

## **MT DANDENONG PRESCHOOL**

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Report Author: Executive Officer - Family, Children & Youth  
Responsible Officer: Director Communities  
Ward(s) affected: Streeton

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*The author(s) of this report and the Responsible Officer consider that the report complies with the overarching governance principles and supporting principles set out in the Local Government Act 2020.*

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

This item is to be considered at a Council meeting that is open to the public.

### **SUMMARY**

During the June 2021 storms the Mount Dandenong Preschool received substantial damage due to a fallen tree. The building was deemed unusable, and the kindergarten program was relocated to a vacant building at Olinda Primary School. Following the storm, council officers have undertaken a needs analysis, explored site options and sought the assistance of the Department of Education (DE) and the Victorian School Building Authority (VSBA) to investigate funding and support to rebuild the preschool.

Following strong advocacy, Council received confirmation in October 2022 that the Mount Dandenong Primary School had been approved by the Minister of Education as the preferred location for the reinstatement of a new preschool building. Ministerial approval covered building an enhanced preschool facility including a multi-purpose community space and consulting room to support other community services.

The damaged preschool, located at 1345 Mount Dandenong Tourist Rd, remains in the hands of Council's insurer awaiting an agreed settlement to be reached enabling subsequent demolition. This site is Crown Land managed by Council on behalf of the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) and reserved for infant welfare purposes only.

It is recommended that Council endorse the preschool development on the primary school site as the preferred location. It is also recommended that Council formally cease land management and any landholder agreement for 1345 Mount Dandenong Tourist Road, Mount Dandenong.

## RECOMMENDATION

### *That Council*

- 1. Endorse the relocation and redevelopment of Mount Dandenong Kindergarten onto the Mount Dandenong Primary School site with a Kinder Plus model;**
- 2. Support a \$400,000 contribution to the development of the facility to secure space for a 'Kinder Plus' service; and**
- 3. Endorse the recommendation to notify Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action of council's intention to cease the Committee of Management landholder arrangement for 1345 Mount Dandenong Tourist Road, Mount Dandenong.**

## RELATED COUNCIL DECISIONS

None.

## DISCUSSION

### *Purpose and Background*

The purpose of this report is to update Council on the current progress and decision making regarding the reestablishment of the Mount Dandenong Preschool following damage it sustained during the June 2021 storms.

The preschool building is Council owned and Yarra Ranges Kindergarten Inc. (YRKI) operate this facility where funded kindergarten programs have been delivered since 1963. Following the June 2021 storms the service was temporarily relocated to a vacant facility at Olinda Primary School.

Following the damage, Council commissioned a targeted assessment of early years infrastructure demand and offerings within the Mt Dandenong – Kalorama area which provided council officers with service planning insights and recommendations around rebuild need and possible site options. Specifically, the report recommended the rebuild of a co-located preschool at the Mount Dandenong Primary School, which also includes additional multipurpose spaces capable of providing Maternal and Child Health (MCH), allied health, supported playgroups or other community activities; often referred to as a 'Kinder Plus' facility.

Council sought the support of the DE and the VSBA to explore funding and support to rebuild the preschool. Since mid-2021, Council has worked closely with key stakeholders including the VSBA, DE, Mt Dandenong Primary Principal and School Council, and YRKI to consider the most suitable site to rebuild the preschool.

The VSBA engaged a range of consultants including architects to examine multiple sites and considered factors such as the location, planning overlays, condition of

trees, soil suitability, and bushfire requirements. In September/October 2022 the consultants' findings were presented to Council officers and other key stakeholders for discussion.

The existing preschool site was considered as part of this discussion but presented several significant challenges, including traffic and access concerns, bushfire and planning constraints, topography, the proximity to large trees as well as uncertainty around when the damaged building could be cleared and or accessed.

Following advocacy from council officers, which also included written support from the Mayor to Minister Stitt and Minister Hutchinson, Council received confirmation in October 2022 for the State funded reinstatement of a newly developed Kinder Plus facility, including a multi-purpose community space and consulting room, onto the Mount Dandenong Primary School site. This enhanced preschool facility provides Council with a great opportunity to address a gap in community offerings within the Mount Dandenong area, without responsibility as the sole funder or project manager.

A VSBA led Project Control Group (PCG) was formed early December 2022 to guide the delivery of the new facility and are now working with an architect to progress design concepts. Communication plans are also being developed in collaboration with key stakeholders to ensure consistent messaging and appropriate consultation opportunities with families and community.

