VICTORIA POLICE

Local Area Commander
Port Phillip Police Service Area
St Kilda Police Complex
92 Chapel Street
St Kilda 3182

3 April 2025

Mr Ian Gray
Chair, Community Safety Roundtable
City of Port Phillip
99a Carlisle Street
St Kilda 3182

Subject: **Community Safety Roundtable – Victoria Police Submission**

Dear Ian,

I take this opportunity to thank you for facilitating the Community Safety Roundtable (roundtable) on 19 March 2025 and provide a submission on behalf of Victoria Police. This submission is made in accordance with the terms of reference governing the roundtable.

Background

Over recent years, St Kilda particularly Fitzroy Street, has attracted those who are homeless and those purporting to be homeless which has enlivened pop up tent cities and encampments in and around commercial zones, shopping precincts and residential areas. It is acknowledged that the geographical footprint of such encampments is far greater and encompasses many areas within the City of Port Phillip.

Based on routine and regular feedback to police from residents, business owners and other community groups; the growth in encampments and rough sleepers in and around commercial zones and shopping precincts is the primary driver of negative community sentiment and perceptions of safety.

Perception in the community is that this cohort are engaged in crime such as theft, assault, drug use, intimidatory behaviour, weapons offences and anti-social behaviour thus impacting amenity and generating fear by those who live, pass through, or operate business where these encampments are established.

This situation has resulted in a loud, angry, frustrated and somewhat distressed resident and business cohort calling for action over the preceding years. This sentiment was reflected during the Port Phillip Neighbourhood Policing Forum on 3 December 2024 where more than 120 members of the community vocally and angrily expressed their frustration at the situation and again during the 'CoPP for COPS' rally on 20 January 2025.

Current Policing Response

The policing response to date has been one of enforcement, joint patrols with City of Port Phillip Local Laws Officers and engagement with social welfare agencies. Outside of a regular presence by the Neighbourhood Policing Team, Operation LION is a standing operation deployed to target encampments in commercial zones such as Fitzroy Street which is a significant driver of complaints from across the community. Operation LION whilst having a foundation in enforcement and disruption, also sees our members engage with social and support services as a matter of practice.

Operation LION is an intensive fixed period focus on crime and anti-social behaviour in and around encampments and has been undertaken during August, November 2024 and March 2025 over the course of 14 – 21 days at a time. Operation LION sees a heavy police investment in human resources and specialist policing services however routinely yields low offending data resulting in short term positive outcomes with little or no impact on the foundational issue of the encampments themselves.

Without strategic work in this space there exists a risk to Victoria Police in the reliance on them as a single agency to regulate behaviour in encampments that may not be being positively influenced through local laws and council practice. Additionally, and most importantly, there is a need for a greater role played by social and therapeutic services.

Victoria Police through the routine deployment of the Neighbourhood Policing Team are committed to continuing to play a pivotal role in this space no matter the outcome of this review.

Local Laws

An examination of the social and legal landscape reveals the City of Port Phillip's local laws to be inadequate in their ability to limit or stop the encampments. The existing provisions and exemptions within the relevant local laws, in particular Local Law 42, appears to have enabled growth in encampments and a degree of permanency at some locations. As a result, there is a heavy and ever-increasing reliance on police by the community to regulate behaviour within the encampments.

I have addressed councillors in chambers on this challenge on two occasions in the preceding months. I support councillors in their commitment to local law reform including but not limited to Local Law 17, Local Law 42 and Local Law 43 and encourage council to continue to consult with Victoria Police to ensure the workability of such reforms.

Social Services

The complexity of encampments, homelessness, those purporting to be homeless and their nexus to other health and social challenges is universally acknowledged by agencies operating in this space. It is submitted that the principal remedies to these challenges sit within the remit of social and therapeutic intervention and housing.

The roundtable resulted in a strong presence by support agencies, great collaboration, and a genuine desire to make a positive difference. The roundtable also revealed an apparent limited awareness by those agencies of community sentiment in addition to the caring and interventionist role that local laws officers and police engage in day in day out at all hours of the day.

It is hoped that by shining a light on this issue and coming together in a roundtable format will see an uplift in social, therapeutic, and housing support for those living in encampments.

Recommendations

The amendments to the local laws as described are strongly recommended with a caveat that execution is by way of a tiered response on the ground namely:

1. Intervention - that social and therapeutic intervention is undertaken primarily, intervention is swift and alternative living, sleeping, and gathering arrangements are implemented.
2. Assessment – that social and therapeutic agencies swiftly determine needs and alternative living, sleeping, medical and gathering arrangements are implemented should they be determined.
3. Enforcement - is undertaken by Local Laws Officers and the Neighbourhood Policing Team to dismantle encampments occupied by those who have rejected support or whom have been deemed as not requiring support.

It is recommended that the local laws are not whole of City of Port Phillip specific but with an ability for temporary application by gazette or otherwise to a problem area under the council's management.

It is recommended that a gathering place be established away from residential and business zones for use by those who would ordinarily camp in the street or other public place with access to medical, housing, and other support services.

It is recommended that social and therapeutic services employ a collaborative joined up response that steers and guides participants to services away from the encampments. This presents an opportunity to rethink an in-situ care model that is currently employed by some support agencies that unwittingly, could be supporting the presence of some encampments.

It is recommended that council rapid response cleaning teams be deployed contemporaneously with police and local laws joint patrols post the introduction of the revised local laws.

Conclusion

I take this opportunity to thank you and Nellie once again for your tireless efforts in facilitating the roundtable.

The challenges we face in this space are whole of community challenges requiring a joint and collaborative approach in addition to creative remedies. Until the foundation issue of encampments and those choosing to sleep rough, is positively impacted, only then will community sentiment begin to shift in a positive direction.

Yours sincerely

Brett COLOE
Inspector