

VicHealth's response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence

September 2016

Introduction

VicHealth congratulates the Royal Commission into Family Violence on the landmark report released in March 2016. This is an historic moment for Victoria. The Royal Commission has created an evidence-based roadmap and mandate to tackle family violence—a prevalent, serious and preventable issue that affects many Victorian women and children.

VicHealth strongly supports the Royal Commission’s finding that there must be a significant and sustained focus on the primary prevention of family violence.¹ Primary prevention approaches can address the underlying drivers of violence through whole-of-population initiatives and targeted strategies for higher-risk population groups.²

The Royal Commission recognised VicHealth’s leadership in the primary prevention space.³ We are very proud of our 15-year history, in which we have built evidence and worked with our partners to develop programs and policies to prevent violence against women in Victoria and beyond.

Our work is guided by the ten-year goals outlined in the [VicHealth Action Agenda for Health Promotion 2013–23](#). They focus on five strategic imperatives—promoting healthy eating, encouraging regular physical activity, preventing tobacco use, preventing harm from alcohol and improving mental wellbeing.

Across these imperatives, we have identified three key themes for action that drive health and health equity in Victoria—gender, youth and community—all of which align with our response to the Royal Commission into Family Violence. Our focus on gender is in recognition of the significant mental and physical health impacts of gender inequality on women and girls, and its role as the underlying driver of violence against women.

Through our activity to promote gender equality, we will continue to work with partners from a range of key sectors and settings to prevent violence before it occurs. Along with the significant primary prevention activity occurring across the state, our work will contribute to the achievement of the ambitious recommendations of the Royal Commission.

About this response

This document details how VicHealth’s work to prevent violence against women and increase gender equality will contribute to the achievement of the Royal Commission’s recommendations. Part 1 outlines VicHealth’s background in primary prevention and our current approach to promoting gender equality. Part 2 focuses on the key considerations arising from the Royal Commission’s findings related to primary prevention, and VicHealth’s role in responding to the recommendations.

1. VicHealth's focus on gender equality

VicHealth recognises that gender equality is a critical determinant of health and wellbeing. Gender equality exists where there are structures, norms and practices that support women and girls at all levels—individual/family, organisational/community, system/institutional and societal. Societies with low levels of gender equality are likely to have higher levels of violence against women.⁴ The physical and psychological toll of this violence represents the greatest burden of disease for Victorian women aged 15–44.⁵

Our work and the work of others has illustrated the importance of advancing gender equality as a key prevention approach that can stop violence before it begins.

Over the last 15 years, VicHealth has invested in a range of initiatives and worked across sectors to build more equal and respectful relationships between women and men at every level, as the key strategy to prevent violence against women. We are proud that our investments in policy, research and programs have contributed to the evidence base in Victoria and to the readiness for action on prevention. We continue to share and integrate our learnings into the new structures, organisations and processes that have been established to carry this work forward across the state and nationally.

Our recently refreshed [Action Agenda for Health Promotion](#) identifies 'gender' as one of our three key themes for action on our health imperatives. In 2016–19 VicHealth will explore unique and innovative ways to promote gender equality in sport, in workplaces and online. Our aim is to find new approaches that build on past successful initiatives to support the next phase of gender equality activity in Victoria. Our actions will include:

- creating inclusive environments so women and girls have more equal participation in key settings, such as sport, the workplace and online/digital environments
- ensuring women and girls are equally and visibly represented in key settings and in leadership roles, particularly in sport
- influencing young people's attitudes and raising their awareness of gender equality and respectful relationships, through activity in communities and online/digital settings
- building and sharing knowledge about primary prevention strategies in policy, organisational and community settings
- working in partnership with diverse settings to promote a public health approach to promoting gender equality.

Our [Leading Thinkers initiative](#) will also put the spotlight on gender equality, by bringing international expertise to Victoria to complement ongoing activity across sectors and portfolios.

We anticipate that our activity will lead to improved health outcomes for women and young people, particularly in regards to mental wellbeing and physical activity. In addition, all of our

work to promote gender equality will support the goals of the Royal Commission into Family Violence, as it will address the fundamental driver of violence against women.

In addition to our new focus on gender equality, we will continue with the 'Integration' phase of our work in preventing violence against women, focusing on knowledge transfer and partnerships with organisations, communities and government. Our goal is to support the elimination of violence against women in Victoria by exploring new research, and continuing to inform policy and support new leaders and organisations to advance primary prevention into the future.