The existing preschool at 1345 Mount Dandenong Tourist Rd, Mount Dandenong remains in the hands of Council's insurer and Council's Risk Team continues to work to reach an agreed settlement for the damaged building and contents.

Council currently manages this land via an ongoing Committee of Management agreement with the DEECA which stipulates that the land is reserved for Infant Welfare purposes only. This ownership and reservation encumbrance of the site, severely limits alternative uses. Should Council wish to utilise the land for alternative purposes, Parliamentary approval must first be obtained to change the land reservation status.

Council's current agreement for the DEECA allotment at 1345 Mount Dandenong Tourist Rd, includes ongoing maintenance responsibilities regardless of early years' service occupancy or site vacancy. Previously site maintenance was undertaken in partnership with the YRKI. However with the preschool relocating, the maintenance responsibility for the vacant site would sit fully with Council.

With the Ministerial approval for a new preschool facility (Kinder Plus) onto the Mount Dandenong Primary School site, including MCH, multipurpose and playgroup provision, the service planning demand analysis indicates infant welfare/early years service demand within the area, will be met in the foreseeable future.

Should Council decide to relinquish the current agreement, written notification of intent and reasoning to DEECA is required. Given the allotment borders directly on all sides with National Park land, it is likely that the site may be offered to Parks Victoria to manage.

### ***Options considered***

Following damage to the Mount Dandenong Preschool facility, six possible options were considered for addressing the early years' service and infrastructure needs of the Mount Dandenong – Kalorama community including:

- Option 1: Permanently cease operating Mount Dandenong Preschool on any site;
- Option 2a: Rebuild the Mount Dandenong Preschool at its existing location and no additional facility;
- Option 2b: Rebuild the Mount Dandenong Preschool at its existing location with a Kinder Plus model including space for playgroups and a consulting suite to support family support services such as MCH, allied health or education support services;
- Option 3a: Co-locate Mount Dandenong Preschool with Mount Dandenong Primary School with no additional facilities;
- Option 3b: Co-locate Mount Dandenong Preschool with a Kinder Plus model including space for playgroups and a consulting suite to enable family support services such as MCH, allied health or education support services; or
- Option 4: Permanently relocate Mount Dandenong Preschool to the Olinda Primary School

Given the limitations pertaining to any alternative use of the original preschool site location at 1345 Mount Dandenong Tourist Rd and the maintenance costs associated with retaining the vacant site, it is recommended Council relinquish management of this land.

### ***Recommended option and justification***

3b is the recommended option for Council's consideration.

From an Early Years' service planning perspective, option 3b provides the greatest potential to generate community outcomes.

The inclusion of a shared multipurpose room provides greater ability to better support the communities of Mount Dandenong - Kalorama, Kallista, Olinda and Sassafras through access to early years services such as supported playgroups, MCH (outreach), and allied health services. There is a current a lack of these services within the area due to a shortage of suitable spaces.

The relocation of the kindergarten to the Mount Dandenong Primary School site also enables shared benefits for both entities such as increased access and convenience for families, improved transition processes and potentially increased learning opportunities via provision of multipurpose/shared spaces.

Specific site challenges such as Bushfire Risk Rating, planning restrictions, existing topography, site access and suitability for a modular build were also contributing factors in the final location and building option preference.

To secure the inclusion of space allowing for an 'Kinder Plus' model on the Mt Dandenong Primary School site, council would need to contribute \$400,000 to the project.

## **FINANCIAL ANALYSIS**

Due to geographical, planning and bushfire challenges, the costs associated with rebuilding Mount Dandenong Preschool far outweigh those expected with a standard preschool rebuild. Cost estimates provided by Councils Major Projects team for the development of a similar one roomed preschool with small multipurpose space, started at \$4.2m.

Development and project management of the new facility will be funded by State Government, Ministerial approval for the build has been received and costing estimates are currently being finalised.

The VSBA have been explicit on numerous occasions that the multipurpose design components of the Kinder Plus model are not 'their reasonability to deliver.' However, these components have been included in all project designs to-date, due to consistent advocacy from council officers that these are much needed community services.

To help secure the Kinder Plus components throughout the schematic design phase council officers provided a letter to the VSBA in 2022 to express in-principle support of a financial co-contribution towards the Mount Dandenong Preschool rebuild project, subject to consideration by Council as part of the 2023/24 budget process.

