



Woollahra Council's submission to the
Senate Community Affairs Committee
for the
Inquiry into Suicide in Australia.

October 2009

Statement of intent:

Woollahra Council welcomes the Federal Government's Senate Community Affairs Committee Inquiry into Suicide in Australia.

By nature of our location, one of Australia's suicide hotspots "The Gap" is on our doorstep, in Watsons Bay. We are all too familiar with the devastating impact suicide has on our community.

In close consultation with our local community and relevant stakeholders we have developed the Gap Park Masterplan. The objective of the Gap Park Masterplan is to address self harm minimisation and improve what is one of Sydney's most popular tourism destinations. The Masterplan has been developed in close consultation with residents, mental health providers, local police and relevant stakeholders.

Woollahra Council's Gap Park Masterplan brings together best practice research and design to provide:

- Purpose built fencing
- Improved lighting
- CCTV cameras
- On site telephone support to Lifeline
- Improved landscaping, seating and general site upgrades to benefit the thousands of residents and domestic and international tourists of visitors to the site.

In addition to the physical aspects of the Gap Park Masterplan, Woollahra Council and the Black Dog Institute have decided to work collaboratively to provide a message of hope, as well as practical coping and resilience skills that improve the mental health of the community through:

- A free community information workshop on 29 September, featuring guest speakers, Professor Gordon Parker, Psychiatrist and Executive Director of the Black Dog Institute
- The development of a mental health resource kit for local residents, community groups and community workers. The kit will be launched on September 29 at the community information workshop and it provides information on depression, suicide, mental health
- On site signage to provide a message of hope and support.

Through the preparation of the Masterplan project and our efforts to attract government funding for its implementation we have learnt much about suicide prevention, treatment and the networks that exist to assist people with mental health issues, depression and the help available for families and friends left behind by loved ones who have taken their own life.

We recognise that suicide prevention and treatment is not our core business and we are not mental health experts. We appreciate the advice and guidance we have been given, particularly by Black Dog Institute and Lifeline Australia.

With help from others, we are doing what we can to make a difference, with the help and input from other individuals and organisations that share our aim to make a difference and reduce self harm in our local area. We strongly believe the Gap Park Masterplan can reduce the incidences of self harm and the flow on effect suicide has in our community.

In developing a strategy for The Gap, there is much to be learned from other international suicide hotspots, including the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. There is general agreement that it is possible to interrupt the suicidal process by making it difficult for people to obtain the means by which to kill themselves. Restricting access is an important step in suicide prevention.

We also believe suicide is a community problem, and that some suicides are preventable and this national problem requires a whole-of-government response and a shared responsibility. We already know that many of the people who have taken their life at Gap Park are not local residents and some have travelled from other states of Australia.

Woollahra Council also has a dedicated Community Services team of staff who through their work have experienced direct community feedback on mental health issues and suicide prevention and support networks.

Woollahra Council recognises that community well-being is dependent on our social connections and our sense of community. Building community resilience is about having a sense of belonging and feeling connected to others. We recognise that people do not exist in isolation, rather in and strong networks including families, neighbourhoods, community groups, cultural organisations, churches, government agencies and businesses are essential building blocks of our community. Community well-being is influenced by participation in community, cultural and recreational activities, access to facilities and community information. The health of residents and access to essential services is also important to ensure community health and safety.

Council's community services team works locally with groups to promote initiatives like *Good Neighbour Day* which starts from a street level in building neighbourhood networks and relations.

Council's contribution to community well-being is through our planning, facilitation and provision of appropriate community and cultural facilities throughout the Municipality. As a Council we fulfil the role of working in partnership with our community to support local neighbourhood networks and to facilitate local participation and engagement.

Woollahra Council's Community Services Division recently held a Youth Mental Health Forum which brought together local service providers, community groups, young people, mental health consumers, families and residents to explore ways in which the community can support young people in building resilience. This was the second annual forum held by Council aimed at strengthening the networks between providers and identifying what Council's specific role should be to further complement what already exists in the community.

This submission serves to document our experience and feedback so that it might guide and assist the Senate Committee members and its final recommendations.

Response to the Terms of Reference:

The impact of suicide on the Australian community including high risk groups such as Indigenous youth and rural communities, with particular reference to:

a. the personal, social and financial costs of suicide in Australia;

Each death from suicide brings with it immense emotional pain. It is impossible to put a cost on human life and suffering. We understand through our consultation with stakeholders associated with mental health support that the human and financial cost of suicide is great.

