



# PROGRESS REPORT ON

## NORTH MELBOURNE COSY COTTAGE PROJECT:

May, 1981

### Introduction to the Cosy Cottage:

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The North Melbourne Cosy Cottage is a small, single-fronted terrace house which is within easy walking distance of the Royal Children's Hospital, the Royal Melbourne Hospital and the Royal Dental Hospital. About a dozen other hospitals are only a short trip by bus or tram away from the Cottage.

The Cottage is a "Home Away from Home" for families from the country who need to stay in Melbourne so that a member of the family can attend one of the hospitals or use other services which are only available in the metropolis.

The Cottage provides the same basic furniture and equipment as an on-site caravan, but in addition blankets and T.V. are provided, and there are many homely touches. There are five beds and a cot and extra mattresses. The rent is \$30 per week.

The Cottage is a joint project of North Melbourne community organisations, several Trade Unions which have offices in North or West Melbourne, and is supported by some of the hospital social workers.

The terrace house will eventually be demolished so that new premises can be built for the Food Preservers' Union, but this will not be happening for several years. In the meantime the Food Preservers' Union offered the Cottage to the North Melbourne Association for any use it thought suitable.

### The following Report describes the first three years of the Cottage Project:

The Report has been prepared to inform hospital social workers about the Project and also to forward the movements around the provision of emergency accommodation for both families and youth.

Several reports from the North Melbourne community groups are referred to in this Report. These are available at the Melbourne City libraries, and a short description of each report is added to the end of this Cottage Project Report.

### HOW THE PROJECT WAS STARTED:

In March 1978 the North Melbourne Association decided to investigate the possibility of using the Cottage to provide accommodation for country families. Letters were sent to hospital social workers in the large metropolitan hospitals and in the country towns where there was at least a population of 10,000 people. Replies to these letters indicated that it would be worthwhile to use the cottage as a "home away from home" for country families.

Opinions on this project were sought from community groups in North Melbourne and the Trade Unions which had offices in the district.

In May 1978 a meeting was held to plan the Cosy Cottage Project. The meeting was attended by representatives of the North Melbourne Association, the North Melbourne Social Service, the North Melbourne Neighbourhood Centre, Community Child Care, the Food Preservers' Union, the Railway Workers' Union, the

Miscellaneous Workers' Union, the Locomotive Enginemen's Union and several social workers from nearby hospitals. Letters of support for the scheme have been received from social workers in about ten country hospitals and from several provincial Trades and Labour Councils.

The Food Preservers' Union confirmed the offer of the use of the Cottage to the community groups, the rates and repairs to be the responsibility of the Project Group. The Union offered \$2,000 interest free loan to repair the cottage to a more habitable state. The Miscellaneous Workers' Union and the Locomotive Enginemen's Union agreed to help with printing and administrative work for the Cottage, and the Railways' Union gave a donation of \$100 towards equipment. The three North Melbourne organisations agreed to help organise work bees and to generally give assistance with maintenance. The hospital social workers supported the scheme and offered to help with bookings. A budget was prepared and the rent set at \$30. 00 per week.

#### "JACKS (AND JILLS) OF ALL TRADES"WORKED TOGETHER :

Within three months, by the beginning of August, 1978, the Cottage was ready for families. The main repairs were rewiring the whole electric system, repainting the interior, repairs to roof, window and sashes, fencing, installing sink hot-water and gas stove. All furniture and equipment had to be acquired, including fridge, T.V., carpets, blankets and so on. The main donors were the Brotherhood of St. Laurence (blankets and some furniture), the Central Methodist Mission (carpets), the Herald Blanket Appeal (blankets), but most of the furniture and equipment was donated by local people.

Repairs and renovations cost about \$1,600. A number of work bees were held and several members of the North Melbourne Association devoted a great deal of time to making the Cottage cosy and comfortable, and into transforming the yard into a secluded garden area.

#### FAMILIES FROM FAR DISTANT PLACES:

During the past 140 weeks the Cottage has been used for 110 weeks. That is an average of about 35 weeks per year. Most bookings have been for several weeks or a month, but on some occasions the accommodation has been used for a few nights stay.

