



W A V E R L E Y
COUNCIL

COUNCIL MEETING

ADDITIONAL BUSINESS

7.00 PM, TUESDAY 16 JUNE 2020

Waverley Council
PO Box 9
Bondi Junction NSW 1355
DX 12006 Bondi Junction
Tel. 9083 8000
E-mail: info@waverley.nsw.gov.au

ADDITIONAL BUSINESS

7. Reports

CM/7.14/20.06(2) Mayoral Minute Update - Supporting Asylum Seekers through COVID-19
Pandemic3

REPORT
CM/7.14/20.06(2)

Subject: Mayoral Minute Update - Supporting Asylum Seekers through COVID-19 Pandemic

TRIM No: A02/0436

Author: Rebecca Rodwell, Manager, Community Planning and Partnerships

Director: Emily Scott, Director, Community, Assets and Operations

RECOMMENDATION:

That Council:

EITHER

1. Endorses the Mayor signing the open letter to the Prime Minister on supporting asylum seekers through the COVID-19 pandemic proposed by the Refugee Council of Australia and the Local Government Mayoral Taskforce Supporting People Seeking Asylum.

OR

2. Declines to endorse signing the open letter to the Prime Minister on supporting asylum seekers through the COVID-19 pandemic proposed by the Refugee Council of Australia and the Local Government Mayoral Taskforce Supporting People Seeking Asylum.

1. Executive Summary

This report provides further information on the open letter to the Prime Minister on supporting asylum seekers through the COVID-19 Pandemic proposed by the Refugee Council of Australia and the Local Government Mayoral Taskforce Supporting People Seeking Asylum, which was considered by Council at its meeting on 2 June 2020.

2. Introduction/Background

This report relates to the mayoral minute on this subject considered at the Council meeting on 2 June 2020.

Chronology/events

On 2 June at 1.30 pm, Council officers received an email from the Refugee Council of Australia requesting the Mayor join other Mayors and organisations in signing an open letter to the Prime Minister requesting that the Federal Government expand JobKeeper, JobSeeker and Medicare for all people seeking asylum during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was the first interaction Council staff had had with the proposed open letter (it was later found that a more generic email had been sent to staff on 26 May 2020 but had been detected and labelled as 'spam' by Council's email system thus going unseen).

A Council officer spoke to a Refugee Council staff member immediately after receiving the email, who then forwarded the link to the open letter. The original deadline for signing the letter had been 31 May 2020, which the Refugee Council advised had been extended to 5 June 2020.

Upon receipt of this email, on the same day, Council officers forwarded the request to the Mayor. The Mayor correctly sought advice on whether she could sign the letter or whether a Council resolution was required. The advice provided was that a resolution prior to signing would be preferable.

Given the shortness of time, the Mayor asked for staff help in preparing a proposed resolution for Council to consider as a mayoral minute. Due to the only Council meeting before 5 June being that evening, staff were not able to complete this process within normal quality control processes.

3. Relevant Council Resolutions

Meeting and date	Minute No.	Decision
Council 2 June 2020	CM/6.2/20.06	<p>That:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Council supports the principle of providing people seeking asylum with access to Medicare, income support for those out of work, and valid visas through the COVID-19 pandemic as outlined in the open letter to the Prime Minister and signed by 35 local government mayors tabled at the meeting. 2. Further information comes back to Council at the next Council meeting.

4. Discussion

Further information

Following the Council meeting on 2 June and the Council's request for further information, officers contacted the Refugee Council to see if it would be possible to get an extension to the deadline for signing the letter. Council officers were told that the deadline could not be extended. On 10 June, officers were updated by the Refugee Council staff member to advise that the deadline for sending the letter had been extended to enable the letter to be released during Refugee Week (14–20 June 2020).

The Refugee Council has also now advised (as at 10 June 2020) that the open letter has only been signed by the following Councils and organisations:

- Banyule City Council.
- Blue Mountains City Council.
- Cardinia Shire Council.
- City of Canterbury Bankstown.
- City of Greater Dandenong.
- City of Hobart.
- City of Melbourne.
- City of Mitcham.
- City of Monash.
- City of Port Phillip.
- City of Prospect.
- City of Ryde.
- City of Vincent.
- Hawkesbury City Council.
- Hepburn Shire Council.
- Inner West Council.

