



Submission to the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria

Having adequate and nutritious food is the basis of good physical and mental health. Recognising that the greatest population health gains can be achieved by ensuring government policies and strategies support food security for everyone, the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria is being undertaken by the Legal and Social Issues Committee, which focuses on issues related to community services, health, education, and justice.

1. Recommendations

Maribyrnong City Council strongly suggests that the State Government:

Governance

- Legislate the right to food in Victoria, embedding it into all relevant policies and budgeting processes. This involves developing a Victorian Food Systems Strategy and Investment Plan with a rights-based approach, ensuring meaningful engagement with diverse stakeholders.
- Empower local governments with the resources required to lead community food systems strategies.
- Support First Nations communities in advancing their food sovereignty. This involves supporting initiatives that promote traditional food practices, land stewardship, and cultural sustainability.
- Establish a comprehensive food systems monitoring framework and revise planning provisions to consider health impacts.
- Identify opportunities and undertake advocacy to reduce cost of living pressures on families, such as utilities and interest rates, to ensure ongoing affordability of nutritious and healthy food is not compromised.
- Advocate to the Federal Government on raising the minimum wage and welfare payments to enable individual affordability of adequate and nutritious food for vulnerable and low-income families.

Food Supply, Production, and Circular Economy

- Transition to regenerative agriculture and agro ecology, decentralise food production and retail options, and strengthen local and regional food production to reduce reliance on imports.
- Diversify the food system in terms of production locations, enterprise scales and biodiversity.
- Enhance Victoria's circular economy by building on existing sustainability initiatives.

Food Access

- Advocate for increased income support payments above the poverty line and legislate food as a human right.
- Continue and expand the FoodBank school breakfast club program and develop public sector food procurement programs to support local, regenerative farms.
- Resource the emergency food relief sector during the transition to a sustainable food system, collaborate with the education sector on food literacy programs, and create dignified food relief models.

Food Pricing and Affordability

- Support the recommendations from the Federal Senate Select Committee Inquiry into supermarket prices and pass the Supermarket Industry Bill to regulate supermarkets under the Essential Services Commission Act.
- Enable the Essential Services Commission to monitor and regulate supermarket prices and profit margins for essential grocery items.

2. Impacts of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity in Victoria profoundly impacts physical and mental health, economic stability, and social well-being, affecting individuals and communities state-wide. Across the region, food insecurity heightens the risks of malnutrition, obesity, diabetes,

and other chronic health conditions among vulnerable populations. The uncertainty surrounding food availability exacerbates anxiety, depression, and stress levels, significantly impacting mental well-being and overall quality of life. Economically, food insecurity amplifies financial strain within households, perpetuating cycles of poverty and hindering economic mobility for families throughout the state. Socially, communities across Victoria experience diminished cohesion and reduced social participation due to food insecurity, contributing to social isolation and inequities in access to resources and opportunities.

In Maribyrnong, the impacts of food insecurity are particularly severe, affecting approximately 15% of households (Smith, 2023). The Maribyrnong Food Inequality Network, recently established and convened by the Maribyrnong City Council, reports a significant increase in demand for food assistance, underscoring the urgent need for targeted interventions and support. Member organisations within the Network, including food relief agencies, Neighbourhood Houses, and community centres, are struggling to meet the rising needs of the local community. Recent media reports confirm this growing demand, with food charities experiencing unprecedented levels of need.

Maribyrnong City Council commends the recent allocation of \$2.5 million in food relief funding for Neighbourhood Houses through the Victorian state budget. However, as food relief becomes a central responsibility for many Neighbourhood Houses, there is a pressing need to consider sustainable support solutions beyond one-off grants to address this long-term challenge.

Addressing food insecurity in Victoria requires collaborative efforts from policymakers, community organisations, businesses, and residents to implement sustainable solutions that ensure equitable access to nutritious food and promote health, well-being and economic resilience across the state and within Maribyrnong specifically.

3. Drivers of Food Insecurity

Several interconnected factors drive food insecurity in Maribyrnong, influencing its prevalence and severity within the community:

- **Economic Challenges:** The combination of rising living costs, inadequate wages and high unemployment rates amplifies financial strain on households, making it difficult for residents to consistently access affordable and nutritious food options.
- **Environmental Pressures:** Climate change and extreme weather events pose ongoing threats to local food production and agricultural sustainability. These environmental challenges impact the availability, quality and reliability of food supplies, further exacerbating food insecurity.
- **Supply Chain Disruptions:** The disrupted food supply chains leading to shortages, price increases and logistical challenges in distributing food to residents. The dominance of large supermarket chains has marginalised local farmers and reduced consumer access to affordable, locally sourced food options.
- **Urban Development:** Rapid urbanisation and urban sprawl in Maribyrnong continues to diminish available agricultural land, limiting local food production opportunities. This loss of agricultural space further restricts the potential for developing sustainable food systems and exacerbates food insecurity among residents.

Addressing these drivers requires coordinated efforts and comprehensive strategies that prioritise economic resilience, environmental sustainability and equitable access to nutritious food for all residents of Maribyrnong. Collaborative initiatives involving government agencies, community organisations, businesses, and residents are essential to implementing effective solutions that enhance food security and improve overall community well-being.

4. Evidence-Based Initiatives

Several initiatives within Maribyrnong and neighbouring councils could provide evidence-based solutions to food insecurity with appropriate support from State and Federal Governments:

- **Local Food Security Strategy**

Building on the Maribyrnong Food Inequality Action Network, Maribyrnong City Council could enhance its efforts by transitioning its existing network into a dedicated Food Security Task Force. This task force, inspired by successful models like the City of Melbourne's approach, would tailor a comprehensive food security strategy to local needs. It would set measurable goals, monitor progress, support advocacy initiatives, identify resources required to implement the strategy and engage deeply with community stakeholders to ensure effectiveness.

- **Strengthen Local Food Networks**

Consider the opportunity to enhance and further promote initiatives like the Yarraville Farmers Market and supporting local markets, including Maribyrnong's "My Smart Garden" program, and how these can enhance accessibility to fresh, locally grown produce for low-income residents. Consideration of other accessible local opportunities that aim to increase food security by promoting sustainable food production and reducing reliance on external supply chains should be explored with appropriate resourcing from State and Federal Governments.

- **Support Urban Agriculture Initiatives**

The Footscray Community Garden is an excellent model where unused public land has been converted into productive spaces. This initiative could be expanded to other areas in Maribyrnong, promoting community engagement and food production.

- **Expand Food Relief Programs**

A commitment to the establishment of ongoing and dedicated funding to support neighbourhood houses would ensure they have the resources to meet increasing demand..

- **Enhance Food Literacy Programs**

Partnering with local schools and community centres to introduce food literacy programs, similar to the "Grow it Local" program in Wyndham, can educate residents on nutrition, cooking and budgeting.

- **Incentivise Sustainable Practices**

Providing grants and promotional support to local businesses that source produce from local Victorian farms and reduce food waste, akin to the City of Merri-bek's "Zero Waste to Landfill" initiative, can encourage sustainable practices in Maribyrnong. This will progress opportunities for 'farm to table' food accessibility for the local community.

- **Community Engagement and Support**

Organising community workshops and forums to engage residents in food security planning and implementation can be modelled after the successful "FoodHubs" in Darebin, which involve local communities in food distribution and education.

By adopting these evidence-based initiatives and with appropriate State Government resourcing, Maribyrnong can more effectively address food insecurity and build a resilient, sustainable, and equitable food system for all residents.