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Strong communities don't just happen

Springvale's story



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To this day, Springvale is a testament to how innovative thinking, positive attitudes and a warm welcome can build a strong cohesive vibrant community. (Springvale Neighbourhood House)

Introduction

On 30 March 2020, Victoria entered the first of many lockdowns in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Communities across the state retreated to their homes, into what would become an extended period of uncertainty.

As the pandemic wore on, we learned more about the virus. Strategies were put in place to mitigate its transmission, strengthen immunity and protect the vulnerable. Yet only much later would it become clear that the lockdowns were having other impacts. Some commentators have since argued that the pandemic exposed society's 'fault lines' (Talevski et al. 2021). In essence, times like these reveal something fundamental about a society or community.

This narrative examines what the pandemic revealed about Springvale, a suburb 22 kilometres to the south-east of the centre of Melbourne. It describes the challenges that emerged, those who spearheaded a response and how the community coped. In many respects Springvale was already a community under pressure and the pandemic could have pushed it to the brink.

Yet the stories that emerged tell of the community's resilience and cohesion, underpinned by an extraordinarily strong fabric of service provision and

interconnectedness that had been tirelessly woven in prior decades.

This narrative focuses on one suburb's story during a time of challenge in order to reflect on what makes a community strong. It offers wider lessons about how social cohesion can be fostered at a local level, and the institutions and organisations that can make it possible, even in one of the most diverse places in Australia.



Immigration: Australia's story... and Springvale's



Springvale's story is intrinsically tied to the people who have chosen to call it home. The waves of immigration that characterise Australia's demography today also characterise Springvale. To appreciate where Springvale was positioned when it entered the pandemic, we need to understand the patterns of immigration and settlement that have defined the area. To do so we will return to a time of great demographic transition – the end of World War II.

In the post-war period, Australia entered a time of demographic change. Concerned to bolster its defence capacity and economic prosperity, it initiated an immigration drive. Under the catch cry, 'Populate or Perish', the nation sought to bring in young and skilled workers to increase productivity and address workforce shortages. Statistics show the impact of this policy decision. In 1947, about 10 percent of Australia's population was born overseas, but by 1971 this proportion had almost doubled. With accelerated immigration since 2000, Australia's overseas-born population reached 28 percent in 2021.

In the initial years, the emphasis was on recruiting immigrants from the United Kingdom, with the 'Bring Out a Briton' campaign and heavily subsidised fares of passage that led to the arrival of the

'Ten Pound Poms.' For those displaced by Europe's war, Australia seemed like a paradise. Yet Britain's own population concerns and worker deficit meant that Australia was unable to recruit sufficient numbers of migrants to reach planning targets.

In the following years, the immigration intake shifted to other European countries, although the largest single group remained British. Agreements were secured with several European nations to encourage the migration, through subsidised passage costs of those who were expected to assimilate easily. As a result, substantial arrivals were from continental Europe, with the largest numbers from Italy, Greece, Holland, Germany and Yugoslavia. The result was a significant change in Australia's ethnic composition.

The gradual abolition of the White Australia Policy from 1966 preceded a third wave of migration, beginning with the entry of a large number of refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia. Today, the largest proportion of Australia's immigrants are from India and China. Of the top ten nations that provide permanent additions to Australia's population, seven are Asian countries.





Growth, opportunity, transformation

While immigration characterises Australia's growth, its impact is unevenly felt across the country. Variations in patterns of settlement mean that some areas attract greater numbers, while others, perhaps lacking the necessary settlement infrastructure, attract few. One of the regions most impacted by the country's demographic transition was the south-east of Melbourne, where rapid post-war development was in large part the product of immigration.

Immediately after the war, Springvale was located within the Shire of Dandenong. Prior to the 1950s, the area's population growth was fairly slow. It was a sleepy, semi-rural area, punctuated by market gardens and dairy and poultry farms. Residents were often situated on three-to-four-acre blocks. They tended horses and raised chickens or cows, while growing their own fruit and vegetables. Infrastructure was relatively underdeveloped. Houses lacked municipal sewerage, roads were generally unpaved and there were few footpaths. Perhaps with little to attract residents to the area, the local population only grew by a handful above 4,000 between 1933 and 1947.