- Leeton Shire Council.
- Liverpool City Council.
- Local Government NSW.
- Maribyrnong City Council.
- Melton City Council.
- Moonee Valley City Council.
- Municipal Association of Victoria.
- Randwick City Council.
- Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils.
- Whittlesea City Council.

This is 26 organisations—fewer than the 35 originally advised by the Refugee Council.

The open letter and a copy of relevant emails are attached to this report.

The issue

The Refugee Council of Australia and the Local Government Mayoral Taskforce Supporting People Seeking Asylum have developed a campaign to support people and families impacted by COVID-19. It is reported that many asylum seekers have lost work or are not eligible to work and are without access to a liveable income and health support due to their status. The Refugee Council are advising that there are increasing instances of homelessness and poverty which could lead to a worsening of the public health crisis due to the increased need for emergency relief and growing strain on already stretched service providers.

Arguments made in support of the call for an extension of benefits include:

- Unstable housing as a result of destitution impedes people's ability to adequately self-isolate.
- Lack of access to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme means many cannot afford to purchase vital medications.
- This can further compromise people's general health and increase their need for hospital admission, putting further pressure on the health system.
- Therefore, it is important that asylum seekers receive access to the support during the pandemic.

There are not high numbers of refugees or asylum seekers living in Waverley. However, Council has a long history of supporting multicultural communities and the Community Strategic Plan 2018–2029 notes the community has a strong interest in supporting diversity and inclusion.

Decision

Council has already formally expressed support for the principle of providing people seeking asylum with access to services such as Medicare, income support for those out of work, and valid visas through the Pandemic period. The decision for Council is whether it wishes to sign the letter or not.

Unfortunately, information provided by the Refugee Council and relied on by Council staff in relation to this matter has changed from time to time (deadline dates), and in some cases may have been inaccurate (number of signatories). This information was supplied to the Mayor and Councillors by staff in good faith in short timeframes. The accuracy of the information has now been checked to the extent reasonably possible.

Notwithstanding issues concerning the information provided, it is up to Council to decide whether it wishes to be a signatory to the letter or not.

5. Financial impact statement/Time frame/Consultation

Council is now advised that the time frame for signing the open letter is after the Council meeting on 16 June for release during Refugee Week (which is the week of 14-20 June 2020).

6. Conclusion

Council has expressed support for the principle of providing people seeking asylum with access to services during the Pandemic impact period. Council asked for further information on this matter before agreeing to sign the open letter regarding this issue. Staff had been advised that the deadline for sending the letter was 5 June 2020 but have subsequently been advised the deadline has been extended until after the next Council meeting. Information previously provided to the Mayor and Councillors by staff in good faith and based on advice from the Refugee Council has subsequently been changed or corrected by the Refugee Council.

The decision as to whether to sign the open letter or not is over to Council.

7. Attachments

1. Open letter [↓](#)
2. Relevant emails [↓](#)

May 2020

Prime Minister Scott Morrison
Parliament House
PO BOX 6022, Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister Scott Morrison,

Local governments around the country are gravely concerned about the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact it is already having on the most vulnerable members of our community. Many councils included in this letter are home to people seeking asylum living in our communities, many of whom are receiving limited to no support by the Federal Government at this critical time.

This cohort of people, including those that are awaiting an appeal process or who have exhausted their review options, are in a uniquely vulnerable situation. Many have already been exited from the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program, and those that were fortunate enough to find work now face long-term unemployment as the economy contracts with casual jobs already having been the first to go.

Without access to a liveable income, demand for emergency relief and housing support has already increased, placing a growing strain on already overstretched service providers, and subsequently leaving many community members destitute with zero income to survive on.

The Government has already flagged people who were on the pathway to citizenship would have welfare waiting periods waived so they could access the same benefits as Australian job seekers. Students and apprentices have also received increases of \$550 to their fortnightly payments in response to COVID-19. These are commendable actions taken by the Morrison Government.

