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Merri-bek City Council

**Re: Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into anti-LGBTIQA+ hate crimes in Victoria**

Merri-bek City Council welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission into the *Inquiry into anti-LGBTIQA+ hate crimes in Victoria*. Council also welcomed the two new criminal vilification offences recently commenced to better protect more Victorians from vilification.

Merri-bek's *2016-2026 Human Rights Policy* commits to a Merri-bek that is a safe and welcoming city for LGBTIQA+ people, striving to ensure that Merri-bek's services are accessible to and appropriate to the needs of LGBTIQA+ residents and visitors.

Council acknowledges the leadership of LGBTIQA+ led organisations, such as Thorne Harbour Health, in the establishment of this inquiry and all victim survivors who have been impacted by anti-LGBTIQA+ crimes.

Merri-bek City Council sits on the lands and waterways of the Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung people in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. We are one community, who is proud of the diversity of our genders, sexual orientations, cultures and faiths. Merri-bek has a large and diverse LGBTIQA+ population who play a central role in the historical, social and cultural vibrancy of our communities. From our schools, sports clubs, community groups and businesses LGBTIQA+ people are visible, celebrated and vital to the fabric of Merri-bek.

**Supporting Merri-bek's LGBTIQA+ Communities**

The *Merri-bek Human Rights Policy* identifies LGBTIQA+ communities as a priority group who are at greater risk of social and economic exclusion due to systemic barriers. Council's *LGBTIQA+ Action Plan 2023-2026* aims to address these barriers and works towards equality within the community through a range of activities and ongoing programs. These include Rainbow Storytimes, programs for young LGBTIQA+ people, pride public art works, community training, LGBTIQA+ reference group and service provider networking. Council's endorsed advocacy priorities also states clearly that our laws should protect everyone equally, no matter who we are, who we love, or what we believe in and Council continues to advocate for strong anti-discrimination legislation to protect all communities.

Council Officers are aware and concerned that discrimination, violence and hate crimes directed at LGBTIQA+ people still occur within our communities. These crimes are typically under reported and have lasting physical and psychological impacts on victims. Merri-bek Council Officers, in conversation with other council's in the northern metro area, have also noted a rise in attacks against LGBTIQA+ people facilitated through dating and hook-up apps, such as Grindr. These attacks exist within a broader landscape where anti-LGBTIQA+ hate speech has become more common in online spaces and media. Council Officers are seeing this rhetoric entering Merri-bek City Council's community

engagement responses and social media comments. Worryingly wider anti LGBTIQA+ discourse and disinformation has started to intersect with narratives of misogyny, racism and transphobia.

Council is proud of the range of LGBTIQA+ programs and projects we deliver and see this as central to Council's community wellbeing function. However, Council Officers are increasingly seeing more anti-LGBTIQA+ hate speech directed at the organisation. This represents a concerning trend where hate speech has now become normalised or expected during Council's LGBTIQA+ projects. Examples included during the lead up to drag story time events at Council libraries, dishonest registrations or "brigading" at youth events and direct anti-LGBTIQA+ correspondence to the organisation before LGBTIQA+ associated Council decisions. At its most extreme Merri-bek has also seen protests and infiltration by bad actors at Council LGBTIQA+ events. These instances have had negative impacts on the organisation and resulted in significant operational changes to ensure community safety. Council is committed to ongoing LGBTIQA+ projects and programs but the current landscape requires careful planning, risk assessments, security and social media monitoring.

Council believes in the need to build social connection, wellbeing and capacity in our LGBTIQA+ communities, while countering the challenges of discrimination and violence. This inquiry is an opportunity to explore ambitious changes which could provide greater protections to LGBTIQA+ people and collaboration between state, local councils and community.

**Opportunities for positive change**

Council believes there is an active role that local government can play in community safety and LGBTIQA+ hate-crime prevention. With a strong pedigree in gender-based violence prevention, anti-racism programs and community safety, Merri-bek Council has a wealth of partnerships that could be leveraged to support wider LGBTIQA+ hate-crime prevention work.

While formal reporting and data is not available to determine the extent of hate crimes, anecdotal evidence from LGBTIQA+ organisations such as Thorne Harbour Health suggests there is scope to strengthen current legislation to protect communities from harm. Council Officers support Thorne Harbour Health's submission and recommendation for the Victorian Government to consider stronger and standalone aggravated hate-based crime laws to complement existing anti-vilification laws. Without such reporting, hate-based offending is difficult to identify within the justice process meaning these crimes can go undocumented. Feedback received by Council suggests this leads to low levels of community reporting and distrust in the justice system to protect LGBTIQA+ people. This would support other prevention and diversion programs, while also improving police capacity, community trust, victim survivor recognition and would create greater opportunities for the State, Council and community to work collaboratively to end anti-LGBTIQA+ hate-based crimes.

Violence prevention and harm reduction are central to Council's community wellbeing role and Council Officers see the opportunity to work collaboratively with a range of stakeholders to end anti-LGBTIQA+ hate-based crime. Council has strong partnerships across sporting, faith, education and LGBTIQA+ sectors, making Council a suitable advocate and supporter for any prevention programs. Council can work on the ground as auspice, partner or mentor and be nimble to meet the needs of different cohorts. To improve how Council works with the community, Council Officers would encourage greater transparency on the collection and sharing of LGBTIQA+ hate-crime data. Better

data and evidence on hate-crime offending would allow Council to target projects and partnerships to have a greater positive impact in the community.

Online anti-LGBTIQA+ discourse has begun to intersect with narratives of misogyny, racism and transphobia by tapping into the vulnerabilities of audiences – typically men and boys. Disinformation which targets LGBTIQA+ communities spreads easily online and fuels hate-crime behaviours. Merri-bek Council along with councils around the world provided advice to researchers to help develop the *Disinformation in the City: Response Playbook*[1]. This playbook is designed for local council and cities details practical ways civic organisations can combat disinformation in communities by building trust in the organisation, people, messages and places. This is achieved through transparency, displaying competency and consistency in messages which are informed by clear evidence.

There is a greater need to improve digital literacy skills in the community so that content is questioned and dismiss when viewed online. Council's libraries and youth services could play an active role in improving digital literacy skills to ensure users have the knowledge and confidence to ignore discriminatory narratives and disinformation messages on social media.

Council has been working with partner organisations such as Women's Health in the North to ensure our prevention messaging and work is intersectional by unpacking the shared drivers of gender-based violence, many of which are the same for hate-based violence directed at LGBTIQA+ people. Collaborating across sectors can improve the strength of projects and Council would encourage any prevention programs to be led by trusted organisations within the community to ensure its sustainability into the future.

Merri-bek Council recognises the urgent need to address anti-LGBTIQA+ violence within the community. This violence sits within a broader context where anti-LGBTIQA+ narratives have become common place resulting in significant negative health and wellbeing impacts on LGBTIQA+ people. However, Council believes there are opportunities end anti-LGBTIQA+ violence, with strong leadership and partnerships between the state government, local councils and the community. Merri-bek is proud of our large and diverse LGBTIQA+ population and believe that greater protections for this group will have transformative impacts for all in our diverse community.

Sincerely



Eamonn Fennessy
DIRECTOR COMMUNITY

1 May 2026

[1] Trijsburg, I., Sullivan, H., Park, E., Bonotti, M., Costello, P., Nwokora, Z., Pejic, D., Peucker, M. & Ridge, W. (2024) Disinformation in the City: Response Playbook. The University of Melbourne. DOI 10.26188/26866972