As the state's leading health promotion body, VicHealth has unique expertise in prevention across a broad range of health areas. We have a proven track record in designing, delivering and evaluating programs using a public health approach. We work across sectors and settings using a comprehensive set of strategies that aim to promote good health and prevent illness from occurring in the first place.

Through our work we have built strong partnerships in many sectors, including health, sport, business, research, education, the arts and community. Our partnerships allow us to share knowledge, capacity and resources, enhancing our prevention efforts. It is through these partnerships we plan to continue our work, by investing in research and programming that supports these sectors to trial new and innovative approaches that will support gender equality.

We will continue to foster partnerships across settings and sectors where there is most likely to be sustainable impact for gender equality. We are working together with our existing partners in the field, as well as new partners and agencies that can bring fresh expertise to the challenge of advancing gender equality.

In the next section, we have identified the key roles that VicHealth can play in delivering on the Royal Commission's primary prevention recommendations.

2. VicHealth’s response to the Royal Commission’s findings and our role in achieving the primary prevention recommendations

2.1 Overview

VicHealth commends the Royal Commission’s finding that there is a need for a dedicated focus on primary prevention in future family violence planning, resourcing and governance in Victoria. Our state is now poised to achieve a world-first reduction in family violence not only by improving crisis responses, but also by stopping it from occurring in the first place.

VicHealth agrees with the Royal Commission’s finding that ‘we need to give as much attention to prevention as we do to the other parts of the family violence system’.⁶

VicHealth welcomes the Royal Commission’s recommendations that will provide policy reform and institutional-level change to support advances in primary prevention. VicHealth recognises the need for sustained investment with bipartisan commitment at all levels of government in order to achieve coordination across the spectrum of responses to family violence—including crisis response, early intervention and primary prevention—and to achieve coordination across government and non-government sectors.

In relation to primary prevention in particular, VicHealth recognises the need for statewide mechanisms to lead and coordinate activity, by engaging government and community and utilising proven public health methodologies. In the following sections we outline the key issues for consideration in planning and sustaining primary prevention activity, and also VicHealth’s potential contribution to each of these areas.

2.2 Prevention governance

We strongly endorse the Royal Commission’s recommendations to establish a new family violence governance structure which includes the Family Violence Statewide Steering Committee, the independent Family Violence Agency, and the creation of the Statewide Family Violence Action Plan by the Victorian Secretaries’ Board. We agree with the Royal Commission’s advice that ‘prevention strategies and actions must be a discrete and prominent part’⁷ of the Action Plan, via a long-term primary prevention strategy which has dedicated funding, key performance measures and a rigorous evaluation framework.

These recommendations recognise that prevention is most effective with a coordinated, well-resourced and sustained approach. It reflects the need for prevention approaches to be incorporated into the full spectrum of responses to family violence, but also ensures that there is a specific focus on primary prevention where required.

VicHealth recommends that the State Government consider additional prevention-focused mechanisms within its governance structures. For example, a dedicated prevention sub-

committee of the Victorian Secretaries' Board Family Violence Sub-Committee or the Inter-Departmental Committee would bring together departments that do not traditionally work in the prevention space but that could have a significant impact on prevention outcomes.

We recommend that the structure and content of [Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia](#) is used to inform the development of the primary prevention strategy.

VicHealth's role in prevention governance

VicHealth is well-positioned to support the work of the Victorian Secretaries' Board, the Family Violence Agency and the committees within the broader governance structure recommended by the Royal Commission.

2.3 Prevention coordination and leadership

VicHealth strongly supports the Royal Commission's recommendation for the establishment of a prevention coordination initiative to oversee and coordinate prevention of family violence activity. This will provide a mechanism to coordinate policy and programmatic responses to the issue across Victoria.

We encourage the government to ensure that the new statewide initiative has capacity to drive primary prevention responses using a public health approach that addresses the drivers of violence against women and engages multiple sectors and industries in prevention action. The [Change the story framework](#) provides a range of effective and promising techniques and approaches for driving action.

The prevention coordination initiative will require significant human and financial resources and expertise, and have the authorising environment necessary to drive primary prevention across the state. Partnerships across diverse communities, sectors and government areas will be critical to its success.

