

## 2.2 UPDATE ON THE EXPANSION OF SUPPORTED PLAYGROUPS INTO LEGEND PARK KINDERGARTEN

(File No. CT)

Responsible Director: Julie Salomon

### **RECOMMENDATION**

*That Council:*

*1. Note the preference by Bestchance to continue operation at Legend Park Kindergarten in 2020 conditional on:*

- a) Achieving confirmed enrolments of 20 eligible four year old children and 10 three year old children by 2 September 2019 to ensure that the kindergarten remains financially viable throughout 2020 without additional financial assistance from Bestchance or other funding sources;*
- b) Agreement by the kindergarten parents (through Bestchance) to meet the requirements of the lease by keeping the kindergarten garden and play area to a community expected standard;*
- c) Agreement by the parent group (through Bestchance) to take responsibility for the promotion of the kindergarten, as occurs for all other kindergartens in Monash.*

*2. Authorise officers to re-activate the Central Enrolment Parent Portal for Legend Park Kindergarten effective immediately and closing 2 September 2019.*

*3. In the first week of September 2019, authorise officers to work with Bestchance to undertake a review of the enrolment numbers in order for Bestchance to establish the operational viability of the kindergarten based on the confirmed enrolment numbers;*

*4. If enrolment targets are not met and Bestchance advises that the kindergarten is not operationally viable, authorise officers to coordinate a joint consultation with the community in mid September 2019 to inform the community of the status of the enrolments and implications for the operations of the kindergarten for 2020 onwards;*

*5. Receive a further report in the September 2019 Council meeting cycle to inform Council of the consultation outcomes and implications and options for the operations of the kindergarten for 2020 onwards; and*

*6. Suspend the expansion of the Supported Playgroup for Glen Waverley at this time and authorise officers to identify and report back to Council in the September 2019 cycle on an alternate location and associated financial implications to support a five day per week operational model or a transitional approach for Legend Park Supported Playgroup in 2020.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this report is to advise Council of the outcomes of the community meeting at Legend Park Kindergarten held on 17 June 2019 and to seek endorsement of the proposed options for the operation of the kindergarten from January 2020 onwards.

### **BACKGROUND**

In March 2019 the supported playgroup model established at Cabena Ave Oakleigh expanded to Legend Park Kindergarten in response to the demand from the Glen Waverley community. At this time in excess of 230 families are using the Glen Waverley playgroup.

Legend Park kindergarten facility was selected using the following criteria:

- Location – identified need being Glen Waverley area;
- Council owned building;
- Current use consistent with playgroup use; and
- Underutilised facility.

After considering the above criteria, Officers commenced discussions with Bestchance as the main service provider in Council owned buildings delivering kindergarten services. Discussions highlighted that certain kindergartens managed by Bestchance were struggling with numbers and are currently operating at below capacity. Kindergartens operating below capacity are not operationally viable. Bestchance has been managing the shortfall however this is not financially sustainable for their organisation.

Of the sites operating at below capacity, the Legend Park Kindergarten in Glen Waverley, was identified as geographically suitable to support vulnerable families and other families in Monash.

Furthermore, this kindergarten operates for two days per week and therefore has capacity to accommodate a Supported Playgroup for the remaining three days of the week.

However, given that the Legend Park facility is only available three days, it not possible to hold smaller specialised playgroups for those families identified as meeting the Department of Education and Training (DET) criteria for vulnerability.

The Legend Park Kindergarten is currently leased by Council to Bestchance on a shared lease arrangement to expire on 31 January 2020.

### ***DISCUSSION***

A meeting of approximately 50 people was held at the kindergarten on the evening of 17 June 2019 in response to a number of concerns from the community received by Council. The local community clearly stated that they did not want Legend Park Kindergarten to close. The key issues raised at the meeting were:

- Lack of consultation prior to the closure decision being made;
- Financial viability should not be a consideration for the ongoing operations of the kindergarten and should be further subsidised by Council;
- Local children require this local kindergarten given proximity to the Camelot Rise Primary School which also experiencing reducing enrolments;
- The educators have provided a wonderful program for the past 20 years and concerns regarding their ongoing employment with Bestchance;
- Local parents expect to be able to send their children to this kindergarten and this experience should not be compromised by financial concerns or alternate early years' service provision;
- Council has not adequately promoted the kindergarten to attract families (lack of care of the garden and playgrounds and lack of adequate signage);
- The area is seeing an influx of children who will require this kindergarten in the future;
- The kindergarten has been offered to the community since 1974 and is an important part of their community and should not be closed;
- Concerns that the kindergarten facility would be sold and lost to the community;
- Alternate kindergartens are not in walking distance for all families who have enrolled at Legend Park Kindergarten; and
- The needs of the 240 plus playgroup families, whilst important, should not be at the expense of the kindergarten community and an alternative solution should be found.

In addition to the feedback from this meeting, Council has received and responded to 19 written concerns.

It is also important to note that Bestchance has made a commitment to the Oakleigh community to continue the operation of Dover Street Kindergarten in 2020 despite low enrolments and financial viability implications. Bestchance has strongly advised that this is not a viable business model and will not be considered as a precedent for the future considerations.

***POLICY IMPLICATIONS***

There are no policy implications of this decision.

***SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS***

Evidence tells us that a person's life successes, health and emotional wellbeing have their roots in early childhood. We know that if we get it right in the early years, we can expect children to thrive throughout school and their adult lives.

Both nature and nurture (genes and environment) influence children's development. The quality of a child's earliest environments and the availability of appropriate experiences at the right stages of development are crucial determinants of the way each child's brain architecture develops.

Caring and supportive environments that promote optimal early childhood development greatly increase children's chances of a successful transition to school. This, in turn, promotes children's chances of achieving better learning outcomes while at school and better education, employment and health after they have finished school.

***HUMAN RIGHTS CONSIDERATIONS***

There are no Human Rights implications associated with this report as all children and families will have access to a kindergarten program.

***CONSULTATION***

Consultation with the community occurred at meetings held on 11 June 2019, the 17 June 2019 and it is proposed that further consultations will occur in July 2019 and September 2019.

***FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS***

There are no financial implications associated with this report, however there may be budgetary considerations pending the option for operation post September 2019.

***CONCLUSION***

Following consultation with the community and discussions with Bestchance, it is recommended that Council endorse the minimum enrolment numbers proposed by Bestchance to ensure financial viability. It is proposed that Council officers will work with the Bestchance and the Legend Park Kindergarten community to support promotional activities to increase 2020 enrolment numbers by 2 September 2019.

Should the required kindergarten enrolment numbers not be achieved, it is further proposed that officers will consult with the community in transitioning the Legend Park Kindergarten to a full time supported playgroup program for the Monash community from 2020 onwards.