

Submission to Fairfield City Council

Bonnyrigg Living Communities Project
Concept Plan and Stage 1 Project Application



February 2008

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1. About NCOSS

The Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS) is an independent non-government organisation (NGO) and is the peak body for the non-government human services sector in NSW. NCOSS works with its members on behalf of disadvantaged people and communities towards achieving social justice in New South Wales. It was established in 1935 and is part of a national network of Councils of Social Service, which operate in each State and Territory and at Commonwealth level.

NCOSS membership is composed of community organisations and interested individuals. Affiliate members include local government councils, business organisations and Government agencies.

Member organisations are diverse, and include unfunded self-help groups, children's services, youth services, emergency relief agencies, chronic illness and community care organisations, family support agencies, housing and homeless services, mental health, alcohol and other drug organisations, indigenous community organisations, church groups, peak organisations and a range of population-specific consumer advocacy agencies.

2. Introduction

NCOSS welcomes the opportunity to comment on draft Concept Plan for the Bonnyrigg Living Communities Project. We note that while the redevelopment is a major project in terms of Part 3A of the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*, the Director General of the Department of Planning has delegated the assessment of the application to Fairfield City Council.

NCOSS and its member organisations have a long history of dealing with issues to do with large scale public housing estates. In earlier periods we expressed considerable concern about the decision to locate large tracts of public housing in new housing estates on the then fringes of residential development in Sydney, in local government areas such as Blacktown, Campbelltown, Fairfield, Liverpool and Penrith, without adequate consideration being given to the provision of public transport, access to education and employment opportunities, and access to necessary community facilities and services. Many of these estates were planned around unsuitable models of residential development, such as the Radburn model with its 'back to front' cottages and town houses and street patterns that make it extremely difficult to design and deliver proper bus services.

While the downside of these previous approaches is now accepted, other problems have emerged. Ever increasing targeting of public housing provision has resulted in an undesirable concentration of highly disadvantaged households in particular geographic areas, at the same time as the cheap public housing stock began to prematurely age and fall into disrepair.

In response to these trends new debates have emerged around community regeneration and social mix. Different approaches have been advocated, depending on whether people see the main problem as being one of insufficient social mix, poor urban design and housing quality, or a lack of government investment in necessary infrastructure and support services.

Earlier attempts at community regeneration in Sydney have been problematic, with insufficient recognition being given to the disruption and uncertainty that flows from redevelopment plans and only token efforts to plan *with* the tenants rather than *for* them. This was well illustrated in the initial attempts to redevelop Minto (see *Leaving Minto: A Study of the Social and Economic Impacts of Public Housing Estate Redevelopment*, Minto Resident Action Group, March 2005).

NCOSS welcomes the Living Communities Program as a fresh attempt to grapple with these issues. The Program aims to achieve comprehensive and integrated renewal of the social, economic and physical environment and extensive engagement with residents and stakeholders. From our active involvement in the Living Communities Consultative Committee we have seen that the Department of Housing and Council have invested significant time and effort in testing a better approach. That approach has been continued by Bonnyrigg Partnerships.

While NCOSS is pleased with the approach adopted by the Department of Housing under the Living Communities Program, it remains to be seen whether the desired outcomes will be achieved. Being the largest and most costly of the Living Communities projects, the Bonnyrigg redevelopment will be closely monitored in this regard.

3. The Bonnyrigg Living Communities Project

The Bonnyrigg redevelopment was announced by the NSW Government in December 2004 as the first initiative under the Living Communities Program. It is being delivered as Public Private Partnership (PPP) and will see the current 833 social housing and approximately 100 privately owned dwellings replaced in 18 stages over 13 years with some 2,330 dwellings, 70% of which will be private housing.

As outlined in the draft Concept Plan, the redevelopment also includes the staged construction of a multipurpose centre comprising community, retail and commercial uses; the upgrade of some existing roads, construction of new roads and the provision of a pedestrian and bicycle movement network; reconfiguration and upgrade of existing public open space; stormwater infrastructure works; and the extension and upgrade of existing services infrastructure.

