

Item 3.4

Community Facilities

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

In recent weeks, I have had to correct false and misleading claims that I am privatising our community centres by stealth and that permanent staff were stood down during the pandemic and have not been asked to return to work. These claims, published online, caused unnecessary anxiety and confusion for many community groups that use these facilities and for staff. They have now been taken down.

Community facilities

I have opposed the privatisation of community assets my entire public life. As Councillors should know, any such proposal to sell the City's community centres to the private sector would require a Council resolution, which is not proposed to happen.

Misleading claims have been made about the leasing arrangements for the City's community facilities. The City provides facilities to the community in three ways: by operating facilities ourselves, by making facilities available for hire and through our Accommodation Grants Program.

The City operates twenty-eight community centres and venues for hire, nine libraries and two library links. Eight community centres and all libraries have permanent staff offering a range of low and no cost activities, programs and events during opening hours, and online. All centres, venues and spaces in libraries can also be hired by community for a wide range of uses.

Many of the City's properties, including town halls, community centres, libraries and recreation facilities have spaces available for hire by community groups, corporate organisations and individuals. There are three charging rates for our community venues for hire, the standard rate (i.e. for corporates), a community rate (50 per cent of the standard rate) and a self-help rate (i.e. Alcoholics Anonymous) at 50 per cent of community rate.

Council sets venue hire fees and charges every year as part of the adoption of the Integrated Planning and Reporting Program and Budget. The fees for 2021/22 are set out on pages 54-68 of the Operational Plan 2021-2022, unanimously adopted by Council on 28 June 2021.

Community and cultural groups and organisations may also apply for the waiver of up to 100 per cent of venue hire fees through a separate grant program. It helps these groups and those demonstrating financial hardship to access our venues for events, concerts, fundraisers, conferences, meetings and community gatherings.

Organisations and individuals hiring our facilities are free to charge what they think is appropriate for their offering, with most offering free or subsidised classes and activities to community.

The Accommodation Grants Program provides ongoing space to community and cultural organisations. Tenants are selected by an expression of interest process and are leased at up to 100 per cent subsidised rent. All tenants must complete an annual performance review which is reported to Council.

The program is enabling the Museum of Chinese in Australia to occupy the former Haymarket Library and the award-winning Hayes Theatre to operate from the Reg Murphy Hall in Potts Point. Other lessees, such as the Surry Hills Neighbourhood Centre in Surry Hills, 107 Projects and Brand X manage creative spaces on behalf of the City. They have the experience and expertise to maximise the use of these spaces, while also making them available for hire. Brand X, which has successfully curated cultural and community programs at East Sydney Community and Arts Centre, is also managing the soon to open City of Sydney Creative Studios.

The City currently has 72 tenants taking space in 48 properties. These properties include theatres, workshops, studios, galleries, offices, childcare facilities and space in some of our community centres. Some properties, such as 107 Redfern Street and St Helen's Centre in Glebe have more than one tenant. 107 Projects makes its gallery and auditorium available to a wide range of arts practitioners. St Helen's Community Centre has a range of tenants as well as a community room available for hire for rehearsals, health and fitness classes, family functions and meetings.

While this program provides opportunities for organisations to operate in facilities they could not otherwise afford, they in turn provide significant social and cultural benefits.

I am aware that some community groups are still uncertain about the use and operation of the City's facilities and have concerns about access. These concerns have been exacerbated by the false and misleading claims recently published online.

The community can find information about the City's community facilities and operations, make requests, and find out how to hire facilities and apply for accommodation grants by using the City's online resources, at centres or by contacting the City's Manager Social City, Kirsten Woodward on 02 9246 7201 or at kwoodward@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au or communityvenues@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au

I have asked the Chief Executive Officer to continue to liaise with the community to identify changing needs and address specific concerns and as the population and demographics of communities evolve.

Councillors will have the opportunity to consider the resourcing of our community facilities in the context of the draft operational plan in early May prior to going on public exhibition with final approval anticipated at the June Council meeting. At the same time, Councillors will have the opportunity to review fees and charges for the use of our community facilities. In doing so, Councillors will need to take into account the severe impact of the Covid-19 pandemic over the past two years and the resultant pressure on the City's budget.

Staffing

The Chief Executive Officer has assured me that no permanent staff were stood down at any time since the beginning of Covid-19 pandemic restrictions in March 2020. Eight library staff were on special leave under the Splinter Award for a maximum of 22 days from July 2021. All other employees continued to work and be paid at their standard rates throughout the pandemic. Centres and libraries returned to standard opening hours from October 2021 following the most recent lockdown period.

At the end of February 2020 our community centres and libraries had 132.4 full-time equivalent positions. As at 31 January 2022, our community centres and libraries had 133.2 full-time equivalent positions. Our community centres have had a slight increase in total staff, and not the opposite as was claimed online.

This information was available to all Councillors who cared to ask the Chief Executive Officer.

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

(A) Council note:

- (i) that the City provides a wide range of facilities to the community through its own operations, venue hire and the Accommodation Grants Program;
- (ii) there are no proposals to privatise or outsource the City's community facilities, and if there were, they would require a resolution of Council;
- (iii) Councillors may request information about the operation and staffing of the City's community facilities from the Chief Executive Officer; and
- (iv) the community can find information about the City's community facilities and operations, make requests, and find out how to hire facilities and apply for accommodation grants by using the City's online resources, at centres or by contacting the City's Manager Social City, Kirsten Woodward on 02 9246 7201 or at kwoodward@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au or at communityvenues@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au;

(B) the Chief Executive Officer be requested to:

- (i) continue consulting with the community on the appropriate use and operation of the City's community centres to meet changing needs as demographics evolve;
- (ii) address any changes and requirements to the use and operation of our community centres through the draft operational plan and City budget to be considered by Council in May; and
- (iii) streamline and simplify the booking process for community groups to access community facilities.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor