

Public Exhibition - Draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines

File No: S111435

Summary

Mobile voluntary services operate across the City of Sydney local area providing food, showers and other services to vulnerable communities. The City recognises and values the contribution made by mobile voluntary services within the inner city in supporting people experiencing homelessness, food insecurity and disadvantage.

In 2007, Council adopted the City's Mobile Free Food Services Policy and Voluntary Accord to better coordinate the provision of mobile voluntary services operating in the local area, and minimise issues that can be associated with their operation, such as vermin and noise.

In December 2016, Council requested a ten-year review of the Mobile Free Food Services Policy and Voluntary Accord. Since that time, City staff have provided briefings to Council on progress on three occasions, 30 April 2018, 3 September 2018 and 4 November 2019. City staff have been working with a range of government authorities and stakeholders to develop a collaborative approach to the provision of mobile voluntary services.

To assist in the review of the Mobile Free Food Services Policy and Voluntary Accord, the City conducted a study of mobile voluntary services and service users across the City's local area. The findings of this research were reported to Council in November 2019 as an attachment to the draft Homelessness Action Plan, which was recently on exhibition.

The research supported the development of the attached draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines, which are proposed to replace the existing Mobile Free Food Services Policy and Voluntary Accord following a period of public exhibition.

During April and May 2019, researchers interviewed 21 mobile voluntary service operators, and 112 people who access these services. The research identified that mobile voluntary services play an important and valuable role for the community, with most service users accessing the services on most days, and most rating the services highly.

The research found only 47 per cent of the service users who completed the survey were currently experiencing homelessness. Of those, 32 per cent were sleeping rough, and 15 per cent were staying in crisis accommodation, emergency temporary accommodation, or with family and/or friends. The remaining 46 per cent of the users of mobile voluntary services who were surveyed reported living in social housing, and use the services for connection to community, and to assist with access to fresh food and a range of services.

The attached draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines were developed in collaboration and consultation with NSW government agencies and local homelessness service providers. A program of education, redirection and advocacy will support the implementation of the draft policy and guidelines to improve quality of service delivery.

Subject to approval by Council, the draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines will be placed on public exhibition for a minimum of 28 days to allow an opportunity for the community, along with service providers and other stakeholders, to provide feedback.

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) Council endorse the draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines, as shown at Attachments A and B to the subject report, for public exhibition for a minimum of 28 days.
- (B) authority be delegated to the Chief Executive Officer to undertake minor editorial amendments prior to the exhibition of the draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines.

Attachments

Attachment A. Draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy

Attachment B. Draft Mobile Voluntary Services Guidelines

Background

1. Mobile voluntary services operate across the City of Sydney local government area providing food, showers and other services to vulnerable communities. These services have been operating in the City for many years, and have historically been delivered from vans and other vehicles.
2. The services are operated by predominantly volunteer and/or faith-based community groups. These groups are driven by compassion and a goal to provide vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, including people experiencing homelessness, with sustenance and opportunities for human engagement.
3. Mobile voluntary services respond to a perceived need and the desire to give their volunteers a chance to provide support to vulnerable people. Only some of the services operating in the local area are currently linked to formal social services, though most are well utilised by the most vulnerable in our community.
4. On 13 February 2019, the Lord Mayor and Premier of NSW signed a joint commitment, along with the leaders of major non-government organisations, to join the Institute of Global Homelessness Vanguard Cities movement.
5. The partners to the collaboration committed to reduce rough sleeping in the City of Sydney by 25 per cent by 2020. The collaboration also committed to reducing street sleeping across NSW by 50 per cent by 2025. These targets will be achieved through a range of interventions and programs, and the provision of affordable housing and pathways to housing.
6. Whilst rough sleeping remains an issue in the inner city, the City recognises and values the contribution made by mobile voluntary services in supporting people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, food insecurity and disadvantage.
7. There has long been, and remains, a lack of effective collaboration between mobile voluntary services, the City and partners, with a corresponding lack of clear regulatory or legislative instruments that uniformly apply to the activities of mobile voluntary services. For example, the Food Act 2003 does not apply to mobile voluntary services, as they do not sell food, but rather provide it as a charitable act.
8. As a landowner and placemaker, the City is uniquely placed to bring together mobile voluntary services, agencies and partners to improve the response to vulnerable groups, and improve the amenity and safety for all people using the public domain.
9. In October 2007, Council adopted the current Mobile Free Food Services Policy and Voluntary Accord. The policy and accord were developed to assist in improving coordination of the mobile voluntary services operating in our local area, and to minimise issues, which can be associated with their operation.
10. Since 2007, there has been a significant increase in the number of mobile voluntary services operating within the City's local area – from nine in 2007 to more than 40 in 2019. This is not linked to an increase in the number of people requiring services.
11. With the increase in the number of mobile voluntary services operating in the area, there has been a rise in the number of reported amenity issues, resident and community complaints, and concerns associated with the operation of some mobile voluntary services.

12. Reported issues and concerns include:
 - (a) excessive noise from the operation of services;
 - (b) rubbish, waste and littering, including dumping of food, clothing, blankets and bedding, which attracts rats and other vermin;
 - (c) inappropriate, unsafe or unauthorised use of public places, including illegal parking, and use of outdoor cooking facilities;
 - (d) instances of undignified giving, such as waking people to feed them, leaving food at people's side while they sleep, and requesting photographs from service users;
 - (e) concerns about the provision of unsafe food to vulnerable service users, many of whom have compromised health or immune systems;
 - (f) operation of uncoordinated service delivery that is not targeted to need, and
 - (g) missed opportunities to link service users with specialist support.
13. On 12 December 2016, Council resolved to request that the Chief Executive Officer initiate a ten-year review of the Mobile Free Food Services Policy and Voluntary Accord, in part to address these concerns.
14. City staff have provided briefings to Council on progress of this review on three occasions, 30 April 2018, 3 September 2018 and 4 November 2019.
15. Throughout this process, City staff have been working collaboratively with a range of government authorities and stakeholders in designing a collaborative approach to working with mobile voluntary services. Stakeholders include NSW Department of Communities and Justice, NSW Police, NSW Health, NSW Food Authority, St Vincent's Homeless Health, and Homelessness NSW.
16. To successfully develop a collaborative approach to mobile voluntary services, and provide a robust review of the Mobile Free Food Services Policy and Voluntary Accord, the City and partners identified that research was needed to provide an evidence base and shared understanding of the needs and circumstances of the people accessing mobile voluntary services to respond to the issues, concerns and opportunities raised by community, partners, mobile voluntary services and service users.
17. In designing the scope of the research project and a joint approach to engaging with mobile voluntary services, City staff have been working collaboratively with government authorities and stakeholders.
18. During 2019, the City conducted a study of mobile voluntary services and service users across the City's Local Government Area. The findings of this research were reported to Council in November 2019 as an attachment to the draft Homelessness Action Plan, which was recently on exhibition.
19. The research supported the development of the attached draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines, which will replace the existing Mobile Free Food Services Policy and Voluntary Accord following a proposed period of public exhibition.

20. The research also informed the development of a planned program of engagement and engagement with mobile voluntary services to support the implementation of the draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines, pending Council approval.
21. The research:
 - (a) identified the services operating, including times of operation, frequency and location, the type/s of support offered;
 - (b) investigated the reasons charities are motivated to provide services, and;
 - (c) provided an overview of the circumstances of people who access the services, and how they would like to receive support in future.
22. All known services operating in the City of Sydney local government area were approached to take part in the research, with approximately half agreeing to take part.
23. During April and May 2019, researchers interviewed 21 services (out of approximately 40 to 50 services), and 112 people who access the mobile voluntary services.
24. Services and service users were interviewed across five key hotspot locations over a spread of days and times that intersected with peak operation of mobile voluntary services.
25. The research identified that:
 - (a) mobile voluntary services serve an important role in the community:
 - (i) most organisations are providing food, along with other free items such as blankets, clothing, toiletries and books;
 - (ii) the 21 services interviewed deliver approximately 4,400 confirmed occasions of service per week, for example a meal, a blanket or a shower;
 - (iii) the majority of service users rated the services highly, with over half saying they use the services on most days, and;
 - (iv) 83 per cent of service users are happy accessing food on the street.
 - (b) 46 per cent of the service users who completed the survey reported they were living in social housing. The remaining 47 per cent reported they were currently experiencing homelessness. Of those who reported they were homeless, 32 per cent were sleeping rough, while 15 per cent reported staying in crisis accommodation, emergency temporary accommodation, or with family and/or friends.
 - (c) the research found people use mobile voluntary services for a wide variety of reasons. These include not having enough money for food, being unable to access appropriate kitchen facilities, or not having sufficient cooking skills to cook for themselves, through to wanting to connect with friends and community.
 - (d) users of mobile voluntary services are vulnerable and financially disadvantaged, with 90 per cent reporting they were not in paid employment at the time of the survey, and 87 per cent receiving a government benefit.