Families have come from all corners of Victoria and from Tasmania, Fiji, northern New South Wales and the Riverina.

Most bookings have been from families coming to Melbourne for hospital treatment, but the Cottage has also been used to enable wards of the state to spend some time with his/her family, and for some emergency accommodation for those on low income. By far the greatest proportion of bookings have been through the Royal Children's Hospital but some bookings have been received from the Royal Women's Hospital, the Royal Melbourne Hospital and others such as the Eye and Ear and the Peter McCallum. Country hospitals and welfare agencies have made some direct bookings.

#### MAKING THE BEST USE OF THE COTTAGE:

To date bookings have been accepted in the order in which they are received. This has resulted in some short term (two days stay) preventing families from booking the Cottage for several weeks. It is therefore recommended that bookings for less than one week can only be made two or three days in advance. Tentative bookings could be accepted earlier and confirmed two days before.

The most suitable use of the Cottage is for about three weeks. This gives the family a chance to feel really at home and to take advantage of community facilities if they so desire; for example, several families have sent some of their children to school at Errol St. School and thus the stay at the Cottage is more like a home situation.

#### HELPING YOUTH FIND ACCOMMODATION:

Enquiries for youth accommodation have been received by the Cottage. It has been possible to arrange for private board for a few short-term stays. For example, a girl apprentice needing to go to the Printing School for a fortnight, a boy student needing accommodation while he had "work release" experience.

It has not been possible for the Cottage Project Group to find long-term accommodation for youth. The Cottage accommodation is best used by families. However, the Project Group recognises the pressing needs for youth accommodation in the inner suburbs of Melbourne.

#### THE COTTAGE PROJECT AND COMMUNITY ISSUES:

1. The North and West Melbourne Youth Accommodation Committee was formed in 1979. A representative of the Cottage Project attended these meetings. A report "Homeless Youth in North and West Melbourne" was prepared by the Cottage Project representative for this Committee. This report was also sent to the Melbourne City Council Community Planning Group (for North and West Melbourne) and to the Melbourne City Council Community Consultation (see list of reports at end of the Progress Report). The appointment of a Youth Accommodation Officer for North and West Melbourne is a very welcome development.
2. The Melbourne City Council Community Consultation was held during 1980. The Cottage Project Group made a submission to the Consultation and a representative of the Cottage Project Group attend the seminars on residential care for children, which were held as part of this Consultation (see list of reports).
3. Protest On Luxury Flats on H.C.V. Reclamation Site:

The North Melbourne Association protested to the Housing Commission of Victoria about the luxury flats "City Apartments" which are let at about \$180 weekly as holiday accommodation.

These flats have been built on land reclaimed by the Housing Commission and sold to private enterprise. The North Melbourne Association requested that some of these flats be let out to country families and cited the Cottage Project as an example of the need for such accommodation.

In 1981 the Association followed up this letter by preparing a submission to the Victorian Government's Royal Commission into Land Purchases. (see list of reports)

#### COTTAGE FINANCES:

Probably, more by coincidence than good management, the Cottage Project finances have followed the budget laid down at the first meetings of the Group.

The 1978 budget proposed that the Group should aim to pay back the \$2,000 loan within about three years. In order to do this and to pay rates, electricity and repairs, it was estimated that the Cottage would need to be occupied for about 30 weeks each year.

The number of weeks the Cottage has been rented has exceeded expectation and thus \$1,800 has been placed on fixed deposit, and, with interest, this now covers repayment of the loan.

The main maintenance expenses at the Cottage have been for repairs and replacement to the fridge and T.V. These two essential pieces of equipment have broken down when families are staying at the Cottage and time has not permitted trying to get a free replacement. However, we now have an extra black and white T.V. and have replaced the fridge with a less worn out one (we hope).

