

**Report to the Future Melbourne Committee**

Agenda item 6.3

**Covid-19 response at North Melbourne and Flemington public housing****Presenter:** Dean Robertson, Director On Street Support and Compliance**20 July 2021****Purpose and background**

1. The Future Melbourne Committee resolved on 7 July 2020 (in part): *'that management prepare a report for Council and the Victorian Government to consider the effectiveness of the response to the COVID-19 outbreak at the Flemington and North Melbourne high rise estates so that any lessons learnt from this incident can be embedded into future emergency management responses.'*
2. On 17 July 2020 the Victorian Ombudsman announced it would undertake an investigation into the detention and treatment of public housing residents arising from the COVID-19 'hard lockdown'. City of Melbourne officers provided a submission to the investigation. The Ombudsman report was finalised and released in December 2020. City of Melbourne officers have worked with all stakeholders including the local community and the Victorian Government to debrief and review the response and lessons learned. It is appropriate to now report back to Future Melbourne Committee given the completion of the Ombudsman's report.
3. On 4 July 2020 nine public housing towers in North Melbourne and Flemington were identified as COVID-19 hot spots and were placed in hard lockdown by the Victorian Government to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Five of these were towers are in the Melbourne municipality. Eight of the towers moved to Stage 3 Restrictions on 11 July 2020 whilst the Alfred Street tower moved to Stage 3 restrictions on 18 July 2020.
4. The Council' executive leadership team met on the afternoon of the announcement and determined that the organisation's response would be for and in partnership with our community members and community organisations.
5. A meeting of approximately twenty community leaders was arranged for the next day at The Hub in North Melbourne with the purpose of understanding the needs of the public housing residents and to determine how the City of Melbourne can best provide support. The community leaders detailed to City of Melbourne officers the experiences of residents over the first 24 hours of lockdown and the needs of tenants in the days ahead.

**Key issues**

6. Given the proximity of Council's North Melbourne Community Centre (NMCC) to nine public housing towers, it was established as the control and distribution centre. Council staff were responsible for coordinating the incoming and outgoing food deliveries and also the overall management of the centre. Over the course of the lockdown Council provided on site environmental health officers, increased waste services and parking and traffic management.
7. The then State Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Victoria Police, Fire Services Victoria, the Sheriff's Office and State Emergency Services coordinated their respective operations from NMCC. DHHS as landlord to the housing estate residents assumed a lead role and named the supporting program Operation Benessere. Roles of each agency were not clearly specified from the beginning of the lockdown period.
8. Initially no communication was had with community leaders and local organisations such as the Australian Muslim Social Services Agency (AMSSA) located opposite the Alfred Street estate on Boundary Road. Lack of inclusion of AMSSA in plans and implementation resulted in culturally inappropriate food being provided and a breakdown in any prior relationship government and community had had.
9. While all but one tower in the City of Melbourne moved to Stage 3 restrictions within a week, the public housing estate tenants remained quite distressed and distrustful of government.

10. The public health decision to protect the community from a developing COVID-19 outbreak is understood. However the distress caused to residents as a result of the approach taken was also significant, as reflected in the Ombudsman's report. This distrust of government has been somewhat improved by considerable efforts by the Victorian Government through a number of programs initiated since restrictions were lifted for all towers. (Attachment 2 provides details of the various programs).
11. These programs demonstrate an openness of the Victorian Government and its partnering agencies, including City of Melbourne to learn from errors made at the time and feedback from the community. City of Melbourne officers also worked closely with neighbouring councils to share what had been learned and prepare operational contingencies should a future outbreak in a high-density setting occur.
12. The main lessons learnt are:
  - 12.1. An Incident Control Team (ICT) structure needs to be established immediately an incident has been identified with roles and duties being clearly allocated.
  - 12.2. Community members and organisations have knowledge that should be utilised to maximise the outcome for the community and minimise any potential trauma the incident may cause must be engaged at all levels. Engaging them at the outset is paramount.
  - 12.3. Ordering and distribution of food and other items should include community knowledge to ensure cultural appropriateness
13. In July and August 2020, relevant City of Melbourne staff engaged with officers from surrounding Councils including Yarra and Port Philip to assist in their development of their pandemic response plans, in the event that similar hard lockdowns were undertaken at public housing estates in their local government areas.
14. These lessons were put into action during the most recent COVID-19 outbreak which occurred in a Southbank high-density residential setting. The approach taken by the Victorian Government, and supported by the City of Melbourne, involved improved coordination by authorities, better engagement and communication with residents and a swift operational response to support those impacted.

### **Recommendation from management**

15. That the Future Melbourne Committee notes:
  - 15.1. The lessons learnt by the Victorian Government and City of Melbourne management from the hard lockdown of the North Melbourne and Flemington housing estate towers in July 2020.
  - 15.2. That measures are being taken by all levels of government to continuously improve relationships with those communities and also that what was learnt will be used in other locations where a lockdown is considered necessary.
  - 15.3. That a copy of this report will be provided to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing for reference and incorporation of information into future planning and delivery of services to the residents of the North Melbourne and Flemington high rise housing estates.

