



A Core and Cluster Refuge for Albury

Community Consultation Report

Yes Unlimited acknowledges the Wiradjuri people as the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work, and pays respect to Elders past and present.



Betty's Place Core and Cluster Redevelopment Consultation Report

October 2022

Betty's Place Women's Refuge has been an important part of the Albury service landscape since the early 1970's when local residents Bob and Betty Maclean began accommodating women in their own home. Betty's Place currently provides accommodation to up five women and their children alongside onsite case management, and a range of other supports to assist women in achieving their goals. The site is centrally located, and operates within a 'communal' living environment, accommodating up to two families in the main house and one family in a semi self-contained unit in the backyard. There are two single rooms also located in the main house. Residents currently share bathrooms, kitchen, lounge rooms and laundry facilities.

Owned by the Lands and Housing Corporation, the building was constructed in the 1930's and as a result has extremely high maintenance and utilities costs. Our partners Homes Out West Community Housing, who manage the building and maintenance, carry the ongoing costs (approximately 19k per annum) of the failing electrical systems and plumbing that are to be expected with any ageing house. A room at the front of the house is used as a staff office, which we are beginning to outgrow as our DFV services continue to expand.

A Core and Cluster for Albury

While the model in its existing form has served an important purpose for many years, the stories from women who use the service and an emerging evidence base around communal refuges all indicate it is time for a significant change. Notably a key recommendation from the Victorian Royal Commission into Domestic and Family Violence was to begin a staged transition of all communal models to what is known as a 'core and cluster' model.

Core and cluster refuges are a more modern and flexible approach to crisis accommodation for women and their children. They consist of several independent units, the 'cluster', located on the same block as a multipurpose space, the 'core' including staff offices, meetings rooms and communal facilities. They are usually centrally located, with high quality security and offer a range of services onsite.

Yes Unlimited has been working towards developing a core and cluster for a number of years and have recently partnered with Housing Plus, a community housing provider based in Orange who developed the first purpose built core and cluster in NSW. After a significant funding announcement by the NSW state government at the end of 2021 it is with much excitement that we are preparing a bid for a purpose-built core and cluster for women and children in Albury.



The Consultations

In the lead up to the design phase, Yes Unlimited and Housing Plus have undertaken a series of consultations with local Aboriginal groups and yarning circles, members of the CALD community, DFV service providers, police, health services, and women with lived experience. This has occurred through a mix of informal one on one conversations, a research project in 2021, and interactive workshops with specific community groups.

What the Community Told Us

Generally, the community was very supportive of the move towards a core and cluster women's refuge for Albury. Key themes raised across all consultations included:

- **Safety and security:** The refuge needs to feel safe and secure without feeling like a prison. People discussed the idea of 'layered' levels of access, ensuring the site was accessible for emergency services, the location of site in a residential area, having a card access for separate access to the resident's area, secure parking that is shielded from public view (i.e. underground or otherwise not visible from the road) and consideration of physical safety in terms of structural design and fittings.
- **A welcoming and comfortable environment:** People think the refuge should convey a sense of home and feel as normal as possible. People thought the potential to have your pet with you was great. Warm lighting, nothing too bright. There should be spaces that support 'active' relaxation i.e. somewhere to get your hair braided, fancy massage chairs, quiet places to meditate, pray, read or otherwise take care of yourself.
- **Privacy:** People appreciate the way privacy is upheld in a core and cluster model and discussed the soundproofing of adjoining units, and not having to engage with other residents unless they want to.
- **Use of outdoor spaces and landscaping:** The way outdoor spaces contribute to how comfortable people feel was discussed extensively. Gardens, outdoor cooking areas, quiet corners, and children's playground, outdoor gym equipment encouraging personal wellbeing, sufficient undercover areas so people can get outside when it's raining.
- **Therapeutic spaces:** It was considered important that the refuge include a variety of formal and informal 'therapeutic/healing' type spaces such as comfortable counselling rooms, quiet areas, and spaces for art, play and creativity.
- **Child Friendly Environments:** Play equipment such as slide, swings and climbing equipment are the most popular with children, open grass areas for soccer or cricket, netball hoops, bike tracks or play gardens with line of sight for easy supervision.
- **Flexible communal space:** People discussed the importance of having the option to access communal spaces such as shared cooking areas, spaces for group work, or other areas where people can interact with each other.
- **Inclusive of diversity:** Consideration of cultural design, diverse needs and the variety of backgrounds people may come from should flow throughout the entire facility, not just be a single room.