We understand that the local Rose Bay Area Command spend an extensive number of hours each week looking for missing people and reported suicidal people at Gap Park. The site is extensive in size, estimated at 46755m².

Part of the Gap Park Masterplan aims to deliver measures that will assist police in locating and offering assistance to missing people and people who are suicidal. The resourcing of police personnel in attending to missing person investigations at Gap Park is significant. The Masterplan aims to deliver significant resource cost savings for the NSW Police and emergency services.

We have no financial figures to demonstrate the cost of the impact of suicide on mental health providers, the hospitals, the Courts and the Coroners office. We imagine these costs are significant.

As a local Council we are more familiar with the social cost of suicide – the impact it has on families, friends and colleagues.

b. the accuracy of suicide reporting in Australia, factors that may impede accurate identification and recording of possible suicides, (and the consequences of any under-reporting on understanding risk factors and providing services to those at risk);

Specific details on the number of suicides at The Gap are not readily available. Feedback from local police and residents indicates that approximately one person a month takes their life at The Gap. More recently Woollahra Council has received feedback which indicates an increase in the number of people ending their life at The Gap.

Whatever the specific numbers, we know that suicides at Gap Park are disturbingly regular and that each suicide brings with it a ripple effect on the community – on families, friends, work colleagues, doctors, nurses, police officers, coroners, courts, local residents, witnesses, the list goes on.

We are mindful in our media and promotional work not to emphasise the number of deaths and the location, as we do not want to promote the location as a suicide hotspot or encourage copycat suicides.

While we don't need to promote the number of suicides at Gap Park it does provide us with information that is crucial to the development of the project plan. These statistics would provide us with an idea of the magnitude of the problem we are dealing with as a community and whether or not the statistic is increasing or decreasing.

Even more importantly when the project proceeds, statistics that are location based, will be useful in evaluation and feedback.

The Gap Park Masterplan has the potential to reduce the number of incidences of self harm through its proactive on site support and design. The Masterplan also has the potential to help those considering suicide, i.e. people who are saved and assisted. It is this statistic that is equally important. Every life saved is worth recording.

- c. the appropriate role and effectiveness of agencies, such as police, emergency departments, law enforcement and general health services in assisting people at risk of suicide;

We think the best people to comment on this would be the agencies themselves. Our only comment is that we understand from anecdotal feedback that police and health workers are under pressure to meet the community's mental health demands and prevent suicides.

From a community services perspective we believe there needs to be an increase in services and support for local residents on improving mental health.

We trust there would be benefit in local police receiving regular training and support to deal with suicide.

Woollahra Council helps fund a local youth service provider – Urban Arts Base which aims to improve opportunities and support for youth with a mental health issue through an art and music program. More information on Urban Arts Base is given later in this submission.

- d. the effectiveness, to date, of public awareness programs and their relative success in providing information, encouraging help-seeking and enhancing public discussion of suicide;

In the lead up to, and during, Mental Health Week this year we hosted a community workshop on the September 29 with input from the Black Dog Institute and Lifeline on building resilience and understanding depression and suicide. The workshop was booked out.

A mental health workshop targeting service providers and young people was also held in October, during Mental Health Week which focussed on building resilience and fostering principles of asset based community development. This workshop was also well attended with a number of strategies identified in which young people, service providers, Council and residents can work collaboratively on projects which foster inclusiveness and promote the achievements of young people.

As suicide and mental health is largely an issue rarely publicly discussed, these community forums were well received.

We know that many of our local residents living near Gap Park are involved in assisting people who are on site and either depressed, contemplating suicide, or making a suicide attempt.

It is fair to say that many of our local residents have received very little or no appropriate training, or support.

They are responding out of the goodness of their hearts and their own genuine intent to help.

In promoting our community workshop on the September 29 we targeted local residents and acknowledged the proactive role many of them are taking at Gap Park.

It is also acknowledged that ongoing community education on mental health, depression and suicide prevention and support should be widely communicated to all Australians. This kind of community education would best be resourced by State and Federal Governments in consultation with relevant mental health agencies and with the support of local community groups and councils.

We are not aware of any mental health community education programs operating in our local community that are aimed at our residents.