In light of these vital support measures, we are calling on the Federal Government to provide similar provisions for people seeking asylum. We believe as a matter of principle, people seeking asylum should have:

- **Access to Medicare** – During this global pandemic, our world-leading health system must be available to everyone, to protect themselves and those around them.
- **Income support for those out of work** – Many people seeking asylum have lost their jobs as a result of the COVID-19 economic downturn. They cannot return home. Therefore the Government should look to ensure they have the support necessary to avoid becoming destitute at this time. This could include enabling people seeking asylum on Bridging Visas to have access to the JobSeeker Payment for the duration of the pandemic, or at the very least, changing the eligibility criteria for SRSS.
- **Valid visas** – Visa security is necessary not only for people to access vital services but also to ensure that visa status, or the lack thereof, is not a barrier to people seeking COVID-19 testing and treatment. The Government needs to ensure people's visas are renewed before their expiry and to ensure there are no gaps where people are left destitute.

Without an adequate safety-net in place, it is not possible for people to protect themselves from infection and self-isolate themselves. To prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the Government needs to ensure basic support to all members of the community facing destitution, as we are all in this together. This in turn protects the wider community and public health.

In the past week, we have seen in Singapore what can happen when we leave people – especially migrants – behind. More than 70% of the skyrocketing infections in that country have come from migrant workers who have limited access to medical services, income support if they cannot work and appropriate housing where they can practice physical distancing. You have highlighted this risk of complacency yourself.

Once again, I thank the Federal Government for their decisive work thus far in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on our communities and ask that this positive work be expanded to include people seeking asylum.

Please contact Marek Krol on 0413 280 903 or at marek.krol@cgd.vic.gov.au if you have any further questions in relation to this request.

Yours sincerely,

Mayor, [Insert Name]
[Insert Council]

Mayor, [Insert Name]
[Insert Council]

Mayor, [Insert Name]
[Insert Council]

Mayor, [Insert Name]
[Insert Council]

Relevant emails

CHAIN 1

From:**Sent:** Thursday, 11 June 2020 9:40 AM**To:****Subject:** Re: Date finalised

Hi,

National total people seeking asylum is 96,952

Total for NSW is 40,390

Bayside our estimate is 602

The other LGAs you mention would have small numbers, and are not published for this reason.

These figures include people who arrived by boat and people who arrived by plane

Kind regards,

Office Manager

Refugee Council of Australia

Suite 4A6, 410 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010, Australia

Phone: +61 (02) 9211 9333. Fax: (02) 9211 9288

Email: manager@refugeecouncil.org.au

Website: www.refugeecouncil.org.au

Follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of this country. We pay respect to their Elders past and present and to the unique role that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples play in welcoming refugees and people seeking asylum to Australia.



From:

Sent: Thursday, 11 June 2020 9:33 AM

To:

Subject: RE: Date finalised

Thanks.

I am just preparing some information to Council. Is it possible to let me know;

- How many people are there in Aus and NSW seeking asylum?
- How many people in Waverley (I think none), Randwick, CoS and Bayside?

Regards

From:

Sent: Thursday, 11 June 2020 9:25 AM

To:

Subject: Re: Date finalised

Hi,

The following Councils have signed on so far:

City of Monash
Leeton Shire Council
Randwick City Council
Whittlesea City Council
Cardinia Shire Council
City of Canterbury Bankstown
Melton City Council
City of Greater Dandenong
Maribyrnong City Council
City of Mitcham
City of Port Phillip
City of Vincent
Local Government NSW
City of Prospect

City of Hobart
Blue Mountains City Council
Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils
Hawkesbury City Council
Banyule City Council
City of Ryde
Inner West Council
Liverpool City Council
Hepburn Shire Council
Moonee Valley City Council
Municipal Association of Victoria
City of Melbourne

Kind regards,

Office Manager
Refugee Council of Australia

Suite 4A6, 410 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010, Australia

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From:

Sent: Wednesday, 10 June 2020 5:12 PM

To:

Subject: Re: Date finalised

Hi

I'm sorry to bother you - is it too late to call you?

Our Councillors are interested to know who the other 35 Councils are that have signed the letter - is it possible to please send me the information?

Thanks

From:

Sent: Wednesday, 10 June 2020 12:49 PM

To:

Subject: Re: Date finalised

Yes.

