

**Indigo Shire**

**Senior Citizens Clubs and Centres  
Future Directions Report**

**(Summary)**

**June 2021**

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## 1. Aim and objectives of Study

- The aim of the study is to review the current usage of the senior citizens centres to ensure equity of access to community spaces and innovative use of existing infrastructure (as per the Action 5.5 of the Indigo Ageing Well Strategy). The key objectives area of the study is:
  - Audit the governance and management arrangements of and the operational policies and processes of the senior citizens clubs and centres in Indigo Shire
  - Identify the role that the clubs and centres play in meeting the service and activity needs of Indigo’s community and the type and levels of use the centres receive
  - Identify the factors that prevent the centres from being optimally used
  - Identify the actions that could be taken to optimise the use of the centres and discuss the merits of these options, including an increased Council support of the U3A model.
  - Make final recommendations about the clubs and centres which will enhance their operation and optimise their use.

## 2. Key findings

### 2.1 Senior Citizens Centres/Clubs in Indigo

- There are five senior citizens clubs and centres in Indigo. The clubs have 271 members: down from 341 in 2016. The clubs range in size from 37 to 103 members.
- Membership numbers at the clubs, except Chiltern, have declined or fluctuated around the same number in recent years. Women make up the bulk of the membership’s numbers - estimated at 80%.
- Four senior citizens centres are located on Council land and one, Wahgunyah, is on Crown Land and is DEWLP owned. The facilities on Council land are all purpose built. Wahgunyah is located in a small hall which is an annexe off a larger arts facility.
- Rutherglen is the largest building - 500m<sup>2</sup> under the roof line. Wahgunyah is the smallest, 180m<sup>2</sup>. The purpose-built centres have similar component spaces, although they differ in size. Common spaces include foyers, consulting/rest rooms, lounge areas, storerooms, kitchens, halls/stage areas, male and female toilets and disability toilets.
- Some internal spaces in the facilities need updating but generally the centres are in good condition. From a functionality perspective, the centres have a number of positive attributes:
  - All centres have access to on-site and/or nearby on street carparking
  - All are disability accessible: ramps, unimpeded entrances, clear paths of travel to most parts of the buildings
  - All centres have multiple activity spaces: halls, recreation rooms, consulting rooms, meeting rooms
  - All centres have good sized kitchen areas which are directly connected to their main halls
  - The hall spaces at the centres are open, have good natural light and good visibility
  - All the centres have good sized amenities areas
  - All centres have effective heating and cooling systems.

- With the exception of Beechworth, the senior citizens clubs describe their facilities as being highly functional and suitable for their needs. Beechworth operates its centre like a community centre and would like to redesign the facility to allow concurrent use.
- Other than Beechworth, there are no occupancy agreements between Council and the clubs using the council buildings. They pay no rent and have no maintenance responsibilities. Wahgunyah pays rent to the DELP owned Wahgunyah School of the Arts for access to the hall annexe. Council reimburses the club for this cost.
- The Seniors Citizens Clubs are run by volunteer elected committees. Four are incorporated (Rutherglen is not incorporated). All allow external use of their centres. The external use of Yackandandah is coordinated by Council. External use of the other centres is managed by the clubs. Beechworth has appointed a booking officer to perform this function.
- The clubs are in strong financial positions. All operate with a small annual surplus and have monies in the bank – term deposits and cash. Some clubs are using their funds in the bank to make improvements to their centres (e.g., Beechworth) or subsidise/expand club activities (e.g., Chiltern). Others are retaining their funds to generate interest and protect against future declines in revenue (e.g., Wahgunyah).
- The centres are used for a range of Senior Citizens Club and other community groups activities. Of the purpose-built seniors, Beechworth is the busiest centre – used regularly by six groups for up to 50 hours per week. Rutherglen is the quietest. Three clubs offer the traditional activities of cards, games and bowls. Chiltern offer these activities and exercises groups. Beechworth is different and offers arts and craft groups and dancing.