In 1955 the Shire of Dandenong was subdivided into two smaller municipalities: Dandenong and Springvale-Noble Park. After a further adjustment of boundaries in 1961, the north-western area was renamed the City of Springvale.

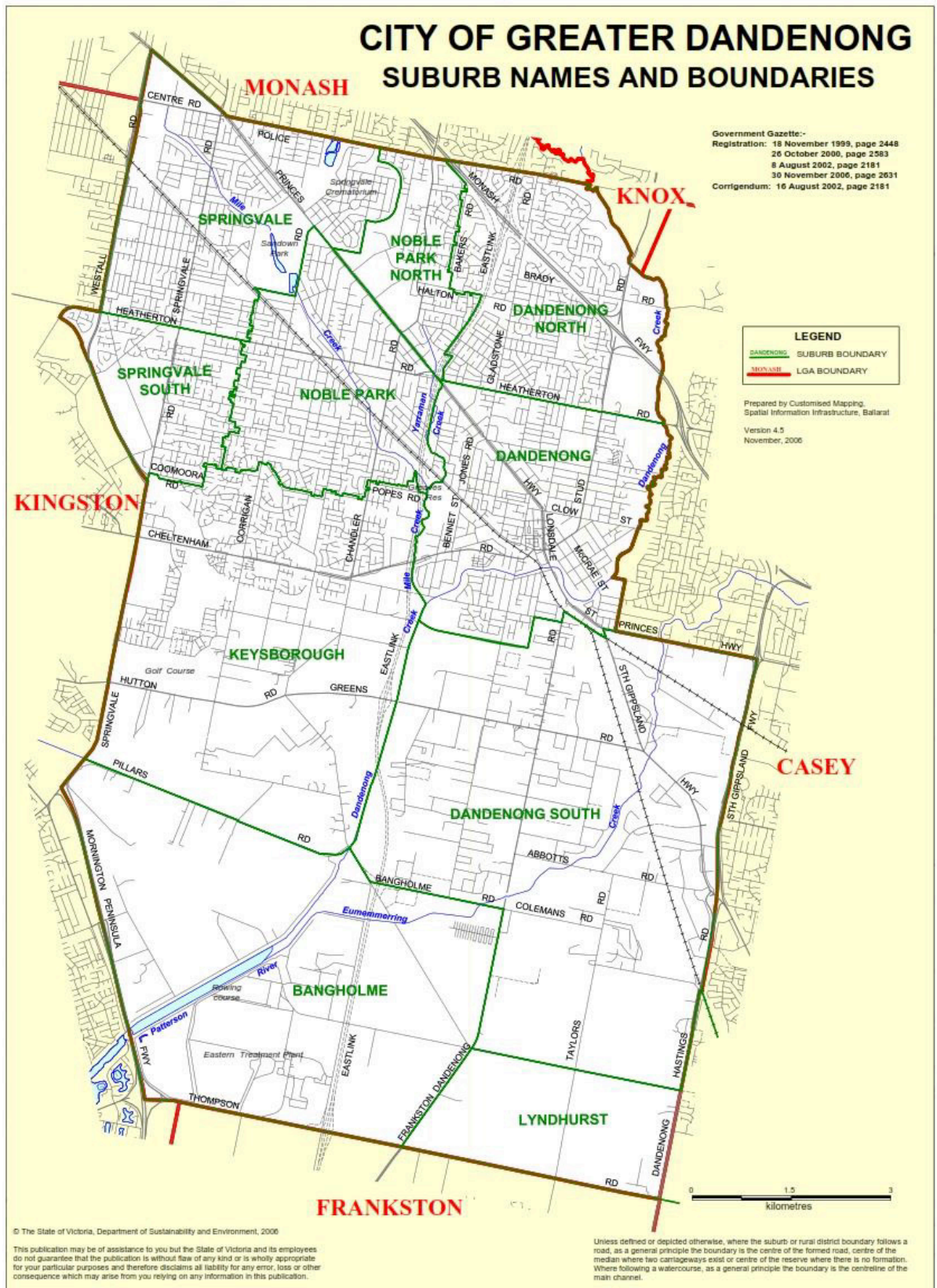
The changing of the municipal boundaries from a sizable local government area to the much smaller City of Springvale coincided with a significant acceleration in population. By the 1960s, the area's yearly growth rate had increased to almost the equivalent of its population growth between the years of 1933 and 1947. The population of the City of Springvale reached 28,526 residents in 1961; 77,817 in 1981; and 89,478 in 1991. Immigration flows across the country were reflected in

the municipality of Springvale. But it was not all smooth sailing. While migration had economic benefits, it was also changing the landscape of local areas. As one resident recalled:

