

**Submission to the Victorian government’s**

**consultation on a new**

**LGBTIQ Strategy**

**August 2020**

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# Introduction

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is the legislated peak body representing Victoria’s 79 councils. Local government has multiple roles relevant to the Victorian government’s consultation on developing a new whole of government LGBTIQ strategy.

As the recognised voice for local government, our role is to:

* represent and advocate for local government interests
* build the capacity of Victorian councils
* facilitate effective networks
* initiate policy development and advice
* support councillors
* promote the role of local government.

We welcome this opportunity to respond to the Victorian government consultation and look forward to outcomes that will make significant and substantial change to the lives of people in the LGBTIQ community.

**Local Government and the Victorian Government Consultation on LGBTIQ strategy**

On behalf of local government, this submission advocates for consideration of issues relevant to LGBTIQ people and communities across Victoria. It describes some of the ways that councils are currently working towards improving the lives of LGBTIQ people. It asks that local government’s role and its potential for future involvement be acknowledged and supported.

The MAV is commenting on the issues most relevant to local government. Some councils are making their own submissions to your consultation.

The MAV’s focus is on the environments that support access, inclusion, health and wellbeing for people in diverse communities. Councils work towards improving community inclusion of diversity groups that may face barriers and discrimination including people in the LGBTIQ community and their allies.

Councils have a role as civic leaders, planners, employers, advocates, managers of public environments and providers of community, arts and sport/ leisure services. They often work in partnership with community organisations and individuals using a place-based approach.

# Councils and MAV – Diversity

Many councils have Access and Inclusion policies that include LGBTIQ interests. For example, Casey City Council’s policy says:

A definition of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect and means more than just acknowledging and/or tolerating difference. It means understanding that each individual is unique and understanding the importance of respect and recognition of differences and similarities in our community. Consideration of diversity in race, ethnicity, physical ability, socio-economic status, age, religious/faith beliefs, political beliefs, gender identity, sexual orientation is vital in Council’s decision making and advocacy, service provision, built environments, workforce and community development.

In February 2018, the MAV Board endorsed the MAV Diversity and Human Rights Policy Statement:

The MAV has a strong and historical commitment to equality for all Victorians. This is demonstrated in the MAV’s recognition and support of diversity and human rights, as well as in sustained advocacy for vulnerable groups. This has been exemplified in our Prevention of Violence Against Women Leadership Statement and Statement of Commitment to Cultural Diversity.

Local government has obligations under Victoria’s Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, which includes the rights to recognition and equality before the law, protection from degrading treatment, freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, taking part in public life, and cultural rights. Human rights are integrated into council business, and a priority of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission is to track Victoria’s progress in building a human rights culture.

The MAV welcomes the outcome of the non-binding postal survey on same sex marriage, and acknowledges that the ‘yes’ vote and subsequent legislative reform around same sex marriage represent a triumph for equality and human rights for all Australians. The MAV affirms its support for the LGBTIQ community and recognises marriage equality as a human right.

## 3.1 Council Plans and Diversity

Councils already have planning frameworks that can be used to plan, implement and evaluate actions to address LGBTIQ issues. Community and civic leaders can lead by example and help shift community attitudes, beliefs and practices.

Councils adopt 4-year Council Plans that articulate the outcomes the Council intends to achieve during its term, how it will prioritise efforts and resources, and how it will measure success in meeting the needs of the community. Councils are also required under the Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 to prepare a Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan every four years. These plans articulate council commitments to building, promoting and maintaining healthy communities.

For example, Glen Eira City Council’s Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan provides a platform to explicitly provide LGBTIQ inclusive programming, events and a voice for the LGBTIQ community including Council staff. The current Plan addresses this through the strategy outlined below with an overall priority to Improve Mental Health and Community Connection.

*Promote inclusion of diverse groups including people with disabilities, people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities and LGBTIQ community members.*

Councils often also adopt strategies that promote health and inclusion for specific populations including Disability Action Plans, Reconciliation Action Plans and Multicultural Action Plans. The new Gender Equality Act requires public entities, including councils, to take real steps to improve gender equality outcomes in workplaces and community, and to report on these publicly. Councils often also have Early Years Plans, Youth Plans and Positive Ageing Plans as well as Sport and Recreation Plans, Community Plans, Open Space Plans and more. In a recent MAV survey, 47 councils reported having one or more strategy or plan related to gender equality, PVAW, or prevention of family violence.

