

22 December 2023  
via email: [COVID-19Inquiry@pmc.gov.au](mailto:COVID-19Inquiry@pmc.gov.au)

Dear Ms Kruk AO

## **Re: COVID-19 Response Inquiry – City of Stonnington Submission**

The City of Stonnington welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the COVID-19 Response Inquiry (the inquiry). The information provided seeks to address key elements of the Terms of Reference, specifically, key health response measures and supports and support for industry and businesses.

### The City of Stonnington

The City of Stonnington (Stonnington) is located in Melbourne's inner south-east, alongside the Yarra River, covering an area of 25.63 square kilometres. Stonnington is close to the centre of Melbourne and takes in the suburbs of Armadale, Kooyong, Malvern, Malvern East, Prahran, Toorak and parts of Glen Iris, South Yarra and Windsor.

Stonnington's Estimated Resident Population for 2022 is 106,418, with a population density of 4,151 persons per square km. This is a decrease from ~121,000 estimated residents at 30 June 2020.

Stonnington has a culturally and economically diverse population. The housing stock ranges from some of Melbourne's finest mansions to large blocks of public housing, an indication of the community's contrasting lifestyles, needs and expectations. Just under one-quarter of the community speaks a language other than English at home. Just under one-third of the community was born overseas. Stonnington has 4,012 residents who require assistance with core activities due to a long-term health condition, a disability, or old age, and one in 10 residents act in the role of unpaid carer for a person requiring assistance.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted Stonnington's local services and economy, with Melbourne's lockdown periods accounting for 131 days of the 2020-21 financial year and 120 days of the 2021-22 financial year. Stonnington Council invested approximately \$5 million in relief for residents and business in 2019-20, and over \$11 million in each of 2020-21 and 2021-22. This included fee and registration waivers, grants and refunds for businesses, an innovative outdoor dining program, waiving fees in some of our car parks, mental health programs, assisting sporting clubs and local groups to adapt, helping owners' corporations ensure high rise accommodation buildings were safe for residents, providing food and support packages to the most vulnerable

members of our community and maintaining crucial programs like early education and maternal child health during lockdown.

### Key health response measures and Governance (roles and responsibilities of Local Government)

Stonnington made a significant contribution to support our community with key health measures and public messaging assistance. Stonnington actively identified and closed gaps in areas where signage, communication, and funding from State and Federal Government were insufficient.

1. Vaccination Centres provided from within Council funding.
  - Council buildings were rapidly established as mass vaccination and testing centres, demonstrating our commitment to public health and the well-being of neighbouring Councils and communities. These buildings later transitioned into GP respiratory care clinics to provide care for residents and alleviate the burden on hospitals and doctors, contributing to a more comprehensive healthcare response during the pandemic. However, the provision of this service came at a cost to Council; while the Federal Government partnered with Star Health to deliver health services, Stonnington funded many operational costs, for example the heating and cooling of the facility.
  - It is proposed going forward that more clarity and transparency over funding arrangements is provided to local Government groups who agree to host such facilities during pandemic events.
2. Cleaning Packs and Education for Rooming Houses
  - Council provided cleaning packs (buckets, gloves, chlorine, face masks) and education to rooming houses, complete with checks in multiple languages. Over sixty homes were visited individually with a door knock to ensure all residents were up to date with pandemic information in their preferred language and were provided with Council direct contact information for more help if required.
3. Extended Support for Food Businesses
  - Our support extended to assisting food businesses in reopening and closing safely, offering guidance on hygiene and safety measures and physical visits assisting with 'how to measure' density quotients as well as provision of connections to mental health services for many business owners who were struggling.
4. Council COVID Hotline for Unanswered Inquiries
  - Understanding the importance of accessible support, we established a dedicated local hotline for inquiries that couldn't be addressed via the COVID hotline.
5. Education to Owner Corporations (multi-level dwellings were overlooked).
  - Stonnington provided proactive engagement including education to State-wide Strata corporations, emphasising community safety, education, tips, and awareness for common/shared spaces in these types of dwellings.
  - It is critical in future pandemic events that multi-level dwellings are not overlooked in outreach.
6. Simplifying Legislation into Checklists
  - Recognising the need for clarity, we simplified legislation into practical checklists for managing common areas and food and health industry businesses. Checklists for shutting down, reopening with food and hygiene safety in mind to avoid further burdening the health care system with potential foodborne outbreaks.
  - Clear and straightforward communication was found to be better for our community in terms of understanding Federal and State Government direction.

## Support for industry and businesses

Two key issues impacted Stonnington's ability to provide support for our industry and businesses.

1. Public health messaging undermining support for service-based industries that rely on foot traffic.
  - Much of our key industry relies on foot traffic – retail trade is the largest industry by employment in Stonnington, representing almost 20% of jobs (in 2023). Around 10% of jobs are in accommodation and food services.
  - It is proposed that a more considered approach to public messaging is required in response to future pandemics, both throughout and post the pandemic event. Businesses in the service industry in Stonnington experienced significant disadvantages due to the changing and inconsistent messaging from State and Federal Governments, and the resultant fearmongering reduced foot traffic in shopping precincts. The impact of this messaging on customers worked against financial and other support provided by Stonnington Council to businesses.
2. Insufficient sector-specific support.
  - There were several successful COVID-19 business support initiatives provided by Stonnington Council and spearheaded by State and Federal Governments.
  - However, proactive measures could be taken to develop and provide tailored pandemic responses for each sector in the future. Night-time economy businesses are a key example of this. These businesses were severely affected, particularly during lockdowns due to density limits, working from home directions and the staged reopening after lockdowns. Grouping these businesses with other dissimilar sectors resulted in staged reopening rules that were not fit-for-purpose for many businesses in Stonnington which, with more tailored support, could provide an important cultural and economic boost to the area.

It is appropriate that a whole-of-government approach was taken to address the wide-ranging impacts of COVID-19 across various sectors, and that localised and specific, culturally appropriate services are delivered to communities. Victoria was particularly affected due to the extended length of COVID-19 lockdowns, and Stonnington continues to face and address the financial, community and workplace impacts of the pandemic. Consideration of how response measures undertaken by Local Governments can be resourced in the event of future pandemics is welcomed by Stonnington.

Yours sincerely

**Dale Dickson**  
Chief Executive Officer