While outside the scope of the Concept Plan, the redevelopment involves the trial of a radically different approach to the financing, planning and management of social housing. The NSW Government has entered into a complex and complicated series of agreements with the proponent, the Bonnyrigg Partnerships consortium. This consortium brings together the Becton Property Group (consortium leader and development manager), Westpac (finance), the Spotless Group (maintenance and facilities management services) and St George Community Housing Association (tenancy management). Tenants will be treated as public housing tenants, even while tenancy management is outsourced to a community housing provider, to ensure no loss of existing entitlements.

The most significant element of the proposed redevelopment is obviously the increase in density that it entails. The total number of dwellings in the area covered by the draft Concept Plan will increase from 930 to around 2,300 dwellings primarily through the erection of a substantial number of apartments and attached homes (in configurations of 2, 3, 4, 6 and 8). As a result the proportion of detached housing will fall from the present 70% to around 15% when completed. While there are no apartments in Bonnyrigg at present, more than one fifth of the housing stock in the redevelopment area will be in the form of 4 and 6 storey apartments. These changes are obviously central to the underlying finances of the project (with the proponent developing and selling private housing) and to the social mix objective of 70:30 private: public housing.

An increase in density of this magnitude will result in the population of Bonnyrigg more than doubling over the next 15 years. This has obvious implications for the provision of facilities and services.

NCOSS notes that the proposed redevelopment does not entail either a nett loss in public housing stock or any additional (as opposed to new) public housing stock. Not all the replacement public housing will, however, be provided in Bonnyrigg itself, with 699 dwellings being provided onsite and 134 being provided elsewhere in Western Sydney.

We note that the redevelopment is consistent with the State Government's Metropolitan Strategy in that it seeks to provide an additional 1,400 dwellings of

diverse size and type in a well-located site that is close to transport, employment and services.

Before considering the likely social impact, NCOSS would note the following other elements of the draft Concept Plan:

- The development of a Senior Living Area is proposed, with around 200 private independent living units, a residential aged care facility and potentially an aged service centre;
- It is proposed to allocate at least 70 public housing apartments, located adjacent to the private Senior Living Area, to older tenants, enabling existing tenants to 'age in place' close to existing social and service networks;
- At least 30% of the public housing dwellings, and around 11% of dwellings in the redevelopment, will be designed as adaptable housing, which will particularly benefit households that include the frail aged and people with disabilities; and
- The redevelopment includes positive environmental measures, including housing design to at least BASIX requirements, recycled water and natural gas.

4. The Social Impact Assessment

The draft Concept Plan is accompanied by a comprehensive Social Impact Assessment that was prepared by Judith Stubbs & Associates.

NCOSS restricts its comments to two dimensions of the likely social impact of the redevelopment. The first concerns the impact on the provision of affordable and social housing within the Fairfield/Liverpool area. The second concerns the impact of the current residents of the Bonnyrigg public housing estate.

In terms of the social housing system within the Fairfield/Liverpool area, the redevelopment has both positive and negative impacts. On the positive side it retains 699 public housing dwellings within Bonnyrigg, and will replace decaying housing stock with more appropriate and contemporary dwellings, including a substantial component of adaptable housing. On the negative side some 134 replacement dwellings will need to be sourced outside Bonnyrigg in order to ensure that there is no net loss of public housing stock. Our preference would have been to maintain 833 public housing dwellings in Bonnyrigg. While we support efforts to achieve greater social mix, we are not aware of any research

that would demonstrate that a social mix of 65:35 (which would result if the redevelopment involved 833 public housing dwellings onsite) would produce less sustainable and healthy community than a social mix of 70:30 (which the draft Concept Plan provides). We accept, however, that the tender for the redevelopment was conducted on the basis of the 70:30 mix, and signed contracts are now in place with Bonnyrigg Partnerships that prevent fundamental elements of the proposal from being changed. We recommend that the 134 replacement public housing dwellings should be provided within the Fairfield/Liverpool area, rather than generally across Western Sydney. We further recommend that subsequent Living Communities projects should test a range of social mix combinations, rather than rigidly following the 70:30 formula..

