

# Local Government Mayoral Taskforce Supporting People Seeking Asylum

## Minutes – Executive Meeting No. 16 – Wednesday 14 July 2021

1-3pm via Microsoft Teams

**Chairperson:** Mayor Angela Long (*Greater Dandenong*)

**Attendees:** Wambui Thirimu (*Brimbank*), Shabaz Fattah (*Darebin*), Cr Rhonda Garad (*Greater Dandenong*), Peter Johnstone (*Greater Dandenong*), Marek Krol (*Greater Dandenong*) – Minute Taker, Kristen Cherry (*Hume*), Mayor Steve Staikos (*Kingston*), Mayor Brian Little (*Monash*), Colin Bostock (*Monash*), Pamela Kosij (*Monash*), Deputy Mayor Mark Riley (*Moreland*), Emma Sampson (*Moreland*), Nalika Peiris (*Moreland*), Petr Svoboda (*Moreland*), Mayor Gabrielle de Vietri (*Yarra*) & Cristina Del Frate (*Yarra*).

**Guests:** Cr Rose Iser (*Moonee Valley*), Greta Williams (*Moonee Valley*), Deputy Mayor Frances Eyre (*Nilumbik*), Corrienne Nichols (*Nilumbik*), Maria Hapke (*Refugee Advocacy Network*) & Sr Brigid Arthur (*Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project*).

**Apologies:** Amber Cassidy (*Hobsons Bay*), Mayor Jonathon Marsden (*Hobsons Bay*).

Agenda Item	Discussion Points/Comments	Follow up Actions / Who
<b>Welcome and Introductions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mayor Angela Long welcomed all representatives attending and acknowledged Traditional Owners.</li> <li>• Apologies noted.</li> </ul>	
<b>Ratification of Executive Member Kingston Council</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Executive ratified Kingston Council as ninth member of the Executive.</li> </ul>	

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<p><b>Overview and Update on Taskforce Activities (June 2018 – Current)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overview of the last three-years:</li> <li>• <u>Mid-2018</u>: Federal Government announced drastic cuts to the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) Program. Revised eligibility criteria would see the SRSS reduced from 13,000 recipients, to as little as 5,000 people seeking asylum.</li> <li>• <u>Mid-2018</u>: In response, Greater Dandenong Council invited Victorian Councils to attend a Mayoral Roundtable to investigate options to stop and/or mitigate the impact of the cuts. The Local Government Mayoral Taskforce Supporting People Seeking Asylum was established thereafter.</li> <li>• <u>Late-2018</u>: Mayoral Taskforce launched the Back Your Neighbour campaign to advocate against the cuts to the SRSS and raise awareness about the impact the cuts will have on people seeking asylum.</li> <li>• <u>Early-2019</u>: Back Your Neighbour campaign is ramped up in the lead up to the 2019 Federal Election. Theory of change during this period was that the Federal Government was not supportive of the program and would remain unsupportive if based on humanitarian issues. Therefore, we were reliant on the political self-interest of Coalition MPs in marginal seats around the country, worried about their prospects to win.</li> <li>• <u>Mid-2019</u>: The return of the Coalition Government back in 2019 hardened their position with chances of a reverse to the SRSS extremely unlikely. Taskforce's advocacy focus shifted to State Government, where greater success has been achieved in securing additional funding for people seeking asylum.</li> <li>• <u>2020</u>: COVID-19 has led to a further compounding of the challenges faced by people seeking asylum. During this period there has been a lot of behind the scenes advocacy as well as change in messaging, such as #nobodyleftbehind #wereallinthisogether.</li> <li>• <u>Going forward</u>: The next major focus will be on the upcoming federal election.</li> </ul>	

