

STATEMENT BY CR CATHY OKE AT CITY OF MELBOURNE COMMITTEE MEETING

Tuesday, February 6, 2017

Tonight we are considering a status update and the CEO's initial views on the current investigation before it has concluded and before any findings have been made public.

Given the investigation hasn't concluded I am conscious to keep my remarks to [the report](#) we are being asked to consider on the agenda tonight.

Whilst noting my deep frustration that without a conclusion I continue to feel disempowered to speak, nor have the ability to speak up for a colleague who is a very brave woman, I do remain supportive of the investigation.

I am also acutely aware of the considerable mental and physical stress key people are experiencing. So whilst frustrated, I understand why there has been a delay in receiving the final report.

I also understand why at this first committee meeting of the year there was a need to include an update and an initial response from management, in lieu of the final report.

As we see in all other agenda items – whilst we as councillors haven't met formally since last December - Council has been getting on with what it does best, looking after our great city. Council officers and my colleagues have been getting on with it and tonight's agenda shows you that.

Ok, so to [the report](#) from Management.

I start by saying that any form of sexual harassment within or outside of the workplace should be reported and acted upon.

Victims certainly should not see the only option before them is to resign in order to seek justice.

I do encourage anyone, especially women, who have experienced unacceptable behaviour towards them to report it.

However it is not easy to act immediately if you are personally involved. And I would never pressure another woman to tell their story nor how they tell that story.

All of this is of course compounded when workplace norms do not encourage speaking out or the avenues to speak out are flawed.

Avenues to act are determined by the law, by workplace structures and policies, and by legal support systems.

The role of a Councillor is challenging because we are both part of an organisational structure, and also accountable to the electorate that is not part of that organisational structure.

Management has identified a necessary improvement to our code of conduct and so I obviously support a review.

Given the construction of the Local Government Act and the potential for a Council's code of conduct to guide a Councillor to a particular conclusion about what their options are - despite the

fact that the full suite of options available to them may be broader - it is clearly difficult for a Councillor to know how to formally address sexual harassment towards them.

It is certainly difficult to navigate the statutory processes without advice of a confidant or lawyer, which doesn't come without significant financial sacrifice.

So I support a review into our [Code of Conduct](#) and to make these processes more accessible. And I support the other recommendations on how to address gaps in our policies.

But while I welcome management's work, until we have the report into the current investigation a full and frank conversation from councillors is premature.

Management reports can make recommendations to improve our protocols and processes, but our job and the way we got here is adversarial in nature, and power dynamics aren't only defined by the law.

So we as the Council need to acknowledge that, and ensure that every one of us is contributing to a culture that both allows Councillors to do the job we have been elected to do, while ensuring that there is no fear of speaking out about inappropriate behaviour.

This isn't about politics. This is about people.

We know that women, in all levels of government have experienced inappropriate behaviour towards them in their workplace – what I hope we can do is use the report to make a change for ourselves and our colleagues at the local government level that enables our workplace culture to support healthy political operations and human interactions.

I strongly believe the solution isn't just about what is written in our Councillor protocols.

There is a responsibility on all of us to recognise where power lies and to foster a healthy workplace for everyone, aligned with the values that we all hold as important and that our community would expect.

I conclude as I started by saying that I am supportive of the investigative process under way and reiterate that I will not make further comment until it is concluded, except to say a huge thank you to my family, friends and community for their ongoing support.