We have to note that our own local newspaper, the *Wentworth Courier* has been working closely with us on communicating the Gap Park Masterplan, its intent and our community education. The newspaper has played an important role in communicating self-help and support resources to the wider community.

- e. the efficacy of suicide prevention training and support for front-line health and community workers providing services to people at risk;

We have no informed comment to make on this.

- f. the role of targeted programs and services that address the particular circumstances of high-risk groups;

Woollahra Council recognises that supporting community organisations is critical to the creation of a thriving and healthy community. We currently recognize the importance of our local community organisations by working in partnership with them, through the distribution of annual grants and the provision of subsidised accommodation.

The Urban Arts Base program is an innovative community arts and music program aiming to assist young people with mental health issues and their recovery. Urban Arts Base provides a fun, safe and youth friendly environment where young people can regain the confidence and skills necessary to re-engage with education, employment, vocational training and social and community networks.

Urban Arts Base was established in 2000 by a Steering Committee of youth mental health clinicians and consumers who were concerned that young people with mental health problems were socially isolated, and felt marginalized by their mental health problems from existing mainstream youth services, and were disinclined to access health or mental health services.

Urban Arts Base continues to and has been addressing this growing gap in services over the past nine years by using unique creative arts programs as effective tools to connect with young people with mental health issues through a general centre based program located in Double Bay and through a mobile community "Art Reach" program.

Being a non medical model Urban Arts Base has successfully provided a space for people to join in and be a part of an enterprise that has successfully held a number of exhibitions and community based projects.

Woollahra Council, through its community development program has highlighted the importance of supporting local residents experiencing mental health issues. To this end, Council acknowledges the professionalism and invaluable impact this service has on the individual, families and the wider community and has provided financial support and currently sits on the steering committee.

Jewish House is another local organisation which has received support through the community grants program to provide a technological upgrade of their Crisis Line. This Crisis Line operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and focuses on assisting people experiencing crisis throughout the whole community. This service is highly utilized and provides support to people who are experiencing mental health issues.

Other local services which offer targeted programs and services that address the particular circumstances of high-risk groups include WAYS (Waverley Action For Youth Services), Point Zero, Bondi Outreach Program and the Aunties and Uncles Program. These programs primarily take a preventative approach to suicide through programs and activities that aim to build resilience and increase coping strategies.

- g. the adequacy of the current program of research into suicide and suicide prevention, and the manner in which findings are disseminated to practitioners and incorporated into government policy; and

We have no informed comment to make on this.

- h. the effectiveness of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy in achieving its aims and objectives, and any barriers to its progress.

We have no direct experience of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy and its implementation.

We understand that the National Suicide Prevention Strategy promotes suicide prevention activities across the Australian population, as well as for specified at-risk groups.

The Strategy aims to develop and enhance existing services and programs with governments, business, non-government and community organisations that support people at risk of suicide.

Despite an endorsement from the Australian Suicide Prevention Advisory Council (ASPAC) that the Gap Park Masterplan is in line with international best practice, it does not meet the funding guidelines of the Strategy.

Advice from the Federal Department of Health and Ageing indicates that funding under the Strategy is only strictly intended for national suicide prevention programs and not infrastructure.

During our efforts to secure government funding assistance for the Masterplan we have observed a lack of available funding for mental health initiatives, suggested in the response letters we have received from both State and Federal representatives.

We applied for first round of Federal infrastructure funding in 2009 under the Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program (RCLIP) for the Masterplan and we were unsuccessful.

We will be lodging another application for the second round.

We agree that there should be a national suicide prevention strategy and that any integrated Federal, State, Local Government initiatives should be encouraged and promoted.

Woollahra Council's Gap Park Masterplan is an integrated approach to suicide prevention that provides the opportunities for all levels of government to come together and work on a project that has the potential to save lives.

The Masterplan incorporates both physical barriers and support at what is a nationally recognised suicide location.

Given the project has been well designed and developed and is being endorsed by a wide range of relevant mental health providers, organisations, agencies and leaders we would have thought that it would have been quickly embraced by both State and Federal Government.

The Masterplan implementation would provide both State and Federal Government with the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to suicide prevention in a tangible way. The opportunity to save lives through a built infrastructure project is unique and worthy of bi-partisan and whole of government support.

We are committed to continuing to our efforts to see the Masterplan come to fruition and we are confident that any organisation or government that decides to help us fund it will be proud of their contribution to saving Australian lives.

Ends.