

Public Meeting Notes
Our Lady Help of Christians
7:30 PM, 1 May 2023
Attendance: approx. 104 people

Introduction

Father Michael Sierakowski, Moderator, St Francis Xavier Montmorency Parish, opened the proceedings, expressing the desire to surround and support the residents of SV. A little background was given.

Welcome to Eltham, St Margaret's and Our Lady Help of Christians church organised this meeting. Cameron D will present data to help explain the history.

St Vincent's residents were especially welcomed, having made a considerable effort to come.

Philip, the interpreter, was applauded in. Natalie Duffy and Vicki Ward were present. Kate Thwaites and her team were an apology. St Vincent's management was invited but were unable to attend. It was noted that they provide a lot of services in the area.

Fr Michael said he was hoping that there would be useful suggestions made to manage the crisis. Participants could supply their email addresses to Cameron after the meeting.

Miranda and Marlis wrote a short history, St V first report and the letter to Lincoln are available in hard copy for participants after the meeting.

Section one of the meeting - history

Timeline of the history of the Independent Living Units shown in PowerPoint.

☑ Slide 13 - 3 questions about previous cost of repairs of the current pricing and about why the review has not been released.

Questions and comments

Q. If flooding is present, can't the top level still be used?

A: Not if the bottom is rotted out.

Q. Does the land have a singular purpose ie to house the aged and the like?

A: Audience member provided some detail about the donation that Judge Book made to the Eltham area to provide aged care.

Comment: There was a suggestion that the space at the back of the property was earmarked for social housing.

Comment: An audience member was aware that SV had plans for independent living units already in place on 39 Railway Parade and she had questioned whether St Vs intended to follow through with those plans as she had put her name on the list. She had met the person who had made those plans is happy to again discuss possibilities with St Vincent's.

Fr Michael summed up again, especially noting the difficulty of dealing with the agency when it is interstate.

Section two of the meeting. Vicki Fitzgerald interviews ILU residents.

Q What brought you to St Vincent's?

Aliyah resident

I have been in St Vincent's for 6 and a half years

- o Fall of Baghdad
- o Killing in the streets on sectarian lines
- o Son fled to Amman, Jordan
- o They kidnapped her husband – ransomed twice
- o Visa to Amman, 2 years, then applied for Australia

Moses, resident

- o War in Syria started
- o Aleppo – threat of death on daily basis
- o Mortars hit the neighbourhood
- o Surrounding area damaged
- o Daughter in Australia for 2 years
- o Went to Lebanon
- o His family is now living in a diaspora – kids in Armenia, Canada
- o He's here with his daughter

Debbie, resident

- o Came from New Zealand
- o Lived in Perth
- o Domestic violence
- o Lost everything
- o Came to Melbourne with a few boxes
- o Had to start up again – it was a struggle
- o A few years she really needed help and a friend at the bowling club offered to take her to St V Eltham ILU.
- o We all need to help and support each other in this situation

Q2. When you came to St Vincent's, what was it like?

Aliyah, resident

- o Comfortable in area
- o At start – didn't know anyone, no car, didn't know language
- o WTE volunteers hosted us and received us
- o St Vincent's looked after us very well in the beginning
- o We were so happy and so sure about our future

Moses, resident

- o In the beginning I was living in private rental and paying nearly \$1300 per month
- o I have a limited income
- o I was not able to buy whatever I wanted
- o My daughter told me to come to St Vincent's
- o I recognised it was a nice place to live
- o Then we were living like a community – each one supporting each other
- o So angry at the sudden decision of St Vincent's to evacuate
- o It was so distressing, and he doesn't know why they did that

Debbie, resident

- o It's been really good

- o A month after I moved in, I had a stroke in my leg
- o It was right at the beginning of COVID
- o I couldn't walk very well
- o I go to the pool 3x per week
- o I'm getting physio every week
- o I've got everything right here
- o I've got the shops right across the road
- o I don't have to go too far
- o I've got my neighbours and friends
- o It's upsetting not to know where we're going or what's happening
- o You felt safe

Q3 On 25 February 2023 I imagine it was quite a shock when St Vincent's told you that you would have to move out. To be fair, St Vincent's told people that they would be placed in alternative, suitable and long-term housing. How did you feel when you heard that you had to move?

Debbie, resident

- o Very stressful
- o Lack of sleep
- o You don't know where you are
- o I emailed Emma about having a meeting Emma gave me the day and date but didn't tell me which month so I prepared myself emotionally for a meeting a month early and then was confused and distressed that no-one was there and had to wait another month for the interview.
- o They started it in February
- o They didn't tell of the meeting
- o The meeting was only okay – they didn't even ask me where I wanted to live
- o They've offered me a place recently living with 10 other people sharing a facility 50 kilometres from here
- o I said no
- o Even offering that when it's supposed to be a one-bedroom unit was distressing – it's not the same

Moses, resident

- o It's so distressing to receive this information in this meeting
- o Everyone was shocked – we hadn't expected it
- o It was strange news
- o I was angry – a lot of families and everyone is suffering from the problem with income
- o Nobody can afford to have a private rental
- o They can't afford to go and apply and find another place
- o If St Vincent's can't find them another place it's a serious problem for them

☑ Aliyah, resident

- o It was so shocking when we received the news that all properties must be vacated in 10 months by end of 2023

- o I didn't know what to do
- o I ask all the people here today to help us stay in Eltham
- o Everything is here – GP, shopping, train station – people help us even with our limited English – we are seeking your help as our final hope.
- o There are issues with the price of the rental – everything is too expensive

Comment from the Audience - Hana

In my situation, my home in Iraq was burned by ISIS. There was no place for me. Now I feel nearly the same. My family is divided in the whole world so there is nowhere to live. I have been on the public housing list for 7 years.

(Editor's note that the refugees who are on public housing lists are there because they were required to put themselves on those lists before they came to St Vs, not because that's where they want to be)

Question from the audience

Do you want to move as a community or move individually?

Moses, resident

- o We want to stay together

Audience

- o We agree

Aliyah, resident

- o We want to stay together

o If not the whole group, we want a small group to keep supporting each other as neighbours, for example, if somebody needs medicine or to go to the GP

- o We speak Arabic

o We suffered homelessness in our homeland so we don't want to suffer the same fate here

Comment from the audience – Jack

We want to thank the Australian Government for accepting us. In our homeland we had our own property. We are not trying to beg just to gain money. We already had a lot of property but everything was stolen from us. The big joke is that St Vincent's is a charity. We are so disappointed by St Vincent's – it is so distressing that a charity has done this.

Section three of the meeting

Father Michael asked the audience if they had any suggestions for ways to help the residents.

Questions from the audience

Suzette: Can we put pressure on St Vincent's to at least hold out for a couple more years until social housing can be built in the area?

Michael: I hope St Vincent's will take time to consider the story they are being told. We should put the human story to them and hopefully they will hear it [the residents clapped]

Vicki W: Nobody in this place needs to justify the want or the need or to apologise for the want or the need to have secure housing.

Josephine: People have said they've sent emails and received no response. However there was a big response when the refugees were brought to Eltham. Especially when Pauline Hanson said she was going to come down to Eltham to protest against them. We could try a more public response – placards. Raise awareness. Most families do not have the time. Becoming more public and more vocal about the issues could perhaps help.

Jason: St Vincent's are obviously doing this for economic reasons. Would the government buy the site and help run it?

Vicki W: Jason's got a petition going. He wrote to the government about a week ago. There is not enough turn around to find the money that is necessary for this because it's already done. If this had been February maybe but it's difficult. I've been having conversations with St Vincent's and social housing organisations.

Joan: I'm from Herring House. On 8 February 2023 we were advised that on 15 February 2023 we would have a meeting. We were beside ourselves with anxiety. We didn't know where we were heading and we speculated about what was going to happen to us. On 15 February 2023 my home no longer felt like home to me. It just dissipated into the fog. While sitting here, I have no feeling of connection. I feel very down. I don't know where to head. It was my home for 13 years and I absolutely feel nothing. One thing St Vincent's can do is to increase the number of hours for the project worker. They only have 2 days per week to get through 52 homeless people. I am distressed and I am threatened in my wellness mentally. I was asked to come up and talk but didn't feel I had the capacity. When I heard those other courageous people come up I thought I can do that too.

Michael: There were a number of you who ended up in hospital upon hearing the news.

Vicki F: We've been supporting the refugees as much as we can but we haven't got a lot of people. If there are people in the audience who could help the Australians that would be great. There are people who are distressed and St Vincent's haven't helped them.

Gillian: We've spent a lot of time sending emails to St Vincent's and that hasn't been productive. You've been speaking to social housing providers. Would it help if we wrote letters to the social housing providers asking them to consider providing social housing here to address this need? And if so, can you provide us with a list of who we should be writing to?

Vicki W: I'm speaking to three social housing providers at the moment. One of them knows St Vincent's and hasn't been approached by them which I'm pretty disappointed about because in February 2023 I spoke to them and suggested investing in Eltham. If there's a commercial interest in it, they'll be interested in it. Can we continue to talk with St Vincent's Care? I had an answer today saying they couldn't tell us why the buildings

need to be decommissioned. For me, it's a continued conversation around "Here are some options. St Vincent's, can you look at these as well?" The aim is housing that suits people's needs. St Vincent's Care have found alternatives, some of which are suitable and some of which are not, which have been knocked back and that is entirely reasonable. St Vincent's may think this is a WTE issue rather than a wider Eltham issue. There are lots of bits and pieces of land around including 39 Railway Pde which they own.

Audience member: Australians are very generous with natural disasters. I worked with the Federal Government on Black Friday. The community gave people holiday homes and cars. There was no way to deal with the amount of things that people donated. After we got the news, panicked, we googled comparable rents. You know what we found? Parking spaces. I went to real estate agents and asked for listings below \$200. There was nothing. Can those buildings be salvaged in any way? Can we get a community campaign going to get tradies to donate some time – even if it's not all of them? The stock's not there. The housing's not there.

Vicki W: I want to thank WTE and the residents that have come to share their stories with me and work with me on a better outcome and more secure housing and everyone who has come tonight and hope we can work towards something that's better than what we've got.

Michael finished the meeting thanking all for coming.