



9.1 THE STATE OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES WITHIN PORT PHILLIP ANNUAL REPORT 2023

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: ALLISON KENWOOD, GENERAL MANAGER, COMMUNITY WELLBEING AND INCLUSION

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1. PURPOSE

1.1 In line with the implementation of the *Every Child, Our Future Children's Services Policy* (the Policy), *The State of Children's Services Within Port Phillip Annual Report 2023* (Annual Report 2023) has been prepared to give a snapshot of Children's Services in the municipality. The report also provides an update on the implementation of the of the Children's Services Policy throughout 2022.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1 The *Every Child, Our Future Children's Services Policy* took effect on 1 July 2020.

2.2 When endorsing the Policy, it was agreed that an Annual Report of Children's Services would be prepared to understand the performance of Children's Services in Port Phillip and any additional factors impacting the implementation of the Policy.

2.3 This is the second annual report to be prepared since the adoption of the Policy, (see Attachment 1 *The State of Children's Services Within Port Phillip Annual Report 2023*).

2.4 Key Policy implementation actions undertaken in 2022 include:

2.4.1 Following consultation on an extended opening hours trial at both the St Kilda and the Skinners Adventure Playgrounds, Council adopted a vision and design principles for these highly valued facilities in May 2022. Both sites will be upgraded in the coming years. Equipment assessments at Skinners Adventure Playground identified the need for immediate rectification works, and \$300,000 was allocated to progress these in 2022/2023. The first phase of community consultation for the Skinners rectification works was conducted in October 2022 and now a draft concept design is being developed based on the community feedback received. There will be one more round of community consultation for this project prior to finalising the design. Both phases of consultation are open to all residents whilst also focussing on engaging with children and young people. Consultation for the St Kilda Adventure Playground upgrade will commence in March 2023.

2.4.2 Community consultation undertaken in late 2021 and in 2022 for the proposed sale of 3 childcare centres, led to the signing of a Building Blocks Partnership Agreement with the State Government in October 2022. The Agreement will ensure these three centres and three further centres requiring significant renovation or replacement will be made fit-for-purpose and accessible for future years. Council is contributing 18 million in addition to the Victorian Government funding of up to \$12.6 million. This will secure the future of 364 licenced places (57 greater than the current provision in these facilities).

2.4.3 An internal Children's Services Project Control Group was established and meets monthly to oversight the implementation of the Building Blocks Partnership Agreement.



- 2.4.4 Establishment of the Early Years Education and Care Network, providing our community managed service stakeholders with the opportunity to share up to date service needs, understand the challenges experiences by services and families and collaborate on strategies to implement actions within the implementation plan.
- 2.4.5 Implementation of a Children’s Services Integrated Registration and Enrolment (CSIRE) System has begun, with Council managed services the first to transition to a new software system that will provide families with a much-requested online self-serve portal.
- 2.4.6 Maternal and Child Health client survey of 276 families highlighted the important supports valued by families and the important role nurses provide families navigating parenthood.
- 2.5 Key themes and challenges highlighted through the Annual Report 2023 include:
- 2.5.1 The disruptions caused from COVID-19 have continued to impact participation and engagement in both universal and targeted services. Council partners have shared their concerns that the capacity for families to form relationships with service providers and other families during COVID-19 is a main contributor to low participation and engagement. Council services have been prioritising the promotion of referral pathways and participation in networks as part of the Policy’s implementation plan. These actions will be ongoing into 2023 as we continue to see children and families manage symptoms of the pandemic, such as anxiety and family violence, and we are working closely with our external partners to link families to the services they need.
- 2.5.2 The long-term impacts of COVID-19 on children’s development, health and wellbeing continue to be monitored through our peak body stakeholders and partnerships, including Better Health Network (formally Star Health), Municipal Association of Australia and the Department of Education. The sharing of qualitative and quantitative data across Council programs is providing a consistent picture of families’ complex needs, including increased access to parenting support and challenges associated with eligibility for government supports and subsidies. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) 2022 data shows an increase in the number of children reported as developmentally vulnerable in five of the eight suburbs in the Port Phillip. There was a decrease in three suburbs, which included St Kilda East and St Kilda where rates in previous years had been some of the highest for the municipality. While the number of developmentally vulnerable children increased, as a proportion of their cohort they declined from 5.9% to 5.3% and this rate continues to be well below the Victoria and National average.
- 2.5.3 The *City of Port Phillip State of Children’s Services Annual Report, 2022* (Annual Report 2022) and Annual Report 2023 acknowledge that the supply and demand of kindergarten and childcare places is being impacted by a range of factors, including State Government early years reforms and declining birth rates in Port Phillip. The current modelling indicates there is adequate supply of licenced places in Port Phillip through to 2026. In 2023 Council and the Department of Education will update the Kindergarten Infrastructure and Services Plan (the KISP) considering the state and federal policy reforms, updated census data and any supply changes.



