

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Sunshine—Monday, 25 November 2019

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr David Southwick

Mr Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Cr Georgina Papafotiou, Mayor,

Cr Victoria Borg, Councillor,

Mr John MacDonagh, Manager, Community Care, and

Ms Rene Burke, Early Education and Care Coordinator, Brimbank City Council.

The CHAIR: Good morning. First of all I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their elders, both past and present, and the Aboriginal elders and other communities who may be here today.

I declare open the public hearing for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. I also take the opportunity to welcome you to my electorate of St Albans, and we are here in Sunshine, in the City of Brimbank. At this stage all telephones should now be turned off. I welcome today the Mayor of Brimbank, Georgina Papafotiou, and also Cr Victoria Borg from Brimbank City Council.

All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, to my right. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

I now invite you to proceed with a brief opening statement of 5 to 10 minutes to the Committee, which will be followed up by questions by the Committee. Welcome, Mayor.

Cr PAPAFOIYOU: I would like to formally welcome the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee to Brimbank and thank the Committee for holding a hearing here today in Brimbank. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Chair of the Committee and our local member of St Albans, Natalie Suleyman, for facilitating today's opportunity and for her ongoing interest in early childhood and multicultural community issues. As the mayor of Brimbank, I am delighted to be here today with my fellow councillor, Cr Victoria Borg, to present to the Committee's Inquiry on Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. I am particularly pleased to be here today. As a former teacher for almost three decades, I have been heavily associated with the education sector. I have a passion for education and the role it plays to build a more resilient community.

This is an important Inquiry that Brimbank strongly supports and to which council made a submission on 7 October outlining the opportunities, the challenges and the issues associated with CALD early childhood engagement in our community. Our submission made it clear that ensuring that all levels of government and the non-government sector effectively work together to engage and support our CALD communities through early childhood is fundamental to us tackling generational socioeconomic issues across the western region.

As the Chair is aware, Brimbank launched its 2020 Transforming Brimbank Agenda at State Parliament last month. The Transforming Brimbank Agenda sets out a clear vision on how the Federal Government, State Government, council and the non-government sector can all collaborate to leverage the record transport and infrastructure investments this region has received. The \$10 billion Melbourne Airport rail link via the new Sunshine super transport hub and the newly identified Sunshine priority precinct will help transform Brimbank into the jobs capital of Melbourne's west. Fundamental to this agenda is ensuring that local residents, including young people, have the support and pathways provided to them to secure jobs around the hub and the precinct. Just like the assembly lines of Ford, Holden and Toyota provided generations of work to newly arrived migrants across the west, Brimbank believes the Sunshine super-hub and priority precinct can provide the next wave of jobs for young people for decades to come.

However, we know the jobs of the future will require higher education standards and qualifications. We know that along with the opportunities associated with our traditional regional industries of manufacturing, construction, freight and transport the jobs of the future around the priority precinct will include health, education, innovation and visitor economy jobs. That is why the Transforming Brimbank Agenda not only focuses on the need to better align and link local higher education, TAFE and secondary school pathways to jobs but it begins with the importance of investing in early childhood. Investing in early childhood will give our local young people the best start in life and the best chance for them to secure a career through the Sunshine super-hub and priority precinct in years to come.

However, we have a lot of work to do if we are to achieve early childhood education outcomes, particularly amongst our CALD communities. As outlined in Brimbank's submission, we are the second most culturally diverse community in Victoria, with people coming from more than 160 countries. The top countries of birth for children aged zero to nine in 2016 included India, 362; Vietnam, 311; Malaysia, 173; Philippines, 148; and Pakistan, 107. Also Brimbank has twice the proportion of residents who speak languages other than English—59 per cent compared to 30 per cent of greater Melbourne. Many local children have parents who speak no English at all. This can greatly impact the family's capacity to engage with early years learning. In 2018 almost one-fifth—that is 18.2 per cent—of all four-year-olds in Brimbank did not attend preschool. Children in Brimbank continue to enter school with high levels of vulnerability. The newly constructed Joan Kirner Women's and Children's Hospital will see around 7000 babies born each year by 2026.

Further to our submission I can also report Brimbank is continuing to receive record numbers of newly arrived citizens. In October council recently welcomed a record 600 new citizens to our community, and we are on track to welcome hundreds of new citizens per month, many of them young families with young children. *Brimbank Children's Plan 2015–2019* sets out council's approach to helping support our CALD communities engage with early childhood services. There are a total of 73 early years facilities providing kinder programs in Brimbank. Brimbank's kindergarten registration service helps facilitate engagement with services.