Council is asked to co-contribute a sum of \$400,000 towards to the project to secure space for a 'Kinder Plus' model, which is envisaged to be covered predominantly through the insurance settlement costs.

## **APPLICABLE PLANS AND POLICIES**

This report contributes to the following strategic objective(s) in the Council Plan:

- Connected and Healthy Communities - Communities are safe, resilient, health, inclusive and socially well connected. Quality services are accessible to everyone.
- Quality Infrastructure and Liveable Places - Quality facilities and infrastructure meet current and future needs. Places are well planned and are hubs of activity that foster wellbeing, creativity and innovation.
- Child and Youth Strategy 20124 – 2024, Outcome 2 – Adequate Infrastructure exists to meet the needs of children, young people, and their families.

## **RELEVANT LAW**

There are several key pieces of legislation that guide the early years sector and associated Child Safe standards, including:

- Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010
- Education and Care National Regulations 2011, and
- Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005

## **SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS**

### ***Economic Implications***

There are no short term anticipated economic impacts related to this report. There are, however, long-term benefits to the local economy from the provision of quality, accessible infrastructure that is responsive to community need and supports engagement in early learning opportunities.

Investment in early learning can also have significant benefits for society, including greater social cohesion, reduced inequality, and a healthier, happier, and more resilient community. It can also help to strengthen the economy by developing a more highly skilled, productive, and higher paid workforce.

### ***Social Implications***

Mount Dandenong is a community in recovery following the June 2021 storm, and local connections, as well as a sense of belonging to place are critical to support community recovery. Health and education are vital influencers for positive long-term outcomes. The proposed multipurpose facility co-located on the Mount Dandenong Primary School site supports and enables increased opportunity for the local community to access essential universal programs and community services within their own township.

### ***Environmental Implications***

Environmental impacts haven't been fully considered, although it is anticipated that a new facility would be more efficient and potentially have reduced environmental impacts.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Following the storm, early engagement with key stakeholders was undertaken when completing the Mount Dandenong Early Years Options Analysis to better assist in understanding the needs of the community for early years services and views in relation to the repair / replacement of the Mount Dandenong Kindergarten. These key stakeholders included YRKI, Mount Dandenong Kindergarten staff and the Principal and School Council representatives from Mount Dandenong Primary School.

This engagement has continued with key stakeholders participating on the external Mount Dandenong Preschool working group and subsequent Project Control Group.

A thorough communication plan is currently being developed by the VSBA with input from PCG representatives to ensure the community remain informed and engaged in the project.

## **COLLABORATION, INNOVATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**

Relocation of the Mount Dandenong Preschool to the Primary School site aligns with the State Government's Kindergarten's on School Sites (KOSS) Initiative. KOSS is based on shared benefits for both entities such as increasing accessibility and convenience for families, improving transition processes and potentially increasing learning opportunities via provision of multipurpose/shared spaces.

Several internal teams and departments such as Recreation and Active Living, Engineering and Planning have been consulted regarding the relinquishment of 1345 Mount Dandenong Tourist Rd. No objections to returning land management to Department of Energy Environment and Climate Action have been identified.

## **RISK ASSESSMENT**

Mount Dandenong Preschool has provided education and care to many residents and their families for 60 years. While the redevelopment of an enhanced Preschool facility onto the Mount Dandenong Primary school site is one that provides improved outcomes for not only the early years' service but also the wider community, a large focus of attention and support for some key stakeholders and community members will be required. It is essential that clear communication around both the new build and future of the existing site are provided.

The Mount Dandenong Preschool has been operating from a temporary location at Olinda Primary school since the June 2021 storm. The estimated timeline for the completion of the new facility is currently Term 2, 2024. Given the challenges with the building site there is a risk that this timeline may be slightly optimistic and again reinforces the requirement of an adequate communication plan.

Ongoing challenges continue to be experienced with Council's insurer in reaching an agreed settlement. While this work continues, the site remains fenced, tarped, and inaccessible to community. In its current state, the fenced off facility continues to be a topic of conversation for community. Not only is the damaged building an unattractive reminder of the June 2021 storms, but it has also been reported by the School Principal as a trauma trigger for community members, in particularly children and families accessing the school who can clearly view the damaged building from the school grounds.

## **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

No officers and/or delegates acting on behalf of the Council through the Instrument of Delegation and involved in the preparation and/or authorisation of this report have any general or material conflict of interest as defined within the *Local Government Act 2020*.

## **ATTACHMENTS TO THE REPORT**

Nil