It was in the late '50s and '60s that the Italians, Greeks and Yugoslavs started coming and settling in Springvale and there were more British, that was when the population really started developing, doubling in ten to fifteen years ... I didn't like what was happening, roads were being made and trees being cut down, the native heath and all the plants that we'd just taken for granted suddenly weren't there (Markus and Sims 1993: 23).

A further change to local governance took place in 1994, with the state government's decision to reduce the number of local government areas in Victoria through amalgamation. Melbourne's 53 municipalities were reduced to 26 and the City of Springvale became part of the City of Greater Dandenong (the largest local government area in the region), where it remains today, with the suburb of approximately 18,000 residents retaining the name Springvale.

Figure 1: Local Government Areas and suburbs



At present, the City of Greater Dandenong is the most culturally diverse community in Australia, with residents from 157 countries and 64 percent of its population born overseas. Of the eight suburbs that make up the City of Dandenong, Springvale has the largest proportion of overseas born residents (71%), although several neighbouring suburbs have similar demographics. Springvale South (with a population of 12,766), Noble Park (32,257), and to the south, the suburb of Keysborough (30,018), are all characterised by sizable Vietnamese and Cambodian populations.

Table 1: Overseas born within the City of Greater Dandenong (Local Government Area) by suburb, 2021

Suburbs with population >1,000	Population	Australia born, number	Australia born, percentage
Dandenong	30,127	9,315	31
Dandenong North	22,500	9,776	43
Keysborough	30,018	12,959	43
Lyndhurst	8,926	3,885	44
Noble Park	32,257	11,029	34
Noble Park North	7,436	3,298	44
Springvale	22,174	6,409	29
Springvale South	12,766	4,646	36
TOTAL	167,128	61,822	37

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census; Greater Dandenong, Statistics and data

While 29 percent of Springvale's residents were born in Australia, this figure masks the cultural background of those who were born here, most of whom are the children of immigrants. Taking into account records of the birthplace of parents and ancestry, just 7 percent of Springvale residents record their ancestry as Australian, while only 6 percent state that both parents were born in Australia.

Table 2: Selected birthplace groups in Springvale (suburb), 2021

Country of birth	2001	2011	2021	Proportion of total population, 2021
Australia	6,068	5,840	6,409	28.9
Vietnam	3,946	4,184	4,645	20.9
India	238	2,075	1,646	7.4
Cambodia	1,073	1,037	1,243	5.6
China	586	979	1,186	5.3
Malaysia	125	105	1,022	4.6
Sri Lanka	232	405	339	1.5
Philippines	164	227	324	1.5
Greece	497	395	323	1.5
Indonesia	53	102	255	1.1
Italy	473	330	216	1.0
United Kingdom/ England	281	196	99	0.4

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census, General Community Profile; Greater Dandenong, Statistics and data

