

## **Bonnyrigg: a community journey**

### ***Delma Arnfield on behalf of the Bonnyrigg Public Tenants' Group***

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Hello. Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you today.

I would like to talk to you about how a redevelopment project has affected and changed life in Bonnyrigg.

My name is Delma Arnfield. I am a tenant in community housing and I have lived in Bonnyrigg for just over 20 years. I lived first in the family home with my mother and brother, and now I am raising my three children with my husband.

For those of you who don't know Bonnyrigg I am not one of a kind, many of us have lived on the estate for a great number of years. Some of the residents of Bonnyrigg have even been there since the first conception of Bonnyrigg and helped build Bonnyrigg to what it is today.

We have the local convenience of a great shopping centre, churches, temples and a school on nearly every perimeter. We have our choice of clubs and a good public transport system.

Other than these fantastic amenities we have built life long friendships. As a community we have gone to school and work, played, lived, loved and lost together.

If we were to have been asked 4 years ago if we thought our life was lacking or needed improving then I feel the answer would have been no.

On 20<sup>th</sup> December 2004 life as we knew it changed with the announcement of the Bonnyrigg redevelopment. Our lives have been like a roller coaster since then, but instead of climbing that first hill like a normal coaster and getting a great view, we felt we went straight into a decent, with no clear vision of a better ride to come.

The vision we had was of loss - loss of our homes, our community and our security.

The reason for this is that when people moved here we were told to treat our home like we owned it, so we put down roots and made improvements with our hard earned money.

Some of us even brought our home from the Department of Housing and that gave us a sense of achievement and empowerment over our own lives.

So when the announcement was made our sense of power was taken with it.

Early consultation and calls for participation by the project partners started to give us back our sense of power.

After the announcement there was lots of consultation with individuals and groups in the community.

As well as existing groups, new groups have started such as the Bonnyrigg Public Tenants Group, an Owners Group and Neighbourhood Watch.

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There are now many local residents actively involved in the project.

The project partners – who were the Department of Housing and Fairfield City Council, set up a Community Reference Group for us to give advice on how best to do the redevelopment.

The Community Reference Group is made up of government and non-government organisations as well as residents. At the moment we have about twenty permanent members of the reference group and we meet monthly.

CRG meetings are mainly a chance for information from the project partners and comments back from local residents and services. Over the last three and a half years we have commented on a very wide range of issues including:

- communicating with the local community
- the needs of the local community
- house design
- neighbourhood design
- neighbourhood safety issues
- rehousing policies
- support for affected tenants
- development of new community services for Bonnyrigg
- and others

A lot of this has been made possible by the support and training provided by the project partners through training workshops and site tours of other development areas around Sydney.

Along with these groups we have had large public consultations, workshops and events, we have smaller neighbourhood coffee mornings and one-on-one consultations with our client service officers if needed.

So even the shyest person has a point of contact and there is a diverse communication network.

I remember when I first put my hand up to join the consultation processes I thought to myself “what have I let myself in for” and “what are they talking about”.

I know I was not the only one, a lot of the residents felt that we were in the dark.

As time went on, we were given the tools, resources and skills to hold our own in any meeting. We gained much more knowledge about the project and we started to see new possibilities. We also saw that we could influence the project’s decisions.

The consultations brought us along on the ride to the top of the roller coaster, where the view is much better.

Without all these processes and networks, we would not have the quality of communication with the Bonnyrigg Living Community Project that we have today. This

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has been built on people's commitment to participation and honest communication between each other.

I personally would like to thank two people in particular, who are both from the Department of Housing.

First is Bernie Coates, who is on this stage today, because he always tries to share information and if he couldn't answer a question he gave us the courtesy of an explanation why he couldn't answer and that helped rebuild trust.

The other person I would like to thank is a lovely lady named Deborah Follers who has known the people of Bonnyrigg since before the announcement. I would also like to acknowledge the efforts of all the workers from the project to date. These people have proven to be a great support and comfort to all the residents of Bonnyrigg.

