

MAY 2024



Inquiry into Local Government Sustainability

Submission

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Imagine a world without suicide

Introduction

Suicide Prevention Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Inquiry into Local Government Sustainability.

Suicide Prevention Australia is the national peak body for the suicide prevention sector. We have over 320 members including the largest and many of the smallest organisations working in suicide prevention, representing more than 140,000 employees, workers, and volunteers across Australia. We provide a collective voice for service providers, practitioners, researchers, local collaboratives, and people with lived experience.

We are contributing to this Inquiry in the interests of highlighting, maintaining, and enhancing the important role Local Government plays in addressing the social and economic determinants of suicide at a community level. Although mental ill-health is a significant driver of suicide, there are a range of other factors that contribute to suicide risk, such as homelessness, social isolation and loneliness.¹

Local Government has a unique role in connecting communities and catering for the specific circumstances of local communities that is not and cannot be replicated by other levels of Government. In terms of addressing suicide prevention, this is a vital role. And is particularly vital in rural communities.

Risk in rural communities arises from social and geographic isolation, socioeconomic disadvantage and exposure to environmental disasters, such as climate change, floods, and bushfires. These issues coupled with lesser access to mental health services can leave people in rural areas particularly vulnerable to mental health problems and suicide.²

Suicide impacts people in every region of the country, from remote communities to metropolitan centres. More than 3,200 people tragically died by suicide in 2022,³ and an estimated 55,000 people attempt suicide each year.⁴ Age-standardised suicide rates tended to increase with the increasing remoteness.⁵ Over the 5-year period 2018–2022, reportable age-standardised suicide rates were highest in the local government areas of Kimberley in Western Australia (32.9 deaths per 100,000 population), Burnett in Queensland (32.3) and Daly - Tiwi - West Arnhem in Northern Territory (31.4).⁶

¹ Suicide Prevention Australia. (2023) *Socio-economic and Environmental Determinants of Suicide – background paper*. <https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SPA-SEDS-Background-Paper-August-2023-Designed.pdf>

² Grattidge L, Hoang H, Mond J, Lees D, Visentin D, Auckland S. *Exploring Community-Based Suicide Prevention in the Context of Rural Australia: A Qualitative Study*. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2023 Feb 1;20(3):2644. doi: 10.3390/ijerph20032644. PMID: 36768008; PMCID: PMC9915251.

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *Causes of Death, Australia*. ABS.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/causes-death/causes-death-australia/latest-release>.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2020-2022). *National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing*. ABS.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/mental-health/national-study-mental-health-and-wellbeing/latest-release>.

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2023). *Suicide and Self Harm Monitoring*.

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/suicide-self-harm-monitoring/data/geography/suicide-by-remoteness-areas>

⁶ [Suicide by local areas - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au/suicide-by-local-areas)

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In developing our submission, we consulted with our Lived Experience Panel (LEP) members who contributed to the key issues and recommendations highlighted in this submission. Our LEP consists of people with lived experience of suicide including those who have experienced suicidal thoughts and behaviours, survived a suicide attempt, cared for someone through suicidal crisis or are bereaved by suicide.

Our submission will respond primarily to the following Terms of Reference:

- The changing infrastructure and service delivery obligations of local government
- The financial sustainability and funding of local government

Summary of Recommendations

Suicide Prevention Australia values the contribution of Local Governments to suicide prevention, and makes these three recommendations:

1. That funding to Local Governments include resources and requirements to target socio-economic and environmental determinants of suicide.
2. That Local Governments be resourced and facilitated to embed suicide prevention in a range of operational processes that impact suicide risk; and
3. That training in suicide prevention be available to employees of Local Governments.

The role of Local government

The demographics of each local Government vary significantly, as do responsibilities by the legislation of each State. Across Australia, more than half (55 per cent) of local councils are regional, rural, or remote; with a further 25 per cent urban and urban fringe, and 20 per cent urban region.⁷ The size of each council, from under 100 population (Maralinga Tjura tj) to more than a million (Brisbane LGA), and respective budgets, are also vastly variable.⁸

Our submission focuses on the service delivery obligations and infrastructure concerns of Local Government that provide methods of addressing and reducing suicide:

- **Connectivity:** providing venues, services, and groups that allow people social interaction, and diminish isolation. This can include physical connectivity such as transport connections in regional and remote areas, and social connections including clubs or spaces for gatherings.
- **Risk mitigation:** infrastructure and community services that diminish risk factors for suicide, targeting the socio-economic and environmental determinants of suicide. This would encompass aspects such as homelessness, isolation, disaster management and other pressures that can lead to distress.
- **Reducing means:** maintenance of facilities that are used as means for suicide to reduce access.
- **Service delivery:** programs that actively and indirectly target suicide risk, including socio-economic and environmental determinants of suicide. This would include services for people in need of assistance due to age or disability.