Nine hundred families were supported over the last three years through the supported playgroup programs. We have had 16 supported playgroups participate in Smalltalk, which specifically targeted diverse and disadvantaged areas. We have also had 500 multicultural families in Brimbank supported through Smalltalk. Smalltalk and CALD supportive playgroups have greatly helped provide CALD parents increased skills and confidence about parenting in Australia. One such example I would like to quote from is a program facilitator who said:

When delivering the strategy ... a parent discussed this was not the practice in Afghanistan, that parents don't talk with the children. She said she is very grateful for this program because it teaches her a lot about what children can learn at this age. She said they only teach children in her country from 7 years old and not before that. I explained that children's learning is rapid and it is a significant learning stage from 0–5 through play.

Over the past five years council has supported around 80 women from culturally diverse backgrounds to become playgroup leaders, which encourages more women from diverse backgrounds to engage with their children. Council's approach is all about engaging as many CALD families as possible in a flexible, innovative and meaningful way so that young people have the best start in life and the best chance to secure a job and career around the super-hub and precinct. I would now like to ask Cr Borg to provide some more opening comments on council's work and for the Committee to consider.

Cr BORG: Thank you, Mayor Papafotiou, and thank you again to the Committee and the Chair, Natalie Suleyman, for holding a hearing today in Sunshine. As a councillor responsible for Brimbank people, my portfolio is responsible for lifelong learning, life stage planning and job readiness for our community. Council provides an array of services to help facilitate outcomes in these spaces, including through our library and neighbourhood house networks, facilities such as the planned St Albans health and wellbeing hub and the Brimbank Learning Futures centre. But for young people, along with our kindergarten and early childhood networks, council's eight maternal health sites are key to identifying and engaging with CALD families. However, council understands that accessing fixed-site health and support services is problematic for CALD families, and barriers can include limited information and knowledge of services, low levels of English literacy, lack of transport and limited support from extended family of the community.

That is why part of council's strategy for engaging with more CALD families has included developing more flexible and innovative approaches through outreach playgroups, pop-up playgroups and kinders, including in Deer Park and Derrimut; mobile early years outreach services; learning English through library story times; bilingual story times; and a new Brimbank-Melton compact, which includes the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education and Training, to strengthen regional early years engagement. These are meaningful initiatives that will help drive local outcomes. Combined with the State Government's work to help fund universal access to three and four-year-old kinder, we now have an opportunity to work together around better aligning early childhood infrastructure investment, workforce investment and program delivery targeted for our CALD communities.

Council genuinely believes that this parliamentary inquiry is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to help identify and develop new initiatives that will help more CALD families engage in early childhood than ever before. Brimbank believes the Committee should consider the following recommendations as outlined in our submission and also our Transforming Brimbank Agenda, including ensuring local early education infrastructure meets community needs and keeps up with demand; developing and growing the early education workforce, including cultural competence; expansion of flexible CALD-specific early childhood programs and initiatives; working with councils to provide funding and service certainty for early childhood services; and the creation of life learning pathways for families and young people to secure jobs through the Sunshine super-hub and priority precinct.

Thank you again for the chance to present. The mayor and I look forward to your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Cr Borg. At this point I would like to welcome my parliamentary colleague Mr Heang Tak, the Member for Clarinda, who has joined us at this point.

Cr PAPAFOTIOU: I might kick start.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much to you both for presenting. That was a very extensive submission. I think that Brimbank, due to it multiculturally and demographically being diverse compared to other areas, is leading the way in the number of initiatives and programs. There are just a couple of questions that I would like to flag. Despite there being such innovative programs and initiatives, such as your supported playgroups and the 16 supported playgroups with Smalltalk, which was provided by council, and the engagement and participation of a number of diverse groups, including the Vietnamese, Mandarin, Cantonese and so on—you had approximately 500 multicultural families in Brimbank participate in this playgroup, which is a fantastic initiative—I also note in your submission that the preschool attendance rate has decreased since 2018. And you have noted that that flags significant disadvantages for early childhood education. Could you possibly just expand on why it is the case, where there are so many innovative initiatives and programs, that there seems to be a decrease in preschool attendance since 2018?

Cr PAPAFOTIOU: I think this is something that we could ask the officers to respond to. Is that okay with you, John?

The CHAIR: That is fine. Hi, John. Could you just state your name for Hansard, please?

Mr MacDONAGH: John MacDonagh.

The CHAIR: And your position?

Mr MacDONAGH: Manager, Community Care. We are aware of that issue, and we have done a lot of work around kindergarten participation. We are currently actually doing a project in partnership with DET around tracking attendance. We have just finished a pilot of that project with six local kindergartens run by local early years management services, and we have discovered that there is a high rate of non-attendance but also a number of people not getting the full allocation—who run late to these. There are number of reasons—it could be weather, it could be transport, it could be the timing of the kindergarten sessions themselves. So the program we are doing now, which has been funded by DET, is going to drill down a bit further and look maybe at some of the cultural issues, some of the social and economic issues and some of the locational issues that might be causing people not to get to kindergarten—and who are not attending kindergarten. Previously we had none of this level of data, so once we have got this information we can actually start making some informed decisions about why this is possibly happening and what are the causes. Now, some intervention has been put in place to improve participation.