The Royal Commission identified three options for the location of the prevention coordination initiative: within government, within the Family Violence Agency, or as a stand-alone entity. VicHealth recommends that the initiative is located and undertaken by an independent stand-alone entity. This will provide clarity of focus and role, and create an environment that encourages innovation, partnership building, whole-of-government commitment, community engagement, and dedicated workforce development.

This option is optimal to enable a focus on building and maintaining Victoria's leadership in primary prevention. It also allows engagement with both community and government. Additionally, it ensures that there is the independence that may be required to drive innovation in prevention, while also providing the policy interface that will be required to integrate new evidence and approaches into government.

VicHealth's role in prevention coordination and leadership

VicHealth can provide advice and input to assist with the establishment and location of the prevention coordination initiative. We can work in partnership with the State Government to oversee the establishment and operation of the initiative as required.

2.4 Prevention programs and practice

Public health approach

The public health approach outlined in the Royal Commission's report offers a comprehensive set of strategies to address family violence—including direct participation programs, organisational and workforce development, community strengthening, social marketing and communications, advocacy, legislative and policy reform, and research, monitoring and evaluation.⁸

The Royal Commission also recognised the critical importance of action across a range of settings, including communities, workplaces, schools, sports, media and popular culture, and local government.⁹

VicHealth supports the focus on whole-of-population prevention strategies, supported by interventions that target priority population groups that are at most risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence. VicHealth supports the Royal Commission's finding that prevention initiatives must recognise the needs of Victoria's diverse communities, including culturally and linguistically diverse communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disabilities, LGBTI communities, faith-based communities, and regional, rural and remote communities.¹⁰ We support the recognition that programs be developed in partnership with these communities for the most effective outcomes.¹¹

VicHealth has long used a public health approach in its work. Within the family violence space, we have recently completed an innovative project that exemplifies promising practice in primary prevention. The [Generating Equality and Respect](#) project used a 'saturation' model of prevention activity in a single site, encompassing multiple settings as well as creating and embedding organisational change within two leading agencies. A 2016 report and a range of tools and resources were produced, including those specific to the workplace setting. The project also led to development of a world-first model for planning and sustaining prevention activity across a single site, and for generating outcomes at the community and organisational level to advance primary prevention.

Sport

The Royal Commission highlighted the potential of sports settings to target a large segment of the community to promote gender equality and undertake primary prevention activity.¹² VicHealth has worked with sport sector for the past three decades. Through this work, we know that as well as building social connection and improving physical health, sport can create

broader social change by promoting positive role models and social norms, and challenge gender stereotypes through women and girls' increased participation and public leadership roles, and improved visibility and recognition of women and girls' role in sport.

Over the past three years we have worked to raise the profile and coverage of women's sport in the media and champion the important role women play in leadership and decision-making positions. As part of this effort, we partnered with high-profile clubs in the inaugural Women's Big Bash League, which achieved increases in the coverage and profile of women's sport in the mainstream and sports media. Our activity in sport also includes our [Changing the Game](#) program, which funds six sporting codes to work with women and girls who don't normally participate in organised sport, with the aim of encouraging female participation in physical activity.

VicHealth will continue to work with key sport partners in 2016–19 to raise the profile of women's sport in the community, create opportunities for women's participation, and strengthen women's role in leadership and decision-making positions. As part of this effort, we are partnering with sporting organisations to develop new participation opportunities that engage less active women to become more active. We are also partnering with elite female sporting teams to support increased coverage and profile of women's sport in the media and community.

We are currently partnering with Vicsport to translate the learnings from our previous programs to increase gender equality in sport, the [State Sporting Association Participation Program](#) and [Healthy Sporting Environments](#). Both programs worked with sports organisations to improve their policies and practices. It aimed to provide welcoming, safe and inclusive environments for women and girls to increase participation in community sport and active recreation.

Workplaces

VicHealth commends the Royal Commission for identifying workplaces as an important setting for primary prevention action. We support the Royal Commission's focus on developing workplace policy, building staff capacity and building respectful and gender equitable cultures. Our action to support health promotion in workplaces recognises that we can create safer working environments for women and girls; increase women's economic participation, a key determinant of mental and physical health; and use the workplace as a setting to create broader social change.