#### MAKING COTTAGE READY FOR NEXT FAMILY:

The caretaking and cleaning of the Cottage has been minimal as most families have left the cottage in a better state than when they arrive. Some families have made small improvements to the amenities. However, each time the Cottage is vacated and re-occupied does mean that a thorough inspection has to be made and some cleaning or small repairs attended to. So far no payment has been made for this.

Now that the loan has been repaid it is possible to afford a small payment for this responsibility. It is suggested that \$10.00 be the fee for any change-over check up and that an additional \$5.00 an hour be paid for extra cleaning maintenance. Voluntary helpers will continue to attend to major repairs and renovations.

#### VANDALISM NO PROBLEM:

It should be noted that when the Cottage Project was first mooted several experienced people warned that such schemes were doomed to failure as the premises would be vandalised. To date there has been no pilfering or damage to equipment and furnishing of the Cottage. The Cottage Project believes that the community involvement in the Cottage Project is one very forceful antidote to vandalism.

### SOME PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING ORGANISATION OF COTTAGE PROJECT:

It is to be hoped that the Cottage Project's experience can be of value to other groups concerned with special projects for accommodation for families and youth.

The following eight points may be helpful to such groups :

1. Initiation of the project by a group of people drawn from a wide cross section of the population (social welfare, residents, child care, unions and health workers).
2. Devolution of responsibility for various aspects of the project so that people had specific areas for which they were responsible.
3. Using various ways of informally informing the users of the Cottage that there was community support for the project and that there were people to act as neighbours if needed.
4. The provision of unobtrusive guardianship by people working or living close by; for example, the role played by the Milk Bar proprietor where the key is left and the people at the Miscellaneous Workers' Union office where the rent is paid, and occasional visits by a project committee member.
5. Information about the Cottage has been written in a style which attempts to be neighbourly, yet not over-bearingly so. The information indicates that there is a network of friends in the district near the cottage.
6. When families arrive at the Cottage they usually find that there is some attempt to personalise the welcome (even though it is not possible to have a person there). Sometimes this is by a personal letter of welcome, a vase of flowers, or appropriate toys being left in readiness.
7. The privacy of families must be given high regard and neighbourliness tempered with avoiding intrusion.
8. After the project has been opened it is more difficult to find ways of continuing the involvement of supporters, but even when there are no urgent practical tasks to be undertaken an occasional report on progress helps to keep interest alive.

### THE ROLE OF VOLUNTARY HELP :

The Cottage Project has been vitally dependent on voluntary help for its initiation and for its continuation. This report indicates that this involvement of unpaid people will continue.

However, while it has been possible for this prototype of a service to be the responsibility of voluntary helpers it is not expected that this enthusiasm can initiate and maintain the wide range of similar services which are urgently needed.

The Cottage Project Group helped the Community Consultation to work out some ideas on the role of Voluntary Helpers (Appendix 4 in the Report on Children's Services in the Melbourne Municipality").

This statement made the point that "Community involvement (through voluntary helpers) should enrich services, but should not reduce the need for adequate staffing (and funding for buildings and maintenance).

This is an important principle, particularly when the present cut back in finances for services are so often being justified by the rhetoric of the virtues of community involvement (voluntary help).

### INTRODUCING SOME PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN INVOLVED WITH THE COTTAGE:

Madge Wood is placed first in the list. Few people in the Project Group have met Madge, but she does all the hard work of typing. Madge has been working with the Food Preservers' Union since 1926. She has recently written the history of the Union - "The Way We Were - Replay". (A photostat of this is available from the Cottage Project Group).

Len Peacock and others at the Food Preservers' Union have been mainstays to the Project. Bob Scates (previously of the Miscellaneous Workers' Union) is the man who collected the rent for the Cottage. Gus Peloso, "the milk bar over the road" looks after the key and serves delicious snacks from early morning until eight in the evening.

John Wilson who is now a social worker at the Royal Children's represented the North Melbourne Neighbourhood Centre at the first meetings about the Project. He is a very natural link between North Melbourne and the Hospital. A number of other social workers at the R.C.H. and other hospitals have also been very helpful.

