

INQUIRY INTO ISSUES RELATING TO REDFERN/WATERLOO

Organisation:

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Date Received: 30/04/2004

Theme:

Summary

APRIL 2004

**Legislative Council – Standing Committee on Social Issues
Submission to the Inquiry into issues relating to Redfern-
Waterloo**

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SYDNEY NSW 2001**

**The Hon. Jan Burnswoods MLC
Chair
Standing Committee on Social Issues
Parliament House
SYDNEY NSW 2000**

The City of Sydney Council (Cos) (or more specifically as South Sydney City Council (SSCC) prior to the amalgamation of 6th February 2004) was an active and committed agency in a range of services, activities and initiatives in Redfern and Waterloo for a number of years. All of these programs have been designed to create more vibrant, sustainable and welcoming communities.

With this in mind I welcome the inquiry into issues relating to Redfern-Waterloo and would like to submit the following comments in my capacity as a current Councillor and former Commissioner of the newly amalgamated City of Sydney, as the former Mayor of South Sydney City Council and as former Chair of the Redfern Waterloo Community Council. The views in this submission are my own.

While I am available, should the Committee desire it, to give oral evidence I would respectfully suggest that the following three current Sydney and former South Sydney Council staff be considered by the committee to give evidence.

Ms Monica Barone
Director of Community Services

Ms Kaye Mundine
Aboriginal Development Officer

Mr John Maynard
Crime and Safety Officer

These three officers (in conjunction with others) have spent enormous amounts of time in Redfern and the 'Block' over the last two years; I believe they have a knowledge and insight into this area that would not be matched by many others.

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Background

I have been fortunate to live in Redfern for the last 14 years. As the Committee would be aware, a significant percentage of residents in the suburbs of Redfern, Waterloo and Darlington suffer from a complex series of difficulties which impact on themselves and those around them.

I understand that it takes decades for disadvantage to become entrenched in suburbs such as Redfern and Waterloo and as such the situation cannot be turned around overnight. The Committee should also be aware that there are many positive things about this suburb, the people who live and work here and the conscious effort made by numerous individuals and organisations to assist people and make this area a better place to live.

Introduction

Following the recent death of the young man in Waterloo a number of events were held at The Block, including a memorial service. Approximately 300 people attended this service. It was a hot and dusty day. People stood patiently in the sun, straining to hear the speakers above the constant noise of traffic. On many occasions the speakers were completely drowned out by the sound of sirens.

The press release regarding this event explicitly stated NO MEDIA. Of course they attended. Despite organisers and attendees asking the press to 'move back' and respect the family, cameras continued to click and roll, ignoring people's requests and in contravention of, I believe, established media protocols – newspaper photos and television footage from well within the crowd were latter published and broadcast.

Many children and adults in Redfern and Waterloo grow up under constant surveillance. The soundtrack to their daily lives is traffic, sirens, trains. Many children in these suburbs do not know a single person who has a job. But they are very familiar with the effects of alcohol and drug abuse – they probably all have a friend or loved one in jail. Many people in this community have suffered generations of disadvantage. They are also aware that the media and often Governments appear more interested in their plight when there are scenes of confrontation.

Over the past two years there has been a real focus on this area and this has resulted in some tangible improvements. I particularly want to single out the Police (and specifically the LAC Commander Dennis Smith) who have shown incredible sensitivity and a true commitment to finding better ways to work with disadvantaged communities whilst trying to improve safety and amenity for the broader population.

I sincerely hope that this inquiry recognises that the enormous efforts being made in this community – across government, the community sector and

individuals. Of course we can all do better, but it is very important that this inquiry does not assume that nothing good is going on or that significant improvements have occurred.

Council

Council's commitment to the Redfern-Waterloo area and more specifically to the Redfern-Waterloo Partnership Project can be demonstrated in a number of ways. In October 2003 Council relocated over three hundred staff from its administrative building in Surry Hills to the newly refurbished Redfern Civic Centre. In addition Council invested three million dollars in the recently opened Redfern Community Facility adjacent to The Block. The facility will provide local residents with a valuable resource providing space for education and training, cultural activities, artistic performances and a range of other community-based initiatives. With the announcement of the Partnership Project in March 2002 Council also moved quickly to create and fill the position of Redfern-Waterloo Project manager with a brief to support the project in meeting its objectives.

In addition Council is the lead agency in the development of the recently endorsed Community Safety Plan for the two suburbs, a plan which aims to take a preventative, strategic partnership-based approach to tackling the underlying causes of crime. Council chairs and convenes the Redfern-Waterloo Community Safety Taskforce, a committee made up of a number of state Government departments, non-Government organisations and community representatives who meet quarterly to monitor implementation of the plan. Council has also developed a Public Domain Plan which involves upgrading Redfern Street through streetscape improvements, landscaping, reinforcing pedestrian links, developing cycle ways and upgrading open spaces in the two suburbs.