VicHealth and our partners have led the design and delivery of a range of initiatives to promote respectful relationships in the workplace over a number of years. We are now poised to share the lessons and transfer the knowledge from our interventions to support best practice and drive new approaches to building gender equality in the workplace setting. Our recent workplace initiatives include:

- [Equal Footing Toolkit](#)—released in 2015, this practical toolkit supports workplaces (leaders, teams and individuals) to promote gender equality and respectful relationships.
- [Don't walk past: Bystander training in the workplace](#)—this three-hour workshop aims to build the capacity of individuals and their workplaces to take bystander action to help prevent violence against women through promoting healthy and safe workplace cultures.
- [Creating Healthy Workplaces: Preventing violence against women](#)—The Y Respect Gender project was a funded workplace pilot based at the YMCA that aimed to demonstrate ways for organisations to tackle the causes of violence against women by building equal and respectful relationships between men and women, increasing women's representation and leadership in the workplace, and creating a positive, respectful and equitable organisational culture and working conditions.

Over the next three years VicHealth intends to build on this work, in conjunction with new and existing partners, by trialling new approaches to achieving gender equality using Behavioural Insights methodologies.

Young people, education and online/digital environments

VicHealth strongly supports the Royal Commission's recommendation to mandate respectful relationships education in Victorian government schools at all year levels. Building resilience and positive social and emotional wellbeing in young people improves their capacity to form and maintain positive and respectful personal relationships throughout their life.

Under our mental wellbeing strategic imperative, we are investigating the influence of online and digital environments on young people's mental health and wellbeing, including their interpersonal relationships. Initiatives in the online/digital setting have the potential to promote gender equality by shifting young people's perceptions of gender and sexuality, and promoting safe and inclusive online environments. This focus builds on our research into pornography and young people, and represents a cutting-edge approach to promoting gender equality.

Over the next three years, VicHealth will continue to explore opportunities to promote gender equality for young people. We will also investigate ways to equip young people and their parents to combat the negative impacts of pornography on their interpersonal relationships, and share these learnings with the sector.

Local government and community settings

VicHealth supports the Royal Commission's focus on local governments, and its recommendation to integrate family violence into council plans. VicHealth's learnings from its [Generating Equality and Respect](#) program can provide guidance for the development of council plans. As detailed in the Royal Commission's report,¹³ VicHealth partnered with the City of Monash and Link Health and Community (formerly MonashLink Community Health Service) to

deliver the Generating Equality and Respect program between 2012 and 2015. It aimed to build communities and cultures that are gender equitable and value and support non-violent norms. One of the program's achievements was the council's leadership and organisational commitment to the issue, through the inclusion of preventing violence against women or gender equity in numerous organisational plans and policies.

The implementation of the Generating Equality and Respect program yielded a number of important [practice insights and recommendations](#) to inform primary prevention in Victoria. VicHealth will continue to transfer our learnings from the program to local governments and community organisations across Victoria.

Current knowledge gaps

VicHealth recommends that comprehensive mapping of current Victorian primary prevention activity is undertaken as soon as possible to maximise coordination of the work done through the Royal Commission. This includes assessment of organisational and workforce readiness to deliver prevention activity, partnerships and funding models.

VicHealth has recently undertaken a mapping exercise to determine the type and extent of primary prevention activity in Victoria, and where VicHealth's knowledge creation and translation has influenced this activity. The results of the mapping exercise have helped to inform VicHealth's future directions in this area, and in addition the mapping has highlighted the need for a more detailed and comprehensive review of current prevention activity.

There are also current knowledge gaps about some of the priority settings, populations and strategies identified by the Royal Commission. Particular areas in which evidence or activity is not yet well-developed include:

- targeted approaches for culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- strategies to promote gender equality in online/digital environments
- the intersection of alcohol and family violence.

VicHealth recommends that areas such as these are prioritised in prevention research, policy and programming investment.

VicHealth has begun exploring some of the current knowledge and practice gaps, such as our work that looks at the intersection between alcohol and violence against women. In June 2016, VicHealth convened a cross-sector roundtable meeting with key stakeholders in the alcohol, family violence, mental health, justice, research and policy sectors.

The roundtable participants concluded that there may be opportunities to improve the interface between relevant services and sectors and explore alternative, outcomes-focused models of service provision for those affected by alcohol-related violence against women. However, there are also challenges—such as funding models, varying philosophical

approaches and differing client focus (e.g. perpetrator or victim)—which can all contribute to the isolation of relevant services.