- 2.5.4 Four-year-old kindergarten participation in Port Phillip declined from 82.3% in 2020 to 78.3% in 2021. The barriers to accessing early education and care are complex, and whilst COVID-19 continues to impact how and when families are accessing services, cost continues to be a critical challenge for vulnerable families as well as families experiencing cost of living challenges.
- 2.5.5 We continue to monitor the performance of Council's five early education and care centres and how effectively services are supporting vulnerable children. With two years of data collection demonstrating the quantum of vulnerable children participating in Councils' services, we have seen an increase in children accessing inclusion support funding and the Preschool Field Officer program (both externally provided supports) and a decrease in the number of children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds at Council managed services and for children in out of home care in community managed services.
- 2.5.6 The financial performance of Council's five early education and care centres also continues to be a focus (refer to section 7 of this report for further details).
- 2.5.7 North St Kilda Children's Centre were assessed in 2022 under the National Quality Standards (NQS) and were awarded a rating of Exceeding Quality Standards. This raised the percentage of Council services Exceeding National Standards to 80%, highlighting the value of investing in systems and structures that support services to deliver high-quality education and care.

3. RECOMMENDATION

That Council:

- 3.1 Notes *The State of Children's Services Within Port Phillip Annual Report 2023*.
- 3.2 Notes that the Council's operation of childcare centres continues to meet the public interest due to the ongoing support provided for children and families experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability.

4. KEY POINTS/ISSUES

- 4.1 At the 4 September 2019 Ordinary Council Meeting, Council resolved to formally adopt *Every Child, Our Future Children's Services Policy* which committed Council to continue its delivery of existing early childhood services and provide greater support to the children and families that benefit most from and are least likely to access services.
- 4.2 At the 6 April 2022 Ordinary Council Meeting, Council noted the first Annual Report 2022 and that Council's operation of childcare continues to meet public interest due to the ongoing support provided for children and families experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability.
- 4.3 The second Annual Report 2023 provides new data on children in Port Phillip, including AEDC data, kindergarten participation data and how families have accessed and participated in Council-managed and Council-funded children's services. The report includes comparison data, trends over time, Council's performance and tracks the implementation of the Policy.
- 4.4 Building of strong relationships and programs has been a focus for 2022 with the principles of trust, collaboration and transparency at the core of working with our stakeholders. Consultation on the implementation of the Policy has been structured



around immediate stakeholder needs, including delivering the Solihull program for families, the establishment of a toy library and playgroup network and the Early Years Education and Care Network.

4.5 With comparison data now available and a greater understanding of stakeholder needs, further commitments under the Policy Implementation Plan can progress, including:

4.5.1 Consultation and collaboration on the six services set for renovation or replacement through the Building Blocks Partnership Agreement.

5. CONSULTATION AND STAKEHOLDERS

5.1 The Policy was developed through broad and diverse community consultation and engagement.

5.2 Delivery of the Policy requires ongoing consultation and engagement with stakeholders and community as the environment in which services are delivered changes and early years reforms progress. Recent and current engagement topics include:

5.2.1 Future needs and interests of middle years children, informing the investment in the St Kilda and Skinners Adventure Playgrounds.

5.2.2 Parent and child outcomes of families who attended the Solihull program, delivered in partnership with Maternal and Child Health and the Lead Family Worker program.

