Executive Summary

**Every Child Our Future**

Policy Issues and Options Paper

**Vision**

*A children’s services environment that honours diversity, builds creativity and social connections and encourages all children and families to maximise their health and wellbeing now and in the future.*

**Policy**

Scope Council is developing a new Children’s Services Policy to guide how we support, deliver and invest in future services that will support the health and wellbeing of our community, specifically our children. Children’s Services include Kindergarten, Toy Libraries, Playgroup and Childcare.

**Policy Objectives:** The Port Phillip community and early years’ service providers worked closely with Council to develop key policy objectives to underpin the development of the new Children’s Services Policy. The policy objectives articulate and prioritise the goals for children’s services in the City.

1. *Universal Access* - Council will work with partners to ensure that every child, regardless of their abilities or background, will have access to affordable, safe, accessible, quality early years’ services to support development to their full potential.
2. *Meeting needs -* Council will understand current and future needs of families in the city and influence the provision of early years’ services to meet those needs.
3. *Sustainability and compliance -* Early years’ services will be financially sustainable and consistently aligned with relevant policies and legislation at the local, state and federal level.
4. *Collaboration -* Council will encourage collaboration across all early years’ services
5. *Information -* Families will have access to the services and information they need, at the times they need it, to make choices appropriate for their needs.
6. *Facilities -* Early years services will be supported by safe, accessible, contemporary, fit-for-purpose, sustainable facilities and environments.
7. *Natural environments -* Children will have access to natural environments that allow them to learn about and experience play in nature. This includes natural environments within early years’ services.

**Rationale for policy change**

A new Children’s Services Policy is being developed in response to a changing service and legislative environment and new information about delivering services to support optimal long-term outcomes for children.

**The changing environment**

* Policy & legislative change:
  + Since the last Children’s Services Policy (2006), there have been 19 state and federal legislative changes impacting the delivery of children’s services
  + Key changes include the introduction of funded 3-year-old kindergarten; the Commonwealth Childcare Subsidy, and the National Competition Policy (NCP)
* A growing city - Our population is increasing (from 3,912 0-4-year olds in 2006, to an expected 6,348 by 2031). This will have impacts on infrastructure and services. Overall there are sufficient places and diversity in the market; however, there are some barriers to access, particularly for children in vulnerable circumstances.
* A changing market - Private and independent services have increased their percentage in the market, since 2006.

**The new policy will respond to improved information on:**

* *Financial and asset sustainability*
  + 59% of the children’s services buildings are over 50 years old. 41% of buildings were purpose-built for early years’ services.
  + The increasing cost of providing services is not sustainable under the current service model, including: meeting NCP requirements; maintaining and renewing assets; and meeting increasing demand for children’s services stemming from population growth
* *Community feedback*: - The following themes were strongly supported through consultation:
  + Helping families find the services they need
  + Making sure we have enough children’s services for growth areas
  + Ensuring an adequate supply of childcare for children under three
  + Supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability or who are from disadvantaged backgrounds, including supporting them to access children’s services
* *Research and evidence* - Council officers have undertaken significant research, evidence gathering and analysis to understand:
  + The importance of investment in the early years children’s lives and the role of children’s services in supporting optimal development
  + Best practice and emerging/contemporary service and infrastructure settings to enable healthy development
  + Current and future demand for children’s services
  + Market impact and analysis of policy options

**Measuring success**

To support the vision for early years’ services and to address our challenges and deliver on our key policy objectives, seven critical success factors have been developed to guide decision-making and to identify specific actions for each policy objective.

**Critical Success Factors:**

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| * Legislative compliance | * Future-focused |
| * Meeting national quality standards | * Financial sustainability |
| * Positive market impact | * Ability to implement |
| * Access for all |  |

**Key partners**

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| * Providers | * Parents, children and families |
| * Children’s Services: Private/Independent, Community-managed, Council-run | * Staff |
| * Complimentary services: maternal child health (including the enhanced service), Council’s Integrated Family Support Service, Star Health and other allied health services, Orange Door, and Child Protection. | * General Community |

Next Steps

Once endorsed for release, stage 2 consultation will be conducted with key stakeholders from 21 March to end of April 2019. This will include:

* pop-up events across the municipality
* an online survey
* open submissions to the Service Transformation Team (via hardcopy and email)

This Stage 2 consultation will inform the development of the final policy and implementation plan.

