Local Government Preventing Violence Against Women Projects

**Gender Equitable Design of Community Facilities – developing a design guide**

**Whittlesea City Council**

**Project Process:**

The project was started by a sub committee of our Gender Equity Working Group. With the assistance of the MAV grant we were able to dedicate a lead Council officer to drive the project to completion. We held a further two workshops with the original project group to discuss and refine design elements for the Community Centre section. This work then formed the basis for the lead Council officer to complete the other facility type sections (pavilions, youth facilities and so on). The lead officer then held targeted consultations with relevant staff for each facility type. A further consultation was held with our key Major Projects representative and with an architect employed in our Urban Design team. The purpose of this meeting was to check the structure and content of the document for usability – acknowledging that the guidelines will not succeed if they are cumbersome or onerous to apply. We have also had discussions with Project Managers working on current sporting pavilion projects to use the opportunity for a test run of application of the guidelines.

At project initiation we had identified the Planning Institute of Australia’s Women’s Planning Network as partners in the project. Nearing project completion however, we realised that given the applied content and scope of the guidelines, expertise at a more fine grain level, i.e. architecture and design, would be better placed to add value to the work. Consequently, we have approached JMA Architects to provide a ‘peer review’ of the guidelines. JMA Architects have experience in community facility design and were key consultants in the development of the SRV Female-Friendly Facilities Guide, as well as Cricket Australia Guidelines and AFL Unisex Guidelines. They are well placed to review the content of our guidelines for clarity and consistency with SRV content and for useability for design practitioners.

Completion of the project required not only the time of the lead council officer to drive the project (with funding support from MAV), but considerable time contributions from other staff for general workshops, targeted consultations and individual document revision.

**Project achievements and successes:**

The completion of these guidelines provides a resource to be shared, adapted and built upon by all local governments. Conversations about design within the organisation have ultimately raised the question of *what else* Council should be doing to ensure equitable access. The design guidelines development has provided a mechanism to highlight inequity in the allocation of Council facilities and Council budgets. This conversation itself has been helpful for progressing conversations about gender equity and PVAW more broadly within our organisation.

As a document that will form the basis of an audit of our existing facilities, the guidelines will improve Council’s knowledge base of where facilities need improvement, making it easier to take up funding opportunities that have a focus on increasing female participation.

Consultations internally about the design guidelines have been positive and well-received. The guidelines have acknowledged and captured good practice that has been evolving over many projects and staff observations at City of Whittlesea – it has been positive for staff to have that expertise recognised.

**Project challenges and issues:**

One of the difficult elements of this project has been defining and maintaining its scope. We found that the identification of gender equitable design elements easily strayed into general, ‘good’ design. We then had to decide whether particular elements should remain in just because they were a good idea or whether their inclusion would dilute the gender equity objective of the guide. We decided to retain, as best we could, the emphasis on ‘gender equity’ elements, being clear that the guidelines are utilised alongside other key tools and standards, e.g. Design for Everyone. Through application of the guidelines, we will learn if struck the right balance and can amend the guidelines accordingly in future.

A risk for the guidelines is that they are not appropriately embedded and utilised. There is a risk that they are seen as yet another layer of bureaucracy and are disregarded. To mitigate the risk of this happening, we have tried to keep the guidelines as clear and concise as possible. We have differentiated between ‘must-haves’ and ‘nice-to-have’ elements to be cognisant of budget pressures. We are having the guidelines reviewed externally by an Architect firm with experience in Community Pavilions and equitable design to ensure the guidelines are as user-friendly as possible and that they remain consistent with other guides and regulatory controls. We will also be providing training to internal staff on the application of the guidelines to their work.

**Advice for other councils:**

If we were to start this work again, we would include a parks and open space section in the guidelines from the outset. Configuration of parks and open space plays a vital role in the safety, attractiveness and activation of community space. This will be need to be added to the guidelines in the months to come.

We have realised that many decisions regarding site selection and layout of sites for community facilities that affect accessibility and inclusion are determined, to a large extent, in the Precinct Structure Planning Process. Including an equity lens at this stage is a component that could potentially be included as an extension of the design guidelines but it would result in a considerable expansion of scope and a different type of approach. It may be better for this to remain a separate piece of work.

We believe a lot of the core content in the City of Whittlesea guidelines will be transferrable to other local government contexts. It will be important for others however, to understand their local community and local needs. For instance, in the development of *our* guidelines, as a growth area council, we were acutely aware of the need for social inclusion for the many carers of young children in our municipality who are predominantly women. Local data on women’s participation in sport and recreation was another key driver. Other priorities may be more relevant in other areas.