

November 24, 2019

The Mayor & Councillors
Whitehorse City Council
379-397 Whitehorse Road, Nunawading
Victoria 3131, Australia



Dear Mayor and Councillors,

Town Hall Hub Tenancy - Notice of Intention to Lease

As you should be aware, Eastern Community Legal Centre (ECLC) provides a broad range of legal and related assistance from its offices in Box Hill, Boronia and Healesville and at outreach locations across Melbourne's east. ECLC is also active in partnerships, law reform and undertakes community development activities to educate and empower the community.

ECLC has been notified of the Notice of Intention to Lease Suites 3 & 10 of the Box Hill Town Hall Hub to the Centre issued by Council and writes in support of that proposal.

ECLC has been providing free legal assistance to local residents from within the City of Whitehorse since May 1974. Initially in Nunawading and the Blackburn, over the last 45 years, staff and volunteers have provided assistance to many thousands of community members.

Since moving to the Box Hill Town Hall Hub in 2006, this has facilitated increased accessibility, expansion of support to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities, stronger partnerships with organisations within and close to the Town Hall and improved professionalism for the organisation and its clients.

ECLC provides free high quality legal help to approximately 3,000 community members each year. While providing assistance across a range of issues, priority communities receiving assistance are:

- People experiencing or at risk of family violence
- Older people experiencing or at risk of elder abuse
- People experiencing or at risk of homelessness
- People with a disability or mental illness
- People who experience language or cultural barriers
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Increasingly, the Centre has been able to employ community service professionals (social workers, financial counsellors and advocates) to work alongside the community lawyers in multidisciplinary teams, providing a more holistic service. Demand for the Centre's services has never been higher and it struggles to meet the needs of the local communities. While the Centre's staff has considerably grown since 2006, the team serves six municipalities across Eastern Melbourne.

The Centre enjoys the support and active involvement of approximately 100 volunteers, particularly practising lawyers, paralegals and other key roles for the Centre's clients and communities. The volunteers particularly support the 'Night Service' that operates from the Town Hall Hub two - three nights each week, providing free legal help to local residents.

In addition, a number of key programs operate of the Town Hall Hub location:

- Enhanced Entry Project and HEAL program – supporting clients with multiple legal issues and complex needs;
- SAGE – supporting women and children experiencing family violence with additional barriers to assistance;
- ROSE – specialist elder abuse service, including a lawyer, social worker and financial counsellor
- Youth Referral and Independent Person Program (partnership with CMY), supporting young people in contact with the police.
- Community legal education, community development and partnership projects

ECLC attaches its newly released Annual Report and Strategic Plan to summarise both the recent work of the Centre and its plans for the year ahead.

ECLC greatly appreciates and enjoys its current office arrangements in the Box Hill Town Hall Hub and utilises this to provide extensive support to the residents in the Whitehorse community and some from neighbouring areas.

However, offices and facilities are a major strategic issue for the Centre. This was identified in its recently published Strategic Plan 2020 – 2023, that noted:

"ECLC has reached its current offices' capacity, which is impacting on operational effectiveness. The imperative for space presents an opportunity to appraise what infrastructure is the most conducive to providing multidisciplinary and integrated legal programs that are accessible to priority communities."

While ECLC has no current plans for major change in relation to the Box Hill site, the Centre has high demand and with additional programs (such as those listed above) has had to base a number of these at alternative locations – such as its Boronia or Healesville office.

Rather than an apparently straightforward lease arrangement, ECLC respectfully suggests that Council consider the opportunities for its communities, particularly the ability to attract new programs and services into the Whitehorse area, rather than limiting these through change to the lease arrangements. In fact additional space is needed if that were available.

Further, the Plan noted that,

"... plans and programs require technologies which enable staff to remain connected and feel supported across different offices and outreach locations, with a workforce that is increasingly mobile and reaching community members where they live and access services."

In this context, it is noted that the Town Hall Hub facilities have fallen significantly behind modern expectations and requirements, such as meeting rooms without basic technology, such as simple telephone connections, projection connections or flexible lighting.

While ECLC is keen to take up the opportunity to formalise the lease arrangements with the Town Hall, some matters remain unclear, from the information provided to date.

1. On what basis/methodology were the proposed lease rental fees determined? They appear to vary considerably and it is unclear how this assessment was made.
2. There are a number of areas within the building requiring maintenance or more significant attention. What plans or maintenance program does Council have in this regard?
3. Similarly, are there any plans for technology or other upgrades?

In terms of the rental cost itself, ECLC can probably accommodate the significant increase proposed in the first instance. However, the proposal for a \$5,000 increase in each upcoming year seems excessive and will directly impact on the services that the Centre is able to offer to the local community members in need.

We also observe that of the six municipalities in the Centre's catchment, the other five each make a significant direct financial contribution to ECLC's operations and programs. As for a number of years, the City of Whitehorse's contribution is only through the subsidy on the Town Hall Hub space. We suggest that this be actively considered in the rental arrangements. It would be unfortunate if the Centre needed to consider alternative locations with its other municipal partners.

Finally, ECLC is proud of and committed to its collaborative approach with other Hub 'tenants' to the Whitehorse community through the vision of the Hub and the partnership potential with Council through this. Rather than just a 'lease agreement', it would be preferable to see some clear reference to the vision and purpose of the Town Hall Hub included in the proposal, this current process and the lease agreement itself, including an encouragement to work together where possible and appropriate. The renewal of these arrangements seems an ideal time to renew this vision and conversation.

ECLC looks forward to engaging with Council further to progress this discussion. As offered through the public notice, we would be pleased to appear in person in support of this written submission at the Committee of Council. Please feel free to contact me directly on these issues and in regard to the Committee process.

Thank you for the opportunity to support this proposal and we look forward to continuing to working in partnership Whitehorse City Council into the future.

Yours sincerely,

Michael B. Smith
Chief Executive Officer