Also critically important to the Cottage Project are the following people . . . . Rob Oke, our Treasurer; Robert Taylor, our Bank Manager; Dora McLennan, our handy-woman; Jack Lewis, our honorary architect; and Ruth Must, our creative needlework woman (who has added so many homely touches to the Cottage) and many, many others.

Throughout the country districts there are people who have taken an interest in the Cottage Project; some are social workers at hospitals; others welfare workers in organisations such as Red Cross. Teachers at country schools and kindergartens have also drawn parents' attention to the Cottage Project.

Thus, although the Cottage is only a very small project, it does involve a wide range of people in a caring network as well as fulfilling its main role in providing accommodation for country families.

#### THE FUTURE OF THE COTTAGE PROJECT:

When the Cottage was offered to the North Melbourne Association it was for a period of "about three years". This period has now ended.

This report shows that the scheme is viable and that there are no foreseeable difficulties in keeping it going in the same style and at the same rent, with continued reliance on voluntary help.

As the Food Preservers' Union has no immediate plans for re-developing the site the Cottage Project should continue for some time into the future.

It is to be hoped that the example which is being set by the Cottage Project will result in more emphasis being placed on the need for adequate accommodation for country families when they have to visit the metropolis for services which cannot be provided in their home district; and that community involvement will be a feature of such schemes.

#### LINKING INTO THE NEIGHBOURHOOD:

In addition to meeting its main commitment of providing cheap, comfortable accommodation for country families, the Cottage Project has had other results. These are worth listing :

1. It has popularised the idea that residents in the inner suburbs need to recognise that these areas are host to city-wide and state-wide specialist services (for example, hospitals) and that these host functions strengthen the variety of inner suburban life.
2. It has shown how community groups in a neighbourhood can become concerned about issues affecting people in far distant places, and thus be an antidote to parochialism of some of the resident action movements.
3. It has provided opportunities for representatives of the large centralised institutions and organisations (the hospitals and unions) to meet with representatives from small local groups.
4. It has demonstrated the value of linking services into the local neighbourhood network, and at the same time how these networks are strengthened by such links.

#### REPORT LIST:

The Reports referred to are available in the North Melbourne Library in Errol Street."

1. Homeless Youth in North and West Melbourne: This Report is in a collection of reports on Community Facilities which were brought together by the North Melbourne Asscn. in 1980. The Association made this collection available to both the Melbourne City Council Community Planning Group and the Melbourne City Council Community Consultation . . . (copies of "Homeless Youth" can be purchased from the Cottage Project for \$1. 00)

2. Reports of the Melbourne City Council Community Consultation: There are six reports in all . . . 1. Report on Decentralisation and Participation in Services . . . 2. The North Melbourne Children's Services Report . . . 3. Children's Services for the Melbourne Municipality (report compiled for the whole M.C.C.); and three other neighbourhood reports . . . Flemington, Kensington and Carlton.

These reports are available for \$5. 00 each, plus \$1. 00 postage from the Cottage Project. Those working with children's services, particularly at the municipal level, may find the Report on children's services in the Melbourne Municipality useful. The neighbourhood reports include detailed information on each of the neighbourhoods and may be useful to those undertaking research projects.

3. Submission to the Victorian Government Royal Commission into Land Purchases: This is about the ten years campaign by the North Melbourne Asscn. on the Lothian Street (Happy Valley) Reclamation scheme. In 1970 the H.C.V. reclaimed three acres of land (including eleven shops) at the cost of \$672,000. This was sold to developers for \$425,000. Thus there was a subsidy of \$247,000. The submission included N.M.A. submissions used on deputation to the Minister of Housing, and newspaper cuttings. The flats are now luxury holiday apartments at rents of about \$180 a week.

4. A report not referred to, but which may interest some people is "Less Energy . . More to Enjoy in North and West Melbourne".

(A draft for community discussion) by the Community Energy Group of the North Melbourne Asscn. This report is available in the North Melbourne Library or can be purchased for \$5. 00 plus \$1. 00 postage. It is a valuable example of local plans worked out by community organisations.

The report emphasises the need to build up community facilities.

