

Supportive housing on Community
Facility zoned land in the ACT



A Case Study
October 2009



ACT Planning &
Land Authority

Introduction

This case study examines the St Vincent de Paul villas in Aranda, within Canberra's Belconnen district. Adjacent to a Catholic church and primary school, these villas are a recent innovative development by the local Archdiocese. The development addresses two issues facing Canberra, along with many other cities in Australia and beyond:

- the need to provide supportive housing.
- better utilisation of land holdings by religious organisations.

After briefly discussing these contextual issues, the study then outlines the processes through which this supportive housing has come to be—including a significant policy change within the local planning framework—and examines how this development might be a model that religious and other community organisations may wish to emulate.

Case Study: St Vincent de Paul villas

Developed and managed by CatholicCare/Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn

7 Bindel Street, Aranda (Section 1, Block 25)

Development type: 15 x 2 and 3 bedroom supportive housing units

Area of site: Approximately 0.6 Ha

Date of development approval: June 2005



The St Vincent de Paul villas, Aranda (2009)



The supportive housing units are to the right (north-east) of the site (highlighted in blue), with a pre-existing church building (built 1982) standing in the centre of the photo. A Catholic primary school is directly adjacent to the top of (north) the photo.

Background: the need for supportive housing and better land utilisation by religious organisations

It is well recognised that the populations of cities within Australasia, North America, Western Europe and certain parts of East Asia are ageing to a greater or lesser extent. Across Australia, the median age of the population is projected to rise to 46.7 years by 2050 (compared with 35.4 years in 2000). Persons aged 65 years and older will grow from 12.7 per cent (2002) to 27.1 per cent (2051) as a proportion of the national population. While the aggregate population of the ACT is expected to remain slightly younger than the other states (excluding the Northern Territory) the local proportion of persons aged 65 and over is nonetheless expected to rise from 8.8 per cent (2002) to 23.5 per cent (2051) of the Territory's population¹.

Accordingly, finding suitable accommodation outcomes to meet the specific needs of the aged is—and will continue to be for decades—an important challenge for the ACT Government and community. At a more localised scale, the sub-district of south Belconnen, within which the suburb of Aranda is located, has been identified as a location within Canberra likely to have a particularly high demand for aged accommodation by 2014 (Howe 2006:18)². This may be a result of residents 'growing old together' as the suburb was developed in the late 1960s as the first suburb in the 'new town' of Belconnen.

¹ ABS [Australian Bureau of Statistics] (2004) Australian Social Trends 2004. pp. 16-21. Cat. No. 4102.0.

² A. Howe. Retirement Accommodation and Residential Aged Care in the ACT 2006-2026. Report commissioned by the Chief Minister's Department (ACT Government).

The second key imperative that the villas address is the fostering of appropriate uses by religious and other community organisations of their often considerable land holdings. Historically in Australia, religious organisations have frequently been significant holders of lands through grants made by governments and bequests made by their adherents. In 2005, as it sought to raise \$450 million for new churches and schools, it was suggested that the Anglican Diocese of Sydney held real estate assets at that time estimated to be worth 'between \$3 billion and \$4 billion'³. Similarly, in discussion around the possible sale of underutilised land owned by religious organisations to improve the affordability of housing, the Catholic Church in Victoria was reported as being 'one of the state's largest land holders'⁴.



The villas (highlighted in blue) are approximately 600m walking distance from the Jamison Centre in Macquarie (at the top-left/north-east corner of the image), which include retail, banking, and medical facilities.

3 Morris, L. 2005. 'Parishes rebel on Anglican mission'. Sydney Morning Herald. 14 October.

4 Gough, D. 2008. 'Churches' radical plan for cheap rental housing'. The Age. 3 February.

Locally, the Catholic Church is the largest religious community in the ACT with in 2006 28.1 per cent of the Territory's population at least nominally identifying as adherents. Additionally, along with various other older churches, the Church is also a significant holder of land— on which places of worship, primary and secondary schools, a university, presbyteries, and social service facilities are located. Much of this land has been leased to the Church on concessional terms through a variety of government programs since the 1920s⁵. Further, in common with most of the other traditional Christian denominations, not insignificant portions of this land are underutilised, whether through the cessation of previous uses, or through the land never having been developed in the first place.

Policy change and the building process

In the late 1990s the Aged Care Advisory Council of the Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn approached the Government seeking to build housing specifically for older persons at Aranda. Significantly, the units were to be constructed on underutilised land leased by the Archdiocese, adjacent to a church building, presbytery (i.e. priest's residence), and primary school.