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<p><b>Going Forward – Federal Election 202?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Executive brainstormed a number of different options to be taken to the next election:</li> <li>• Access to a liveable income to all people seeking asylum was raised high on the agenda as a campaign objective.</li> <li>• Cr Garad raised the issue surrounding children of asylum seeker families having limited access to education, e.g. tertiary education is only accessible for full fee students. Opportunities to establish a delegation of Mayors to approach James Merlino MP and advocate for greater access to education was favoured by the Executive.</li> <li>• Limited access to healthcare was also raised as a serious concern and to be taken to the next election.</li> <li>• Important to continue existing collaborations with sector agencies and recruiting new council members.</li> <li>• Councils highlighting the impact of the cuts on local families and LGAs could also be included in upcoming campaigning. The Community Activation and Social Isolation Initiative could assist the Taskforce with connecting with local families affected by the SRSS cuts.</li> <li>• Approaching people like Julian Burnside could also be advantageous in future campaigning.</li> <li>• Increasing the visibility of this issue is essential and highlighting the generational disadvantage this has on families.</li> <li>• Cr Garad proposed advocating to The Smith Family in regard to providing educational services to students of asylum seeker families who have been excluded from mainstream schooling.</li> <li>• Focus could also be shifted from simply reinstating the SRSS Program, to actually making mainstream services accessible to people seeking asylum e.g. Centrelink payments, education, healthcare services etc.</li> <li>• Options to be mapped out and a draft proposal to be developed by the next meeting to outline what a Phase 4 would look like.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investigate options to send delegation of Mayors and Councillors to meet with James Merlino MP about greater access to education for people seeking asylum (particularly TAFE) – Marek Krol.</li> <li>• Develop list of marginal coalition seats in Victoria – Marek Krol.</li> <li>• Investigate options regarding advocating to The Smith Family – Marek Krol.</li> <li>• Develop a draft Phase 4 Campaign Proposal be next meeting – Marek Krol and Peter Johnstone.</li> </ul>

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<p><b>Extreme Hardship Program and Medevac Cohort</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sr Brigid Arthur distinguished the difference between income support and extreme hardship payments. Substantial number of people seeking asylum are now receiving no SRSS support. State funding has attempted to fill this gap through the Extreme Hardship Program, which is roughly about \$800 per person every two months. It has now been extended until October.</li> <li>• The Extreme Hardship Program is still not enough to cover a person's ongoing rent, utility bills etc. However, combined with charity assistance and donations some cohorts have remained out of homelessness. Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project has provided \$1.5 million in services in the last 12 months for people seeking asylum. This includes housing for 270 people.</li> <li>• Sr Brigid Arthur expressed concern regarding the end-date in October for the Extreme Hardship Program. Marie suggested the Taskforce lobby the Victorian Government to extend the Extreme Hardship Program.</li> <li>• Regarding Federal Government payments, suggestion was made for the Mayoral Taskforce to lobby for Centrelink payments to be made available to people seeking asylum, rather than SRSS.</li> <li>• Suggested there is scope for the Taskforce to lobby State Government to advocate to the Federal Government to release Medevac cohort into the community. 40 – 50 people seeking asylum remain in the Park Hotel, MITA and Kangaroo Point Hotel in Brisbane.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taskforce to draft letter in support of Extreme Hardship Program being extended and Medevac cohort released into the community – Marek Krol.</li> </ul>

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<b>Regional/Local Updates</b> a) PSAARD Taskforce b) South East Melbourne Material Aid/Humanitarian Response Collaboration	a) PSAARD (People Seeking Asylum at Risk of Destitution) Taskforce Executive recently decided a change in scope acknowledging that the Taskforce is now operating as an information sharing network group supporting people seeking asylum rather than a coordinating Taskforce. b) South East Melbourne Aid/Humanitarian Response Collaboration In Late-March 2020, Greater Dandenong Council approved \$490,000 for food relief through direct procurement from local suppliers and weekly distribution amongst 12-14 local agencies. From Nov 2020, this work was supported by State Government funding for culturally appropriate food through the CALD Local Partnership project. Data indicates that approximately 60 per cent of food relief recipients are people seeking asylum. As of April 2021, Greater Dandenong Council's Material aid relief is being facilitated through a consortium of local agencies receiving grants for the purchase of food vouchers or the agencies directly procuring food from local suppliers for their own distribution.	
<b>Other business</b> a) Refugees and Higher Education b) Moreland Motion	a) Taskforce response was discussed in Agenda Item 4 – Going Forward Federal Election 202? b) Moreland Notice of Motion put forward regarding detention of people seeking asylum in some of the motels in the LGA. Requesting information from Planning Minister about planning provisions concerned with motels converted as detention centres.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop map of existing detention centres amongst LGAs. Can be used for future lobbying – Marek Krol.</li> </ul>
<b>Close</b>	<b>Wednesday 8 September 2021, 1:00pm-3:00pm via Microsoft Teams</b>	