Policy Recommendations

Policy objectives articulate and prioritise the goals for children’s services in the City of Port Phillip, and the Policy Recommendations identify decisions and actions that can support the achievement of policy objectives.

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| **Policy Objective One: Council will work with partners to ensure that every child, regardless of their abilities or background will have access to affordable, safe, accessible, quality early years’ services to support development to their full potential.** | |
| ***Policy recommendation 1.1*** | Create a new grant to program to provide a financial subsidy for families experiencing ongoing and situational vulnerability and disadvantage. This subsidy will be available for all eligible City of Port Phillip community members accessing any Early Years’ Service in the City. |
| ***Policy recommendation 1.2*** | Support Child Safe Standards implementation across all early years’ services (especially toy libraries and playgroups) through an education and capacity-building program. |
| ***Policy recommendation 1.3*** | Fund an early intervention outreach role to work with relevant service providers in the City (child protection, homelessness, mental health, family violence) to increase participation of vulnerable children in early childhood education services, especially kindergarten services. |
| ***Policy recommendation 1.4*** | Develop a Children’s Services website that will provide information on all children’s services in the City. This will include services provided, vacancies, specialist expertise, fee levels, educational approaches, target groups served and more. Participation in the website should be a condition for services to receive Council grants. |
| **Policy Objective Two: Council will understand current and future needs of families in the city and influence the provision of early years’ services to meet those needs.** | |
| ***Policy recommendation 2.1*** | Review and update the service model for toy libraries to include:   * Review funding model and operating subsidy to increase operating hours at current toy library sites to increase access and availability to services for residents now and into the future in existing Port Phillip areas. * Develop one new toy library site in Fishermans Bend to service the growing population, as part of an integrated hub. |
| ***Policy recommendation 2.2*** | Monitor, track, encourage and report on the market response to childcare demand. |
| ***Policy recommendation 2.3*** | Review and update the service model for playgroups to include:   * A dedicated, or several functional multipurpose, playgroup space/s to be considered in Fishermans Bend, as part of an integrated hub. * An additional playgroup or children’s multipurpose space in the north end of Port Phillip to be considered (South Melbourne or Port Melbourne neighbourhoods). * Make available the playgroup rooms in Bubup Nairm Family and Children’s Centre across five days of the week and transition other programs into other Family Services Rooms in the building to increase availability and capacity. |
| ***Policy recommendation 2.4*** | With the addition of funded three-year-old Kindergarten, consider transitioning current Council assets into kindergarten facilities to meet future demand where relevant, especially where the private market is meeting the demand/need for childcare services in that area. |
| **Policy Objective Three: Early years’ services will be financially sustainable and consistently aligned with relevant policies and legislation at the local, state and federal level.** | |
| ***Policy recommendation 3.1*** | Council to decide the future service model for childcare services from five policy options (A, B, C, D, E). |

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| *Option A* - Council continues operating and subsidising childcare services as is.   * This option is likely to be in breach of National Competition Policy. * It is unlikely Council will be able to maintain and renew all existing assets to meet current and future demand, functionality and compliance issues. * Council subsidies will continue to be untargeted and not based on need. * Some assets will not be fit-for-purpose or compliant with legislation. * Could explore co-funding or lease-to-own opportunities with tenants of council-owned facilities. | | *Option B* - Council continues operating services, but at full cost recovery.   * This option is likely to meet National Competition Policy requirements. * Requires a review of infrastructure and maintenance levies to ensure they cover all renewal and utility costs. * Will require increased fees at Council-run childcare services to allow for cost recovery ($5-$15 per day). * Explore co-funding or lease-to-own opportunities with tenants of council-owned facilities. * Continued support for community managed centres. | *Option C* - Council ceases operating Council-run childcare services and transition services to not-for-profit providers.   * This would include full cost recovery rental arrangements, and utilities at cost to new owner. * Meets all industrial obligations under relevant agreements and legislation. * This could include purchase, co-funding or lease-to-own opportunities with not-for-profit providers. * Operational savings to Council * Asset sales to support transition arrangements | *Option D* - Council ceases operating Council-run services and sells or transitions assets for other Council purposes.   * This assumes that the market will meet current and future demand. * Uncertain as to how market failures will be overcome. * Operational savings to Council. * Asset sales to support transition arrangements | *Option E* - Council chooses a hybrid model based on above options. |
| ***Policy recommendation 3.2*** | - Review all funding, subsidy and levy arrangements to ensure return on investment and KPI deliverables for acquittal purposes | | | | |

