Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion

Public Submissions

Submission Copy

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Section 1 - Questions about you

1.1 What is your name?

Merri-bek City Council

1.2 What is your email address?

sbhatta@merri-bek.vic.gov.au

1.3 What is your preferred contact phone number during business hours?

03-93049761

1.4 In which State or Territory do you live?

Victoria

1.5 Do you live in a remote, rural or regional area?

No

1.6 How old are you?

Prefer not to say

1.7 Are you from a non-English speaking (culturally and linguistically diverse) background?

No

1.8 Have you already made another submission to the Royal Commission?

No

1.9 Who the submission is for?

An organisation

Name or description

Merri-bek City Council

1.9A What is your submission about?

- Other — Role of Local Government in Reducing All Forms of Discrimination and Strengthening Social Cohesion

Section 2 - Your submission

2.1 Which of the Royal Commission's terms of reference is your submission about?

- Other — Role of Local Government in Reducing All Forms of Discrimination and Strengthening Social Cohesion

2.2 What would you like to tell the Royal Commission?

Role of Local Government in Reducing All Forms of Discrimination and Strengthening Social Cohesion

Merri-bek City Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Royal Commission into Antisemitism and Social Cohesion through the broader lens of the role of local government in reducing all forms of discrimination and strengthening social cohesion. Council is committed to supporting residents who experience racism or discrimination, including antisemitism, and recognises that safe, inclusive and cohesive communities depend on active local leadership.

Everyone has the right to practise their faith, move safely through public spaces, and participate in community life free from fear, harassment or vilification. This principle is central to healthy, democratic and resilient communities, and it underpins Merri-bek's approach to human rights, inclusion and participation.

Local government is often the level of government closest to daily life. Councils shape public spaces, deliver community services, convene local partnerships, and help create the conditions in which people can belong, connect and participate. This makes councils important community-facing organisations in responding to incidents of discrimination experienced in streets, parks, community facilities, libraries, events and places of worship.

Merri-bek recognises that antisemitism is one serious and harmful form of discrimination, but it sits within a broader pattern of racism, religious discrimination and exclusion that affects many communities. A strong response requires immediate action when incidents occur, as well as sustained investment in prevention, education, inclusion and community-led connection.

Introduction

Merri-bek welcomes the Royal Commission's work and stands ready to contribute a local government perspective that centres prevention, inclusion and social cohesion.

Council supports approaches that improve coordination, enable robust incident reporting, resource frontline responses and reinforce the principle that racism, antisemitism and all forms of discrimination have no place in Australia.

Merri-bek's Social Cohesion Plan 2020–2025 includes a dedicated focus on addressing discrimination in all its forms. Under the theme "Diversity and Discrimination," the plan outlines actions to challenge racism and religious discrimination, promote inclusive practices and support community-led anti-racism initiatives.

Council's Human Rights Policy (2016–2026) further acknowledges that human rights are the bedrock of healthy and resilient communities, where everyone can participate and feel included. The Policy states that Council is strongly committed to respecting the cultural, religious and linguistic diversity of our municipality and ensuring that the benefits of an inclusive and welcoming society are enjoyed by all.

Merri-bek is a diverse municipality, and creating social cohesion requires ongoing commitment across policy, planning and service delivery, in partnership with residents, community organisations, businesses and all levels of government.

Role of local government

Councils play a critical role in maintaining safe and inclusive public spaces, including through swift action to remove offensive graffiti, posters and stickers when incidents of hate arise, and by maintaining strong relationships with places of worship and community organisations so issues can

be identified early, trust is built over time, and responses can be coordinated respectfully and effectively. Councils also contribute to social cohesion by funding and facilitating programs that build belonging, intergenerational connection, civic participation and cross-cultural understanding.
In Merri-bek, this role is supported through partnerships with faith groups, multicultural organisations, youth services, neighbourhood-based engagement, libraries, community hubs and community-led initiatives. These are not optional extras; they are core tools for reducing exclusion and strengthening trust.

Local context

Our research shows that 17% of Merri-bek residents have experienced discrimination and 26% of adults are classified as lonely/isolated. 34.5% of the community speaks a language other than English and 5.1% speak English "not well or not at all".
Council supports an active Merri-bek Interfaith Network, which meets regularly and has representatives from 17 faiths, including a Jewish representative. Council supported the Network to host the Victorian Interfaith Festival in 2023 and recently supported the launch of Peace Poles in Fawkner to share the desire for peace across faiths.
Council also supported the joint statement on the incident at Bondi, Sydney, distributed by the Hume, Merri-bek and Whittlesea Interfaith Networks. This reflected a shared commitment across faith communities to stand against hatred and support peace, dignity and social cohesion.
Merri-bek's Diversity and Inclusion Calendar recognises Pesach (Passover) and Rosh Hashanah, and Council has also supported public social media posts acknowledging these important observances. Council is committed to ensuring that Jewish residents are visible, respected and included in civic life.

Support pathways

To ensure residents know where to turn for help, Merri-bek has launched the Anti-Racism Reporting and Support Services booklet, which outlines practical steps for reporting incidents and accessing support.
The booklet includes Jewish-specific supports, including the Victorian Community Security Group, a dedicated service where people can report incidents or acts of antisemitism. It also references the Jewish Emergency App, which offers security or medical response in times of emergency.
Council also encourages residents to use the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission's Community Reporting Tool for confidential reporting and access to support.
These services reflect Merri-bek's broader commitment to ensuring all residents feel safe, respected and supported, regardless of background or identity.

Anti-racism work

In 2023, Council has participated in research with Associate Professor Mario Peucker at Victoria University on understanding reporting barriers and support needs of those experiencing racism. This work reflects Merri-bek's commitment in improving reporting pathways and strengthening local responses to discrimination.
Council, along with Hume City Council, has recently launched the Hume & Merri-bek Anti-Racism Support Network. This community-led initiative, supported by both Councils, aims to bring together trusted community organisations and service providers to support individuals who experience or witness racism. The network will offer opportunities to collaborate, share resources and build local capacity to respond to racism in meaningful ways.

Recommendations

Based Merri-bek City Council's existing commitments as outlined above, Council recommends that the Royal Commission consider the following actions to strengthen the role of local government in reducing all forms of discrimination and building social cohesion:

• That the Royal Commission recommend the Commonwealth Government fund and implement the National Anti-Racism Framework as a whole-of-government prevention strategy, including sustained

support for local and place-based action.
• That the Royal Commission's recommendations protect the role of local governments in providing safe spaces for community expression, celebrations, and peaceful protest.
• That the Royal Commission recommend continued investment in local initiatives that strengthen social connection, belonging and civic participation, particularly for communities experiencing marginalisation, isolation or exclusion.
• That the Royal Commission recommend coordinated efforts across all levels of government to support employers, community organisations and public institutions to prevent and address racism and discrimination in workplaces and service settings.

Conclusion
Local government has a critical role in reducing all forms of discrimination and strengthening social cohesion, as the level of government closest to communities and everyday public life.
Councils shape the safety, accessibility and inclusiveness of public spaces, deliver community services, support local institutions and events, and act as trusted convenors across sectors. For Merri-bek, this includes fostering social cohesion across a diverse municipality, responding to incidents occurring in public spaces, and ensuring that policies, partnerships and communications actively promote inclusion and prevent harm.
The Royal Commission presents an important opportunity to clarify and strengthen the role of local government within a coordinated national and state framework. With appropriate support and collaboration, councils can play a central role in creating safer, more inclusive public environments where all communities are protected, heard and able to participate fully in civic life.

2.3 Would you like to provide supporting material or a submission you have already prepared?

Yes

Uploaded files:

- Merri-bek City Council- Submission to Royal commission on Anti-semitism and social cohesion.docx

Section 3 - Publication and use of submission

3.1 Publication

I agree to my submission being made public and include my name

3.2 Willingness to be contacted by the Royal Commission

I am happy for the Royal Commission to contact me about my submission

3.2A Willingness to make a statement and give evidence at a hearing

I do not want to make a statement or give evidence at a hearing

Questions about your submission? Contact the Royal Commission at contact@royalcommission.gov.au.

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