

Item 3.2

Managing the Workforce during the COVID-19 Pandemic

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

The City has acted swiftly to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, including closing a large number of our facilities in accordance with Federal Government mandates to slow the spread of the virus. We have also put in place a range of support measures to mitigate its impact.

In addition, the City prioritised measures to secure the health and safety of its staff. Since 16 March 2020 all City staff who could work from home were asked to do so. IT access was fast-tracked and now supports all City staff with access to email, calendars, and video conferencing. Over 1,600 staff can connect into the city network to access key business systems.

For essential workers who cannot work remotely, such as our Rangers and Cleansing and Waste staff, Work Health and Safety risk assessments have been undertaken and new work procedures introduced.

While some of our staff are working harder than ever, the closure of so many of our facilities has left some staff with little or no work to do. The City has maintained pay to all permanent full time and part time staff, and is working on redeployment opportunities where possible. Staff are already being redeployed to other activities such as managing the new enhanced grants program and concierge service.

This pandemic has underlined the inherent problems with the ongoing trend to casualisation of Australia's workforce. It is something that the City has endeavoured to avoid.

However, there has been a need to employ casuals to fill irregular needs and vacancies, such as a permanent staff member being on sick leave. I am advised the City employs 135 casual staff, a small fraction of our total number of almost 2000. I believe we have responsibility to support our casual staff, and I take this very seriously.

Our casual staff were advised that many of our operations have been suspended due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, but approximately 45 casuals are still receiving shifts – such as after school care and childcare centres and Meals on Wheels. This may of course change as the situation further evolves.

All casuals are still on our system and considered employees of the City. The work is only suspended while some operations have temporarily ceased due to new measures restricting services. At no time did the City terminate the employment of any casual.

It has been my expectation that all our casuals would continue to be paid by the City until they are able to access government assistance.

On 25 March 2020, Local Government NSW (LGNSW) and the three relevant unions – the United Services Union, the Local Government Engineers Association and the Development and Environmental Professionals Association – signed a statement outlining a collective approach on how to manage casual staff. The agreed guidelines for councils across NSW were to pay casuals affected by closures four weeks' pay, and the City moved to adopt this approach. This statement is attached to this Minute.

While it is important that councils try and act collectively on these matters, it will be impossible if collective agreements cannot be reached and honoured.

It is now clear that the closure of our facilities could be for up to six months. With the uncertainty of Federal and State Government support for local government workers and the likelihood of longer term closure of our facilities, it is clear that the agreement signed by Local Government NSW and the unions does not go far enough.

Therefore I am asking Council to request the Chief Executive Officer to maintain the employment of existing City employees, including all casuals, on their current pay and employment conditions until the Council is able to fully consider the implications of the Federal and State government support packages and how they apply to councils, and the financial implications of the options that council may consider.

There will be many challenges for the City in managing its workforce throughout this period, including reallocating staff to areas experiencing high or new demands due to the Pandemic, finding enough productive work for all employees whose normal work has ceased or decreased, and maintaining employee's ongoing connection to the workplace.

There is also a significant financial cost to the City, given more than half the City's operating expenditure is salaries and wages.

It should be noted that the Victorian Government has announced a \$500 million Working for Victoria Fund that will help workers who have lost their jobs to find new opportunities. Through this Fund, Victorian councils who are maintaining their workforce will receive funding to employ staff in key essential roles and deliver critical community functions. It is an oversight that such an initiative has not been negotiated with the NSW Government, and should be a top priority for Local Government NSW.

The Chief Executive Officer should consider the measures required to manage the workforce during the pandemic and bring a report back to the next Council meeting on a package of measures, inclusive of their cost.

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) the Chief Executive Officer be requested to maintain the current pay and employment conditions of our existing casual employees impacted by the closure of our facilities until Council considers the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic at its next meeting; and
- (B) Council note that the Victorian Government has announced a \$500 million Working for Victoria Fund that will provide funding to local councils to employ workers who have lost their jobs, and request the Lord Mayor write to the Premier seeking financial support for NSW councils to enable them to continue to provide essential services to the community and support the local government workforce.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor

Attachments

Attachment A. Joint Statement by Local Government NSW and the Unions