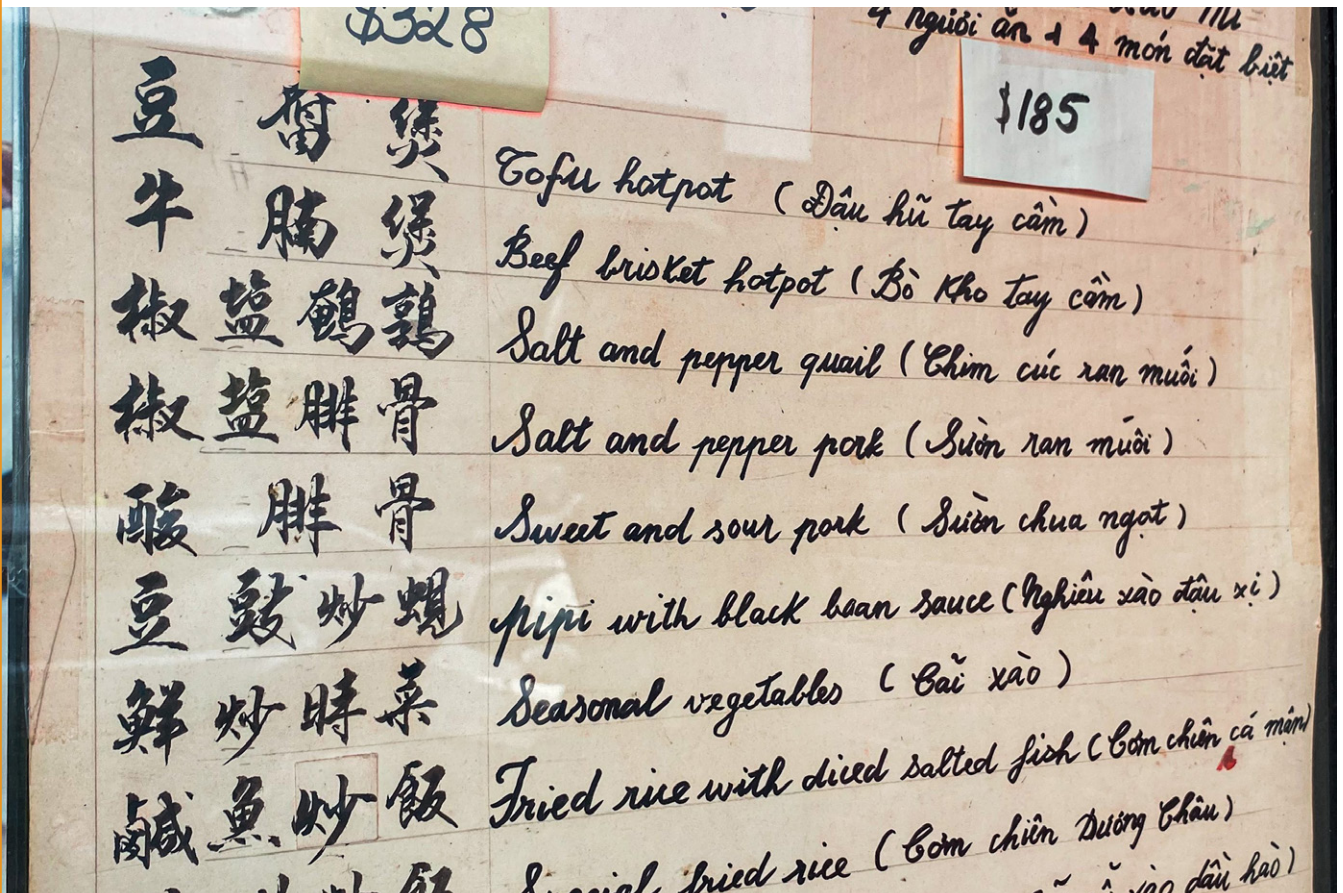
Spoken language tells a similar story. Only 19 percent of Springvale residents — just 4,167 of Springvale’s 22,174 residents — speak English in the home; a larger number (5,602) speak Vietnamese. Fifteen percent (3,238 residents) speak Cantonese or Mandarin, nine percent (1,953) speak an Indo-Aryan language (either Punjabi or Hindi), five percent (1,079) speak Khmer and seven percent (1,551) speak another Asian language. Even though in the post-war decades a large proportion of Springvale’s residents migrated from Europe, by 2021 only five percent (1,238 residents) spoke a European language, with the main language groups being Greek (488) or Italian (274).

A further indication of Springvale’s diversity today is the number of languages with a small number of speakers (fewer than 200). These include speakers of Arabic, Croatian, Filipino, French, German, Japanese, Macedonian, Nepalese, Persian, Polish, Samoan, Serbian, Tagalog, Tamil, Thai or Turkish.

Springvale’s population growth has slowed since its peak some decades ago. In 2011, Springvale had 19,772 residents, but in the 10 years following that number only increased by a few thousand. Even so, these figures mask the considerable population movement in and out of the suburb.

Springvale has also experienced considerable population movement. As a real estate agent commented in 1984:

When the Greeks and Italians moved in, a lot of Australians moved out. Now the Vietnamese are moving in and a lot of the Greeks and Italians are moving out: it is a cycle in this area; there is a high turnover (Bulletin, 9 October 1984).





