

14.2 Kindergarten Expansion Reform - Consultation

SUMMARY: Manager Family and Children's Services, Janine Brown

The State Government has announced significant reform and investment in kindergarten programs across Victoria, subsidising the provision of two years of funded kindergarten for eligible 3 and 4-year-old children from 2022.

In May 2020 Council confirmed, in principle, its intention to provide two years of kindergarten continuing with 15 hours a week for 4-year-olds and commencing with five hours a week for 3-year-olds in 2022, on the basis that further investigation be undertaken to ensure this could be provided in a sustainable and efficient manner. Council will shortly consider the outcomes of this investigation, part of which is understanding the potential impact on affected employees. While the outcome of this decision will not constitute a major change to the existing kindergarten service, any change will require adjustments to the way the Knox early years workforce currently plan, support and deliver kindergarten services.

Formal consultation with staff who could potentially be affected by Council's decision is planned to take place between 26 March and 9 April 2021 and will ensure feedback from the Knox early years workforce has been heard and considered by Council.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council:

- 1. Notes it is considering whether to confirm its May 2020 in principle decision to provide 5 hours of kindergarten to eligible 3-year-old children from 2022, on the basis that the service is provided within existing infrastructure and delivered as a sustainable and efficient service from 1 January 2022; and**
- 2. Note that consultation with affected employees will now begin in accordance with Council's Enterprise Agreement No. 10 and the Early Childhood Education Agreement and feedback summarised in report presented to Council at a future meeting.**

1. INTRODUCTION

The State Government has announced significant investment in 3-year-old kindergarten programs across Victoria, to provide universal access to two years of funded kindergarten. In the Knox community, the State Government will subsidise five hours per week of 3-year-old kindergarten from 2022, increasing to 15 hours per week by 2029. This will allow local families to access two years of subsidised kindergarten before starting school, supporting all children to grow and realise their full potential.

Kindergarten forms an important part of Council's integrated early years services and programs, which support children and families to live happy, healthy lives here in Knox. There is strong evidence that two years of kindergarten provides an excellent foundation for children to learn and grow.

Council will shortly consider whether to confirm its intention to expand its current provision of 4-year-old kindergarten to include five hours of funded kindergarten for eligible 3-year-old children from Term 1, 2022. The outcome of this decision will not constitute a major change to the existing service but may require the Knox early years workforce to adjust the way they currently plan, support and deliver kindergarten services. Formal consultation with staff will be undertaken between 26 March and 9 April 2021 and officers recommend Council receive and consider a report on their feedback in April 2021.

2. DISCUSSION

Council has embarked on an extensive project to plan for the future of kindergarten in the Knox community, including exploring Council's role as a provider, and as a municipal planner to provide infrastructure and facilities, including working with the State Government in partnership with early years service providers, kindergarten stakeholders and the community to deliver the best outcomes for children and families in the municipality.

Any expansion of Council's existing kindergarten offering will require adjustments to the way Council's early years workforce currently plan, support and deliver kindergarten services.

Formal consultation with staff will be undertaken to ensure staff are aware that their feedback on the proposal and its likely impact has been heard and considered by Council. The two enterprise agreements which apply to early years staff – the Knox City Council Enterprise Agreement No. 10 and the Early Education Employees Agreement 2016, and any successor agreements, require formal staff consultation if Council is proposing to introduce a major change. While the outcome of this decision will not constitute a major change in terms of the definitions within both applicable Agreements, consultation with staff is planned in order to meet and exceed Council's legislative and industrial obligations.

3. CONSULTATION

A formal consultation period is set for 26 March to 9 April 2021. All Knox kindergarten staff will be invited to participate and informed of the consultation activities. A subsequent report outlining the themes identified by affected employees will be presented for consideration and notation by Council.

4. ENVIRONMENTAL / AMENITY ISSUES

There are no environmental or amenity issues directly associated with this report.

5. FINANCIAL & ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

There are no additional financial or economic implications directly associated with this report. Communication, consultation and engagement activities have been an ongoing component of the Communication and Engagement workstream as a key component of the Kindergarten Expansion Project (KEP). This project has been undertaken by Council, in partnership with the State Government.

6. SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The staged introduction of an additional year of funded kindergarten is a significant social reform that creates the opportunity for all children to engage in State-funded teacher-led early education and care programs in the two years prior to school.

The evidence which supports this policy direction is profound. Quality play-based learning is a powerful way to support children's learning and development, with the benefits lasting into the school years and beyond. Starting earlier and staying longer positively effects child development. It has even greater benefits for children who need extra support or are in vulnerable circumstances.

7. RELEVANCE TO KNOX COMMUNITY AND COUNCIL PLAN 2017-2021

Goal 5 - We have a strong regional economy, local employment and learning opportunities

Strategy 5.4 - Increase and strengthen local opportunities for lifelong learning, formal education pathways and skills development to improve economic capacity of the community.

Goal 8 - We have confidence in decision making

Strategy 8.2 - Enable the community to participate in a wide range of engagement activities.

8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The officers contributing to and responsible for this report have no conflicts of interest requiring disclosure under Chapter 5 of the Governance Rules of Knox City Council.

9. CONCLUSION

This report has outlined officers' plans to commence consultation with employees affected by the proposed delivery of 3-year-old kindergarten services and the likely impact of the proposal on employees, in accordance with Council's Enterprise Agreement No. 10 and the Early Childhood Education Agreement 2016 (or its successor). It recommends Council receive and consider a report which will set out any feedback provided by affected employees for Council's consideration.

10. CONFIDENTIALITY

There is no content in this report that meets the definition of confidential information from the Local Government Act 2020.

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Attachments

Nil