The CHAIR: Because it is one-fifth at the moment, so that is 18.2 per cent of a decrease. My second question is in relation to the introduction of the initial registration. The Committee has heard throughout our public hearings and submissions how complex the navigation of the system is. There seems to be a lot of red tape, a lot of forms and a lot of running around for your parents or carers. But I note that Brimbank council has introduced an initial registration for kindergarten generated from the birth notice to the home visit.

Mr MacDONAGH: That is right.

The CHAIR: I think that is a very, very positive step for MCH. What I am trying to engage is that you have actually integrated your initial first step. Could you just elaborate on that point?

Mr MacDONAGH: That is right. We are using MCH as a soft-entry point for all services, not just the kindergarten program. We have actually recently set up a new team, an early years services access team, which is a one-stop shop for all council-funded services. So there is one point of entry and then there is lots of cross-referral and engaging with different communities to attract them into programs. A key component of our work in future will be outreach. We will be doing a lot of outreach from that team as well: going out to communities, engaging with them and then trying to attract them into services—refer them into appropriate services as well.

The CHAIR: So do you believe the one-stop hub is an effective way of delivering and, I suppose, giving a bit more opportunity to other service providers as well? For instance, when we were out in Bendigo we spoke about how there is one-stop hub, but then also if someone needs help with Centrelink or if someone needs help with their healthcare issues, that could be a referral as well, so there are other opportunities for this one-stop hub. Is that the way that the one at Brimbank is operating at the moment?

Mr MacDONAGH: It is not a hub as such; it is a team, and the team basically is supporting access to council services. We do have within that team a service-navigation role, so that person can address people on the waitlist—some of the issues around access for some families, particularly people from cultural communities—and help them to access other services. That is something we will be looking at. We have got a commitment in council to build that service-navigation component across all life stages but particularly in early years. So it is an add-on service to make sure that people do not miss out, and that if they have got other issues that need to be addressed through other appropriate referrals we can support them to do that. That obviously brings all the other services into the connecting point.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I think it is excellent. I am calling it the ‘one-stop hub’—

Mr MacDONAGH: It is virtual, I suppose.

The CHAIR: It could be a department but having a centralised—

Mr MacDONAGH: Centralised point.

The CHAIR: It is good to see that Brimbank has already got that in place, whereas other councils in other areas still have not got this in place, so that is a compliment to you and the council.

Ms SETTLE: I am really interested in the initial registration as well. It seems like a very interesting idea. I guess I am curious—one of the things, as Natalie said, we have heard a lot is about people not being able to fill out forms, those sorts of things. Is that an opportunity? I guess what I am wondering is: when they are coming in as a maternal health nurse, are they going through that process so that you can just pick it up later? I guess, are they helping to navigate through the translation and those sorts of things at that point or is it really just an introduction?

Mr MacDONAGH: Just really an introduction. It is a notional registration, so at that point we register them for kindergarten; it is not an enrolment because that is done by the service provider. But it is really about registration and raising awareness about kindergarten—the importance of early education—and that is a connecting point there.

Ms SETTLE: And does someone follow up on those registrations?

Mr MacDONAGH: There is follow-up through the early years service access team over the period of years. I cannot remember the sequence.

Ms BURKE: I am Rene Burke. I coordinate early years community programs. Our kindergarten registration process does do the follow-up. We have a series: two years out we contact families. This is about keeping in touch with the families the whole way, and then the year prior to their kindergarten attendance year we again contact them to check existing addresses and kindergarten choice et cetera—what they want.

Ms SETTLE: Is there any assistance in actually filling it out? As I said, we have heard a lot about just the registration itself—it is online, it is difficult to do. So is there support at that point as well?

Ms BURKE: It is online and we have had a great take-up of the online service. The access officer, the navigation role that John mentioned previously—that is the one that is available to help walk parents through actually even knowing where the kindergartens are and making those choices, and helping with the registration, yes.

Ms SETTLE: That leads me onto another question I wanted to ask, which is around workforce. Are there bilingual people or bicultural people within the unit, and is that something you are working towards?

Ms BURKE: Very much so, particularly within our supported playgroup area and our outreach playgroup. We have many languages spoken with those groups of people. We are really engaging with who the community is so our workforce actually reflects who you see in our community.

Ms SETTLE: Is that correct in the navigation role as well within council? We have talked a lot about translators and so forth.

Ms BURKE: Out of the access team I suppose the other key language that would be spoken would be Vietnamese, and that is available—absolutely, yes.