In terms of the broader affordable housing system within the Fairfield/Liverpool area, predicting the outcome of the redevelopment over a 13 year period is clearly subject to many variables and uncertainties. The draft Concept Plan assumes that most of the new private dwellings will be sold to home purchasers, rather than investors in rental properties, and that prospective purchasers are likely to currently reside within the sub-region in which Bonnyrigg is located. Fairfield local government area is currently a relatively affordable area for home purchase, with a median sale price for the September 2007 quarter of \$315,000, compared to \$435,000 for Sydney as a whole. Whereas the median sale price for Sydney as a whole has risen by 3.6% in the last year, Fairfield local government area has experienced a fall of 4.6%¹. Nevertheless, home purchase remains beyond the means of most moderate income households in the region. We note that, as part of the Community Renewal Services Plan, Bonnyrigg Partnerships has undertaken to develop an Affordable Housing Strategy. We welcome this undertaking and request that the NGO sector, including NCOSS, be consulted during the development of this strategy.

The impact of the redevelopment on existing public households in Bonnyrigg needs to be considered in the light of what we know about their history and characteristics. A very high proportion of Bonnyrigg tenants were born overseas, with many settling in the area after fleeing persecution in Indo China or from other war-torn countries. Many have lived in the area for a considerable time and have built up strong networks within their particular cultural and religious groups. Almost half the families on the estate are sole parent families, which is more than double the rate for Fairfield local government area. There are also significant numbers of the frail aged, families with one or more disabled

¹ All figures from *Rent and Sales Report No. 82*, Department of Housing, released February 2008 p. 10.

members, large low-income families and indigenous families². They thus constitute a particularly vulnerable group.

Compared to the Minto redevelopment, the most positive aspect of the Bonnyrigg proposal is that there is likely to be sufficient public housing stock onsite to allow all existing tenants who wish to stay in Bonnyrigg to do so. In the process, however, all tenants will be required to move at least once and a substantial number will be required to move twice. This will involve considerable disruption to a vulnerable group, and is likely to weaken and disrupt long-established community networks in the area. To this extent current tenants will experience a number of adverse impacts for the 'greater good' of developing a better Bonnyrigg.

The Social Impact Assessment proposes a number of additional measures to mitigate the adverse impact on existing tenants, including pursuing allocation policies that enable links to be maintained between existing tenants, ensuring that housing types are suitable for those with special needs (especially larger families with multiple disabilities) and that there is an adequate spread of adaptable housing across dwelling types and precincts. NCOSS recommends that those proposals be incorporated into the plans.

The increased density involved in the redevelopment, and the associated loss of private outdoor space (yards), is clearly the source of the greatest concern expressed by existing tenants. We recognise that it will not be possible to provide existing households with the detached home with a backyard that they seek. NCOSS recommends that the new higher density dwellings incorporate very high standards of visual and acoustic privacy, and other design measures, to minimise likely neighbourhood conflict.

5. Conclusions

NCOSS considers that Bonnyrigg redevelopment will have major implications for the future of public housing estates in Sydney. The NSW Government and its private partners, Becton and Westpac, have made a significant investment in the project. The Department of Housing and Council have devoted considerable effort into engaging with the Bonnyrigg community to develop a proposal that enjoys community support. Given the timetable for the redevelopment, it will be a considerable time before a final judgement can be made about the success or otherwise of the project. It is clear, however, that existing tenant households will experience substantial disruption and dislocation as the project proceeds. Every

² Sourced from the Social Impact Assessment and the Updated Demographic Profile, both commissioned by Bonnyrigg Partnerships.

effort must be made to put into place mitigation measures to reduce these and other possible adverse impacts.