- (e) the research found 78 per cent of service users reported at least one vulnerability factor such as mental health, disability, or drug and alcohol misuse.
 - (f) the research also found mobile voluntary service providers have low levels of first aid and food safety training and can find it challenging to manage anti-social behaviour. In addition, a lack of coordination of services has resulted in overcrowding of services, and service clusters at certain times and in some locations.
 - (g) service users reported they experience a number of issues associated with the services including poor food quality and a lack of diverse food options, long wait times, poor food hygiene, and security concerns.
26. The research provides an evidence base that has informed the development of the attached draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and accompanying set of guidelines to ensure the efforts of valuable mobile voluntary services are going where they are most needed.
27. The draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy outlines the City's role in working with mobile voluntary services and managing public places, the legislative and regulatory framework and service delivery principles mobile voluntary services should operate within.
28. If the draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines are adopted by Council following public consultation, this will rescind the existing Mobile Free Food Services Policy and Voluntary Accord from 2007.
29. The draft Mobile Voluntary Services Guidelines also set out the City's expectations of mobile voluntary services operating in our local area under the following headings:
- (a) service delivery targeted to need;
 - (b) specialist support and safety;
 - (c) safe and nutritious food, and;
 - (d) responsible use of public places.
30. The draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines were developed in collaboration and consultation with a range of stakeholders and partner organisations, and will provide clarity for mobile voluntary service operators, and service users, of the City's expectations regarding the operation of mobile voluntary services. This will help to improve outcomes for service providers and service users, and reduce issues and complaints.
31. The City will continue to work closely with mobile voluntary service providers to ensure they understand, and are engaged with, the findings of the research, and the City's approach.
32. Public exhibition of the draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines will ensure the documents meet the needs of all stakeholders. Service providers in particular will be encouraged to provide feedback during the exhibition period.

33. Once the policy and guidelines are finalised, the City will undertake a program of education and engagement with mobile voluntary services, stakeholders and partners, relevant organisations, businesses, residents, and land owners and managers to support the implementation of the draft policy and guidelines to achieve the following outcomes:
- (a) improved coordination of services, targeted to need, (which may result in some services electing to operate in areas of need outside the City of Sydney local government area);
 - (b) improved safety standards and linking of service users to appropriate support and referral;
 - (c) improved food safety practices by service operators;
 - (d) improved nutrition for service users, and;
 - (e) a reduction in current issues including waste generation, inappropriate waste disposal (and related vermin), illegal parking, obstruction of footpaths and noise.
34. The planned program of engagement and education will feature:
- (a) interagency meetings hosted by the City to discuss relevant issues and to improve coordination and service delivery;
 - (b) training sessions provided to mobile voluntary services and their volunteers on topics to improve food safety, service standards and volunteer safety;
 - (c) place-based interventions to improve service coordination in hot spot areas and to redirect services to areas of need;
 - (d) potential technological solutions that enable mobile voluntary service providers and service users to understand where and when services will be operating in real time e.g. an online interactive map on the City's corporate website that depicts where and when mobile voluntary services are operating;
 - (e) working with partners to advocate for the Food Act 2003 to be updated to cover the activities of mobile voluntary services and thereby ensure service users have access to safe food, and;
 - (f) working with individual services to assist them in finding alternative ways to offer support to vulnerable communities, including food programs offered closer to home for those people who are housed, and programs that encourage connection with neighbours and the local community.
35. The City is also working with partners including FoodLab and TAFE NSW to develop a range of hire options, food programs and food based education programs to be offered through City Community Centres and venues for hire to support people without access to appropriate cooking facilities, nutritional information or cooking skills.

Key Implications

Strategic Alignment - Sustainable Sydney 2030 Vision

36. Sustainable Sydney 2030 is a vision for the sustainable development of the City to 2030 and beyond. It includes 10 strategic directions to guide the future of the City, as well as 10 targets against which to measure progress. The draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines articulate how the City will meet the following strategic directions and objectives:
- (a) Direction 5 - A Lively and Engaging City Centre;
 - (i) 5.1 The city centre has safe and attractive public spaces for people to meet, rest and walk through at all times of the day or night: Cleanliness, safety and high levels of amenity are a feature of the city centre;
 - (b) Direction 6 - Vibrant Local Communities and Economies;
 - (i) 6.4 There is equitable access to community facilities and places, parks and recreational facilities to support wellbeing in daily life: Residents and visitors can enjoy quality places and spaces where they can take part in cultural life and build connections with people from a range of backgrounds;
 - (ii) 6.5 The community has the capacity, confidence and resilience to adapt to changing circumstances: Communities naturally pull together and support each other in times of change and of stress and crisis;
 - (c) Direction 10 - Implementation through Effective Governance and Partnerships;
 - (i) 10.6 Strategic partners and collaborators support the delivery of Sustainable Sydney 2030: Collaboration and integration occurs with federal, state and other local governments for the benefit of our city.

Organisational Impact

37. In the 2019/20 financial year a new Senior Social Programs Officer position was funded to work with mobile voluntary services and promote the guideline principles. This funding was allocated within existing resources.