Many of these plans in some councils mention LGBTIQ people and issues and strategies. Some councils already have active LGBTIQ Reference/Advisory groups and good links with the LGBTIQ community. Strategies to increase activity in local government can be explored. For example, MAV’s experience is that showcasing good practice across the sector and facilitating the sharing of resources are powerful ways to influence and inform other councils.

# Responding to questions

## Do you think that the discussion paper captures the current challenges facing LGBTIQ Victorians and future opportunities? Is anything missing?

The discussion paper is very detailed and does capture a wide range of challenges faced by the LGBTIQ community. The following points could have featured in the discussion paper:

* The role of local government to date is not explicitly mentioned in the discussion paper as a stakeholder. Some of the 79 Victorian councils have become actively involved in LGBTIQ work to date and this could be usefully acknowledged. Some of these councils have developed individual submissions to your consultation as well as contributing to the development of this MAV submission. As a sector, there is great potential to address LGBTIQ issues, building on the work of councils already committed.
* The discussion paper does not fully explore the needs and challenges for LGBTI people situated in outer suburban settings. Although rural and regional settings have rightly received some attention and still experience significant barriers, there is also a need to consider suburbs in interface councils surrounding urban centres. City of Casey and City of Hume brought up this issue.
* The discussion paper was written before the COVID19 emergency impacted us all. There will be additional needs arising from the COVID19 crisis and its impact on councils, the LGBTIQ community and individuals. After our society returns to the “new COVID-normal” there will be a need to recover from the lockdown and its associated loss of social connection. There are also likely to be mental health implications.

**Councils have identified the following as of high importance:**

* Lived experiences from rural and regional Victoria must be fully considered in developing the new strategy. Population migration, tree and sea changers and population growth has resulted in an increase in demand for services in rural and regional towns. For example, there is a shortage of experienced GPs with knowledge on LGBTIQ support needs. Access to gender and sexual health clinicians is also difficult. Issues of isolation, discrimination and ensuring confidentiality of LGBTIQ people living in a regional and rural setting are important.
* There is a lack of useful data on LGBTIQ people and communities that is needed to inform strategies/interventions. Moreland City Council recommends that the Victorian LGBTIQ Strategy provide best practice guidelines in relation to collection and management of data on staff and community diversity in relation to the LGBTIQ community.
* Social engagement opportunities are important. People need to have access to socialisation opportunities with peers and experience the cultural nature of the LGBTIQ community. However, social support groups that rely on the same small number of volunteers can cause “champion burnout.” Identified barriers to mainstream sports and community participation need to be addressed through educating club committees of management on LGBTIQ inclusion.
* Access to resources and support is needed for children under 18 who are exploring their own sexuality and or questioning their assigned gender. Extra support and resources for schools are needed. Families and carers of these young people also need education materials and support systems.
* Stronger indicators and mandates required for LGBTIQ inclusion in sport. The only mention of an indicator for sport is a policy document. A better indicator would be around actual rates of participation or perceptions about inclusive nature of clubs. There is a need to challenge sporting culture that is not inclusive and welcoming. Integrating this with other strategies for Sporting Clubs (such as Healthy Eating, Gender Equity etc) is required. For example, Monash City Council has included LGBTIQ inclusion benchmarks into its Draft Active Monash Sports Club Development Framework. City of Greater Dandenong is actively working in this space. City of Moreland’s website provides a link to resources tackling homophobia in sport and Brunswick Baths have run a Q-Fit program.

Overall, the discussion paper does outline comprehensively the issues that need to be addressed by all levels of government and all communities. City of Casey sums it up as “…it provides a fantastic overview of the challenges facing LGBTIQ communities in Victoria, presents valuable data insights, and details the diverse and unique experiences of intersectional groups.”

## 4.2  What do you think should be the priorities and areas of focus for the Victorian Government over the next ten years? (select up to 5 options)

 Improving inclusion in Government and Government-funded services

 Rural and regional inclusion

 Improving equality in state laws

 Addressing family violence in LGBTIQ communities

 Reducing discrimination in the workplace

 Reducing discrimination and harassment online/in public

 Improving the mental health of LGBTIQ people

 Improving the physical health of LGBTIQ people

 Improving awareness and inclusion in the justice system

 Improving inclusion in education settings

 Improving inclusion in health services

 Improving awareness and understanding of intersectional experiences in Government services, initiatives and legislation

Data.

