



BROTHERHOOD
of St LAURENCE

Changing faces of Craigieburn and Roxburgh Park

Brotherhood of St Laurence community consultation

Summary

In 2002 the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) decided to undertake a consultation process about its services at Craigieburn, a north-western suburb of Melbourne, and their potential development. This was part of a progressive review of the Brotherhood's services to determine their fit with the new organisational vision.

The BSL has operated a program at Craigieburn since 1990, when it was identified as an area of potential disadvantage and marginalisation on the metropolitan fringe. Since 1996, the services have been based at a purpose-built Centre in Hothlyn Drive. In 2002, BSL services operating from the Centre included:

- a Family Day Care program
- a No Interest Loans Scheme
- a counselling service
- a Community Care scheme supporting older residents (which serves several northern municipalities including the City of Hume).

Aim and objectives

The review was organised with the aim:

- to ensure that the Centre is best organised and managed to meet the emerging needs and potential of the local community.

The specific objectives of the research were to:

- undertake an informed consultation process about the potential development of the Centre
- document the achievements of the Brotherhood of St Laurence services presently located at the centre
- develop recommendations and a direction for the future of the Centre which ensures its relevance to and service for the local community.

Research team and methodology

The research was conducted by an independent consultant, Linda Kelly, with a research assistant, Meredith Levi, and a member of the Centre staff, Helen Denney. The team was supported by a Critical Reference Group including representatives from local community organisations in Craigieburn and neighbouring Roxburgh Park.

The team undertook a literature review of existing documentation about the neighbourhoods of Craigieburn and Roxburgh Park, and a series of interviews with Centre staff, present users of the Centre, key service and community organisations and significant groups of non- service users.

The research included a comprehensive review of the two communities of Craigieburn and Roxburgh Park, including their demographics, strengths, gaps in existing services, groups with particular needs, and the state of social planning and community development. It also involved a limited review of the existing Brotherhood of St Laurence program at Craigieburn, in order to formulate some recommendations about how the services might be developed to fit community needs emerging from the neighbourhood study.

Findings

Community

The latest demographic data (projections from the 1996 Census) shows that Craigieburn and Roxburgh Park are rapidly growing areas of low to middle income earners, with a high proportion of families in the process of buying their own homes. Anecdotal evidence suggests there are growing numbers of residents from a wide range of ethnic groups with languages other than English, and of Indigenous Australians, in the neighbourhoods.

Consultation with community members revealed a number of perceived community strengths. People in Roxburgh Park appreciate their pleasant physical environment with its parks and lakes, peace and quiet. People in Craigieburn attest to community spirit and resourcefulness—partly linked to the shared experience of working together to ‘build’ a new suburb and partly linked to the area’s rural community heritage. People in both neighbourhoods refer to the community strength of ethnic diversity and of lots of young families with high aspirations for their children.

On the other hand, the research identified a serious risk of social isolation and marginalisation, especially in newer areas and for groups such as youth, the elderly and parents of young children—the groups most disadvantaged by the serious lack of adequate public transport. Although there are lower than average unemployment rates, families face considerable financial pressures because of mortgage repayments; and employment insecurity in sectors like manufacturing is likely to add to their vulnerability and stress levels. There is some evidence of increasing numbers of one-parent and blended families, as result of family breakdown.

Social isolation is accompanied by lack of access to services. Notable gaps are in the range of local health services, the limited shopping choices and the shortage of child care places.

Many community members drew attention to the lack of local programs and activities attractive to youth, resulting in alienation of young people from their neighbourhood. Some people were concerned about problems of under-age drinking and illegal drug use. Perceptions of high rates of vandalism, violence and crime were expressed, but not supported by available police statistics.

Some respondents also identified elderly people as a group with special unmet needs, some of which relate to restricted mobility. Residents’ lack of information about existing services also appears to be a contributing factor.

While ethnic diversity is reported as a strength, people from non-English speaking backgrounds moving into the area do have particular needs which appear not to be adequately addressed. This presents an added challenge because the people belong to a wide range of language and cultural groups, so members of a single group may be very isolated. With a reported rise in harassment of visibly different ethnic groups, there is also a need to build greater understanding and community links including new ethnic groups.

With a growing number of young families in both neighbourhoods, services such as child care, preschools and playgroups do not have enough places to meet needs. Families are also affected by inadequate public transport and medical services: the need to own a second car adds to heavy financial commitments.