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| **Policy Objective Four: Council will encourage collaboration across all early years’ services** | |
| ***Policy recommendation 4.1*** | Facilitate collaborative and collegiate relationships with early years’ networks.   * + • Identify professional development needs for educators (including assistance in sourcing bulk discounts for training and providing free training room space).   + • Childcare staff to visit and learn from centres in the municipality or within Melbourne that are consistently receiving an ‘Exceeding’ or ‘Excellent’ NQS rating, encouraging a ‘community of practice’.   + • These recommendations to apply to all providers, including independent and private providers.   + • Support of educational leaders and networking in services. |
| ***Policy recommendation 4.2*** | Support the development of a kindergarten network to provide collaborative practice and integrated services that inform pedagogy and practice, for example approved provider responsibilities, professional development, quality referrals, transition to school programs, and so on. |
| **Policy Objective Five: Families will have access to the services and information they need, at the times they need it, to make choices appropriate for their needs.** | |
| ***Policy recommendation 5.1*** | Proactively create and promote opportunities for families with children to meet other families and develop social connections through such things as community events and parents’ workshops. |
| ***Policy recommendation 5.2*** | Improve communications about the availability of, and access to, all early years’ services, especially kindergarten to culturally and linguistically diverse communities. |
| ***Policy recommendation 5.3*** | Utilise approved state funding to scope the creation of an effective and centralised municipal-wide enrolment system for community-run and independent kindergartens in Port Phillip. This will require significant consultation with service providers. |
| ***Policy recommendation 5.4*** | Develop a Memorandum of Understanding for playgroups with guidelines regarding:   * + Size and inclusion   + Available support for volunteers, committees and parents   + Sustainability, including sharing of resources between groups and recycling |
| ***Policy recommendation 5.5*** | Develop a centralised portal and communication strategy as part of the Customer Experience and Technology Transformation project, and work with children’s service providers and families to establish the best way for families to receive the information they need, in the way they need it, when they need it. |
| ***Policy recommendation 5.6*** | Improve the current childcare waitlist and investigate expanding it to include private and independent centres in order to provide families with better information about places for children under the age of three, as well as to inform short- and medium-term planning for childcare. |
| **Policy Objective Six: Early years services will be supported by safe, accessible, contemporary, fit-for-purpose, sustainable facilities and environments.** | |
| ***Policy recommendation 6.1*** | Develop an Early Year’s Services Facility Framework that will deliver the following outcomes:   * + All assets to meet legislative and building compliance over the life of the strategy.   + All assets able to receive co-contribution funding from state government. This will require all assets to meet a minimum of 66 places. |
| ***Policy recommendation 6.2*** | Work with all community-managed services over time to implement the framework outlined above. |
| ***Policy recommendation 6.3*** | Ensure additional facilities for services and consolidate existing services if required to meet functionality and compliance are incorporated into integrated facility hubs to address multiple service demands. Council will optimise opportunities for Major Capital Works grant applications available from Department of Education and Training for the building of integrated service hubs, especially on any new school sites, such as in Fishermans Bend. |
| **Policy Objective Seven: Children will have access to natural environments that allow them to learn about and experience play in nature. This includes natural environments within early years’ services.** | |
| ***Policy recommendation 7.1*** | Develop model for optimising access to existing assets in the city such as parks, beaches, and adventure playgrounds. |
| ***Policy recommendation 7.2*** | Advocate for the promotion of outdoor learning environments and programs that promote children’s connection to nature and environmental sustainability practices, for example Clean up Port Phillip Day, Be Out There, Let’s G.O (Get outside), and Indigenous nature-based cultural programs. |
| ***Policy recommendation 7.3*** | Develop a minimum design guideline for future playground works/upgrades at childcare centres that can be tailored for each site and implemented in stages, including investigating the development or suitability of nature and sensory play environments within open space settings for excursion purposes, for example developing bush kindergarten setting/s in the municipality. |
| ***Policy recommendation 7.4*** | Work with early years’ networks to consult and promote the range of opportunities to incorporate nature and sensory play into their service settings with supported funding opportunities. |