

2.4 IMMUNISATION ADVOCACY

Responsible Director: Russell Hopkins

RECOMMENDATION

That Council:

- 1. Notes the important work the Immunisation Program does within the community as a simple, safe and effective way of protecting people against harmful diseases.*
- 2. Writes to the Victorian Minister for Health, the Hon. Martin Foley MP seeking an increase in the level of State funding to local government immunisation services in line with the greater requirements on and increasing costs of immunisation.*
- 3. Authorises officers to engage with other local government authorities, peak bodies and immunisation agencies in a collective advocacy campaign.*

INTRODUCTION

In Victoria, immunisation services are a function of local government according to the Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 (PHWA), Part 3, Division 3, s.24. (Annex 2). This section states *'the function of every council under this Act is to seek to protect, improve and promote public health and wellbeing within the municipal district by- (f) co-ordinating and providing immunisation services to children living or being educated within the municipal district'*.

BACKGROUND

Local Government in Victoria has historically played an important role in delivering immunisation services to the Victorian public. It currently provides approximately 45 percent of all immunisation encounters for children aged two months to four years of age given in Victoria, and contributes significantly to raising the importance of immunisation in local communities. Local Government administers approximately 90 per cent of immunisations provided to school age children and young people.

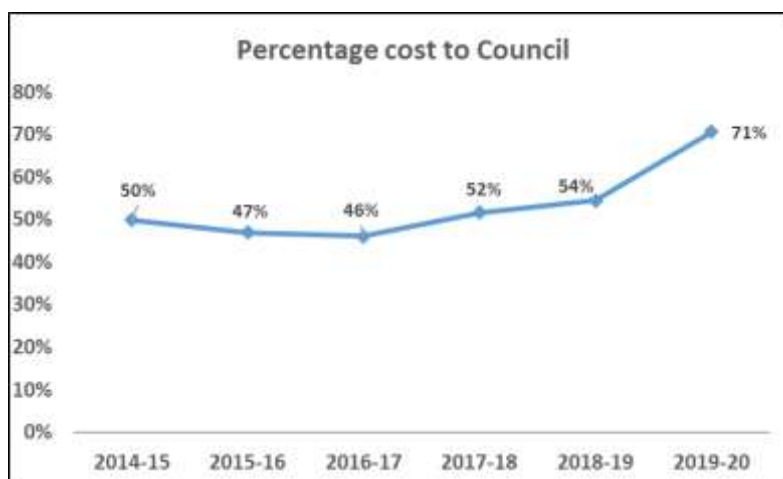
DISCUSSION

Funding for local government immunisation services have not been increased since 2005 other than yearly CPI increases. Any funding changes have solely been related to the type and number of vaccinations required by the changes in the immunisation program as set by the National Immunisation Program. This program is subject to change without significant notice from the Department of Health.

The changing nature of immunisation over recent years has placed increased financial burden on local governments. These changes include:

- No increase in payments relative to increasing service costs and demands.
- Introduction of “No Jab No Pay” and “No Jab No Play” policies with no increase to per encounter payment.
- Significant and regular changes to the secondary school cohort immunisations, including catch up programs for HPV, Boostrix and Meningococcal CV ACWY.
- Introduction of whole of life Australian Immunisation Register (AIR) which has increased the administrative load for councils.
- Increased community demand for overseas/complex catch up schedules.
- Community expectations have increased in relation to:
 - access to information and education
 - access to immunisation sessions
 - access to reports that are now required for pre-school entry, school entry, tertiary study /placement and employment

The changes in Council’s proportional cost of the provision of the Monash immunisation program can be seen in the following figures:



The obvious trend is upward and a cost shift to Council. The significant increased cost to Council for the 2019/20 year is primarily related the required impost of the COVID-19 restrictions placed on the Immunisation service for such items as personal protective equipment (PPE), hospital grade cleaning wipes, reduced numbers of clients in one session due to social distancing and the level of cleaning required between each client. The team also needed to pivot to community-based sessions for secondary school students during the time that schools were using on-line learning. It is expected that the increased cost of providing immunisation sessions will be ongoing, particularly while social distancing measures are required.

It is important to note that early advice indicates that any COVID-19 vaccination program will be rolled out through multiple immunisation services with the Monash Council program being one of these. If this program is funded in a similar fashion to the current program, the cost of such a large vaccination program will be significant. Advocacy at this time to ensure adequate funding for the service is essential.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Nil

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Currently the range of services offered cover the life span birth to the elderly with a particular focus on our infant program and secondary school program. The service is currently also offered to parents, grandparents and vulnerable groups within our community. This is especially prevalent with Council's influenza program which is offered free of charge to eligible cohorts.

High immunisation coverage rates, and the associated protection against vaccine preventable diseases, can have an impact on the health and wellbeing of a community. An immunisation coverage rate of 95% in each cohort is required to obtain herd immunity. The public health consequences of falling immunisation rates have the potential to be serious within our community particularly given our demographic. A large percentage of our residents were born overseas and travel often to countries and regions where the diseases we vaccinate against are prevalent. These diseases, whilst rarely seen in Australia, could and will become more common with our community if our service cannot maintain the high level to which it currently functions. Falling immunisation rates in the setting of a frequent travelling community can cause significant public health risks.

The Monash Council immunisation service is accessed regularly to provide education, advice and recommendations relating to immunisation. These requests come not only from our residents but also other stakeholders, such as schools, clinics, employees and the Australian Immunisation Register. The community trusts that we can meet their evolving needs to not only immunise but also answer their queries and concerns. The service has an increasing role to play in vaccine recording and data cleansing in the setting of "No Jab No Pay" and "No Jab No Play" policies related to other services such as access to kindergarten. It is vital the Monash residents continue to have confidence in our service.

HUMAN RIGHTS CONSIDERATIONS

There are no adverse Human Rights Impacts for this advocacy.

CONSULTATION

Consultation is not required.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The cost of the provision of Council's immunisation service has increased significantly to ensure compliance with hygiene and social distancing requirements, without any commensurate increase in State Government funding. It is expected that these requirements will be in place for some time, with any COVID-19 immunisation program also needing to be factored in to future service and budget considerations.

CONCLUSION

Local government immunisation services have been flexible and committed to ensure they meet the needs and expectations of their local community, particularly during the pandemic. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to reach the more vulnerable members of the municipality who do not attend our regular community sessions. The current funding received by local government has not kept pace with ongoing service costs and requirements. Importantly, the cost of the service to Council and other providers has increased as a result of the current pandemic, with an expectation that even greater demands will be made on the service once a COVID-19 vaccine is ready for distribution.

It is therefore timely to work with other providers of immunisation services to seek support from the State Government in offsetting these additional costs.