A place of transition

A number of factors drew people to the southeast of Melbourne in the growth years following World War II but arguably the most significant in attracting settlement, one that would change the cultural landscape of Springvale forever, was the establishment of the Enterprise Hostel.

As migrants flocked to Australia seeking prosperity and a new life, the government directed settlement to particular areas with the aim of providing labour for the region. In 1970 the Enterprise Hostel was opened in Springvale on 17 acres close to the Westall industrial estate.

The Enterprise was the first new hostel built in Victoria under the federal government's hostels rebuilding program. It was designed to attract immigrants, at a time of increased competition from many countries for European migrant labour, by providing subsidised accommodation and access to other services. The complex comprised 250 family units, with accommodation for about 1,000 people. Migrants could stay at the facility for up to a year while they settled into their new life, with board and lodgings provided at a reasonable cost.

There was plenty of work, both in the surrounding market gardens and timber yard and in the burgeoning industrial areas of Springvale and Clayton. A car assembly plant established by Volkswagen in the Westall Industrial Zone in 1954 was later expanded into manufacturing and acquired in 1968 by the Japanese company Nissan, employing many migrant workers. The train line provided further options for workers, linking Springvale and Westall to the Dandenong industrial area, where employment could be at Kelly and Lewis, Rocla, General Motors, and other factories.

The Enterprise operated for more than two decades (apart from a three-year break in the 1980s), providing a first home for more than 30,000 migrants and refugees who would settle permanently in Australia. By the time it closed in 1992, individuals from 58 different countries had passed through its doors. The first arrivals at the Enterprise were mainly migrants from Britain and continental Europe, but after 1975 it became predominantly a place of first settlement for refugees. As Hibbins notes in a 1984 history of Springvale, the main nationalities were often determined by events far away:



A great range of nationalities has passed through the hostel ...[The] dominant nationality has tended to change from year to year in reflection of political upheavals elsewhere. In 1971 the Yugoslavs were the largest group, in 1972 the French from Algiers, in 1973 the Turkish, in 1974 ... from Chile, Uruguay and Argentina, and in 1975 the Timorese ... in 1977 the first Vietnamese refugees ... since then from Cambodia and Laos (Hibbins 1984: 223).

Europeans, East Timorese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Serbian, Bosnian and Croatians all called the Enterprise home — for a while. An estimated three-quarters of the population left the hostel to establish lives in Springvale or adjacent suburbs, choosing familiar surrounds to put down their roots. As each cohort moved out, the cultural demography of the surrounding areas, most notably Springvale, changed.

In the years since the Enterprise Hostel closed, Springvale has welcomed other national groups seeking a place of safety in Australia: Afghanis, Hazara, Iraqis, Sudanese, Burmese and most recently, the Rohingya. For many, Springvale provides something familiar. Tropical fruit, traditional spices, halal meat, an abundance of fresh produce laid out on market stalls, the press of people going about their daily business in the retail quarter, chaotic parking and signs in familiar scripts all feel like home. More than that, Springvale feels like a place where you can fit in because pretty much everyone has come from somewhere else.

From new beginnings to a rocky start

But the heady days of opportunity in Springvale and its surrounds were never guaranteed to last. While blue-collar work was plentiful until the 1980s, Australia's movement away from manufacturing had a huge impact on its migrant workforce. As industrial employment declined, those who were less proficient in English struggled to move into other sectors, experiencing long-term unemployment as a result. In Springvale, many blue-collar workers, predominantly of non-English speaking background, lost their jobs. The Census documents the dramatic decline in the manufacturing sector: the number of Springvale residents employed in manufacturing almost halved between 2001 and 2016 (from 2,133 to 1,307), with only a slight increase by 2021.

This legacy continues today. Springvale has persistently high levels of long-term unemployment, much higher than the average for Melbourne. In 2001, Springvale's unemployment rate was 16.2 percent, compared with 6.6 percent in Melbourne. Things improved slightly between 2011 and 2016 but still, unemployment was 5 percent higher in this period in Springvale, close to double the Melbourne average.

Table 3: Unemployment, Springvale and Greater Melbourne, 2001-2016, percentage

	Springvale	Australia born, number
2001	16.2	6.6
2006	12.1	5.3
2011	10.5	5.5
2016	11.7	6.8

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, QuickStats

Unemployment statistics provide only a partial indication of the difficulties faced by those seeking employment. Other factors, including the workforce participation rate and the extent of part-time employment, must also be considered. Compared with other places, Springvale has a relatively low percentage of its population in the labour force. In 2021, just over half of its workforce (53.9 %) was employed, compared with Greater Melbourne's participation rate of 64.1 %. It also has a lower proportion of full-time workers: 51.1 percent compared with 56.9 percent (Greater Melbourne).

The industries where growth has occurred in Springvale include health care and social assistance (reflecting the increasing needs of Australia's ageing population), food services and accommodation, and the transport, postal and warehousing sectors. Another big employer — retail trade — has provided relatively stable employment in Springvale.

Table 4: Main industry of employment, Springvale residents, 2001-2021

	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021
Manufacturing	2,133	1,896	1,845	1,307	1,401
Retail trade	798	698	770	903	919
Accommodation and food services	213	398	671	796	861
Health Care and Social Assistance	300	408	602	742	1,014
Transport, Postal and Warehousing	193	313	512	473	545
Construction	229	267	323	396	633
Total six industries	3,866	3,980	4,723	4,617	5,373
Total population	18,093	18,431	19,772	21,771	22,248

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Springvale General Community Profile, 2001; Springvale Time Series Profile, 2011, 2016, 2021

Across these six industries the number of jobs increased by nearly 40 percent in Springvale between 2001 and 2021, but this growth reflects employment in relatively poorly paid, unskilled or semi-skilled occupations. The trend has been toward service-oriented industries rather than highly skilled and therefore more lucrative employment.

Many of Springvale's residents do not hold a post-school qualification: 35 percent of residents indicate their highest level of schooling as Year 12 or lower. This proportion is much higher than in Greater Melbourne (23%). Moreover, seven percent of residents have never attended school, compared with 1 percent in Greater Melbourne.

Better-paid service industry jobs, which have grown in number since the 1990s, require English proficiency and analytical skills, areas where Springvale falls behind because of its population composition. The many migrant and refugee households have lower education levels than the general population, with many refugees having spent years in camps without access to education.

Others come from subsistence cultures or have not yet completed required levels of English language training. In some communities, many have been out of work for long periods, suffer from disabilities or are recovering from trauma.

Other individuals have been unable to obtain recognition of their overseas qualifications or cannot afford the further study necessary to have their qualifications recognised in Australia.

Table 5: Selected demographic indicators, Springvale and Greater Melbourne, 2021, percentage

	2021 Springvale	2021 Greater Melbourne
Level of highest educational attainment		
Bachelor Degree or above	22.2	32.8
Diploma	7.8	9.9
Certificate III or IV	7.7	12.4
Year 12	22.2	15.8
Year 9 or below	12.3	7.2
Participation in the labour force		
In the labour force	53.9	64.1
Employment status		
Worked full-time	51.1	56.9
Worked part-time	33.8	31.6
Unemployed	8.1	5.3
Occupation		
Labourers	20.0	7.8
Professionals	15.7	26.8
Machine Operators and Drivers	11.9	5.8
Clerical and Administrative Workers	8.7	12.9
Median weekly income		
Personal	\$558	\$841
Family	\$1,470	\$2,243

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, QuickStats

Educational disadvantage is a big contributor to the relatively high number of individuals employed in manual or low skilled jobs rather than professional work.

With significant barriers to better employment, it is unsurprising that Springvale’s socio-economic profile differs substantially from that of Melbourne. The Australian Bureau of Statistics Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage provides a summary indicator of economic disadvantage by examining income, educational attainment, level of unemployment, occupations, housing and access to services, among other indicators. The measure categorises suburbs across Australia and within states from the least to the most disadvantaged.

Springvale and the neighbouring suburbs of Springvale South and Noble Park are ranked in the lowest deciles — meaning the relatively most disadvantaged — in Victoria. Percentiles provide an even more precise gauge of disadvantage, and here Springvale ranks at two percent, meaning that in economic terms, nearly 98 percent of localities are ranked more highly. Springvale South is ranked at one percent.