⁷ Australian Local Government Association. *Facts and Figures*. <https://alga.com.au/facts-and-figures/>.

⁸ Australian Government Centre for Population. (2024) *Fastest Growing Local Government Areas*. <https://population.gov.au/population-topics/topic-growth-lga>

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The role of Local Government in suicide prevention is both as a gatekeeper and essential tier of collaborative, consistent, and comprehensive strategy, and local government is uniquely placed to link strategy to action.

Recommendation 1: That funding to Local Governments include resources and requirements to target socio-economic and environmental determinants of suicide.

Suicide Prevention Australia is undertaking work on identifying the socio-economic and environmental determinants of suicide.⁹ These encompass distressors including damage to cultural continuity/connection; domestic, family, and sexual violence; employment distress; environmental degradation; financial distress; food insecurity; housing insecurity and homelessness; impacts of environmental disasters; isolation; and loneliness.

Local Government has a role to play in all of these factors, whether it is through disaster responses, providing transport connections in regional areas, addressing homelessness, or considering local companies in awarding contracts.

In consultations, it was stated that financially poorer councils in regional areas don't always see suicide prevention as a high priority because competing priorities, such as infrastructure, are seen as the work that 'needs to be done', leaving attempts to address social factors as 'tokenistic'.

Embedding both the resources and the responsibilities to balance the social obligations alongside the infrastructure priorities in funding local government would enable decisions that balance these roles in a less competitive manner, allowing councils to act on the social pressures that cause suicidal distress.

The Final Advice of the National Suicide Prevention Officer, a landmark set of government reports in the suicide prevention sector, called for an enhanced role for local governments in suicide prevention design, delivery, and collaboration, "drawing together all three levels of government for greatest effect".¹⁰

Recommendation 2: That Local Governments be resourced and facilitated to embed suicide prevention in a range of operational processes that impact on suicide risk.

So many responsibilities of Local Government provide opportunities for suicide prevention through either active engagement to diminish distress or through provision of infrastructure that mitigate risk or means. Many of these factors are already core responsibilities of Local Government, but not viewed as suicide prevention measures.

Social isolation is a major factor in regional areas, especially where populations are aging. Transportation connectivity to allow people to attend medical appointments or social gatherings are important.

Providing venues for clubs and gatherings can reduce distress and isolation.

⁹ Suicide Prevention Australia. (2023) *Socio-economic and Environmental Determinants of Suicide – background paper*. <https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SPA-SEDS-Background-Paper-August-2023-Designed.pdf>

¹⁰ National Suicide Prevention Adviser. (2020) *Connected and Compassionate: Implementing a national whole of governments approach to suicide prevention (Final Advice)*. Canberra.

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Interventions to address the socio-economic and environmental determinants of suicide, such as homelessness, isolation, disaster management and other pressures that can lead to distress, should be central to Local Government responses.

Maintenance of infrastructure and facilities that are known means for suicide to reduce access is an essential aspect, as is creating safe public spaces that create opportunities for interaction and enjoyment.

Connectivity through parks and sports facilities; public health measures such as mother and baby groups or playgroups; community services such as meals on wheels, libraries, community spaces and dedicated groups all play a part in creating a safe and protective community.

However, there is not a concerted focus on uniting these factors in addressing suicide prevention. Facilitating and resourcing these efforts as part of local suicide prevention plans for each council would provide the mechanisms that these councils need to prepare comprehensive responses.

Recommendation 3: That training in suicide prevention be available to employees of Local Governments.

People experiencing suicidal distress interact with diverse sectors of the community, and local Government is the closest tier of Government to the community. Through interactions of services such as home assistance, youth spaces, local libraries, or general services, Local Government employees are in a unique position to recognise both the impact of local circumstances and the presence of distress. This creates an opportunity for these employees to link people in distress to local services.

It is a critical moment when a person discloses their distress or suicidal thoughts for the first time, so it is vital to build suicide prevention skills and knowledge throughout the community. For suicide prevention to be effective, employees in local Governments should be actively engaged.

With appropriate evidence-based suicide prevention training, these employees are capable of having a conversation with local residents in need, and to provide vital assistance to help reduce their risk of suicide.

One mechanism for enhancing community skills is Suicide Prevention Australia's LearnLinc Platform.¹¹ This learning platform connects participants with multiple different training providers plus free online resources. Further support such as subsidising training programs could significantly improve the ability of communities to connect and address the risk of suicide.

¹¹ More information on Learnlinc can be found here: <https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/learnlinc>

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