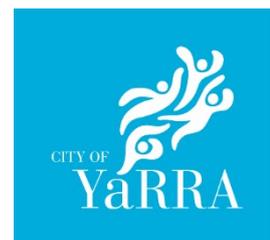


CHAS FARQUHAR PROJECT UPDATE

OFFICERS' REPORT TO COUNCIL

3 DECEMBER 2019



Purpose

1. To provide information to Council on the progress of the Chas Farquhar project and considerations for the proposed management and service model of the community hub.

Background

2. The Cubby House at 92-94 Lord St is owned by Council and leased to the Richmond Community Learning Centre (RCLC). The facility is nearing the end of its building life.
3. Assessments for Council's Property Strategy (2018) found that the future of three facilities in Richmond should be considered collectively and as a precinct, called the Chas Farquhar Complex.
4. The Chas Farquhar Complex in Richmond includes:
 - (a) The Cubby House;
 - (b) Richmond Kindergarten at 27 Duke Street; and,
 - (c) The Stables at 19-21 Duke Street.
5. The Complex has several management arrangements. In addition to the Cubby House lease, the ground floor of the Stables is also licensed to the RCLC. The Richmond Kindergarten and the top floor of The Stables are managed by Council.
6. At its meeting on 4 June, 2019, Council resolved:
 - (a) In principle to transition the Chas Farquhar Complex into an integrated community hub offering complementary services for children and families and notes that Option A provides a building program to achieve this;
 - (b) Receives a further report following stakeholder and community engagement which includes –
 - (i) An analysis of the Neighbourhood House functions and services delivered by the Richmond Community Learning Centre from 92-94 Lord St as well as the future role and financial viability of the RCLC; and
 - (ii) Details of a recommended future management model and preferred provider for the Chas Farquhar Community Hub for Council's consideration; and
 - (c) Requests that the report in (d) be provided in the fourth quarter of 2019 in order to progress the redevelopment of the Chas Farquhar Complex in the 2019-2020 financial year.
7. Option A in the 4 June 2019 report, proposed to:
 - (a) Transition the Chas Farquhar Complex into a community hub with integrated services for children and their families, and general community activities and

spaces for hire, all from modern and compliant buildings including a heritage listed building:

- (b) Redevelop 27 Duke Street (Richmond Kindergarten) to meet DDA compliance and service standards for provision of 3 and 4 year old kindergarten programs and occasional child care (type 2, longer sessions);
- (c) Provide capacity in the local area to respond to predicted increased in demand for 2 years of funded kindergarten for children aged 3 and 4 years;
- (d) Design to support continued provision of access to indoor and outdoor space for children's parties;
- (e) Design to support visiting family services such as immunisation, Maternal and Child Health, family support and supported playgroups;
- (f) Support development of sustainable and attractive venues for services and programs with a management model that supports a precinct approach to provision of services; and,
- (g) Demolish 92-94 Lord St building and include this land if required for a larger facility including external play space at 27 Duke Street.

External Consultation

- 8. To initiate the project for community consultation, officers provided information on the key issues at the Complex that need to be addressed:
 - (a) Increasing the number of kindergarten places at Richmond Kindergarten including space to provide funded 3-year-old kindergarten programs, which the Victorian Government will be introducing from 2022;
 - (b) The Cubby House building is nearing the end of its life, and relocation of current Neighbourhood House services needs to be considered;
 - (c) Improving utilisation of the community rooms at The Stables; and
 - (d) Council decided to explore transitioning the Complex into an integrated community hub which would offer a range of complementary services for children and families. As part of this, we will consider future management models for the hub.
- 9. The community was invited to share their feedback and ideas about the services, facilities and activities held at the Richmond Kindergarten, the Stables and the Cubby House.
- 10. Community members were able to share their feedback online from Monday 23 September to Monday 20 October. The consultation opportunity was promoted through:
 - (a) An online landing page on our Your Say Yarra site which provided information on the project;
 - (b) A flyer which was dropped in about 330 letterboxes in the local area;
 - (c) The flyer was also distributed at the RCLC and through the kindergarten;
 - (d) An SMS was sent to kindergarten families and families registered for a future child care or kindergarten place in Richmond via Whispir which included a link to the consultation page;
 - (e) A link to the consultation page was sent via email to individuals and groups who had previously booked The Stables community rooms and similar facilities in the area; and

- (f) An email link was shared with Maternal and Child Health, Yarraberg Children's Centre (Richmond) and the RCLC to share with their families, service users and networks.
11. The consultation page was viewed 464 times during the consultation period and the average view time was around 6 minutes – this is much higher than the average 2 minutes that people spent on other pages on Council's website.
 12. We received 36 responses to the online feedback form. Community feedback suggested that popular elements of the current activities and services on the site involved:
 - (a) Hiring for children's birthday parties and events;
 - (b) The large outdoor space at the facility with grassed area;
 - (c) The playgroups and occasional care, including the friendly and helpful staff;
 - (d) The community feel of the facilities; and
 - (e) Kindergarten service.
 13. There was a broad range of ideas for new services and activities to be held at the Hub, as well as a strong desire for current activities to be continued. General feedback included:
 - (a) Continue currently running services, including the party hire, playgroups, occasional care and kindergarten;
 - (b) Upgrade and improve the buildings and facilities;
 - (c) Ensure there is still a large outdoor space for children's activities;
 - (d) Extending hours of services that are already available at the complex;
 - (e) A broader range of activities specifically for young children (babies and toddlers); and
 - (f) Ensuring that the outdoor space remains and its natural feel is retained.
 14. The project concept includes expanding the capacity of the Richmond Kindergarten and achieving DDA compliance. Early childhood teachers are teaching kindergarten children about the importance of inclusion and equality and some children attending the service have specific assistance needs.
 15. Officers also consulted with 27 children attending the Richmond Kindergarten to hear their views about the kindergarten service and facility. Children told us that all kinds of kids come to kindergarten including big tall kids, kids who can walk, kids with moving help (wheelchair); kids who know different words including those who don't speak English or use sign language [Auslan].
 16. Children's favourite things at the Kindergarten include:
 - (a) Outside space: noisy spaces, space to run, places to climb, swings, water play, doing hard things, mud and quiet spaces;
 - (b) Gardens: things you can use, being able to get to the plants, things you can pick, no plastic or brightly coloured stuff; food plants; and
 - (c) Inside space: drawing, painting, sitting on the floor, learning & practising; dress ups; building, learning new things, pretending, places to keep things, sitting at tables, messy play games.

Richmond Community Learning Centre (RCLC)

17. Since 4 June 2019, officers have formally met with Committee of Management representatives and Coordinator from the RCLC on a number of occasions to discuss the project and consult on key matters. Further opportunities occurred through individual contacts with officers via email and telephone.
18. A consultation with representatives from RCLC's Committee of Management and Coordinator was held on 28 October. The proposed questions were provided to the RCLC beforehand to ensure they had time to consider an organisational response to the matters raised.
19. At the consultative meeting, RCLC outlined their vision for the Hub and their proposed role.

Internal Consultation (One Yarra)

20. An update on the project and consideration of community contacts and information was sought from Children's Services, Community Partnerships, Governance and Arts, Culture & Venues teams.
21. The Stables is currently closed for structural works and prior to temporary closure, utilisation was low. Improving utilisation and meeting community need is one of the key drivers for this project.
 - (a) Despite promotion of the top floor of The Stables for community hire and use, utilisation was low because of amenity issues. For example, a lack of insulation in the ceiling caused the top floor to be extremely hot, and other issues included insufficient air conditioning, poor toilet and kitchen facilities and limited street parking; and
 - (b) Works are currently in progress that will address the structural and some of the amenity problems with the building.
22. Utilisation and access to community spaces for venues like The Stables was explored with Venues and Events, who advised that they received few requests for site visits when the venue was hireable. Sometimes potential hirers are more likely to want to review all the Richmond venues (The Stables, Loughnan Hall and Richmond Seniors) before making a booking.
23. Venues and Events suggest that there are system and process improvements in progress and under consideration to improve access to venues and to offer a better bookings process.
24. Council could also consider alternative management of The Stables as a community venue. Council's Family, Youth and Children's Services (FYC) branch manages the Connie Benn Centre, which includes responsibility for bookings of community spaces at the centre. This includes allocation of spaces to stakeholders for programs and activities and managing community hirers with full responsibility for bookings time allocations and cleaning.
25. The spaces for hire at Connie Benn Centre are promoted as part of the suite of rooms offered by Council for hire and the FYC branch uses the same bookings system as Venues and Events (who manage most of Council's community venues for hire).

Financial Implications

26. The Chas Farquhar Hub proposal does not directly impact on the level of financial support currently provided by Council to the RCLC for their neighbourhood house activities.

Economic Implications

27. Investment in early childhood has significant economic benefits as it provides employment and enables parents / guardians to work, study and support family and personal interests while their children are attending kindergarten
28. There is evidence clearly linking kindergarten attendance to improved student results in numeracy, reading and spelling in primary school. In the long term, a longer duration of early childhood education and care is linked with improved academic outcomes for children.

Sustainability Implications

29. The project will include sustainable features in the design with the aim of optimising energy and water savings to reduce Council's overall environmental footprint.

Social Implications

30. There is an opportunity through this project to develop an integrated hub in readiness for future provision of 2 years of funded kindergarten programs for 3 and 4 year old children. This approach would in essence, future proof the service and align with the policy agenda of the Victorian government and Council.
31. Integrated hubs provide a consistent level of service and support to families to reduce barriers to accessing service. Integrated hub management provides a more efficient use of resources through removal of duplication and shared approach to supporting families with children.
32. Achieving DDA compliance at the upgraded Richmond Kindergarten will provide a modern learning environment for all children accessing services at that facility. The project proposes provision of kindergarten and occasional care at the upgraded Richmond Kindergarten. This will support children in occasional care to access high quality facility and learning program overseen by early childhood teachers. It will also enable families to enrol with the same provider.
33. Adequate provision of community infrastructure is essential so as to avoid costs associated with disadvantaged, disengaged and isolated communities. It plays a vital role in the social life of communities contributing to their sense of belonging and safety.

Human Rights Implications

34. Increasing participation and inclusion is consistent with the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006. Council has a responsibility to meet its obligations through appropriate and accessible community infrastructure. Residents and service users were invited to contribute their views for the first stage of the project. More community consultations are planned for future stages of the project.

Communications with CALD Communities Implications

35. No implications are considered in this report. The project has a community communications and engagement component for each stage.

Council Plan, Strategy and Policy Implications

36. This project approach follows a review of all Council properties considered in an assessment for the Property Strategy (2018) that identified the buildings in the Chas Farquhar Complex as a precinct and for further review.
37. The project is informed by the direction of Strategic Community Infrastructure Framework that asserts a Yarra approach in which importance is placed upon getting more out of existing infrastructure. This approach includes developing integrated services and facilities to deliver strong community benefits and maximise value to the community.

Other Issues

38. Council has directed officers to provide further information about the neighbourhood house program at Lord Street (Cubby House) so it could better understand the service provision and potential impacts of this project.
39. The community hub approach endorsed in principle by Council at its meeting on 4 June 2019 arose from consideration of the capital works budget and how to get more out of existing infrastructure. This issue and the fact that the Cubby House is nearing the end of its life was included in the Have Your Say project page on Council's website.
40. The project consultation page was viewed 464 times during the consultation period and the average view time was around 6 minutes – this is much higher than the average 2 minutes that people spent on other pages on our site. Combined with feedback from the community survey this suggests that the Cubby House situation is understood by the community.
41. The Cubby House is utilised on weekday mornings for occasional care (4 mornings) and playgroup (1 morning):
 - (a) RCLC provides an occasional care service offering 15 places (licensed for 17 places) with an average of 40 places filled weekly over the past year (estimated 60% utilisation); and
 - (b) Families may enrol on a term or casual basis. 25 families are currently enrolled on a term basis and 10 families are enrolled on a casual basis.
42. The weekly playgroup run by the RCLC at the Cubby House has 20+ families attending regularly.
43. The weekend party hire is highly used, primarily for children's parties (95%). In 2018 there were over 60 parties with over 2,400 people attending the venue. Most hirers were local residents (68%) and from neighbouring suburbs (21%).
44. RCLC also schedule on an ad hoc basis, messy play activities such as a weekend session for all families with children and these events are well attended.
45. Further information about the neighbourhood house program delivered from Lord St (Cubby House) shows that whilst this project will impact on the program, there is also continued opportunity for the RCLC to continue delivery of programs in the new Hub, should they choose to do so.
46. It is unknown to what extent the provision of two years of funded kindergarten will impact upon demand for childcare but it seems reasonable to assert that demand for child care will be significantly impacted.
 - (a) Families with concession cards will eventually be able to access free kindergarten program of 15 hours in the two years prior to commencing primary school.
 - (b) The introduction of universal access to 4 year kindergarten changed demand for child care. There is far less demand for child care places in the year immediately before school and we would expect the introduction of funded 2 years of preschool to continue this trend.
47. Information from the community consultation undertaken in September – October suggests that the community feel, continued provision of current services and outdoor space is important. For children in particular providing a variety of indoor and outdoor learning and play spaces is important.
48. The detailed schematic design will provide further opportunity to consider how the different service and program functions including outdoor spaces will work together.

Next steps

49. Regardless of the direction Council determines to take on the service model and future management of the Hub, the upgrade building works are currently scheduled to commence in the second half of 2020.
50. Those works will require closure of The Cubby House as the area will be part of the construction site
51. Decanting and transition of services and activities currently delivered by the RCLC has to be considered in the next stage of project planning and execution..
52. Further consideration should also be given to the timing of the demolition of the Cubby House particularly if part of the current site could be incorporated into the outdoor space design for the Hub.

Conclusion

53. The driver for considering a community hub approach at the Chas Farquhar site is to develop integrated services and facilities to deliver strong community benefits and to maximise value to the community. The proposal also recognises the significant current issues facing the Cubby House building and the opportunity for integration of similar service offers in Richmond.
54. Community feedback suggests support for improved provision in the proposed Hub for the Chas Farquhar precinct whilst keeping all the community components and services.