

Councillor Question Time

Question from Councillor Pearl:

The Port Phillip Citizens for Reconciliation (PPCR), successfully applied for a hall hire subsidy to hold a public forum "Learn about the Voice to Parliament Referendum". That forum occurred on 21 September 2023 and the funds covered hall hire, security and staffing up to the value of \$3.5K. Was this a neutral event? and if it was found to not be neutral and was used to promote the 'Yes' event, would it meet the policy and qualify for a subsidy?

Response:

On 6 July, a Town Hall Hire Subsidy Scheme booking was submitted by a member of the Port Phillip Citizens for Reconciliation (PPCfR) via the online booking system for 21 September. The proposal described the intention of the planned event was to share information with the local community about the principles relating to the Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum.

In general terms the PPCfR application was within the subsidy guidelines which supports, community groups and not for profit organisations based within Port Phillip, and proposals that align with Council's strategic priorities.

The subsidy guidelines however also state that booking requests that are considered as relating to activities of a political nature (bipartisan or otherwise), or that are submitted by political parties or groups associated with political parties, will be referred to the Office of the CEO for assessment to ensure the request does not provide implications for Council against its Code of Conduct and/or associated policies.

It was in this context that the application was referred to Governance and Organisational Performance who assessed the application and informed Councillors that officers were planning to decline the request as it related to political campaigning. Councillor feedback initiated a review of this decision and a determination that the event could go ahead.

Upon receiving this advice, officers however neglected to seek the further qualification that the application remained eligible for the subsidy or alternatively, that the application should only proceed as a full fee booking. Instead, it was assumed that feedback received from Governance and Organisational Performance was sufficient to advance the application as a fully subsidised event. This was an error.

At all times officers worked with the applicant to ensure that the event did not assume Council's position nor speak on behalf of Council. This included requesting that the applicant's remove of Council's logo from all advertising. Noting that the use of Council's Logo on advertising was a requirement of successful subsidy recipients. Members of the PPCfR also provided reassurance that the event was one of information sharing and education.

Going forward, process issues have been noted and officers involved are aware of the importance of observing to the full intention of the guidelines in any future subsidy and hall booking applications. Minor changes will be made to the Town Hall Subsidy Guidelines in relation to the referrals of booking requests that are political in nature to Governance and Organisational Performance for a determination as to whether:

1. the general booking is to be supported and
2. whether the booking is considered eligible for a full or part subsidy.

All matters that are considered highly complex, or place the organisation at risk, will be referred to the CEO and Executive for final determination.

**Please note: answers to any questions in Public Question Time and Councillor Question Time which were answered at the meeting are included in the minutes of that meeting.*