Council is represented on each of the four Taskforces convened by the Partnership Project and provides a number of services and programs for people in the Redfern-Waterloo community with high and complex needs including Redfern Occasional Child Care, Drivin' for Employment, Lights Camera Action, Rec'n' Redfern and Meals on Wheels. This work is complemented by community development workers who specialise in supporting local Aboriginal and multi-cultural communities. Council acknowledges that it has limited powers to address the many, varied and complex issues which are prevalent in the two suburbs on its own and that any solutions to these long-standing issues will require a sustained collaborative approach over the medium to longer term.

Redfern-Waterloo Partnership Project

Council welcomes the \$7 million dollar investment of the Premier's Department to the Redfern-Waterloo Partnership Project as a first step in developing real and sustainable outcomes for the people of Redfern and

Waterloo. Despite its limited resources and broad-based agenda the project has developed and implemented a number of practical initiatives to address key issues in the two suburbs. Council acknowledges the Human Services Review which is currently underway is an important process in recognising that the capacity of some services to meet community needs are limited, and, that the findings of the review have the potential to redirect existing resources to where they are needed most. Council also recognises the significance of the Redfern-Eveleigh-Darlington (RED) strategy to guide the future development of the built environment in relation to issues such as transport, conservation, parks and open space and economic development.

While acknowledging the importance of the Human Services Review and the RED strategy it should be noted that there is a great deal of concern in the community due to the Project's inability to meet agreed time lines for rolling out these and other programs, flawed community consultation strategies and the failure to deliver on other promised initiatives such as a comprehensive Youth Services Plan, The Employment and Enterprise Development Taskforce and the Community Building Program.

The Partnership Project appears to lack the resources to develop a comprehensive media strategy and as such newsletters and forums have taken place on an ad-hoc basis. In addition there appears to be a lack of co-ordination of all of the Taskforces some of which do not meet with any regularity and act more as meetings for the exchange of information rather than as outcome and action-based forums.

Council understands that the aim of a place-based approach is that agencies and services tailor their service to meet the real needs on the ground in a way that accommodates the cultural, social, physical and economic realities of a specific location. In this regard Council acknowledges that without the commitment from all participating agencies to change current operating methods to improve on how they work together with agency partners, then the model is limited. The Redfern-Waterloo Partnership Project despite its worthy intentions has highlighted that the notion of strategic partnerships between State Government Departments working together on shared issues is still in its infancy. With this in mind it is suggested that without compulsory joint service agreements (which exist in overseas models) between both government and non-government agencies, then community organisations and the community themselves will continue to feel alienated from this top down approach.

Redfern Police

Council recognises and acknowledges the vital role Redfern Police have taken in the Partnership Project. In addition to law enforcement imperatives, Local Area Commander Dennis Smith has embarked on a range of flexible and active community-based policing approaches designed to build relationships aimed at preventing crime. Furthermore Redfern Police have played an important role in developing strategic partnerships with other

agencies such as the Department of Community Services to assist at-risk children and young people.

The approach undertaken by the Police has included appointing a second Youth Liaison Officer at the command as well as participation in the Police-Youth Mentor Project. This project involves local Police (often in their own time and despite limited training and resources) working with local at-risk and vulnerable children and young people by taking them on excursions and organised activities designed to improve relations between the two groups, improve school attendance and to reduce the incidence of youth-related crime. While Council acknowledges that the incident on Lawson Street on 15th February was unfortunate, it is suggested that committing more resources to Police in community liaison roles (including upgrading such positions to the sergeant level) especially Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers, and increasing dialogue with local Aboriginal leaders may be beneficial in developing a more culturally appropriate policing model for the area.

Department of Education and Training

Council acknowledges the considerable resources the Department of Education has committed to the development of the Alexandria Park Community School and the innovative approach taken in co-locating other community services (particularly those which support the family) on the campus. The new Green Square Public School for children with behavioural or emotional problems on the old Waterloo Public School site is also a reflection of the Department's commitment to the two suburbs. Longer term support for training and employment placement remains a key priority particularly for children and young people from families where there exists several generations of unemployment. The loss of social capital linked to the closure of Waterloo and Redfern Public Schools and the continued uncertainty over the future of the latter site remains an issue of concern to the community.

Housing

The state of The Block in Redfern remains a cause for extreme concern to Council and the community. Historically some tenants have refused to pay rent to the Aboriginal Housing Company which has led to a lack of maintenance and a subsequent deterioration in the state of many properties and in general living conditions.

