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| **2.1** | **Supervised Injecting Facilities as a Means of Reducing the Harm Associated with Illicit Drug Use** |

**Executive Summary**

**Purpose**

To inform Council about Supervised Injecting Facilities (SIFs) as a means of reducing the harm associated with illicit drug use.

**Key Issues**

Injecting drug use has been a major issue in the City of Yarra for over a decade, having been pushed by Police activity from Russell Street in the CBD, to Smith Street Fitzroy / Collingwood and now Victoria Street North Richmond / Abbotsford.

2011/12 data on ambulance attendances at heroin overdoses indicate that the highest proportion of ambulance attendances occur in Yarra of any local government area (LGA) in Melbourne. However, it should be noted that recent data indicates prescription drugs (such as painkillers and tranquillisers) are the leading cause of overdose in Victoria.

Injecting drug use, overdoses, and discarded needles and syringes are significant concerns for businesses and residents. Indeed, in 2012 alone, almost 50,000 syringes were collected across Yarra as a result of public injecting.

For many people, this is a confronting experience and can negatively impact their perceptions of safety and enjoyment of local amenity.

SIFs provide a safe space for drug consumption and immediate equipment disposal. SIFs aim to reduce the public health and public amenity problems associated with public drug use. They are generally established in areas of concentrated and highly visible street injecting.

No single intervention will be adequate to manage the complex and dynamic issues arising as a result of public injecting drug use. Instead a range of responses are required that match the range of people, issues and consequences within a local community affected by public drug use.

**Financial Implications**

The funding of the establishment and operation of a SIF would be the responsibility of State Government.

Council may need to fund a community awareness campaign to raise the issue and inform the community about the facts, benefits and implications of a SIF.

While not a significant cost, Council would need to potentially provide planning approval if a SIF is to be established in the City of Yarra. Although, existing Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs) such as North Richmond Community Health or North Yarra Community Health could be expanded to include a SIF.

**PROPOSAL**

That Council endorses Supervised Injecting Facilities as a strategy to reduce the harm associated with illicit drug use in the City of Yarra.

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| **2.1** | **Supervised Injecting Facilities as a Means of Reducing the Harm Associated with Illicit Drug Use** |

Trim Record Number: D13/41932

Responsible Officer: Manager Community and Corporate Planning

**Purpose**

1. To inform Council about Supervised Injecting Facilities (SIFs) as a means of reducing the harm associated with illicit drug use.

**Background**

1. Injecting drug use has been a major issue in the City of Yarra for over a decade, having been pushed by Police activity from Russell Street in the CBD, to Smith Street Fitzroy / Collingwood and now Victoria Street North Richmond / Abbotsford.
2. 2011/12 data on ambulance attendances at heroin overdoses indicate that the highest proportion of ambulance attendances occur in Yarra of any local government area (LGA) in Melbourne. However, it should be noted that recent data indicates prescription drugs (such as painkillers and tranquillisers) are the leading cause of overdose in Victoria.
3. Risk factors for overdose include poly drug use (the mixing of multiple drugs); being out of drug treatment; and using the drug under conditions of changed tolerance (for example, resuming drug use following a period of abstinence).
4. Injecting drug use, overdoses, and discarded needles and syringes are significant concerns for businesses and residents. Indeed, in 2012 alone, almost 50,000 syringes were collected across Yarra as a result of public injecting.
5. The factors that cause people to inject in public are diverse and complex:
   1. limited access to ‘safe’ accommodation due to homelessness;
   2. an urgent need to mediate withdrawal symptoms;
   3. a fear of being apprehended by police once they have obtained their drugs;
   4. fear of theft by other drug users; or
   5. a sense of comradeship among peers who are street-based users.
6. While the existence of a street based market may have a significant influence on the potential for public injecting, the absence of such a market does not necessarily diminish the influence of a myriad of factors that can contribute to decisions regarding injecting behaviour. Public injecting (and therefore dealing) seems certain to remain an issue for the foreseeable future.
7. For many people, this is a confronting experience and can negatively impact their perceptions of safety and enjoyment of local amenity.
8. Council, in collaboration with local services and agencies, has implemented a wide range of initiatives to manage public injecting and amenity throughout Yarra. These include improvements to amenity through decreasing the presence of discarded needle and syringes through improved reporting and contract management and provision of information to residents and local organisations in how to respond to people affected by drugs and safe disposal of injecting equipment.
9. SIFs provide a safe space for drug consumption and immediate equipment disposal. SIFs aim to reduce the public health and public amenity problems associated with public drug use. They are generally established in areas of concentrated and highly visible street injecting. The reasoning behind implementing SIFs is outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1 - Reasons for a Safe Injecting Facility**

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| **Issue** | **How SIF can help manage the issue?** |
| Poor practices of injecting drug users - risk of contracting blood borne viruses such as hepatitis C and HIV | Staff supervise injecting; educate users and access to clean equipment |
| Public amenity – discarded syringes and concerns about needle-stick injury | Provide safe disposal of needles and syringes & supervised space to inject away from public places |
| Overdoses | Staff on site to respond |
| Poor health of injecting drug users | Clients need to be kept safe until they reach the stage where they want to stop using; SIFs offer referrals and links to health services and treatment programs |

1. No single intervention will be adequate to manage the complex and dynamic issues arising as a result of public injecting drug use. Instead a range of responses are required that match the range of people, issues and consequences within a local community affected by public drug use.