Kind regards,

Office Manager

Refugee Council of Australia

Suite 4A6, 410 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010, Australia

Phone: +61 (02) 9211 9333. Fax: (02) 9211 9288

Email: manager@refugeecouncil.org.au

Website: www.refugeecouncil.org.au

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From:

Sent: Wednesday, 10 June 2020 12:48 PM

To:

Subject: Re: Date finalised

Ok - so they could still do it?

Thanks

From:

Sent: Wednesday, 10 June 2020 12:45 PM

To:

Subject: Re: Date finalised

Hi

We are looking to release the letter during Refugee Week, so the timing would be perfect.

Kind regards,

Office Manager

Refugee Council of Australia

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From:

Sent: Wednesday, 10 June 2020 12:27 PM

To:

Subject: Date finalised

Hi

I hope you enjoyed your long weekend.

I have been asked to clarify that it is definitely too late for Waverley to become a signatory for the open letter to the PM? If it is, there is no point us having it on the agenda for the next Council meeting (16 June) so wanted to check.

Thanks

CHAIN 2**From:****Sent:** Tuesday, 2 June 2020 1:43 PM**To:****Subject:** FINAL CHANCE: Open Letter from Mayors to the PM

Hi

Good to talk to you. Here is the email that was sent to all Refugee Welcome Zone Councils asking them to sign onto an open letter calling for COVID19 support for people seeking asylum. The deadline is now 5 June for Councils to sign on. It would be wonderful if the Mayor of Waverley Council would like to add her support, which can be easily done by clicking on the second green button below.

Kind regards,

Office Manager

Refugee Council of Australia

Suite 4A6, 410 Elizabeth Street, Surry Hills NSW 2010, Australia

Phone: +61 (02) 9211 9333. Fax: (02) 9211 9288

Email: manager@refugeecouncil.org.auWebsite: www.refugeecouncil.org.auFollow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)

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I hope this email finds you well.

I am following up an email I sent you a couple of weeks ago about an open letter we are helping bring together alongside the [Local Government Mayoral Taskforce Supporting People Seeking Asylum](#) calling on the Prime Minister Scott Morrison to ensure people seeking asylum have some support during COVID-19..

We are seeing people who have lost work, with no access to JobKeeper or JobSeeker and reliant on piecemeal support from charities and, if they're lucky, state governments. We know many local governments are also feeling the weight of responsibility that should lie with the federal government.

To find out how many people seeking asylum we estimate to be in your local government area, please email... manager@refugeecouncil.org.au

The deadline for signing on to the letter is this **Sunday 31 May, 11.59pm** so I wanted to remind you of this important advocacy opportunity. Thanks to the many Mayors who have signed on. Some of the signatories to date are:

- President, Linda Scott, Local Government NSW
- Mayor David O'Loughlin, City of Prospect, SA
- Mayor Sarah Carter, Maribyrnong City Council, VIC
- Mayor Emma Cole, City of Vincent, WA
- Mayor Khal Asfour, City of Canterbury Bankstown, NSW
- Mayor Heather Holmes-Ross, City of Mitcham, SA
- Mayor Stuart James, City of Monash, VIC
- Mayor Paul Maytom, Leeton Shire Council, NSW

As you can see, we are heartened by the diverse range of Mayors signing on to the letter. With less than a week left we are trying to reach **our target of getting fifty Mayors** from across the country signed on.

Whether you are an elected representative or a council worker, we encourage you to have conversations within your council as to whether your Mayor may be able to sign on. Likewise, please consider contacting your state-based local government associations, as they are also able to sign on.

[Read the full open letter here](#)

[Sign on to the open letter here](#)

The key asks outlined in the letter are:

1. **Ensuring all people seeking asylum have access to medical treatment and Medicare**
2. **Ensuring all people seeking asylum and refugees have a financial safety net so they are not forced into destitution**
3. **Preventing people from losing legal status and access to support**

We do hope you can help us ensure a strong Mayoral voice on these issues as we move forward with this campaign. We have had some very promising meetings and believe this could help contribute to some important changes.

Thanks for all your support. Please feel free to contact me at manager@refugeecouncil.org.au if you have any questions.

All the best,

, on behalf of the Refugee Council team
www.refugeecouncil.org.au