

Resolution of Council

11 December 2023

Item 12.1

Reopening the Darlington Activity Centre for Use by the Community

Moved by Councillor Ellsmore, seconded by the Chair (the Lord Mayor) -

It is resolved that:

(A) Council note:

- (i) the Darlington Activity Centre, also variously known as the “Harry Burland Activity Centre”, the “Harry Burland Welfare Centre” and the “South Sydney Activity Centre”, is a Council-owned building at 132-134 Shepherd Street, Darlington;
- (ii) the site is bordered by Boundary Street, Ivy Street and Rose Lane, Darlington. It is surrounded by the University of Sydney, private terrace housing, a warehouse conversion, student housing, and public housing;
- (iii) the centre includes a large hall, several meeting or activity rooms, toilets, a commercial-size kitchen, outside seating, several separate small garden areas, and a number of large trees which are used by native wildlife;
- (iv) the centre was first built in 1960 by the former South Sydney Council. For most of its life it provided services for older people. In more recent years, the centre hosted council-run arts programs including pottery classes;
- (v) the Darlington Activity Centre has been closed since the Covid pandemic (2020 or so);
- (vi) Council staff have advised that at present there is no plan to re-open or activate the centre;
- (vii) local residents currently use the gardens and seating around the centre to meet, read, walk their pets, or for other forms of passive recreation; and

- (viii) while the centre has been locked and unused for several years, the building is in generally good condition, including the main hall. It is cleaned regularly by contracted cleaning staff, and some maintenance works are being undertaken;

(B) Council further note:

- (i) in September 2023, local residents who live near the centre began making inquiries about why the centre is closed. They were concerned about a lack of low cost or free spaces to hold art activities, and a lack of free, accessible spaces to meet and connect with neighbours;
- (ii) they launched a survey asking other local residents if they wanted to see the centre re-opened, and what sorts of activities they would like to see in the space. The survey was letterboxed in the streets around the centre and shared on local resident Facebook groups. English and Chinese language versions were provided to the Abercrombie Student Accommodation, Scape student accommodation opposite the centre, and the USyd Student Association;
- (iii) the survey is ongoing, and as of 1 December 2023, there were 90 survey responses, with respondents ranging in age from under 18 to 80 years;
- (iv) popular types of activities identified by residents responding to the survey were: art programs and workshops (46 responses); community choirs, creative performances and exhibition spaces (29 responses); yoga, Pilates, meditation or gentle exercise programs (47 responses); community groups including mothers groups, book clubs or a men's shed (31 responses); children and family programs (25 responses); community gardening (22 responses) and senior programs (17 responses);
- (v) a common theme across the survey responses was a desire to bring the local neighbourhood together. Consistent with other feedback received by Council about social isolation and loneliness in the city - students, parents with young or primary school aged children, and older people were three groups who identified a need for activities tailored for them;
- (vi) the survey shows that there is overwhelming support for the centre to be reactivated as a flexible community space which could host low impact activities for free and/or low cost, run by the community themselves, or with the support of Council;
- (vii) a public meeting of residents was held on Sunday, 26 November 2023, to report back the results of the survey so far, and get advice about next steps. Attendees at the meeting reaffirmed:
 - (a) that there is a lack of flexible spaces to hire by artists or performers, for rehearsal, exhibition or performance spaces, or to hold classes to help others create, for low or no cost;
 - (b) there is strong support for neighbourhood sharing and sustainable initiatives such as a men's shed, collective tool library and/or community pantry;
 - (c) the gardens are important green spaces to protect, but need some more love and attention through native plantings. There is also plenty of room to include a community garden; and

- (d) there is concern about why a Council space has remained closed for so long, and the lack of plans for the space to be reactivated; and
- (viii) comments made on the survey or at the public meeting included:
 - (a) “the Harry Burland Centre was so successful for many years. Provided meals and company for so many people. Sadly the older generation has now dwindled ... perhaps it could be used again for (children’s and adult’s) programs...”;
 - (a) “whatever happens with the centre, it should remain a publicly owned and operated space, not developed for commercial or residential purposes”;
 - (b) “this area houses ringtail, pigmy and brushtail possums so ... (keep the trees) ... (host) activities (for students) ... lots of students studying away from home are lonely ... Upkeep on the ground and replace seats so people passing by just sit and enjoy. I come here regularly with my animals but many people think they are not allowed especially international students”;
 - (c) “the performance we do is quite experimental, we don’t get large audiences. There are no spaces nearby where we can hire for free. Even charging a few hundred dollars is too much;”
- (C) Council:
 - (i) note the results of the survey by local residents, in support of the Darlington Activity Centre being reopened; and
 - (ii) commit to reactivate the Darlington Activity Centre for use by local residents; and
- (D) the Chief Executive Officer be requested to:
 - (i) provide advice to Council as to how the Darlington Activity Centre could be reopened as soon as possible, both as a staffed or unstaffed community space for hire by local residents;
 - (ii) organise an open day or tour of the Darlington Activity Centre for local residents, in early in 2024;
 - (iii) make Council staff available for residents to learn about what Council programs, grants and supports are available for community-led activities, including for community gardens; and
 - (iv) arrange for the furniture which has recently removed from the centre - and was being used by residents - to be replaced, and for repair of the other, damaged seating to be undertaken as a priority.

The motion, as varied by consent, was carried unanimously.

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