Mr TAK: My apologies for being a bit late. I thought I had plenty of time to reach here, but then I got stuck midway. Do you, Mayor, think that in multicultural communities parents are aware of the benefit of early childhood education?

Cr PAPAFOTIOU: I think this is where we really need to educate our parents. A lot of them have come from countries where education may not be a priority or they do not offer kindergarten or prep level like we do, so education is really important. As a former teacher in Brimbank I experienced many, many times where a lot of children came into the class without kinder. It made it very, very challenging as a teacher to cater for individual needs, especially in the first year, because it is not just about the learning of literacy and numeracy; it is also those social behaviours that are really, really important that need to be developed. I do not know if you are aware that in 2010 to 2013 the school that I was in, which is in the southern part of Brimbank, trialled a program with Victoria University students called the Kinda Kinder program. We trialled that for four years, and that was highly successful. We made parents aware in our school that kinder is available, but we brought the kinder within our school, and I think that is what made the difference. Parents were not travelling to two different sites to take their kids—they would come for the Kinda Kinder program plus to drop off their primary school children. We also allowed the parents to be in the room for part of the program, and we eventually slowly withdrew them and had a class with them during that same time the children were in that playgroup. We would teach them skills and knowledge about what we do in Australia, and that worked really well.

Mr TAK: Just a follow-on question—do you think translated material would assist in terms of getting information to multicultural families or communities?

Cr PAPAFOTIOU: Sometimes it will assist, and sometimes it will not. I found with the parents in my school they were illiterate in their own language as well. I think the verbal communication—that contact, that personal contact—is more important.

Cr BORG: Madam Chair, can I just elaborate a little bit on what has already been said? As an ex-academic specialising in mental health across cultures I am very mindful of certain child-rearing practices across cultures that are very different to what we do here. One of them is, for example, that children are seen but not heard. I was talking to some colleagues of mine earlier about an experience that I myself had when I first came to Australia in 1972 and I used public transport for the first time. I was on the train, and I could see a mother speaking to her child like an adult, having an ordinary conversation, and that really stuck with me—what a really beautiful way to communicate with children. The reason why I also wanted to bring that up is that I am also mindful that attitudes and beliefs are more resistant to change. You might find ethnic groups that have settled here in Australia for a number of decades that may still believe that talking to children at such a young age is not so important. That is why these Smalltalks that we have created through council are also so beneficial.

The CHAIR: Just a final question in relation to the Brimbank Melton compact. I believe in your submission you noted the compact between DET, DHHS and local government, and in particular Brimbank council is an active member of the Brimbank Melton compact. I wanted to ask: has that program, and how has it, assisted council to advocate on issues relating to early years?

Mr MacDONAGH: I think because there is a shared interest across all the different levels of government, obviously, and the different departments, it has been very beneficial to bring all those departments into the room so issues around protective services, issues around early years and MCH can all be addressed in a coordinated way and we can build better partnerships. I think the conversations have not happened as a group before, and I think that is where the strength of it is. Locally we have also resourced it with an officer that supports the work of the compact working group particularly, so that projects can be followed up on and progressed in a quicker fashion than they would typically be in that partnership model. I think the future of it is very sound, particularly with the three-year-old kindergarten rollout and the infrastructure that will be required and needs to be planned for within both Brimbank and Melton. Given it is a Brimbank Melton compact, I think that helps also build a partnership between the two councils as well.

The CHAIR: Just on a final note, is there anything that you would like to add? We have seen your recommendations to the Committee. Is there anything that you would like to add for Government to your submission?

Cr PAPAFOTIOU: I think I will just provide you with some statistics. I am not sure if it was included in the application. With the maternal and child health services, currently we have got 23 staff across Brimbank that see 23 000 families. That is 1000 families per staff member on average. This is for children between the ages of zero and three-and-a-half and these are the results for the last financial year. We had 2687 births in Brimbank, and of those 1165 were to first-time parents, so it is an extraordinary amount. I think it is really important to include these figures because at the moment, as I said in my opening speech, we are expecting up to 7000 births by 2026, which is a lot. So we need to address the matter, and the Government has made a positive step forward for next year with the three-year-old kinder. We thank you for that.

The CHAIR: Thank you again for presenting and also for providing evidence today. The next steps will be that the Committee has one more public hearing to go, and next year we will be deliberating on all the evidence and submissions. We will then proceed to prepare a report with some strong recommendations to Government. That report will be tabled next year in the Legislative Assembly. You can keep up-to-date on the Committee's web page, but no doubt as your local Member I will keep you informed of the progress. Thank you again, and thank you for all the work that you do for Brimbank, and in particular for hosting the Committee today.

Cr PAPAFOTIOU: Thank you for having us.

Witnesses withdrew.