



## Social Justice Initiatives

### Merri-bek

#### **Our ask:**

State and Federal Government to partner with Merri-bek to protect and promote human rights by ensuring that all people in our community have dignified and equitable access to information, goods, services and life opportunities as a result of good governance and democracy.

Merri-bek is committed to advancing inclusion and social cohesion throughout our community, as outlined in Council's Human Rights Policy 2016-2026 and associated plans.

#### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community**

Council renewed its Statement of Commitment to Australia's First Peoples in 2021 and continues to strongly support processes towards self-determination and local, regional or national Treaty or Treaties that enshrine the rights of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

The Council Plan 2025–2029 commits to continuing work to preserve First Peoples culture by supporting Elders, empowering younger generations, promoting truth-telling, and recognising culture's foundational role in wellbeing. Council also committed to prioritising First Peoples self-determined solutions that promote culture, connection and community strengthening.

Council continues to host 26 January Mourning Ceremonies, advocating for Australia's National Day of Celebration to be moved to a date that is inclusive of all Australians and supports healing, reconciliation and Treaty.

#### **Mental health**

Significant mental health challenges face the community, with more than one in four adults experiencing anxiety or depression.

Mental health promotion and early intervention is critical to preventing the onset and escalation of common mental health conditions. Merri-bek City Council, in partnership with local service providers, community organisations and regional networks, plays a

key role in delivering place-based responses that support community wellbeing.

This includes a broad suite of initiatives such as family violence prevention, youth engagement programs, Maternal and Child Health services, community development and social connection programs, advisory committees that elevate lived experience, and arts and cultural initiatives that foster belonging and inclusion.

Merri-bek advocates for stronger recognition of local government as a critical partner in mental health promotion and prevention. This includes sustained investment to support community-based initiatives, primary prevention services including improved access to mental health services across Melbourne's north, and enhanced data collection and research capability to better identify emerging needs, service gaps and opportunities for targeted intervention.

### **Family violence prevention**

In 2024-2025 around 1,900 incidents of family violence were recorded in Merri-bek.

Council's 2019 Gender Equality Commitment promotes local actions to address and prevent family violence in the community, including promoting a culture of safety and respect through participation in the annual 16 Days campaign and collaborations with community partners, such as early years, sports and recreation, youth education and culturally diverse communities.

Council supports those at risk of or experiencing family violence through convening the Merri-bek FV Network and joint advocacy for housing, resources, funding and cultural change to create safe spaces for all gender identities and their children to escape violence. Based on feedback from local service providers, Council supports strengthening Victims' Support through further investment in family violence services, with a specific focus on children, young people, and victims-survivors of sexual violence.

### **Raise the Rate**

The 'Raise the Rate for Good' Campaign seeks to reduce poverty and inequality throughout Australia. The key recommendations for the campaign include increasing the base rate of JobSeeker Payment and other income support payments to at least \$82 a day so everyone can keep a roof over their head and food on the table. Supplementary payments should be paid to people with disability and illness and single parents that reflect the additional costs they face. Commonwealth Rent Assistance should also be more than doubled to reflect rents paid by people on low incomes. Ongoing indexation of payments should be increased in line with wage movements at least twice per year.

### **Social, affordable and public housing**

In 2025 an estimated 6,873 affordable homes were needed in Merri-bek. There is an urgent need for safe housing options for people who need emergency or transitional housing. Council's Affordable Housing Action Plan (AHAP) aims to increase affordable housing in Merri-bek through policy, advocacy, applied skills and investment.

Council asks Homes Victoria to deliver a minimum of 1,000 new social homes in Merri-bek by 2036. Old and substandard public housing sites in Coburg North, Glenroy and Brunswick West also need to be renewed.

### **People experiencing homelessness**

Homelessness exists in Merri-bek in many forms including in overcrowded, insecure and inappropriate housing and, the most visible form of homelessness, rough sleeping. During the 2021 calendar year, VincentCare recorded 264 people rough sleeping in Merri-bek. This number has likely increased since 2021.