5.2.3 Development of the CSIRE System with the Early Years Education and Care Network.

5.2.4 Parent satisfaction with the Maternal and Child Health service.

5.3 Planned community engagement to be conducted through 2023 includes:

5.3.1 Adventure Playgrounds upgrades and rectification works.

5.3.2 The renovation and redevelopment of the six services funded under the Building Blocks Partnership Agreement.

5.3.3 Improvements for the playgroup play space at Bubup Nairn Children's Centre.

5.3.4 Engaging with families who use Council managed early education and care services on operational policies to inform everyday practices and educational pedagogy.

6. LEGAL AND RISK IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The recommendations in this report are not considered to have any material legal or risk implications.

7. FINANCIAL IMPACT

7.1 The recommendations in this report have no financial impact. The draft 2023/2024 budget has been prepared on the basis of continued service delivery for the suite of services provided by Council as detailed in the attached Annual Report 2023.

7.2 Sound financial management of Council run childcare centres continues to be a focus, however COVID-19 continued to impact negatively on the operating result with utilisation rates dropping marginally to 72.9% in 2021/2022, down from 75.8% in



2021/2020 and 85% in 2019/2020. A performance improvement action plan has been developed to work across five operational domains to lift and improve performance.

- 7.3 Funding and grant seeking to support both service delivery and infrastructure development will require continual attention to support the community needs.
- 7.4 Every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood education returns between \$1.50 and nearly \$3, and the return grows to double digits for children from families experiencing disadvantage (source: Victorian Government, Early Childhood Reform Plan, 2017 <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/educationstate/ec-reform-plan.pdf>)

8. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

- 8.1 The recommendations of this report are not considered to have any material environmental impact.

9. COMMUNITY IMPACT

- 9.1 The implementation of the Policy is seeking to deliver on the following community impacts:
 - 9.1.1 All children living in Port Phillip are supported to develop their full potential.
 - 9.1.2 Parents, carers and families are supported to increase their capacity and capability.
 - 9.1.3 The effects of disadvantage on children's development are minimised.
- 9.2 The Annual Report 2023 seeks to outline the extent to which we are achieving these outcomes and assess the impact our Children's Services are having on children and their families in our community. The Annual Report 2023 contributes to the data and benchmarking to track impact over the life of the policy.

10. ALIGNMENT TO COUNCIL PLAN AND COUNCIL POLICY

- 10.1 The Annual Report 2023 aligns to the Council Plan 2022-2031:
 - 10.1.1 *Proudly Port Phillip: a liveable and vibrant City that enhances the wellbeing of our community.*
 - 10.1.2 *Strategic Direction Inclusive Port Phillip: A City that is a place for all members of our community, where people feel supported and comfortable being themselves and expressing their identities.*
- 10.2 The Policy describes Council's role in children's services and what we will do to support the wellbeing and development of children and families in our community.

11. IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

11.1 TIMELINE

- 11.1.1 An implementation plan drives the co-ordination and tracking of the Policy implementation. The plan is monitored internally through the Family Youth and Children Leadership team quarterly and externally through *The State of Children's Services Within Port Phillip Annual Report*.
- 11.1.2 Work with external stakeholders on the implementation plan has been carefully considered and focused on actions of timely importance, including the



implementation of a CSIRE System and the planned redevelopments at the Adventure Playgrounds.

11.1.3 The plan is refined as stakeholders are engaged at various stages, with the recent engagement topics informing the direction and next steps of each priority. Consultation with the Early Years Education and Care Network is one example where implementation of the plan has been informed by feedback.

11.1.4 Stakeholder engagement and consultation on the plan will take place in 2023 through the reestablishment of the Port Phillip Children's Services Reference Group, which last met in 2019. The Reference Group will be directed through the principles of the City of Port Phillip Community Engagement Policy.

11.2 COMMUNICATION

11.2.1 The Annual Report 2023 will be shared with children's services stakeholders and partners as a tool to be used to inform and further develop children's services in Port Phillip.

12. OFFICER DIRECT OR INDIRECT INTEREST

12.1 No officers involved in the preparation of this report have any material or general interest in the matter.

ATTACHMENTS

1. **The State of Children's Services Within Port Phillip Annual Report 2023**