

October 2000

On the threshold: the future of private rooming houses in the City of Yarra

In order to assist local agencies and government departments in their planning processes, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, on behalf of the Yarra Social Issues Network and with funding from the City of Yarra's Community Grants Program, conducted an audit of rooms and surveyed the proprietors and residents of the municipality's private rooming houses. Sally Jope of the Brotherhood's Social Action and Research was responsible for the project, which involved consultation with service providers, group discussions with rooming house residents and interviews with rooming house proprietors. These were undertaken in November and December 1999.

Findings

Loss of rooms

- In the twelve months to December 1999 there had been a loss of at least three privately-owned rooming houses and a loss of 18 rooms.
- Of the 432 private rooms for rent in the municipality, the number of rooms available to people on low incomes ranged from a minimum of 171 to a maximum of 249. The majority of these rooms were located in Fitzroy (including North Fitzroy).
- An additional minimum of 112 rooms are for rent in unregistered houses and the majority of these were located in Fitzroy.
- 417 rooms were available to people with low incomes through the Community Housing Program.
- A comparison of 1992 and 1999 data suggested a loss of approximately 50 per cent of the privately owned rooming houses, and 60 per cent of the privately owned rooms available for tenants with low incomes in the City of Yarra since 1992.
- A loss of between 13 and 18 privately-owned rooming houses was apparent since 1992 and at least 11 were from the Fitzroy area.
- A net loss of 156 rooms available to people with low incomes in the Fitzroy area since 1992.
- The increase in the provision of rooms through the Community Housing program during this period only offset the loss of private rooms available to people with low incomes to a limited extent.
- The net loss of rooms available to people on low incomes was certainly between 59 and 137.

Reasons for the loss and its impact on people with low incomes

- A significant number of proprietors claimed they had improved facilities and increased rents to attract tenants with higher incomes. Other proprietors indicated their intention to change the use of their property in the near future.
- The decrease in the number of rooms available to people on low incomes appears set to continue within an environment characterised by a high demand for rental housing, raised land values, high building maintenance costs and limited support services for people with high needs.
- The lack of alternative housing options for rooming house residents on low incomes forced many to remain in substandard accommodation and suggests an increased risk of homelessness.

- Providers of support services to residents expressed concerns about the substandard conditions of some rooming houses and the impact of these conditions on the outcomes of their health and other services. They also feared that the future housing of some residents was less secure as they did not enjoy easy access to the very services that could assist them to continue to live independently.
- Many residents stated that they would prefer more independent, self-contained, accommodation that was affordable but felt they had no such alternative housing options at present.
- Rooming houses in the City of Yarra were concentrated in Fitzroy and Richmond and the majority of free food, material aid and day centre support services known to residents were located in Fitzroy.
- The profile of residents and proprietors suggests that some rooming houses continue to provide informal supported accommodation to people with high health and other needs, often without adequate service assistance.
- Proprietors interviewed for the study generally felt that real estate pressures, the costs of meeting building standards and the unmet support needs of residents acted as disincentives to the provision of low-cost rooms in their investment properties.
- The limited knowledge of support services demonstrated by both rooming house proprietors and residents indicated firstly, a barrier to such services and secondly, that the housing of residents with high needs is most at risk and requires urgent attention.

Conclusion

Given the significant decrease in the number of privately-owned rooms available to people on low incomes and the poor quality of some of the remaining rooms, the study points to the importance of increasing affordable accommodation options for people on low incomes and in particular for those with high health and other needs. It also highlights the necessity for policy makers to acknowledge the demands made on rooming house proprietors who accommodate people with high needs and to ensure ongoing active support is available to both residents and proprietors of rooming houses and that this support is adequate and appropriate.

Recommendations

Recommendations based on this study aim to preserve the diversity of the municipality by maintaining the access of people on low incomes to single, low-cost accommodation. They have been structured in two parts:

- those aimed at improving the quantity of housing stock available for single, low-income people by:
 - Advocating for retention and replacement of rooming house stock*
 - Improving the information base to respond to changes in stock*
 - Supporting proprietors to keep stock available*
- those aimed at providing improved support to maintain residents living on low incomes in rooming houses.
 - Supporting proprietors through the support of residents*
 - Continuing the development of support services to avoid homelessness*

Further information

The Brotherhood of St Laurence works for the well-being of Australians on low incomes to improve their economic, social and personal circumstances. In addition to providing direct aid and support and a range of services and activities, the Brotherhood also researches the causes of poverty, undertakes community education and lobbies government for a better deal for people on low incomes.

A full copy of this report, [On the threshold: The future of private rooming houses in the City of Yarra](#), is available by contacting the Publications Officer at:

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