### **Attachments:**

1. Supporting Attachment (Page 3 of 5)
2. Programs initiated by Victorian Government to support the residents of North Melbourne and Flemington Housing Estates (Page 4 of 5)

## Supporting Attachment

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### Legal

1. There are no legal implications for the management recommendation in this report.

### Finance

2. There are no financial implications for the management recommendation in this report.

### 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. The health and safety of community members and those operating from the North Melbourne Community Centre during the hard lockdown was paramount to City of Melbourne staff working on site.

### Stakeholder consultation

5. Consistent community feedback from 6 July to the time this report was written has assisted in Council and Victorian Government staff in better understanding and responding to the needs of residents of the North Melbourne housing estate. This is an ongoing process with formal and informal meetings and other gatherings occurring on a now regular basis.

### Relation to Council policy

6. No relevant Council policies.

### Environmental sustainability

7. During the period of the hard lockdown, waste created by the residents and the supporting operation was greater than usual. City of Melbourne ensured all waste was appropriately removed and disposed. There are no ongoing environmental sustainability considerations needing to be given to management's recommendations in this report.

## **Programs initiated by Victorian Government to support the residents of North Melbourne and Flemington Housing Estates.**

### ***North Melbourne and Flemington Towers Community Working Group***

On 7 July 2020 the Department of Health and Human Services commenced a community online forum. Initially the forum was held twice weekly from 7.00pm – 9.00pm. After about six weeks it occurred once a week and then once a fortnight, concluding in December 2020.

The forum provided the community an opportunity to explain the impact of the lockdown on the residents to the Victorian Government, City of Melbourne and other agencies. Some of the early forums were particularly heated with community members and organisations expressing anger and frustration about their treatment by government in managing the lockdown.

The Victorian Government Ministers and bureaucrats participating in the forums acknowledged the hardship caused by the hard lockdown and committed to rectifying where they could, while maintaining Covid-19 safe living conditions, the impact on residents.

There were many lessons learnt and subsequent programs initiated responded to these.

### ***High Risk Accommodation Response (HRAR)***

The High Risk Accommodation Response (HRAR) program was established by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) in October 2020 to provide catchment planning, community engagement, prevention and preparedness activities and support for outbreak response for high-risk accommodation settings, including public housing, community housing, rooming houses, supported residential services (SRS) and other sensitive settings. The program was state wide with commissioned health services working local government to create a sustainable operating model for proactively reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission and preparing for and responding early to infection or outbreaks in high-risk accommodation settings. In the City of Melbourne cohealth, the community health service provider for the municipality undertook catchment planning, audits, education, engagement and support and outbreak management planning for many settings including the North Melbourne and Flemington housing estate towers.

As a result of this planning, rapid response testing and vaccinating has occurred on the estates in recent weeks.

### ***Paving the Way Forward***

In April 2021 the Department of Families, Fairness, and Housing established the *Paving the Way Forward Program*, a program that will support communities residing in North Melbourne and Flemington public housing towers to recover and rebuild from the COVID-19 health emergency and deliver housing services that better meet the needs of residents.

This program pilots a new way of working with residents, local government and delivery partners, where residents are involved in the decisions that impact them. The program aims to improve outcomes for residents in public housing across three domains:

- **My Home** – improving property and tenancy responses to meet the needs of residents with complex needs
- **My Neighbourhood** – addressing safety and security in public housing, education and employment outcomes, liveability and diversity, and community connectedness to address the drivers of socioeconomic disadvantage
- **My Services** – establishing tailored services and connecting residents to the support services they need to live a healthy and well life.

The objectives of the Program are to deliver on five key outcomes:

- residents are involved in the key decisions that impact their home, neighbourhood and services.
- housing services are fundamentally reformed to better meet the needs of residents
- there are real employment, education and training pathways tailored to communities' needs ensuring more residents have jobs
- residents are safe and equipped to manage their health and wellbeing needs now and into the future
- barriers to access including cultural bias are acknowledged, and tailored responses and services developed

In order to deliver on the commitment to maintain and broaden resident engagement, and provide a strong evidential baseline to begin the Paving the Way Forward reform project, the Department undertook a person-centred research program to better understand the diverse context, needs and challenges of residents. As part of this research, residents were interviewed about their hopes for the future, their engagement and relationship with their neighbourhood and their interactions with services.

The key themes and insights from this research have informed the areas of focus and domains for the Paving the Way Forward program.

- **Pathways** – Depending on the journey residents are on, the expectations of their public housing experience will differ as well as the individual barriers they face and the type of support they require access to, to progress along their journey with public housing.
- **Inspired futures** – Residents want help understanding the possibilities in their future.
- **Independence** – Support needs are nuanced and residents need access to support that enables their needs to be addressed holistically for long-term success.
- **Connection** – Residents have varied experiences with community and want to get most out of the community they belong to.
- **Inclusivity and Collaboration** – Residents seek a sense of control by being included in decision making that affects their day-to-day lives.
- **Safety and protection** – Various factors influence residents' ability to feel a sense of security within the estate.
- **Liveability** – Residents need their basic living needs fulfilled in order to feel comfortable within their homes.
- **Integrity** – Residents want reassurance that the government will stand behind what they say.