A specific indicator of relative disadvantage is weekly income. Between 2006 and 2016, the typical weekly income in Springvale was only 60 percent of the average for Greater Melbourne: in 2016, \$409 per week compared to \$673 for other Melburnians. In 2021 it was marginally higher, at 66 percent. However, Springvale has an extensive cash economy, so it is likely that income is higher due to under-reporting.

Table 6: Weekly personal income, Springvale and Greater Melbourne, 2006-2021

	Springvale, (as proportion of Greater Melbourne)	Greater Melbourne
2006	\$291 (60%)	\$481
2011	\$352 (60%)	\$591
2016	\$409 (61%)	\$673
2021	\$558 (66%)	\$841

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, QuickStats

As these figures show, life in Springvale is challenging for many. Expectations of coming to Australia and establishing a new life through education, employment and opportunity are often dampened by the reality of learning a new language to sufficient proficiency for meaningful participation in work or study, the cost of education for those who are not Australian citizens and barriers to employment, including non-recognition of previous experience or discrimination.

The socio-economic profile of Springvale shows its precarious position. The extraordinary diversity of its residents only adds another layer of complexity.



The melting pot

Given its rich migration history, Australia has always had to grapple with how to create a unified national identity among a population that has, increasingly, come from elsewhere. From the time of Federation in 1901 until the 1970s, the notion that cohesion could come only from racial unity was largely unchallenged. For many, racial or cultural diversity meant tension or even conflict, as evidenced by the race riots in the post-war decades in the United States, South Africa and England, to which Australia had largely been immune. Some years later such fears were famously given voice by Pauline Hanson, founder of the One Nation Party, in her first House of Representatives speech in 1996:

I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians. Between 1984 and 1995, 40 per cent of all migrants coming into this country were of Asian origin. They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate.

Of course, I will be called racist but if I can invite whom I want into my home, then I should have the right to have a say in who comes into my country. A truly multicultural country can never be strong or united. The world is full of failed and tragic examples, ranging from Ireland to Bosnia to Africa and, closer to home, Papua New Guinea. America and Great Britain are currently paying the price (Parliament of Australia, Hansard, 10 September 1996, p. 3859).

In the 1980s multicultural Springvale, one of the first areas of substantial Asian settlement since Federation, began to be viewed somewhat uneasily. Many believed it could become a focal point for racial tension and discord.

Around this time the media began to take a particular interest in Springvale. In 1984 a Bulletin magazine feature article reported the views of local residents, finding “a litany of mixed irritations” about its multicultural residents, including claims that “they are taking over,” resentment at lack of knowledge of English, complaints that “they’re not into cleanliness” and outrage at their supposed arrogance and practice of bartering with shopkeepers. A resident’s comments in 1990 tell a similar story of tension between segments of the community:

... Springvale is perceived as a ghetto by some people who live here. The people I see with the most racist attitudes are the ones who want to stay, either because their business is here or their profession or their friends or they don’t know where else to go. They think they’re being besieged or their properties are being devalued or whatever else, they’re usually [the older generation] ... When you talk to them, they are quite bitter. They feel that their shopkeepers have been driven out ... they don’t have any argument other than, “You don’t know what it’s like” (Markus and Sims 1993: 31).

Discord appears to have been fuelled by cultural misunderstanding and misinformation, such as the belief that refugees received government handouts that were not available to others, or that many people were not genuine refugees. Others simply thought there were too many immigrants.

For local and tabloid media, these tensions provided fodder for their readership. Concerns and negative perceptions were amplified through articles in the local Dandenong newspaper and the Herald Sun (Sharam and Stone 2017: 15-16). While some of the articles were positive, such as “Asians Integrate” (Herald Sun, 28 October 1997), “Latest Arrivals Spread Out” (Herald Sun, 23 March 1998), “They’re Aussies One and All – A melting pot of people from all parts of the world, Melbourne is a truly great city” (Herald Sun, 27 September 1997), the negative coverage was much more substantial. A smattering of headlines

published in the Herald Sun between 1997 and 1998 illustrate how the public narrative about Springvale was to be framed:

- Migrant Ghetto Concern
- Migrant Mix Not Right
- Racial Strife Warning
- Fear High in Ethnic Enclaves
- Riots Could Erupt Here
- Five Stabbed in Brutal Brawl
- Women Sent to Brothels
- Bandit Warning
- Syringe Used in Robbery

It would take years for the suburb to overcome these negative portrayals.





