

**Submission
No 112**

INQUIRY INTO FOOD SECURITY IN VICTORIA

Organisation: Greater Shepparton City Council

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Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Via Email only: foodsecurityinquiry@parliament.vic.gov.au

INQUIRY INTO FOOD SECURITY IN VICTORIA

Greater Shepparton City Council (Council) is pleased to make a submission to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's terms of reference for the inquiry into food security in Victoria.

Local Government plays an important role in improving the health and wellbeing of people in their municipality. In Greater Shepparton, Council does this through the implementation of the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan, coordination of relief and recovery for emergency affected communities, in advocacy for the agriculture sector, and in the leadership and action shown in response to climate change and environmental sustainability. Greater Shepparton, the food bowl of Australia, plays a crucial role in Victoria's agriculture sector, contributing 25 per cent of the state's agriculture output. Fruit and vegetable contribute over 47 per cent of the agriculture production in Greater Shepparton.

Recommendations

In considering the terms of reference for the inquiry into food security, Council recommends that the State Government:

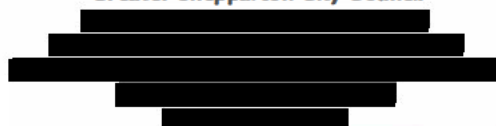
- work with local government, food producers and community organisations to strengthen local and regional food production to mitigate and reduce reliance on imported food products.
- support the establishment of community gardens and urban farms to increase localised food production reducing food insecurity.
- comprehensively resource the emergency food relief sector whilst also recognising that emergency food relief is not a solution to food insecurity.
- work with various levels of government and food producers to deliver programs that strengthen the resilience of producers to respond to a changing climate, emergency events and emerging practices and technologies.

Impacts of food insecurity

Council funds and partners with local community organisations who play a significant role in providing direct food relief to our most vulnerable community members on a daily basis; and increasingly during emergency events.

Food Bank data shows that 70 per cent of those facing food insecurity also experience high levels of psychological distress, particularly the parents of food insecure children. Local food relief providers report that many food insecure community members show lethargy, lack confidence, have anxiety and depression, have chronic health conditions, are regularly skipping meals, are isolated, are experiencing homelessness, are affected by alcohol and other drugs, are family violence victims and can show distrust in accessing other community support services.

Greater Shepparton City Council



Increasingly more people from middle-class backgrounds are now accessing their services due to increases in the cost-of-living. Shepparton Family and Financial Services (SFFS) reported that in 2022-23, of the 2079 measured clients, 72 per cent reported having a disability and 83 per cent were on a government benefit or pension as their main source of income.

Locally, 54 per cent of people do not meet the dietary guidelines for either fruit or vegetable consumption. There is further evidence that people living in areas of high social disadvantage are more likely to be overweight or obese, and to drink greater amounts of sugar-sweetened beverages, in addition, are likely to spend approximately 30% of their weekly income on take away and fast food; leading to chronic disease and increasingly poorer health outcomes. Support from government for the establishment of community gardens and urban farms to increase local food production reducing food insecurity could provide a local solution.

Drivers of food insecurity

Greater Shepparton ranks 14 out of 79 Victorian Local Government Areas on the SEIFA Index of Disadvantage. According to the SEIFA Index, four areas in Greater Shepparton fall within the lowest 10th percentile in Australia (i.e. most disadvantaged). These are: Shepparton Central, Shepparton Southeast, Shepparton South and Mooroopna. A further three areas fall within the lowest 20th percentile in Australia (i.e. very disadvantaged). These are: Shepparton North West, Shepparton Urban Centre and Shepparton North Central.

Greater Shepparton's diverse and multicultural composition is one of its distinctive characteristics, with approximately 17 per cent of residents born overseas.

In providing food relief and responding to emergencies, having the ability to supply culturally appropriate food to these communities at scale can present challenges, and would benefit from significant investment in local leaders and connections.

We are currently facing high levels of food insecurity amidst the worst cost of living crisis in recent history. These cost of living pressures are a primary cause of the 21 per cent rise in Food Bank distributions, with demand for food relief growing every month. The significant profit margins and the escalating prices in supermarkets are emerging as a major challenge for our local community and economy. According to a recent survey conducted by AUSVEG, more than 30 per cent of growers are contemplating leaving the industry within the next 12 months. If this trend continues, our community could witness the departure of multi-generational farmers, resulting in not only personal hardships for local families but also economic repercussions. Consumers as a flow on effect, particularly the most vulnerable, are and will, continue to be unable to afford nutritious food.

Evidence based initiatives

Shepparton Foodshare, a member of the Regional Food Security Alliance, benefits our community through their ability to share excess food supplies and strengthen relationships with food rescue programs that support the supply of food into our community.

Shepparton Foodshare is a local food relief service who distribute on average 350,000 kilograms of food to 140 registered emergency relief agencies, schools, neighbourhood houses, community meals programs and churches annually. Mooroopna Park Primary School, one of these food relief agencies, reports that their Healthy Eating Program 'was introduced to address concerns we had over student attendance, engagement and nutrition. Each day we provide breakfast, lunch and morning and afternoon tea to all students free of charge, the food we receive provides our students with a balanced diet each week.'

Mooroopna Education and Activity Centre also receives food from Shepparton Foodshare where they in turn distribute daily to families, homeless, multicultural communities, people impacted by disasters and cost-of-living crisis, people with disabilities, First Nations people and the elderly. Without these food resources being supplied by Shepparton Foodshare, many of these organisations would not be in a position to provide this service to the community. Additional funding is required by government to ensure that organisations such as Shepparton Foodshare and Shepparton Family and Financial Services can continue to support our local community.

Climate change presents significant challenges for agriculture. For example, any shortening of growing season as well as the increasing incidence of floods, storms, frosts, and drought will make growing food in our region increasingly challenging. This may result in lower yields, damaged crops, lower food profitability, and may lead to an associated rise in the price of food. The Victorian Government has historically administered on behalf of the Australian Government a Horticultural Netting Program. Such a program is a credit to government. Council recognises and advocates for similar programs to support local growers be introduced or expanded to allow protection of crops.

Council is proud of the role local government plays in supporting the health and wellbeing of community through support of emergency food relief providers, advocacy in the agriculture sector and leadership around the effects of climate change and look forward to the State Governments response to our regions food insecurity.

Should you wish to discuss any of this further, please contact Renee Scott,
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Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

Fiona Le Gassick
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

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