



Mental health and wellbeing

Despite steadily increasing investment in mental healthcare services over the last few decades, the prevalence of mental health conditions in Australia is rising rather than falling. Services struggle to keep up with demand (compounded by workforce shortages), and individual, government and societal costs are escalating. A key driver of the increased demand for services is greater awareness of mental health issues in the community. However, under-investment in prevention programs has also contributed to this situation. The COVID-19 pandemic and recent natural disasters have made the crisis worse.

A two-pronged approach is needed, one that strives to keep people mentally healthy through wellbeing and prevention-focused mental health promotion initiatives and supports people experiencing mental health challenges through readily available and high-quality mental healthcare services.

To date, successive state governments have focused almost exclusively on bolstering mental healthcare services, while mental health promotion has been largely overlooked. Local government plays an important role in this area and needs to be adequately resourced to provide this at a local level.

A focus on wellbeing and primary prevention is critical. The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System noted the importance of setting a clear funding target for promotion and prevention activities, separated from funding for mental healthcare services and supports.

The Royal Commission identified the need to understand and modify the social, cultural and economic factors that are driving the surge in mental ill-health, particularly among young people, LGBTIQ+, people with a disability and women. It made several recommendations relating to the promotion of mental wellbeing and the prevention of mental health conditions, specifically highlighting the role of local government in this space.

The mental health reforms proposed in the Royal Commission's final report are underpinned by a recognition of the need to create a continuum of responses, including the promotion of mental wellbeing, the prevention of mental health conditions, early intervention, treatment and recovery support, and suicide prevention.

The Royal Commission's focus on mental health and wellbeing (rather than just mental health) highlights the importance of a holistic approach that moves beyond a strictly biomedical model and recognises the psychological and social determinants of mental health.

Mental health promotion, which encompasses a focus on wellbeing and primary prevention, is already a focus of Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans. Local governments are already making a significant contribution to this space. There is a need to better define, streamline and strengthen local government's current approach to mental health promotion. There is also a need to advocate on behalf of and support people experiencing mental health challenges to access services in Melbourne's north.



State and federal government investment into new mental health services is a positive step. Local government welcomes this investment into new children and family mental health and wellbeing hubs and local mental health services, among others.

Promoting and protecting mental wellbeing and improving access to mental healthcare services must also address health equity issues that exist among structurally disadvantaged population cohorts that generally experience poorer mental health outcomes.

Recommendations

Along with increased investment in and improvements to mental health services in Melbourne's north, there is a need to increase the investment in mental health prevention and promotion activities of local government. A partnership approach between all levels of government is required where data collection, research evidence and best practice approaches inform improved coordination and service delivery across the mental health and wellbeing continuum – from prevention and early intervention to crisis responses and treatment.

Ensure local government is represented on key governance structures and in planning processes relating to promotion and prevention in the mental health field in Victoria

It is essential that local government is consulted on the development of the proposed statewide plan to promote mental wellbeing and prevent mental illness that is being developed by the Victorian Department of Health. Local government must also be represented on any interdepartmental committee on mental health and wellbeing promotion that is established in line with the recommendations of the Royal Commission.

Local government should be enabled to provide input into designing and implementing social prescribing initiatives, given it will play a key role in these initiatives. Also, local government should be centrally involved in the design of the new Social Inclusion Action Groups. Councils already have established advisory committees and capacity building programs which can ensure that these new initiatives are well designed and successful.

Improve recognition and funding for the promotion and prevention work already occurring in local government

Local government is already involved in mental health promotion. Much of this work focuses on tackling key risk factors (for example child maltreatment, gendered violence, racism, discrimination, loneliness and social disadvantage) through family violence prevention, youth programs, maternal child health programs, community programs that promote social cohesion, established advisory committees, arts programs that connect community and more. However, Councils are not always adequately resourced to undertake this key role. For example, there is a lack of specialist mental health promotion staff and generalist youth workers to support prevention and early intervention.