Alongside the general themes mentioned above, specific considerations raised by Aboriginal community members include:

Cultural design: The building and garden should include cultural references or touchpoints throughout. This may include local artwork, use of circles and curves rather than too many straight lines, Aboriginal art linen, considering sleeping configurations in terms of beds and shared sleeping arrangements, toys that reflect the community eg. Aboriginal dolls and books.

Connection to outside/nature: This was particularly important in the Aboriginal consultation sessions who highlighted the therapeutic/healing role of outside spaces. Suggestions included a landscaped yarning/healing circle with a firepit, tactile space using river pebbles and running water, and outdoor consultation/meeting areas where private conversation can occur outside. Native plants and the birds they attract are important for how the environment feels as well as for their medicinal purpose, bush tucker, or certain leaves that be used in smoking ceremonies. The Wirraminna Environmental Centre and the landscaping at AWHS were both frequently mentioned.

An Elder in Residence: One suggestion was the idea of an Elder in Residence where an Aunty from the community would regularly be onsite to support/mentor Aboriginal women, provide a connection to the community, vouch for the service as a safe place and inform the overall cultural safety of the service.

Safety: Navigating this in a small community and balancing the need to stay connected with community/family while feeling safe.

The CALD community told us that the following was important to consider:

Accessible information: Information needs to be available in translated forms with images (particularly important information such as who to call in an emergency). Staff could be upskilled in using translator apps and be able to teach residents how to use them, and it was suggested that providing an informative Youtube or audio clip on the service could be helpful as women were more likely to watch it multiple times until they understood it, rather repeatedly asking staff.

Cooking and sharing food: This was seen as particularly important in the CALD consultation, with food and cooking highlighted as central to sharing and learning about other cultures. Veggie gardens, specific cooking utensils (woks, bamboo steamers, rice cookers, large ladles), and communal cooking areas were all suggested. For some communities it was considered important to be able to assure a new resident that cooking utensils had not come in contact with meat, or alternatively to support them to bring/obtain their own.

Feeling welcomed: Many simple ideas were raised for making people feel welcomed and included such as cultural art or photos of diverse people, kid's books in different languages, cultural games like Sungka, a world map on display in a communal space, cultural leaders or pastors viewing the site so they can vouch for it as a safe place, actively seeking to recruit staff from diverse backgrounds.

Staying connected to community and family: A concern about maintaining connections is often a barrier for people from CALD backgrounds accessing crisis accommodation and it would be important that we consider how visitors may access the site, our connection with community leaders, and catering for larger families.

Safety: While always an issue with domestic and family violence, there is an additional element for CALD people in terms of understanding and the perception of safety. It was considered important that locks or security measures were visible and that care was given to explaining and assuring people of their safety while using the service.

Some words from women with lived experience on staying at a refuge

"You need your own space to grieve privately and not be locked in a room, a place where you can interact when you want to; sharing with other people is hard"

"Having your own space is an important aspect of self-esteem and self-respect – having something that is mine. When you are feeling anxious or insecure, you don't want to make small talk. It's important to have your own kitchen and bathroom"

"Having your own unit would be ideal so you can remove yourself if necessary - you could engage and disengage. You wouldn't have to manage the difficulties that arise when people do things differently from you, you wouldn't have to be uncomfortable"

"The environment is important - you need something lushious - like a reward after all you have been through. It should be colourful, full of plants and books, a place where you feel safe immediately"

"The living arrangements are difficult (in a communal refuge); there was one resident who had very different cleanliness standards than mine, and this made me uncomfortable"

"My children are already traumatised, and I imagine that a communal living environment would re-trigger them, and I wouldn't be able to soothe them. I would have to work even harder to manage my own trauma responses"

Where to from here?

Yes Unlimited and Housing Plus will be pursuing funding through the NSW Government to establish a Core and Cluster for Albury. The feedback from these consultation will be incorporated into the design process over the coming months.

We'd like to extend a sincere and heartfelt thank you to everyone involved in the consultation process, and in supporting us to provide a better response to women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence. A special note of gratitude goes to the community members and people with lived experience who generously offered their own time, cultural expertise and inspiring ideas in shaping a new refuge that will serve women and children experiencing DFV for many years into the future.

If you have any further thoughts, ideas or things you think we may have missed please reach out to:

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