

2019 Submission - Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System

Organisation Name

City of Boroondara

Name

Ms Fiona Brown

What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent mental illness and to support people to get early treatment and support?

"As noted above, local governments play a key role in preventing mental illness through promoting good mental health and providing opportunities for people to build social connections. Examples of the types of health promoting activities that the City of Boroondara has recently undertaken that have worked well include: a project that engaged socially isolated older adults in physical activity, a mental health forum for sports clubs, a men's health week breakfast, and the Add Life to Your Years online search engine, which is designed to engage people over 55 in social, creative, active, leisure or learning activities and groups in the local area. Council also recently organised two mental illness awareness training sessions in response to feedback from our neighbourhood houses about a desire to gain a greater understanding of mental illness and how to support individuals experiencing one. The training, which had good attendance and was well received, highlights the need to educate the community about mental illness and support services available so that they can feel confident in supporting community members and referring them early to relevant services. Supporting people to get early treatment and support also requires a reduction in stigma and discrimination, as noted in question 1. Normalisation of mental health service use and integration of mental health services into general health services would help with this. Simplifying the structure of the system so that it is person centred and referral pathways to clinicians are flexible, would also assist people to access early treatment. It is well documented that symptoms of mental illness are likely to emerge in childhood and adolescence. headspace Hawthorn is currently operating with a 10-week waiting list, demonstrating the high engagement of the community with the service. However, it also highlights the lack of youth-specific low cost services operating in the area. Increased funding to services for this cohort is vital to ensure mental health concerns are addressed from the earliest age possible. "

What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent suicide?

No response.

What makes it hard for people to experience good mental health and what can be done to improve this? This may include how people find, access and experience mental health treatment and support and how services link with each other.

"There are a range of social, biological and psychological factors that make it difficult for people to experience good mental health. These include family violence, insecure housing, loneliness, low income and poor nutrition, which are discussed in question 5. Outlined below are issues that Council is aware of that are related to how people find, access and experience mental health treatment and support, and how services are linked. Council is aware that Boroondara residents living with mental illness are experiencing difficulties accessing appropriate care and support packages through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), including difficulties demonstrating eligibility. Those who are eligible for NDIS packages have experienced loss of

familiar services and staff due to the changing service sector, which can have a negative impact on their mental health. We also know that some community services for people who are not eligible for the NDIS, such as psycho-social rehabilitation and recovery support services, have been defunded. Given the critical role that these services play for people with severe and persistent mental illness who are unable to access the NDIS or are ineligible, it is recommended that funding be reinstated for them. There are a lack of low cost counselling services in Boroondara, with two week waiting lists. There has also been an observed a lack of flexible support options for residents living with mental illness. There is often a need for social support and someone to accompany them to appointments, be with them in the evenings and to assist with domestic tasks. However, these are not typical service supports available to this client group. One of the services the City of Boroondara provides for adolescents is the School Focussed Youth Service. Insecure funding of this program inhibits long-term, proactive planning to address the needs of youth at risk of disengagement. Other impacts of the short-term funding are experienced as barriers to creating partnerships, engaging schools and workforce continuity. Increased funding to local governments for School Focussed Youth Services would enable the program to include more suicide prevention, and lengthening the funding periods would enable proactive planning and increase staff continuity. The lack of service integration for people who have a mental illness and are experiencing other issues, such as homelessness or alcohol and other drug dependencies, is another reason that it is hard for people to experience good mental health. It is critical that there is greater integration between the service sectors so that the needs of the person can be addressed holistically. Regular changes to community mental health service provision, eligibility and delivery models also affect the City of Boroondara's ability to provide current and correct information to community members who are uncertain about the future of their treatment or seeking advice about relevant services. Good communication with the community is essential about changes to the sector. Due to the current complexities with the system, local governments in the Eastern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne have identified the need to establish an Eastern Region Mental Health and Prevention Network. The Network will bring together local organisations, service providers and other stakeholders to explore challenges and potential opportunities and funding. The group will also identify opportunities for local action in capacity building and prevention initiatives, as well as advocacy on key issues. It is recommended that funding be provided to enable the establishment and ongoing coordination of this Network so that it can develop and deliver programs as required to target key cohorts and place-based initiatives. "

What are the drivers behind some communities in Victoria experiencing poorer mental health outcomes and what needs to be done to address this?

"As noted in question 4, there are a range of factors that contribute to some communities experiencing poorer mental health. One of these factors is insecure housing, with people with a mental illness overrepresented in the homelessness population. In the City of Boroondara, there were 426 homeless people on Census night, which was an increase from 383 in 2011. Council has also received an increasing number of reports of homelessness, with 143 reports of homelessness made to the City of Boroondara in 2018 compared to 76 reports in 2017 and 64 reports in 2016. The complexity of the cases is also increasing, with many cases involving people with mental health issues. A lack of social connection is another risk factor for mental illness. An extensive community consultation in Boroondara in 2017 involving 11,845 people found that 69.1% of residents agreed that people in their neighbourhood are willing to help each other compared to 74.1% in Victoria. Just over half the Boroondara residents agreed that they live in a close-knit neighbourhood (51.7%) compared to 61.0% in Victoria (VicHealth, 2015). As Boroondara has high rates of older adults living alone, social isolation is a key concern for this

group. Experience of family violence, abuse and trauma prevent the healthy foundations for mental health being created. The City of Boroondara experienced an upward trend in family violence incidents from 2008-09, with a large increase in family violence reports between 2011-12 and 2012-13, followed by a steady increase (Greater Dandenong Social Statistics). Victorian data shows that female family members were significantly more affected than men, with women between 20 to 44 years of age being the most prevalent cohort of family members affected (Crime Statistics Agency). Adolescence is well documented as a time when symptoms of mental illness to likely arise. Research has found that one in seven young people in Australia aged 4 to 17 (13.9% or just over 586,000 people based on the estimated 2016 population) met the clinical criteria for one or more mental disorders in the previous 12 months (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). Lifestyle factors that are prevalent in modern society including poor nutrition and low levels of physical activity also undermine good mental health. In 2014, less than 5% of Victorians, including Boroondara residents, complied with both fruit and vegetable consumption guidelines (Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). In 2014, just over half of Boroondara residents met the criteria of sufficient exercise (55.1%) (Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Both nutrition and physical activity are known modifiable factors for a range of conditions including depression and anxiety. While Council already does significant work to address these issues, additional funding could go towards research and health promotion initiatives to address social isolation and loneliness in particular, as this is a growing concern for our community. The mental health service sector must also become more agile, flexible and integrated into the local community in order to provide support people need as part of their everyday lives. This includes support for community services known to protect good mental health and keep well."

What can be done to attract, retain and better support the mental health workforce, including peer support workers?

No response.

Thinking about what Victorias mental health system should ideally look like, tell us what areas and reform ideas you would like the Royal Commission to prioritise for change?

"The mental health system should be considered an integral part of the overall health system, not a separate system. This will help to reduce stigma and discrimination and increase help-seeking by community members and increase communication and integration between services. The City of Boroondara recommends that the Royal Commission prioritise improving linkages between related sectors including housing, welfare and community support, employment, education, gambling, drug and alcohol, and family violence. "

Is there anything else you would like to share with the Royal Commission?

No response.