

Item 3.3

The Future of Our Community Centres

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

The City of Sydney is committed to building an inclusive and vibrant city in which we all come together to improve our individual and collective wellbeing. Our community facilities are vital to this endeavour.

Our community centres, creative centres and venues for hire promote lifelong learning, healthy lifestyles and artistic expression. In addition, our libraries run community programs and provide rooms for the community to run their own activities. We also take our services to people's homes, including Meals on Wheels and the Home Library Service.

Along with the community, our caring and passionate staff work hard to respond to community need and create spaces that are welcoming and build social cohesion.

Support for our community centres

Since 2004, the City has invested almost half a billion dollars in our community and recreation facilities. This includes nine new community facilities and three new recreation facilities, with another two new community facilities under construction. In addition, we have undertaken major upgrades of three community facilities and three recreation facilities, with another community centre upgrade underway and another planned and committed.

Support for our most vulnerable community members during Covid

When our community facilities closed during Covid, City staff quickly moved to deliver our activities online to ensure we could continue to connect people and prevent social isolation. In addition, City staff made daily calls to vulnerable visitors to provide them with personalised support and referrals where necessary. We also offered our community spaces free of charge for use as vaccination and testing locations, support centres for vulnerable communities, and food distribution centres.

Post Covid Recovery

As we emerged from Covid lockdowns in 2022, the City took action to encourage people to return to our community facilities, especially those feeling lonely and isolated.

Additional staff

Following my Lord Mayoral Minute, we increased funding for community facilities by 20 per cent in last year's budget (i.e. 2022/23). In recognition of the important role frontline staff play in bringing the community together, this extra \$1.2 million was used to add 9.6 new staff positions to our community centres.

One staff member was allocated to St Helen's Community Centre in Glebe, and another to our Aboriginal knowledge and cultural centre at 119 Redfern Street. Yet another was allocated to the Community Venues Team to help people who need extra support to book our venues, make enquiries or request fee waivers.

The other 6.6 additional staff positions are working across our community facilities, organising additional classes, including cooking, art and fitness classes. We now run over 70 programs across our community facilities each week.

Enhanced facilities

When the site was no longer needed as a vaccination clinic, the renovation of 119 Redfern Street began in April 2022. With a new lift and refurbished interior, the centre will provide a beautiful new space for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community when it opens later this year. In this year's budget (i.e. 2023/24), staff will request another full-time position to work with the community at this site.

Construction on our major upgrade of Pymont Community Centre began in September, with a new lift, community room, foyer, bathroom and play area due for completion in early 2024.

During this time, the air conditioning upgrades at Ultimo and Redfern Community Centres commenced, as did our project to enhance Wi-Fi access across our facilities. And we continued working with the Department of Education to deliver community spaces at Green Square Public School.

Improved access

Following the Council resolution to waive fees for community groups, the City raised awareness among grassroots advocates and organisations about our fee waiver.

In addition, we set about simplifying our community insurance policy so that – should Council approve it in this year's budget – there will be one fee under the City's community insurance policy for hiring our community facilities, rather than three, with the fee waiver still available to eligible community groups.

We also introduced a monthly email newsletter for every community centre, and we display printed versions of our upcoming activities in our facilities for people who are unable to access this information online.

In November and December, we held Community Centre Open Days across the City, encouraging people to sample the services and activities, which was reassuring for people who may have been reluctant to return because of Covid.

Community survey results

In line with our record of effective, open and equitable consultation, late last year we conducted a survey across the City asking people what they wanted from our community centres. I asked the Chief Executive Officer for an update on the results of this survey to include in this Lord Mayoral Minute.

We received almost 800 responses, half of which were from people over 50 and one third of which were in Chinese. Eleven per cent of respondents said they had no internet at home, eight per cent of respondents identified as having a disability, and eight per cent identified as having a mental health condition.

The top 10 facilities visited by respondents were Green Square Library, Customs House Library, Ron Williams Community Centre, Darling Square Library, Ultimo Community Centre, Glebe Library, Surry Hills Library, Ultimo Library, Newtown Library and Waterloo Library.