However, such a proposal was not possible at that time under the planning controls within the Territory Plan. Specifically, while policy for the Community Facility zone⁶ allowed for the development of a 'retirement complex', these complexes were required to include facilities providing relative high levels of personal care. Rather, it was envisaged that while the residents of the Aranda units would have some institutionalised access to care services, this would not be at a level of a nursing home or hostel. Accordingly, the proposed development could not be approved.



The previously underutilised carpark on which the villas were built

(Photo courtesy of CatholicCare)

5 A leasehold system of land tenure operates in the ACT.

6 Strictly speaking a system of land use policies and map overlays rather than 'zoning', as such, was used in the Territory's planning prior to March 2008. However, for simplicity, the contemporary terminology is used in this case study.

Subsequently, as part of a wider policy review of the Community Facility zone, the ACT Government amended its policy to allow the development of 'supportive housing', akin to what was being proposed for Aranda. The enabling legislation—Variation 164 to the Territory Plan—commenced on 5 September 2002.

Accordingly, supportive housing is now currently defined in the Territory Plan as:

'...the use of land for residential accommodation for persons in need of support, which is managed by a Territory approved organisation that provides a range of support services such as counselling, domestic assistance and personal care for residents as required. Although such services must be able to be delivered on site, management and preparation may be carried out on site or elsewhere. Housing may be provided in the form of self-contained dwellings.'

Further, this land use has a number of particular performance controls as specified in the Community Facility Zone Development Code within the Plan:

- a) the occupation of individual dwellings in the supportive housing complex is restricted by the lease to persons with special housing needs for reasons of age or disability
- b) the site has not been identified by the ACT Planning and Land Authority as being required for some other 'community use'⁷
- c) all dwellings are designed to comply with the relevant parts of the Residential Zones Development Code and the relevant Australian Standard for Adaptable Housing
- d) the land is held as a single undivided parcel. Subdivision of the lease to provide separate title to individual dwellings, including subdivision under the Unit Titles Act 2001, is not permitted.

In summary, supportive housing within the Community Facility zone differs from other forms of care accommodation for persons requiring assistance, as well as other residential uses. In contrast to other forms of supportive accommodation, while care services must be available to residents, it is not necessary that these be co-located onsite with higher-level care services. However, differing from other residential uses, there must be recognisable care provision by an institutional provider, the units must comply with relevant adaptable housing standards, units can only be leased to persons requiring care by reason of age or disability and the land cannot be subdivided into individual titles.

It is accordingly against this key planning policy change that the St Vincent de Paul villas came to be built. Initially the Archdiocese sought development approval for 8 units which was given in October 2003. However, the proponent subsequently revised its proposal and in December 2004 re-sought development approval, this time for 18 units. Further, while not disagreeing in principle with the use of the site for supportive housing, a number of local residents expressed concerns around tree loss and other design issues. Eventually the Archdiocese agreed to modify its proposal, reducing the number of units to 15, and retaining certain trees. Development approval for this revised scheme was granted in June 2005.

Following the completion of the construction of the units, CatholicCare (previously known as Centacare), now manages the complex and is responsible for providing care for the villas' residents. A loan-license method of tenure is used in the development. CatholicCare has reported that there was considerable demand for units when they were initially released, allowing financing from the Catholic Development Fund to be repaid shortly after the occupation of the villas.

⁷ 'Community use' is a defined umbrella term in the Territory Plan, covering a number of land uses including: childcare centres, hospitals, educational facilities, places of worship, community activity centres, and cultural facilities.

Outcomes

The St Vincent de Paul Villas can be seen as a successful example of supportive housing developed in accordance with the 2002 policy change to the ACT's Community Facility Zone.

From the perspective of the Catholic community in Canberra, the development can be seen as having delivered a number of positive outcomes. Its residents, who range in age between 63 and 90 years old, have found the villas to be a satisfactory 'downsizing' retirement alternative. Notably, in terms of scale, the 15-unit development is much smaller than many other residential retirement institutions elsewhere in Canberra. Only three units are currently occupied by couples. It is also markedly different from many other aged residential communities through its strong connections to both the neighbouring church and primary school. For example, residents of the villas read to the primary school pupils, parishioners provide various support services to residents, and sacraments are provided in the homes of residents too ill to attend a church service.

Overall, from the perspective of the ACT Planning and Land Authority, the project has quantitatively increased the local supply and qualitative choice of adaptable housing suitable for the accommodation of older persons and has seen the better utilisation of approximately 0.6 Ha of land leased to a community organisation for community development purposes.

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