In 2024, Council launched Merri-bek Zero, coordinating local services to improve housing outcomes for rough sleepers and aim for

homelessness to be rare, brief and non-recurring. Council funds an Assertive Outreach program to provide enhanced access to specialist homelessness and other critical support services for rough sleepers. Merri-bek aims to ensure a human rights approach to people in public space and is committed to responding to homelessness in ways that protects people's agency, dignity and safety.

### **Gambling harm prevention reform**

In Merri-bek there are currently 639 poker machines, which took more than \$64 million in losses from our community in 2024-2025.

State Government research found that the financial impact of gambling on Victorians has doubled over the past decade, reaching a total of \$14.1 billion in 2023.<sup>36</sup> Data on annual player losses for 2024–2025 indicates that electronic gambling machines account for the largest share (43 per cent), followed by wagering and online betting on sports and racing (33 per cent).<sup>37</sup> The existing regulatory framework is not adequately addressing the significant social harm experienced by the community. Council urges the Victorian Government to prioritise gambling harm prevention within the State's Gambling Regulations.

Young people in Australia are increasingly exposed to environments in which gambling is normalised, including sport, media and digital platforms – increasing their risk of gambling-related harm.<sup>38</sup> The currently proposed reforms do not adequately address this issue as they allow the industry to retain substantial capacity to promote its products to young audiences. Council calls on the Federal Government to support advocacy efforts led by local governments and other stakeholders for a comprehensive ban on gambling advertising, and to implement all recommendations from the 2023 Parliamentary Committee report, You win some, you lose more.<sup>39</sup>

### **Social cohesion, racism and fair refugee determination processes for all**

Merri-bek has a long history of welcoming migrants from across the globe over successive generations, and has proudly worked to support and advocate on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers. Through the Local Government Mayoral Taskforce for Supporting People Seeking Asylum, we have led the 'Back Your Neighbour' Campaign to help ensure the rights and wellbeing of asylum seekers remain on the Federal Government's agenda. The campaign calls for the Federal Government to:

- Provide a pathway to permanency for people with a long-term unresolved immigration status
- Provide people with a valid Bridging Visa and the opportunity to work
- Expand access to health care, income support and essential services so that people can fully participate in society.

Council recognises the harmful impacts of racism and discrimination for individuals and communities, and in undermining social cohesion. Australia's National Anti-Racism Framework (NARF), released by the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2024, provides a vital 10-year roadmap with 63 recommendations to eliminate racism through coordinated action in law, health, education, and workplaces. Yet, without government endorsement or funding, implementation is stalled.

Action is required amid surging racism, including rising abuse against First Nations Peoples, antisemitic attacks, Islamophobia, anti-Arab/Palestinian incidents, anti-immigration rallies in major Australian cities and rising racism targeting people of Indian heritage. We urge federal and state governments to formally adopt NARF, fund the Taskforce, and lead public sector change for accountability and community-led progress.

## **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Asexual and Aromantic communities (LGBTIQA+)**

Merri-bek has a large and diverse LGBTIQA+ population. Council is committed to working with our LGBTIQA+ communities through both our Human Rights Policy 2016-2026 and LGBTIQA+ Action Plan 2023-2026 to amplify the voices and advocate for our LGBTIQA+ population.

Council calls on the Federal and State governments to continue to support LGBTIQA+ programs, strategies and plans, including Safe Schools, Pride in our Future and the National Action Plan for the Health and Wellbeing of LGBTIQA+ People.

Merri-bek is concerned by an increase in violence and discrimination directed at LGBTIQA+ people in public places. We ask State and Federal governments work collaboratively with local LGBTIQA+ organisations, leaders and communities to ensure our communities are safe and free from violence.

Council remains concerned about the increasing barriers facing our transgender and gender diverse population. This has seen a rise in discrimination, violence and vilification directed towards transgender and gender diverse people in health settings, the public domain, employment and education. Merri-bek calls on all levels of government to ensure anti-discrimination legislation equally protects transgender people from vilification and expands the positive duty requirements in appropriate settings. Merri-bek has been disappointed to see a reduction to healthcare for transgender people in other jurisdictions. Council calls on all levels of government to commit to gender affirming healthcare that is accessible and free from discrimination.