Although the research found that the Hume City Council has recognised important social planning areas in its Social Justice Charter, it appears that the Council and other levels of government have been unable to plan and deliver all the required services for the present population. In view of the projected rapid rise in population over the next ten years the problem of service gaps is likely to increase.

Centre

Respondents who had contact with the staff or services at the BSL Centre considered it to be well-located, convenient, supportive and well-run service. At the same time, some residents felt the Centre and its services were not well enough known in the wider community. For some people the Centre's link with the Brotherhood of St Laurence, a 'welfare agency', was a kind of stigma which might discourage some participants, but for others the Brotherhood's name added credibility to the services offered.

The Family Dare Care program is highly regarded by parents, care providers and external organisations, for its flexibility and quality of care and its effective administration. It currently serves 493 children from 321 families, and has a waiting list of more than 50 families.

The No Interest Loans Scheme is appreciated by those who have been able to access loans. Its small scale, however, limits its effectiveness in meeting the varied financial needs of these communities.

Similarly, the counselling service, staffed by one half-time counsellor, appears to address a community need but there is some evidence of need for a broader family support service.

As community care packages are provided from the Centre to frail older residents not only in the local neighbourhood but across three municipalities, this wider program was outside the scope of the present consultation.

It was noted that the Brotherhood of St Laurence's learnings from its considerable experience of working with various service models in Craigieburn and surrounding areas are yet to be documented.

Questions about the future development of the Centre produced a variety of suggestions for development and enhancement. Many people proposed that more services should be supplied. Others suggested more integration and linking with other services, and possibly the development of 'satellite' operations e.g. family day care at Roxburgh Park's Homestead Centre. Some people proposed the Centre make space available for activities (e.g. community newsletter, art displays) serving the general community. Finally there were suggestions that the Centre should adopt a community development focus, moving away from direct service provision to community linking and action.

Regarding Centre management, the consultation found that people wanted to retain the Brotherhood of St Laurence involvement in management and administration; but they also wanted wider and creative ways to participate in ongoing planning for the Centre—not in the restrictive form of a community committee of management or advisory committee.

Discussion

The research suggests that a realistic starting point is to enhance community links and overcome misinformation and barriers. The BSL Centre is ideally placed to act a focus for community linking between Craigieburn and Roxburgh Park and for community development and advocacy work, because of its physical location and reputation for being responsive to the community.

The activities presently operating out of the Centre are not of themselves sufficient to address broad issues of community development and advocacy. The Family Day Care scheme, however, offers a base for community linking. The BSL program in Craigieburn and Roxburgh Park could be developed to make it better known—probably in more than one location—and to directly engage the community in shaping services that meet needs most effectively.

Summary of recommendations

1. That the Brotherhood of St Laurence retain a program in Craigieburn and Roxburgh Park, building upon its knowledge of poverty and the strengths and experience of the community, to ensure a program which is targeted at meeting the needs of marginalised and vulnerable people across the two neighbourhoods and beyond.
2. That the Brotherhood of St Laurence Centre be more widely advertised across the community, encouraging increasing access and use of the Centre.
3. That the Brotherhood of St Laurence consider redeveloping its program at the Centre, to place a greater emphasis upon community development and advocacy for more effective social planning.
4. That the Brotherhood of St Laurence program take a 'whole of community' approach, with a special focus upon families with young children and people from non-English speaking backgrounds.
5. That a plan be developed for the long-term future of the Brotherhood of St Laurence Centre, with consideration given to greater enterprise and sustainability within the service, consistent with the Brotherhood's strategic directions.
6. That the Brotherhood of St Laurence develop a process for regular consultation with the community about the program of the Craigieburn Centre, with clear time frames and using mechanisms which are accessible and empowering for both parties.

Immediate action steps

The report proposes that the Brotherhood

- identifies the level and distribution of resources (including staff and responsibilities) available to the Centre for the next 12 months and beyond
- makes a plan for further exploration and development of the ideas raised in this report over the next 12 months
- develops and shares the process to be used for consultation with the people of Craigieburn and Roxburgh Park for the immediate future and beyond
- outlines the range of programs and enterprises they are considering piloting and how the Craigieburn and Roxburgh Park areas could be a location for some of these initiatives.

**Consultation and report by
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June 2002**

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