

Report to Future Melbourne Committee

Agenda item 6.6

Child Safety in Places of Worship

18 May 2021

Presenter: Ali Duncan, Director Community Services

Purpose and background

1. On the 17 February 2020 new requirements contained in the *Children Legislation Amendment Act 2019* came into force. People involved in religious ministry were legally required to report known or suspected child physical or sexual abuse to child protection authorities.
2. This obligation was in addition to existing obligations to report to the Commission for Children and Young People under the Reportable Conduct Scheme (RCS). Failure to report abuse, including information obtained during religious confessional, is a criminal offence. In response to the new requirements some in religious ministry made public statements that they would rather be jailed than break the seal of the confessional.
3. On 23 June 2020 the Future Melbourne Committee unanimously passed the following resolution:
 1. *That the Future Melbourne Committee requests that management:*
 - 1.1 *Note the changes to the child safety laws with respect to child abuse in places of worship.*
 - 1.2 *Invite the Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People, Liana Buchanan to advise the City of Melbourne of specific and proactive actions that the City can take to facilitate child safety in places of worship in the municipality.*
 - 1.3 *Following a response from the Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People:*
 - 1.3.1 *Write to all places of worship and religious institutions that work with and care for children in the municipality, referring them of the new laws and informing them of the specific and proactive actions, as received from the Principal Commissioner, the City of Melbourne will be taking in facilitating child safety.*
 - 1.3.2 *Submit a report to this Committee or the Council by 1 September 2020 and include in that report recommendations for further action.*

Key issues

- 4 Due to CoVID-19 restrictions the Principal Commissioner was unable to meet with Lord Mayor, Councillors and Council officers until 10 September 2020. The Commissioner made clear her mandate and commitment to keeping children safe. She advised it was the Commission's responsibility to investigate or oversee investigations into Reportable Conduct matters across the City of Melbourne including places of worship and that this was not a role for Council.
- 5 The Commissioner highlighted a number of ways Council could have an active external public facing role including a Child Safe City campaign in cooperation with her office, additional examination of procurement practices to ensure contractors meet their obligations under the Child Safe Standards and RCS and prompting the empowerment and safety rights of children as a priority.
- 6 Since meeting with the Commissioner, Council officers have undertaken extensive review of procurement practices to ensure contractors meet their obligations under the Child Safe Standards and the RCS. Improvements have been made to contracts, permits, grants and licenses with clear expectations of compliance.

- 7 The organisation has a zero-tolerance approach to child abuse and children's empowerment and safety will be considered a priority including in service design and planning, program and service delivery, advocacy campaigns and any future recovery and activation plans for the city. The organisational Child Safe Framework is being renewed with a focus on a Child Safe City campaign. The Commissioner for Children and Young People has been approached to discuss the campaign to raise community awareness of the issue.

Recommendation from management

8. That the Future Melbourne Committee endorses:
 - 8.1. As a priority, management undertaking a Child Safe Campaign in 2021-22 to raise awareness of:
 - 8.1.1. the need for a zero-tolerance approach to child abuse,
 - 8.1.2. the importance of children's right to be safe and to feel safe, and
 - 8.1.3. for children to be empowered to be seen, heard and celebrated in the City of Melbourne.
 - 8.2. Management seeking to partner with statutory bodies including the Commission for Children and Young People, other councils, child and family focused organisations and other agencies to implement the Child Safe City campaign and to have children engaged in the design of the campaign.
 - 8.3. The need for children's safety and empowerment to be considered in service design and planning, program and service delivery, advocacy campaigns and in any future recovery and activation plans for the city.

Attachments:

1. Supporting Attachment (Page 3 of 3)

Supporting Attachment

Legal

1. No direct legal issues arise from the recommendation from management.

Finance

2. An amount of \$50,000 for the community campaign has been included in the draft 2021-22 budget.

Conflict of interest

3. No member of Council staff, or other person engaged under a contract, involved in advising on or preparing this report has declared a material or general conflict of interest in relation to the matter of the report.

Health and Safety

4. In developing the Child Safe City Campaign health and safety issues and risks will be considered and mitigated. The campaign will aim to have a positive and empowering effect on the health and safety of the wider community.

Stakeholder consultation

5. Council will seek to partner with statutory bodies including the Commission for Children and Young People, other councils and child and family focused organisations and other agencies to implement the Child Safe City campaign. Children will be engaged in the design of the public facing campaign for Child Safe City.

Relation to Council policy

6. The recommendations are consistent with Council's compliance with the Child Safe Standards 2017 and RCS 2017.

Environmental sustainability

7. The Child Safe City campaign will consider environmental sustainability issues and opportunities as relevant.