With more and dedicated funding, local government could apply a multimodal approach delivered at scale to promote key protective factors such as healthy lifestyle behaviours, psychological self-care skills, the promotion of positive home, school and workplace environments, and social connection and social cohesion initiatives. The more programs available and the more touch points with community, the more likely local government is to boost population mental wellbeing and reduce the incidence of mental health conditions, which will in turn reduce demand on already over-stretched mental healthcare services.

Local government's role in mental health promotion and prevention is likely to increase, with other organisations previously in this area ceasing (for example, Primary Care Partnerships). Increased resourcing is required to support the co-design, implementation and evaluation of promotion and prevention programs and activities, and to boost the capacity of health promotion program areas to meet this need.

Resource local government to strengthen data collection

Preventive mental health activities cannot occur in the absence of robust data and research evidence to guide action. Reliable data helps to identify need, describe what activities are occurring and track whether programs are having their intended impact or not.

There is currently a lack of key data to support action and investment in mental health promotion and prevention in communities. It is imperative that local government is resourced to collect data to monitor and track the reach, uptake and adoption of its promotion and prevention initiatives, and the impact they are having on the mental health and wellbeing of the local population.

An important starting point is to resource every Council to undertake an audit of its promotion and prevention activities, potentially through shared measures, and to benchmark these against the current evidence base and best practice guidelines.

It is also vital that local government contributes to grow the evidence base around promotion and prevention. Councils need financial support to upskill preventive mental health workers in research and evaluation practice, and to conduct rigorous program evaluations.

Improve the availability of local mental healthcare services

Service systems in Melbourne's north are stretched. The Northern Hospital is reportedly at capacity, and peri-urban and regional localities face challenges in attracting and retaining local health and mental health practitioners.

Projected growth in the region will create significant new demand for health services, including general practitioners and allied health providers (primary), specialists (secondary) and hospitals (tertiary).



While local government has a very limited role in the provision of clinical mental healthcare services for people experiencing mental health challenges, it can support recognition and referral, and also play a role in advocating for services in its municipality. Councils need to be consulted in ways to do this through social prescribing and training staff in referrals.

Several new federal and state funded mental healthcare initiatives, such as child and family mental health hubs and local mental health services, have recently been funded and it is vital that these services are located in Melbourne's north.

But clinical services are not enough to promote recovery from mental ill-health. Local wellbeing support and other community services are also needed to support people living with mental health challenges.

The high level of diversity and localised disadvantage across the region requires advocacy to ensure that health and wellbeing services are available, accessible, affordable, and culturally safe and appropriate. All staff need to be trained to be culturally safe for diverse communities, including LGBTIQ+, people with a disability, people from different cultures and First Nations communities.

Home support services have seen increased demand for Home and Community Care for Younger People programs by people with mental illness and psychosocial disability, particularly since the onset of the pandemic. Local government needs support for resourcing to ensure staff are trained and there are enough staff to meet requirements.

Mental ill-health is strongly associated with an increased risk of poor physical health.

Opportunities exist for programs to address modifiable health risks and the determinants of health. This will reduce the incidence of chronic health conditions and mitigate the demand for associated health services among the general population, including among people living with a mental health condition.

There are significant service gaps for people with mental illness and psychosocial disabilities who are not able to access the NDIS. There is an expectation in the community that Councils support local services and advocate for more resources for this cohort in the community.

The impacts of COVID on mental health will be far reaching and continue to emerge over coming years.



Policy context

Legislation

- *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008*

Strategic guidance

- Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2019–2023 (Priority area: ‘Improving mental wellbeing’)

Shared policy area

- Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans (‘Improving mental health’ identified as a priority area within 96% of MPHWP across Victorian local governments for 2021–2025)

Victorian mental health reforms

- Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System
- NEW: Mental Health and Wellbeing division at Department of Health
- NEW: *Mental Health and Wellbeing Act 2022*
- NEW: Victorian Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan