

**ITEM 3. COMMUNITY SERVICES GRANT – REDFERN LEGAL CENTRE – EXTENSION OF MILLERS POINT TENANT SUPPORT****FILE NO: S116523****SUMMARY**

On 19 March 2014, the NSW Government announced its decision to sell all public housing in Millers Point and The Rocks over a two-year period. The decision impacts close to 400 residents living in properties owned by the NSW Government and managed by the NSW Land and Housing Corporation.

On 7 April 2014, Council resolved to approve the allocation of up to \$100,000 in cash to Redfern Legal Centre over a 12-month period for tenant support, advocacy and advice services to public housing tenants impacted by the sale.

Redfern Legal Service commenced services in Millers Point in April 2014. Since commencement, lawyers and support staff have conducted public information sessions, produced fact sheets, developed sample letters for use by tenants and participated in a range of community meetings and events. The work of Redfern Legal Centre has focused on the provision of legal information to ensure that tenants understand their rights and obligations. To date, Redfern Legal Service has advised 130 tenants and their families, conducted 550 advices in person or over the phone and attended 80 interviews between the NSW Department of Family and Community Services and tenants.

Recent advice provided by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services indicates that 50 per cent of tenants in public housing in Millers Point and The Rocks have now been relocated to alternative accommodation elsewhere in Sydney and regional NSW. The intention of the NSW Department of Family and Community Services is to relocate the remaining 50 per cent of tenants within the coming 12 months to enable the sale program to be completed within the two-year period previously announced by the State Government.

Redfern Legal Service has sought additional funding from the City of \$50,000 in cash to continue to provide tenant support services for an additional six-month period from May to November 2015. They are seeking this funding to ensure that the same type of advocacy and advice services that are currently in place can continue to be provided for the remaining 50 per cent of tenants who have yet to relocate.

The request for funding has been assessed against the objectives of the City's Community Services Grants Program and a cash grant of \$50,000 is recommended.

All figures in this report are exclusive of GST.

**RECOMMENDATION**

It is resolved that:

- (A) Council approve a cash grant of \$50,000 (excluding GST) to Redfern Legal Centre for the extension of Millers Point tenant support and advocacy services from May to November 2015; and

- (B) authority be delegated to the Chief Executive Officer to negotiate, execute and administer a funding agreement with Redfern Legal Centre for the Millers Point tenant support and advocacy services.

**ATTACHMENTS**

Nil.

**BACKGROUND**

1. Redfern Legal Centre was established in 1977 and was the first community legal centre in NSW. The service was established by a group of lawyers, students, academics, social workers and activists who were outraged at the injustice created by the lack of affordable legal services for disadvantaged and marginalised people.
2. Since 1996, Redfern Legal Centre has been funded to provide advice, advocacy and representation to tenants in the City of Sydney Local Government Area (LGA).
3. Currently, Redfern Legal Centre employs the equivalent of 3.6 full-time members of staff to operate the tenancy service. These full-time employees are supplemented by students and volunteers.
4. The City LGA has substantially higher levels of public and social housing than other local government areas, and high numbers of refugees, recently arrived migrants and international students. Many of these residents are often on low incomes, which prevent them from accessing paid legal services. Many also have difficulties dealing with landlords, property managers and other agencies associated with resolving tenant conflict due to language or cultural barriers. As a result, requests for service from Redfern Legal Centre often exceed their ability to respond with existing staffing levels.
5. Redfern Legal Centre has been a recipient of several grants from the City in previous years for specific projects relating to public and social housing tenants, boarding houses, international students and tenant advocacy work, and is currently a tenant in Redfern Town Hall under the City's Accommodation Grants Program. The value of the forgone rent for Redfern Legal Centre's tenancy in the current financial year is \$59,189.
6. In March 2014, the NSW Government announced the sale of all public and social housing in Millers Point and The Rocks, including properties located in Gloucester Street and The Sirius building. The sale program is intended to take two years to complete and all existing tenants who are eligible for public or social housing will be accommodated in alternative premises.
7. To date, approximately 50 per cent of impacted tenants living in the area have been relocated elsewhere in NSW through a relocation process administered by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services and overseen by Dr Owen Donald, an independent facilitator appointed by the Minister for Family and Community Services.
8. Whilst some tenants have been willing to move elsewhere and are satisfied with their new living arrangements, many of the impacted tenants do not want to move. City officer's delivering services in Millers Point and The Rocks, and support agencies including Redfern Legal Centre and the Tenants Union, have reported significant levels of distress amongst tenants who do not want to relocate because of a long term commitment to the area and their well-established connections to neighbours and support services.

9. Redfern Legal Centre has been actively providing support, information and advice to impacted tenants since April 2014 through funding provided by the City. In the last 12 months, they have assisted 130 tenants and their families. The Centre currently has a caseload of 75 tenants and their families, 70 per cent of whom are over the age of 60 years; 50 per cent of whom have a mental or physical disability; and 20 per cent of whom come from a non-English speaking background.
10. Whilst some tenants have reported the relocation process as being well-managed, many others have reported the program as difficult. Some of the key issues reported by tenants and support agencies in regards to the relocation process have been:
  - (a) some tenants, whilst eligible at the time they moved into their existing home, no longer satisfy the criteria for public or social housing currently used by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services and are unable to secure private rental accommodation;
  - (b) some tenants have felt obliged to participate in the relocation process and accept housing that is offered to them as they don't feel they have any other choice;
  - (c) some tenants have been separated from their neighbours and friends with whom they have long standing connections and rely upon for domestic assistance;
  - (d) some tenants, whilst achieving improved physical access through their new home, have become more socially isolated because the home is not well serviced by accessible public transport; and
  - (e) some tenants have reported detrimental impacts to their health including stress, anxiety and depression as a result of uncertainty over their future.
11. Redfern Legal Centre has provided quarterly updates to the City in relation to the delivery of tenant support services. Senior City officers have met with the NSW Department of Family and Community Services Sydney Regional Director, and the current and former independent facilitator, to discuss the sale program and tenant relocation.
12. There have been a number of tangible benefits provided to impacted tenants through the services provided by Redfern Legal Service including:
  - (a) clarity for tenants who were confused about their rights and obligations;
  - (b) resolution of issues associated with eligibility for new housing;
  - (c) relocation of non-eligible tenants to alternative forms of housing including affordable housing;
  - (d) secondary relocation of tenants who were moved to housing that didn't satisfy their physical health requirements; and
  - (e) resolution of long-standing issues between tenants and the NSW Department of Family and Community Services in relation to lease obligations or fines.

13. Redfern Legal Centre has requested additional support from the City of \$50,000 in cash to enable the continuation of tenant support services for an additional six months from the expiration of the existing funding agreement at the end of April this year.
14. Funding will be used to cover costs associated with providing legal officers to support tenants and the development of information and advice resources to augment information that has been prepared to date.
15. Whilst it is currently unclear as to when all of the impacted tenants will be relocated from the area, the City understands that the Department of Family and Community Services is still working towards completed asset sales by April 2016. To enable this to occur, it is likely that all tenants will be relocated prior to this time.
16. Redfern Legal Centre has indicated that without additional funding, they would only be in a position to service the needs of 10 per cent of the remaining impacted tenants. They have also indicated that many of the remaining tenants have a range of complex health and social issues, which has delayed their earlier move and will require more intense case management support.
17. The application for support from Redfern Legal Centre has been assessed against the aims and objectives of the City's Community Services Grants program by a panel of senior City officers, and support of \$50,000 in cash, consistent with the request, is supported.

## KEY IMPLICATIONS

### Strategic Alignment – Sustainable Sydney 2030

18. *Sustainable Sydney 2030* identifies a target of 7.5 per cent of all housing in the City LGA to be public or social housing by 2030. Currently, approximately 10 per cent of residential dwellings in the City LGA are public or social housing, which represents a decline on previous years. The reduction of an additional 293 public housing dwellings in Millers Point and The Rocks means that a minimum of 800 additional public or social housing dwellings will be required between now and 2030 to achieve the City's Sustainable Sydney 2030 goals.
19. In March this year, the City engaged with leaders from the government, not-for-profit and private sectors to address the challenges and opportunities associated with the chronic shortage of affordable housing in the City LGA through a Summit and City Talk. Whilst the future directions for the City in this area will be addressed in a Housing Discussion Paper for consideration by Council later this year, one clear direction articulated by a range of stakeholders at the Summit was the need for increased rights and longer and more secure tenure for tenants.

### Organisational Impact

20. The City provides a range of programs and services to the residents of Millers Point and The Rocks including a gym, out of school hours care and vacation care program, meals on wheels, community transport, recreation programs, community events, social support, centre based meals and access to computers, printers and the internet.

21. Since the announcement of the asset sale, the City has provided trained social and community workers for extended weekday hours at the Harry Jensen Centre in Millers Point. It has provided access to the Harry Jensen Centre and Abraham Mott Hall to local community organisations and support agencies to assist tenants. These services are reviewed regularly to ensure they are responsive and will continue to be monitored in the coming months and amended accordingly based on need.

#### **Social / Cultural / Community**

22. Without the support of Redfern Legal Centre, the majority of tenants impacted by the sale of properties in Millers Point and The Rocks would be unable to obtain independent legal advice to assist them with the relocation process due to language barriers or lack of financial means. The continuation of the tenant advice and support services will ensure that these vulnerable members of the City's community will have access to advice that will assist them in decision making and negotiating with their landlord to achieve fair and appropriate housing outcomes.

#### **BUDGET IMPLICATIONS**

23. There is unexpended funding available within the Grants and Sponsorship budget to accommodate the \$40,000 component of this funding required in the current financial year. Provision for the remaining \$10,000 has been included in the draft Grants and Sponsorship budget for 2015/16.

#### **RELEVANT LEGISLATION**

24. Section 356 of the NSW Local Government Act 1993.

#### **CRITICAL DATES / TIME FRAMES**

25. Redfern Legal Centre's current funding for tenant support expires in April 2015. The proposed extension of funding will enable tenant support services to continue until 30 November 2015.

#### **ANN HOBAN**

Director City Life

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