**Consultation**

1. Not applicable.

**Financial Implications**

1. The funding of the establishment and operation of a SIF would be the responsibility of State Government.
2. Council may need to fund a community awareness campaign to raise the issue and inform the community about the facts, benefits and implications of a SIF.
3. While not a significant cost, Council would need to potentially provide planning approval if a SIF is to be established in the City of Yarra. Although, existing Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs) such as North Richmond Community Health or North Yarra Community Health could be expanded to include a SIF

**Economic Implications**

1. The potential economic implications from a SIF in the City of Yarra include:
   1. increase property values of residential properties surrounding the Victoria Street precinct due to less public injecting, (as a result of improved perceptions of safety); and
   2. attract greater business investment in the Victoria Street precinct due to less public injecting.

**Sustainability Implications**

1. Not applicable.

**Social Implications**

1. Council’s role is to respond to the amenity and safety needs of the community.

**Human Rights Implications**

1. The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being.

**Council Plan, Strategy and Policy Implications**

1. The Safer Yarra Plan 2011-2014 contains a range of strategies and actions to manage the impacts of illicit drugs on the community. These strategies and actions are in line with best practice approaches recommended by the former state government as outlined in the report *‘Addressing public injecting through community based interventions: Guidelines for the development of a comprehensive response’.*
2. While Council is undertaking a range of harm reduction strategies, there is certainly scope to actively support other evidence-based approaches such as a SIF.

**Legal Implications**

1. A SIF can only be introduced with legislative and policy change by the State Government.
2. Victoria first engaged in public debate about SIFs in 1998, during a time when the daily ‘heroin toll’ was listed alongside the road toll in one of the state’s most prominent newspapers.
3. Despite much political support for the establishment of a SIF in Melbourne at the time, proposed legislation to enable a SIF to be established was defeated in 2000.

**Other Issues**

1. The first official SIF opened in Switzerland in the 1980s. There are approximately 90 SIFs operating around the world; most of those are in Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, Norway, Luxembourg, Switzerland and Denmark. There are two SIFs in Vancouver, Canada, the first of which opened in 2003.
2. The Medically Supervised Injecting Centre (MSIC) in Sydney, NSW opened in 2001.
3. The MSIC recognises drug addiction is a chronic, relapsing condition. The MSIC does not support or promote drug use - rather it prevents death and injury from overdose and connects people with health services so they may have the opportunity for rehabilitation.
4. Since the commencement of the MSIC, data sources indicate that there has been a decline in the total number of discarded needle and syringes collected in the vicinity of the MSIC and reduced sightings of public injecting. A recent evaluation of the Sydney MSIC has found that in 2011 it had:
   1. successfully managed more than 4,400 drug overdoses without a single fatality
   2. reduced the number of publicly discarded needles and syringes in the Kings Cross area by approximately half
   3. decreased the number of ambulance call outs to Kings Cross by 80%
   4. generated more than 9500 referrals to health and social welfare services.
5. In addition to this, results from a random survey of local Kings Cross residents and business operators indicate that there is strong support for the MSIC that has trended upwards over time. This is in keeping with increased community support for a trial SIF in Yarra.
6. In 2010, after operating under trial conditions for nearly a decade, the NSW Parliament passed legislation to lift MSIC’s trial status.
7. International evidence is consistent with findings from evaluations of the MSIC, concluding that SIFs are effective in reducing the number of discarded needles, syringes and other drug paraphernalia in local streets and laneways as well as reducing the frequency of public witnessing of injecting drug use. These facilities also reduce the spread of infectious diseases, and injuries and deaths from drug overdoses.
8. In October 2012, the Australian Medical Association Victoria released a policy paper supporting the trial of SIFs in Victoria, claiming that the number of heroin related ambulance attendances in the City of Yarra alone pointed to the need for a new approach for Victoria, in order to minimise the harm resulting from drug use. Other supporters of SIFs include the Royal Australasian College of Physicians and the Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine, amongst others.

**Options**

1. Not applicable.

**Conclusion**

1. Council does not believe it is realistic to think that current Government policies will put a stop to all illicit drug use. Hence, Council supports a harm minimisation approach of reducing the harm caused through drug use to both people who use drugs and the wider community. This is consistent with the State Government’s policy on managing drugs in Victoria.

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| **Proposal**   1. That Council continues to support a trial of a Supervised Injecting Facility as a strategy to reduce the harm associated with illicit drug use in the City of Yarra. |

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**Attachments**

There are no attachments for this report.