## 2.2 Indigo U3A

- Indigo U3A started in 2010. It uses the Old Railway Building in Beechworth under a memorandum of understanding with Council which expires in September 2021. It has dedicated access to an office and storeroom at the building. It has shared access to an activity room, kitchen and amenities. It is allocated these spaces for set times each week. It pays \$680 in rental per annum. Given the recent decision of the lead tenant of the Old Railway Building, the Food Co-op, not to re-sign a lease with Council, the Building will now be open to an expression of interest. This leaves the future operational base of the Indigo U3A uncertain.
- The Indigo U3A program has 135 members. This figure is growing each year. The age range of members is 50-90 years; 75% live in Beechworth. The U3A offers a wide range of courses. The program uses the Old Railway Building weekday mornings, afternoons and sometimes evenings. The U3A is in a sound financial position. It operates in annual surplus and has around \$10,000 in the bank.
- Although known as the Indigo U3A, the program offers most of its activities from the Railway Building in Beechworth. Currently, it has little to no presence in the other townships in Indigo. However, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, discussions for quarterly presentations in Rutherglen were underway and the Yackandandah Community Centre is working to have regular U3A events, including adult computer literacy program under Be Connected.

## 2.3 Consultation findings

### *Senior Citizens Clubs*

- The main role of the senior citizens clubs is to provide opportunities for all older people to socialise, connect and make and maintain friendships in a safe and supportive environment.
- The clubs are facing a number of challenges/issues/concerns. These include:
  - Competition from a growing number of groups that provide activities for older people – U3A, Probus, friendship groups
  - Older people having less time to be involved in seniors' clubs: more men working into older age, more women in the workforce and also working into older age, more older people minding children.
  - Difficulties finding members to serve of club committees
  - A lack of understanding/knowledge in the community of the activities/supports the clubs have to offer
  - Perception in the general community that the clubs are not open to all older residents.
- Some clubs are content with the range of programs/activities they offer; they would just like more people to attend. Others have tried to introduce new activities (mainly outings) but there has been little interest. Two clubs, Chiltern and Beechworth, have introduced new activities - such as Tai Chi, Yoga and dance - and offered more subsidised outings. These have been popular. All the clubs want the community meals program to be reintroduced.
- The impact of COVID-19 on the clubs cannot be understated. The clubs did not meet at all during 2020 and many are struggling to get members to return due to ongoing fears about the virus.
- Some clubs are concerned about their future viability. Others are confident about their future. Actions that the clubs could consider to improve viability are:
  - Changing the name of the clubs from senior citizens to another description that makes the clubs sound more welcoming
  - Updating the appearance of the centres to make them more attractive and welcoming
  - Exploring community transport options
  - Looking for new program options
  - Better promoting and communicating the roles of the club and their activities to the general community.
- The clubs are satisfied with their facilities. They have some concerns about physical access – heavy front doors and lack of disabled carparking. Beechworth is the only club that mentioned major works. It wants to reconfigure and possibly extend its facility to provide more capacity and make it suitable for concurrent use. It also is keen on getting access to the adjacent Platelayers Cottage.
- The senior's clubs are trying to increase the use of their facilities. The three clubs that coordinate the external use of their facilities will allow any reasonable hire. They only charge a small fee and hire rules are not onerous.
- Council can best help the clubs by:

- Providing advice on program opportunities
- Helping to arrange activities
- Promoting the clubs
- In the case of Beechworth, helping with the preparation of plans for the redesign of the facilities and accessing funds for the redevelopment.

### *Indigo U3A*

- The U3A program wants to continue to grow its memberships and the range of activities it offers and ultimately expand its presence across Indigo Shire, i.e., offer classes from locations in multiple townships.
- While COVID-19 interrupted the functioning of the group, it embraced technology and offered many sessions on Zoom. This led to an increase in membership and allowed residents from other towns to attend virtually. It will continue to offer Zoom hybrid sessions even after COVID restrictions ease.
- The U3A wants access to its own dedicated facility. This facility would have an office/administration area, activity/classrooms, store, kitchen and amenities. This would be the program's main base. It would hire facilities in other locations.
- Council can assist the program by:
  - Promoting the activities of the U3A
  - Helping to find a suitable location/s for the U3A
  - Helping to explore collaboration opportunities with Beechworth Senior Citizens Club
  - Providing operational support
  - Advocating on behalf of the U3A to government
  - Keeping the U3A aware of grant opportunities.

### *Council*

- Historically, the state government provided Sector Support and Development funding, which in Indigo Shire equated to roughly \$35,000 annually. This funding is no longer provided to Councils to support the running costs of senior citizen facilities. All maintenance costs fall to Council to find the funds. The clubs, and in particular Beechworth and Chiltern, have demonstrated consistent maintenance contributions. In the past six years, Beechworth has contributed around \$60,000 to the improvement of the centre.
- There is a perception that the Seniors buildings are the property of the Seniors Clubs. They are Council buildings and should be available for broader community use.
- No formal occupancy arrangements exist at three senior citizens centres – Chiltern, Yackandandah and Rutherglen. Beechworth has an outdated agreement which commenced in 2008. Arrangements should be put in place. The arrangements do not need to be onerous. They could be in the form of a lease and specify the tenancy period (say 15 years), the lease fee (peppercorn) and the obligations of the clubs and Council.

- Measures are needed to make the clubs and centres more appealing to elderly residents. These measures may include changing the names of the centres and expanding the activities at the clubs to include more outings, classes etc.
- The U3A program has outgrown its current facility and needs access to more space. Facility options need to be explored. The seniors centre in Beechworth could be a suitable option.
- Council can best help the clubs by:
  - Continuing to provide access to the centres at no or little cost
  - Continuing to maintain the centres and meet cleaning and utility costs
  - Providing advice on legal, insurance and operational issues as they arise
  - Providing advice on program opportunities
  - Promoting the clubsIn return for this assistance, Council should require all clubs to expand their activities and encourage greater use of their facilities.

#### *Contemporary practice/case studies*

- The issues and challenges that the Indigo clubs are facing – falling memberships, decreasing use of Seniors buildings, problems with forming committees – are not peculiar to Indigo. These trends are occurring across Victoria and, like Indigo, many Councils are trying to find solutions.
- Unlike Indigo, Darebin Council coordinates the use of all its Seniors facilities. Council took on this function because the senior clubs were finding it hard to manage the external demand on their centres. Council management has resulted in the centres being optimally used. For example, 29 community clubs/groups use the Northcote SCC (a small purpose-built centre) on a weekly basis.
- Establishing formal relationships between seniors' clubs and groups, like U3A and Probus, can help to arrest and reverse the decline in membership numbers at senior citizens clubs. This has been the experience in Myrtleford, Mt Beauty, Ballarat and Numurkah. It has also led to the development of significant facilities such as the Ballarat North Community Centre and the Numurkah Seniors Hub, where the senior clubs are the lead tenants and U3A and Probus Groups also occupy the buildings.
- Like Indigo, Councils are appointing community development officers to work with their older citizens groups. One of the main tasks of the officers is to provide support to the senior's clubs and explore ways to rejuvenate the clubs and make optimal use of their centres

### **3. Recommendations**

That Council:

1. Welcome all - In collaboration with the Senior Citizens Clubs, rename the centres as general community buildings to both embrace older people and the general community.
2. A new look and feel - Update the appearance of the centres such as the signage, landscaping, entrance and internal and external appearance.

3. Programming and activities:
  - Support the clubs in promoting their activities and encourage broader community use.
  - Encourage clubs to use their existing funds to increase the number and range of activities on offer.
  - Research and finance a centralised on-line booking system and support its introduction into the clubs.
  - Encourage and support the Indigo U3A to engage with interested parties in Chiltern, Rutherglen, Tangambalanga and Wahgunyah to form their own branch of a U3A.
4. Future opportunities:
  - Prepare a facilities plan (including appearance, accessibility and more significant infrastructure needs) for all senior citizen centres, including the U3A.
  - When developing the plan for Beechworth, the precinct encompassing the Beechworth Senior Citizen Club. And Croquet Club, Gang Platelayers Cottage and the Old Railway Building should be considered for broader planning for community use as a consolidated hub.
5. Management modelling
  - Appoint the senior citizens clubs as managers of the renamed community centres and aid the clubs in undertaking this role.
  - Review the arrangement after 2-3 years and introduce a new management approach if required.
  - Enter into formal agreements with all Senior Citizens Clubs as a core requirement of Council.