When this project started, if anyone was to ask what our thoughts were on policies and procedure and what our input was, we would have just look at each other wondering what they were talking about.

We had little or no knowledge on how to change anything we disagreed with, but through this project we have learned the skills to fight them at their own game so to speak.

Community members have learned the ability to negotiate and even though we have not been fully successful, we have had some victories in negotiation.

An example of this is the project has changed their designs due to our comments on:

- Size of bedrooms
- Width of doorways
- Getting rid of wind out windows
- The difference between public and private houses
- Keeping pedestrian connections to the main services like the shopping centre

Fairfield council received over 40 submissions from community members when they were assessing the development plans - which was seen as a huge success.

The project has not been a smooth ride; we have had to deal with many changes and feelings throughout the project. All roller coasters have to have their dips.

Some of these include:

- A sense of loss
- Loss of trust and power with the initial announcement and then regaining some back
- Lack of skills and then gaining skills
- Change of landlord to a community housing provider and learning to trust a whole new set of people
- Loss of original project workers and now the handover to the successful private company

These are just a few of the experiences we have learned to cope with and without the constant support through these changes, the project would have been unbearable.

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One of the best examples that I can give you is the change over from the department to St George community housing as our landlord.

We had already seen that when new workers start, they do not know the history of the project and often they do things against how we have previously agreed.

The effect is they seem to be insensitive, even though they really are not.

When St George came on board, Department of Housing staff stayed to help the new workers learn their roles within the project, which gave residents time to get to know the new workers without losing the trust of the project.

Sometimes small allowances can mean so much and can add to the overall success of the project.

Where we don't get a win, the fact that all efforts were made to make it a fair fight can make it much more acceptable.

Everyone likes a roller coaster, but when it comes to your home and your community I think we would rather be on a nice safe train, with a better destination and not too many bumps on the way.

On the Bonnyrigg estate we have a really diverse community and many different needs that have to be met. Just to name a few we have:

- Roughly 7 major language groups on the estate
- Department of Housing tenants
- Community housing tenants
- 99 home owners
- aged residents
- people with disabilities and cultural needs.

Unfortunately not all members of the community are able to be a constantly active participant in The Bonnyrigg living community project.

This is where the true spirit of the community comes to life. The residents that can be more actively involved through the groups like the Public Tenants Group take an objective view that will benefit all the members of the community rather than making these groups just about personal gain.

These are some of the comments made by residents about the redevelopment project and life in Bonnyrigg:

*"Since the announcement in 2004, we have found an elevated level of criminal activity. So our aim is that the new estate will fix this problem."* Resident for 8 years

*"It will be a bitter-sweet feeling of having lost our beautiful home and garden and gaining a new one."* Resident for 21 years

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*"I am one of the lucky ones in stage one, and have been moved to my temporary home."*  
Resident for 27 years

*"I did not want to lose my home but have come to accept that the redevelopment is going to happen."*  
Resident for 27 years

I would like to make you aware that the project is not just about bricks and mortar. The success that we have had is due to concentrating on levels of participation general community welfare, employment and other opportunities.

It is now three and a half years since the announcement and there is no building yet. The first precinct of houses to be demolished has now been identified and the families are just now being rehoused.

The private company has now taken over the project and since January this year we have had a new general manager - Claudia Stevens.

Claudia was thrown in at the deep end after the sudden departure of our previous general manager, but is making great efforts to balance each of the demands and previous agreements of the project.

She has helped organise many different community based projects and even helped one tenant start their own business and sponsored me to go back to TAFE to learn about community and welfare services.

So I will say again this project is not just about bricks and mortar, all this and more has happened and the first brick has yet to be laid.

It is early in the process and we won't know if it is a success until the very end.

Life in Bonnyrigg has become more uncertain, it has certainly becoming busier with all the meetings and workshops, but it has also brought the community together as we all share this journey.

Until then, we need vigilance and to be equipped for the fight and the ride and maybe we can turn this roller coaster into a train.

Thank you.