Without consistent, localised data and research to recognise community trends, it is difficult to identify and measure how LGBTIQ people are being impacted, therefore difficult to advocate for support. This heavily impacts local government’s capacity to apply for grant funding or highlight the need for additional resourcing. A consistent approach to the way information is collected would strengthen the accuracy of findings in surveys such as the ABS Census.

## 4.3 What is working well that the Victorian Government could build on to progress LGBTIQ equality? Consider initiatives in other states/territories or internationally.

Local Government already works with other stakeholders to deliver programs that significantlycontribute to the achievements of the LGBTIQ indicator statements set out in the discussion paper.

**Domain 1: Safe Learning Environments**

The Safe Schools model is considered successful. It could be expanded to early years settings including childcare and playgroups. City of Monash’s ‘Playing Fair’ project emphasises the importance of early years for focusing on equity. Libraries are also learning environments and have been instrumental in promoting LGBTIQ inclusivity and reducing homophobia and xenophobia. Libraries support learning outside of educational settings like schools and colleges.

**Domain 2: Political and civic participation**

Local government is closest to the community and councils know their communities. Civic participation of residents is facilitated by councils, building social capital and promoting wellbeing. The value of diversity is acknowledged by MAV and many councils in terms of workforce and council activity. Some already host LGBTIQ Reference and Advisory groups and aim to include LGBTIQ people in specific council consultations. A growing number of councils demonstrate respect for the LGBTIQ community by marking IDAHOBIT day, flying the Rainbow flag and participation in the Pride March. A group of 4 Northern metropolitan councils work together to have an information stall at the Midsumma carnival.

**Domain 3: Economic security**

Councils are a major employer within their communities. Across Victoria, councils employ more than 43,500 staff in more than 300 different job roles. Many council staff identify with the LGBTIQ community. Many Councils support local businesses and provide employment/training opportunities for jobseekers. LGBTIQ people should be consciously included in this range of activity. Councils provide training to hiring and supervising managers and staff on Equal Employment Opportunity and other “diversity” topics, including unconscious bias. LGPro (an organisation for local government professionals) has a Rainbow Special Interest Group for LGBTIQ council staff to network and socialise.

Wyndham City Council suggests that State and Local Government can use their role as employers to directly support LGBTIQ people from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Working on recruitment, employment conditions and culture within organisations will directly impact LGBTIQ employees. There is a push to acknowledge that employing more LGBTIQ people will then lead to more inclusive policy, services and programs overall.

**Domain 4: Health and wellbeing**

Councils are required under the Public Health and Wellbeing Act to implement strategies that reduce inequities in their communities and prevent chronic disease and mental health issues at the population level among groups experiencing inequities. There is a role for councils to promote health and wellbeing for LGBTIQ residents, given the health inequities detailed in your discussion paper.

Some councils have had Youth Service supports for young LGBTIQ people for years as a response to their issues. Kingston City Council Youth Services run, for example, QIK (Queer in Kingston) weekly groups for LGBTIQ young people. Mornington Peninsula Shire’s Youth Team runs QSA & Pride Groups. Hepburn Shire Council has a transgender project to support transgender women to transition. The aim is to create a social group to reduce feelings of isolation and increase inclusion in our community. The project uses guest speakers to provide information to ensure the women participating are supported to transition in a way that is successful to them. The Shire understands that this potentially is the first time in Australia that a Council has completed a project like this one. The COVID19 emergency has delayed this project but the council is investigating running it online.

Local government is a provider of universal and community services from birth to old age with extensive and well-established community networks where LGBTI inclusion can be embedded as business as usual.

**Domain 5: LGBTIQ inclusive services**

Although there is much room for improvement, councils are at the forefront in communicating inclusivity and equitable access to services. In the LGBTIQ sphere, this has been predominantly in Youth Services, Arts and Culture and, more recently, Aged Services, Positive Ageing and Sport and Recreation. Kingston City Council’s AccessCare supports people over 65 and others with a disability. The service is trialing inclusion initiatives including the use of language during assessment e.g. what pronoun do you prefer, and creating an LGBTIQ email address for disclosure lgbti@accesscare.org.au. However, City of Casey reports that LGBTIQ young people have to travel to Minus18 services in Collingwood for appropriate health and wellbeing care. Some councils have achieved accreditation for their Aged Services under the Rainbow Tick scheme. However, Moreland City Council raises questions about how accessible/affordable this is for many organisations at a local level and would like to see alternatives.