Roundtable discussions confirmed that a collaborative approach between the alcohol and family violence sectors is warranted to facilitate a broad but integrated response to alcohol-related violence against women. The roundtable also highlighted the potential for future research and program activity to address social norms and peer cultures associated with masculinity and alcohol consumption. Issues identified at the roundtable align with the directions and priorities of the Royal Commission’s report.

VicHealth will continue to work in this space by facilitating ongoing collaboration between the alcohol and family violence sectors, and supporting research and evaluation on the intersection between alcohol and violence against women. We will actively participate in the upcoming review of the *Liquor Control Reform Act 1998 (Vic)* to reduce harms caused by the proliferation of packaged liquor.

VicHealth’s role in prevention programs and practice

VicHealth will:

- transfer and integrate learnings from our successful programs into key settings, including the Generating Equality and Respect program, the State Sporting Association Participation Program, Healthy Sporting Environments, and our research into the economic costs of violence against women
- work with key sport partners to raise the profile of women’s sport in the community, create opportunities for women’s participation, strengthen women’s role in leadership and decision-making positions, and create welcoming and inclusive environments.
- explore opportunities to promote young people’s resilience through online and digital environments
- investigate ways to equip young people and their parents to combat the negative impacts of pornography on interpersonal relationships, and share these learnings with the sector
- share learnings from our interventions in workplace settings to support best practice and drive new approaches to building gender equality in the workplace setting
- seek to better understand the intersection between alcohol and intimate partner violence and advocate for improved regulation of packaged liquor through the review of the *Liquor Control Reform Act 1998 (Vic)*
- continue to transfer our knowledge and resources into community, government and organisational settings.

2.5 Prevention workforce

VicHealth welcomes the Royal Commission's recommendation for comprehensive workforce development across the health, human services and justice sectors. It is essential that primary prevention activity is supported by a specialist prevention workforce, and that tools and resources are available for non-specialists to engage with and lead prevention.

A strong and skilled workforce has been established as the primary prevention sector has developed and matured in Victoria. Considering the additional activity that will arise from the Royal Commission's recommendations, and the new sectors that will be engaged, VicHealth strongly supports the Royal Commission's recommendation for a comprehensive and adequately resourced workforce development strategy that builds on the existing workforce.

It is important that workforce development needs are regularly refreshed within existing sectors and industries, from pre-service through to induction and professional development within industries.

As noted in the Royal Commission's report, VicHealth has previously developed and evaluated workforce development modules specific to preventing violence against women. These include workshops that equipped participants to build environments within organisations and across communities that foster and maintain safe, equal and respectful gender relations. VicHealth will continue to deliver workforce development modules until such activity is transferred to those organisations and agencies that will be leading prevention workforce development, such as Our Watch and the prevention coordination initiative.

We have also delivered workforce development activities to specialist prevention workers through our Communities of Practice and networks/hubs, such as the [Advanced Practitioners' Forum](#) and [Partners in Prevention](#).

VicHealth's role in the prevention workforce

VicHealth will:

- continue to transfer our learnings and resources from workforce development activities to those organisations and agencies that will be leading prevention workforce development, such as Our Watch and the new prevention coordination initiative.

References

¹ State of Victoria 2016, *Royal Commission into Family Violence: Report and recommendations, Summary and recommendations*, Parl Paper No 132 (2014–16), p. 11.

² National Public Health Partnership 2006, *The language of prevention*, NPHP, Melbourne.

³ Royal Commission into Family Violence report – Summary and recommendations, p. 5.

⁴ United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) 2010, *Investing in gender equality: Ending violence against women and girls*, UN, Geneva.

⁵ VicHealth 2004, *The health costs of violence: Measuring the burden of disease caused by intimate partner violence*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.

⁶ Royal Commission into Family Violence report – Summary and recommendations, p. 38.

⁷ Royal Commission into Family Violence report – Vol. VI, p. 53.

⁸ Royal Commission into Family Violence report – Vol. VI, pp. 12 & 54–55.

⁹ Royal Commission into Family Violence report – Vol. VI, p. 55.

¹⁰ Royal Commission into Family Violence report – Vol. VI, p. 56.

¹¹ Royal Commission into Family Violence report – Vol. VI, p. 11.

¹² Royal Commission into Family Violence report – Vol. VI, p. 40.

¹³ Royal Commission into Family Violence report – Vol. VI, p. 39.