Social / Cultural / Community

38. Mobile voluntary services are an important element within the range of services provided to people facing disadvantage, including people experiencing homelessness in the City of Sydney. Of the service users surveyed during the research period 86 per cent rated highly, the services provided by mobile voluntary services.
39. The City encourages people to do something good for their community through volunteering. Volunteering can assist people to make social connections, reduce social isolation and improve self-esteem.
40. Provision of information, along with improved education and engagement will ensure mobile voluntary services are delivered in line with best practice, going to areas of most need, and providing the best possible support to people facing disadvantage, including those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and those living in social housing without access to appropriate cooking facilities, or without appropriate cooking skills.

41. Improvements in service delivery practices will ensure volunteers working with mobile voluntary services will have an improved experience, and see enhanced outcomes for service recipients. Improved service delivery practices will also minimise instances of service duplication and overcrowding of services, enable services to connect service users with appropriate supports, limit waste generation (and associated vermin), and reduce instances of illegal parking, obstructed footpaths and noise, especially in high pedestrian volume and residential areas.

Environmental

42. Each year, the City removes from the public domain a substantial amount of unwanted and abandoned items such as food waste, blankets, clothing, mattresses and other goods. Many of these items are left by mobile voluntary services, or are unwanted items provided to service users.
43. The dumping of food, clothing, blankets and bedding attracts bird life and vermin, creating unsanitary conditions for people sleeping rough, residents, businesses and visitors. Abandoned items must be disposed of by the City.
44. The draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines promote the responsible use of public places by explicitly stating that mobile voluntary services must not litter or dump rubbish, waste or leave donations of goods in public spaces.
45. Whilst the sustainability outcomes for this project are primarily in the area of social sustainability, there are substantial potential co-benefits, such as a reduction in the amount of waste generated (including food waste), reduced food miles, and associated emissions.
46. There are also opportunities for the City to work with service providers to reduce or eliminate the use of single-use packaging, noting this will need to be considered in association with goals of ensuring improved food safety for those using these services.

Economic

47. Improving the amenity of the public domain will assist in maintaining Sydney's reputation as a welcoming, safe and inclusive place to live, visit and do business.
48. Working with mobile voluntary service providers to reduce waste, and pass on excess, or unwanted food from cafés and restaurants is an example of the circular economy.
49. Moving towards a more circular economy could deliver benefits such as reducing pressure on the environment, improving the security of the supply of raw materials, increasing competitiveness, stimulating innovation, and boosting economic growth.

Budget Implications

50. There are sufficient funds in the City's operating expenditure budget for 2019/20 and future year forward estimates to continue to provide the existing level of City support for Mobile Voluntary Services.
51. Any opportunities for significant additional investment in major initiatives will be subject to budget processes and Council approval.

Relevant Legislation

52. Local Government Act 1993:

- (a) under Section 68 and Section 626 it is an offence to undertake certain activities without an approval; and
- (b) under Section 632 it is an offence to act otherwise than in accordance with signage erected by Council in public parks.

53. Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997:

Under the Protection of the Environment Act 1997, the City has the authority to issue fines for littering or dumping where it is demonstrated that items are 'waste' and have a 'harmful element'.

54. Road Transport Act 2013; Road Transport Legislation Amendment (Penalties and Other Sanctions) Act 2018:

Under this legislation, the City has the authority to issue fines for illegal parking or other breaches of road rules.

55. Work Health and Safety Act 2011.

56. Work Health and Safety Regulation 2017:

In some circumstances, work health and safety laws apply to volunteers and volunteer associations.

57. Food Act 2003

Currently does not apply to these services because they are not selling food. Advocacy is proposed to extend the operation of this legislation to mobile voluntary services.

Public Consultation

58. The draft Mobile Voluntary Services Policy and Guidelines builds on the City's current strategies, plans and policies, and draws on day-to-day experience, working with partner agencies, networks and community members to support those accessing mobile voluntary services in our local area.

59. To identify immediate and longer term priorities and desired outcomes, the City:

- (a) reviewed the existing City of Sydney Mobile Free Food Services Policy and Voluntary Accord;
- (b) analysed research data, and existing City of Sydney data and trends relating to customer complaints and concerns;
- (c) consulted with providers of mobile voluntary services, and users of those services;

- (d) consulted with a range of stakeholders, including residents, City staff, and partner organisations including NSW Department of Communities and Justice, NSW Police, NSW Health, NSW Food Authority, St Vincent's Homeless Health, and Homelessness NSW.
 - (e) reviewed best-practice approaches to the provision of mobile voluntary services, and engaged with City staff members, and organisations, including government agencies and specialist homelessness services to identify priorities and key actions.
60. If approved by Council, the draft policy and guidelines will be placed on public exhibition for a minimum of 28 days to allow an opportunity for the community and other stakeholders to provide feedback. Known stakeholders will be contacted by the City to encourage submissions on the policy and guidelines.

EMMA RIGNEY

Director City Life

Nelson Tilbrook, Senior Social Programs Officer