Maternal and Child Health (MCH) services engage with all families in Victoria with children from birth to school age in order to improve their health, development and wellbeing. This approach takes into account families’ strengths and vulnerabilities and provides ongoing primary health care according to need. The MCH leadership have had Rainbow Families provide professional development of the experience of LGBTIQ early parenting in the system. This led to Rainbow Families presenting at the State-wide MCH conference and the distribution of materials for MCH services to improve engagement and inclusiveness with LGBTIQ families. Early Years services increasingly work with Rainbow Families.

**Domain 6: Personal Safety and Violence**

Councils are working directly with communities and in partnership with funded agencies in the prevention of violence against women with initiatives that promote equality as key to prevention. Family violence experienced by LGBTI people is often young people in their family of origin. Intimate partner violence in LGBTI relationships is complex and under-researched but we understand it is growing. Family violence projects and programs seek to include people from the LGBTIQ community. Councils also often liaise with police and other organisations to generally improve Community Safety.

**What works well**

* MAV acknowledges that the Victorian Government is a leader in anti-discrimination laws regarding the LGBTIQ community.
* Some existing resources are very useful, including the resources of Rainbow Health Victoria. One example is the “[Pride in Prevention](https://www.rainbowhealthvic.org.au/news/launch-pride-in-prevention-evidence-guide)” guide to primary prevention of Family Violence experienced by LGBTIQ communities. The Victorian Government’s eQuality guide and Inclusive Language Guide are valuable. Some councils promote the Inclusive Language guide on their websites.
* The LGBTIQ Community Grants Program is an excellent initiative, including the Pride Events and Festivals Fund and the Organisational Grants program.
* Cities of Melbourne and Port Phillip are major sponsors of the Midsumma Festival including the Pride March. Hepburn Shire Council is a sponsor and supporter of the ChillOut Festival. An increasing number of councils have representation at LGBTIQ events especially the Pride Mach.
* Positive Ageing work in councils is inclusive of LGBTIQ seniors. For example, Knox City Council Active Ageing and Disability Unit have been awarded a Seniors Participation grant by DHHS to engage with the older LGBTI people residing in the Knox community. There is a broadening of the council view of the LGBTI community from a youth-based approach to an all-life-stages approach. The AADU is designing a Communications and Engagement Strategy that supports identification and engagement opportunities with the older LBGTI community; co-designed and co-facilitated Community Education awareness training at libraries, senior citizen centres and seniors groups, and provide communications and material support to a newly established Knox Seniors LGBTI Allies and Friends Group

**4.4 How can the Victorian Government improve the lives of LGBTIQ people with diverse attributes and varied experiences, such as being from a culturally diverse background, living with a disability, or experiencing family violence?**

The Victorian Government can acknowledge local government as a stakeholder and consider ways it can support councils to implement LGBTIQ-friendly strategies at a local level.

Councils are already experienced in addressing whole-of-council/community diversity issues through Reconciliation Action Plans, Disability Action Plans, Positive Ageing Plans, Multicultural Action Plans and others. This existing infrastructure can be used to tackle LGBTIQ barriers. Communities vary greatly, so the mix of strategies has to be decided at the local level with maximum involvement of people from the LGBTIQ community.

While recognising that intersectionality is about power and oppression, local government tends to take a practical approach. Many councils have developed sophisticated social planning frameworks and policies based on human rights approaches and community development. For example, Moreland City Council has a Moreland Human Rights Policy 2016 – 2026 which has 6 priority groups including LGBTIQ. It says “GLBTIQ Communities Council commits to ensuring that Moreland is a safe and welcoming city for Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender, Intersex and Queer (GLBTIQ) people and will strive to ensure that its services are accessible to and appropriate to the needs of our GLBTIQ residents and visitors.” Mitchell Shire Council’s Social Justice Framework identifies LGBTIQ as one of seven significant priority areas and in doing so, is committed to the Goulburn Ovens (GO) LGBTIQ Community of Practice and LGBTIQ Alliance.