When asked what they like about our centres, respondents said they liked being able to learn something new, connect with people, participate in our activities and use our services (including our study spaces and computers). One person described their centre as “a bridge to meet friends”, and another person said our centres “create spaces for people to gather, to get to know others, to read, to learn, to be safe, to be warm on a cold day”.

When asked how we could improve our community centres, almost half of the respondents said they like what we do but they want more of it.

Generally, our facilities are open on the days and times people want to attend, however, six per cent of people requested longer operating hours, particularly at our libraries. While 17 per cent of respondents wanted us to improve our facilities, only six per cent identified specific improvements, such as more computers, seats and books.

Investing in the future

To ensure our community facilities continue to meet the needs of our community now and into the future, I would like to see the following improvements.

Increased access to facilities

The City has two types of community centres - large multipurpose community centres like Ultimo Community Centre, and smaller local community centres like Cliff Noble Community Centre. Of the City's five large multipurpose community centres, Juanita Nielsen Community Centre, Ultimo Community Centre, Pymont Community Centre and King George V Recreation Centre are in the north, with just Redfern Community Centre in the south.

We need to increase access to facilities and activities as requested by survey respondents, and we need to distribute them equitably. I would like staff to investigate ways to enhance access to community facilities in the southern part of the city. This could include through partnerships with the NSW Government.

Increased hours and activities

I would like staff to review opening hours in certain centres, as well as the type and number of activities offered, with a view to increasing them in line with the survey responses. People told us they want more creative and cultural activities, and activities for young people and older people. Suggestions for activities over and above those we already offer included indoor bowls, bridge classes, woodworking and lithography classes, as well as book clubs in our libraries.

Streamlined booking system

City staff have been supporting community members to navigate our current booking system. The City has been working towards developing a new streamlined online booking system that enhances access to our facilities. I would like staff to ensure sufficient resources are allocated to this IT upgrade in this year's budget, and thereby secure its completion by the end of next year.

More community participation in managing our Community Centres

The community want a more robust process for receiving updates and providing feedback to staff on our various community facilities and activities. I asked the City to develop a new process to embed community participation into the management of our community facilities and deliver a more robust process for responding to local community needs. The City will invite the local community, including resident action group representatives, to meet with centre staff and management twice a year to enable local community feedback, collaboration and information sharing.

This improved collaboration model may be refined over the next 12 months, and will help City staff with their planning and ensure resources are shared equitably across our Local Government Area.

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

(A) Council note:

- (i) since 2004, the City has invested almost half a billion dollars in its community and recreation facilities;
- (ii) throughout Covid, the City's community facilities and staff played an important role in supporting our most vulnerable communities;
- (iii) in last year's budget, the City increased funding for community facilities by 20 per cent, with the additional \$1.2 million used to create another 9.6 staff positions across our community facilities;
- (iv) in addition, the City enhanced a number of its community facilities, including the refurbishment of 119 Redfern Street and the major upgrade of Pymont Community Centre;
- (v) further, the City increased access to its community facilities by raising awareness of its fee waiver for eligible community groups, developing a simplified insurance fee structure, introducing newsletters for every centre, and hosting open days; and
- (vi) at the end of 2022, almost 800 people participated in the City's survey on our community facilities, with the majority of respondents stating they enjoy our facilities and activities and want more of them, and some respondents providing useful suggestions for how we could make our community facilities even better; and

- (B) the Chief Executive Officer be requested to:
- (i) investigate options for increasing access to community facilities, especially in the southern part of the Local Government Area, including through partnerships with the NSW Government and in consultation with communities through an improved collaboration model;
 - (ii) investigate what resources are needed to increase opening hours and the number and types of activities in our community facilities, in line with the community survey results;
 - (iii) include sufficient resources in this year's budget to ensure the streamlined online booking system for community facilities is operational by the end of next year;
and
 - (iv) embed community participation into the management of our community centres by inviting the community to meet with centre staff and management twice a year to enable local community feedback, collaboration and information sharing.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor