a lot of demographic data from community members. This data must be analysed for it to be meaningful. The Victorian Government could support this evaluation through the development of a resource hub, analysis framework or through regular collation of key data.
- Offering effective training on intersectionality. It is a complex topic that is not clearly understood by the sector. The sector would benefit from a form of standard training that ensures everyone has a solid base understanding of intersectionality and the key elements.

## Other Reflections

*Q. Is there anything else you think the Victorian government needs to do for all Victorians to access the support they need and be safe, thriving, and live free from family violence?*

The Victorian Government has instigated some world-first work in the prevention of family violence. The MAV recommends the following areas as potential additional areas of focus:

- *Strong Foundations* does not acknowledge elder abuse and the intersectionality between family violence and elder abuse. Increased awareness of elder abuse at a foundational level may create opportunities for the development of family violence prevention, early intervention, or response initiatives with a broadened scope to achieve increased social impact.
- Continued funding opportunities for response and prevention initiatives for councils, particularly when they are mandated to undertake additional work. For example, while the introduction of the Gender Equality Act 2020 has been welcomed, the lack of resourcing attached to its implementation has presented many challenges for councils, particularly smaller, rural councils.