While the Aboriginal Housing Company has been involved in demolishing derelict properties and have developed a Masterplan to develop the site, this initiative alone will not solve long standing social issues such as drug and alcohol use and misuse, domestic violence and child neglect. The Block is a place of historical, social and cultural significance to Aboriginal people and any plans for its redevelopment will require a strategic plan for addressing these issues. It is vital that the redevelopment of the 'Block' occur as soon as

possible. It is also vital, in my view, that the redevelopment incorporates some form of hostel style accommodation to cater for the many hundreds of Aboriginal people who visit the block on a weekly basis with a view to catching up or locating friends and relatives.

Council acknowledges the Department of Housing's priority housing policy which gives preference to people over the age of fifty-five or people who have other needs such as health concerns or who are single mothers. However the Department does not appear to have been able to commit any extra resources through the Partnership Project to maintain its considerable property portfolio in the Redfern-Waterloo area, offers few support services to its high needs clients and does not provide community development workers for referral, advocacy or to co-ordinate community strengthening activities designed to improve the social environment for public housing tenants.

While considerable private development occurs in and around these estates and with little if any public or affordable housing being built to meet current demand, Council is concerned about the sustainability of current Department of Housing policy in the area. In addition there is a shortage of crisis accommodation in Redfern and Waterloo.

Health

Council acknowledges that the Redfern-Waterloo area is no different to most other areas in terms of being faced with the complex challenges brought on by the impact of drug use and misuse in the community. Council recognises the piloting of the Magistrate's Early Referral Into Treatment (M.E.R.I.T.) program in Redfern as an important early intervention program for offenders with established significant illicit drug use problems. Nevertheless the problem of drug and alcohol use and misuse remains significant in the two suburbs. The lack of mental health services in the area remains an ongoing concern. Many health issues are linked to substandard housing, poor living conditions, low incomes and poor nutrition and as such improved linkages are required between the Departments of Health, Community Services and Housing.

Health currently lacks the capacity for adequate assessment and support of children with waiting lists of up to two months at Broadway Health. This delay in follow-up has the potential to impact negatively on the child's condition and more staff and services are required to ensure interventions take place as soon as possible. Council understands that the community remains concerned over the continued uncertainty of the future of the Rachel Forster Hospital site, a facility which is in close proximity to the more vulnerable and marginalised communities in Redfern and Waterloo.

Community Services

Council understands that the Department of Community Services has a vital role to play in addressing the complex range of issues affecting children and families in the two suburbs. Council acknowledges DOCs' contribution to initiatives such as the Street Team, Barnardos Intensive Family Support Service and Kidspeak as well as funding services through the Community Services Grants Program. According to several agencies in the area DOCs still appears to be suffering from a chronic lack of resources and as such serious doubts have been expressed as to the agency's capacity to respond to all but the most urgent child protection cases. The Community Services Grants Scheme remains under funded and it is suggested that the quality of some services funded under this program could be improved with the introduction of more rigorous accountability measures.

The Media

Aboriginal organisations and sections of the Indigenous community in Redfern have made contact with Council expressing their concerns over coverage of the incident on Lawson Street on 15th February 2004. Sections of the local Aboriginal community believe that protocols developed with the media following the Deaths in Custody Inquiry were seriously breached. For example some sections of the media inaccurately described the incident as having taken place on The Block when the reality was it took place on Lawson Street. It is suggested that such inaccuracies have the potential to further stigmatise such communities particularly since many of the offenders who were later charged were found to reside outside the area. It is further suggested that these protocols be reviewed with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Attorney General's, the Press Council and the Anti-Discrimination Board.

Conclusion

While the problems are complex, entrenched and require a co-operative approach for their resolution, I do not believe they are insurmountable.

It will be self-evident to Committee Members that there are certain 'givens' that should be reasonably expected by members of communities whether they live two or two hundred kilometres from the CBD. They include, but are not limited to, a reasonable expectation that people can safely walk the streets and use public transport even at night. That an adequate level of accommodation is provided for groups with a long association with an area, that a co-ordinated, effective, visible and ongoing effort is made to deal with issues such as homelessness, drug dealing, drug and alcohol abuse and assault.

Recommendations

- The Redfern-Waterloo Partnership Project should be extended and enhanced for at least another three years.
- That an urgent effort is made to commence the rebuilding of accommodation on 'The Block' which includes hostel or temporary accommodation.
- That the recommendations of the Human Services Review currently being undertaken are closely examined and acted upon quickly.
- That specialised health resources such as childhood services, drug and alcohol programs, and community health resources and capacity be reviewed and enhanced.