Representatives from diverse communities need to be in the public eye. Having representation in mainstream settings like councils creates the platform for discussions which can lead to change. An intersectional approach to the LGBTIQ strategy should ensure there are mechanisms in State government to collaborate with other diversity areas and on common issues e.g. Housing and Homelessness, Health Promotion, Employment, Family Violence and Gender Equity.

We commend DHHS for facilitating the public service Diversity and Inclusion Community of Practice and allowing local government membership, though it is not well known by all councils.

Some Victorian government initiatives already address intersectionality in practice. For example, the guidelines on the Pride Events and Festivals fund includes disability access and inclusion, language translations and Aboriginal Welcome to Country.

An example of intersectionality is Whitehorse City Council’s identified need to continue to support the work commenced through family violence funding initiatives and expand it to include a focus on the LGBTIQ community including a focus on the issues and impacts particular to LGBTIQ people. It is also recognised there is a need to raise awareness of the experiences of LGBTIQ people with disability who may be experiencing family or intimate partner violence including awareness of disability based violence - such as denial of care, removal of equipment, under or over medication, use of restraint and seclusion.

**4.5 What role can you or your organisation play in improving the lives of LGBTIQ Victorians?**

MAV is experienced in supporting councils to achieve their aims in a range of Social Policy areas. We have relationships with councils at all levels, staff, managers, CEOs and Councillors and a good track record in advancing diversity issues. MAV does not currently have a Policy Adviser portfolio based on LGBTIQ needs so there is willingness but limited capacity to advance the LGBTIQ agenda.

**Council examples of the range of possible options that could be replicated**

Whitehorse Youth Services & Community Development play an integral role in the Q-East Alliance – a network of Youth and Community Workers representing all 7 Outer East LGAs over the last 9 years. In 2019 the Q-East Alliance held the first ever Eastern Rainbow Formal event which was a huge success. Q-East celebrates IDAHOBIT Day and Wear It Purple day annually and plays an active role in advocating and supporting our young LGBTIQ people in the East.

Monash City Council is working towards becoming an overt ally for the LGBTIQ community

and intends to incorporate the priorities of the new Victorian LGBTIQ strategy into its own Strategic plans and documents. It also intends to promote the inclusion of LGBTIQ people in all consultations, not just the LGBTIQ-specific ones.

Mount Alexander Shire created a Social Equity and Inclusion Officer role in February 2020. The officer works with the LGBTIQ Steering Group to advance equality of LGBTIQ people in the council and community. The Let’s Get Proud Project, funded by DPC, conducted an independent ‘Mount Alexander Shire LGBTIQ Youth and Allies Consultation’ of the needs of LGBTIQ young people in Castlemaine. Community Grant support for the first ‘Glittering Goldfields Queer Formal’, following on the formal’s success, Mount Alexander partnered with two neighbouring shires delivering the Formal annually.

Whitehorse City Council seek to embed LGBTIQ inclusion and representation within Whitehorse narrative through communications e.g. website, Whitehorse News, Social Media and public strategies and plans and mainstream events, e.g.: Senior’s Festival, Spring Festival, etc.

Mitchell Shire Council celebrated IDAHOBIT day with a letter from the CEO sent out to all employees about the importance of IDAHOBIT and why as an organisation the Shire supported the day, along with the raising of the rainbow flag. Mitchell Shire, a rapidly growing community, does not have a dedicated officer to co-ordinate LGBTIQ inclusion work but has nevertheless undertaken LGBTIQ activities.

Wyndham has included Transition and Affirmation of Gender leave in its Enterprise Agreement – a huge achievement and the first in the state.

**4.6 Is there anything else you would like to add to inform the LGBTIQ Strategy**

MAV acknowledges that all councils have further work to do to improve LGBTIQ access and inclusion.

# Recommendations

**1.** The new Victorian LGBTIQ Strategy includes local government as both a sphere of government and an important stakeholder invested in the health and wellbeing of all members of their communities, including LGBTIQ people, and acknowledges the ongoing work of many councils to improve LGBTIQ access and inclusion.

**2.** The Victorian LGBTIQ Strategy recognises that councils have strong existing community connections and networks that provide extensive reach and influence in local communities, with roles that can be harnessed as community and civic leaders, employers and providers of universal and targeted community services, through which LGBTIQ inclusive policies and practices can be embedded.

**3.** The Victorian Government consult MAV when planning the implementation of the strategy about what resourcing and support can most usefully be offered to MAV and councils to further develop the sector’s role in LGBTIQ access and inclusion.