Chasing the dragon

Adding to the tarnishing of Springvale's reputation was the growing availability of heroin on its streets. In the late 1980s and early 1990s the way illicit drugs were sold in Melbourne changed. While venues, including some pubs in inner suburbs, provided easy access to heroin and amphetamines in the 1980s, changes to distribution saw the emergence of new places to score in the 1990s — street markets. Unlike the somewhat underground practices that had occurred in billiard halls and entertainment venues across the city, street-based markets were open, easily accessible, highly visible and mobile, able to re-deploy easily in response to police activity (Dietze et al. 2004: 7). Springvale was not the only suburb in Melbourne to suffer this scourge, but it was one of the highest profile.

While organised crime brought the drugs into the suburb, it was the local kids who did the distribution. The cartels were clever. They sought out the young and vulnerable, who were struggling to integrate or failing at school (interview 1.8), or who had fallen through the cracks in settlement services. Cheap drugs were offered in exchange for working Springvale's streets.

By 1990s, Springvale's drug trade was described as "out of control":

The local supermarket regularly had fifteen to twenty young drug dealers in its driveway selling heroin to passing motorists and the police were powerless to combat it due to limited resources. Not only did it pervade the local community, it was a hub for customers looking for cheap, good-quality heroin from across Melbourne (Sherman and Valenta 2015: 103).

Local media amplified these stories, while national newspapers were quick to seize on just how young the perpetrators were:

1997 – Drug Blitz ... More than 50 young people, including drug dealers as young as 13, have been arrested ... Another 31 have been charged with using prohibited drugs while two have been charged with 17 armed robberies in the operation, centred on the heroin hotspots of Dandenong and Springvale. ... Thirty-four of the 52 dealers arrested were 18 or younger... In Springvale 31 have been arrested ... Chief Inspector McKoy said it was clear heroin addicts entered Dandenong and Springvale to buy drugs, then committed violent and property crimes to fund their purchases (Herald Sun, 23 October 1997).

The drug trade took many lives and damaged many more in those years in Springvale, then known as 'Heroin City.' The Vietnamese community, in particular, suffered significant reputational damage as it was often held responsible for the heroin supply (Sharam and Stone 2017: 4).

With the street market drug trade came high levels of crime, public disorder and drug use. No longer a place of safe haven for many of Melbourne's new arrivals, Springvale became known as a centre for criminal activity. The suburb's rates of serious crimes reached relatively high levels, with rates of crimes against the person and property, deception rates and drug offences well over state figures (Sharam and Stone 2017: 15).

The number of armed robberies, stabbings and violent confrontations surged. Anybody withdrawing cash from an ATM in the shopping centre was at risk of robbery. Shoppers and ordinary citizens going about their daily activities feared for their safety, which deterred visitors to the area and only exacerbated Springvale's tenuous economic circumstances.

Efforts to combat drug distribution led the Greater Dandenong Council to form the Springvale Drug Action Committee, while local business owners, struggling to retain customers, formed the Springvale Traders Association to campaign for safer streets through more aggressive policing. Visible policing was one important strategy adopted to curb the drug trade and its effects on the retail centre and community. Between 1998 and 2002 police drives led to arrests and the imposition of heavy penalties. Each year between 1997 and 2000, an average of 350 drug dealers were charged with trafficking heroin in the Springvale area — almost 10 percent of the total number of arrests for this crime across Australia. In 1999 a record number of 2,500 suspects were processed at the Springvale Police Complex (Sherman and Valenta 2015: 102-103).

It was clear, however, that policing alone was not going to clean up Springvale's streets. In 1997 a needle exchange was trialled in the retail precinct as a harm reduction strategy, despite significant community opposition. Health workers handed out free needles to heroin users on the street and bins were installed for disposal of used needles.

The Council also hired two workers to collect used needles in an effort to clean up the alleyways and car parks littered with syringes and blood-covered antiseptic swabs (Herald Sun, 11 September 1997). In 1998 Victorian Health and Aged Care Minister Rob Knowles outlined a new plan focusing on awareness, prevention, early intervention and support services for people identified in the local community who were at risk of drug taking. Key to this plan was engaging the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and other communities, with initiatives put in place to educate parents and grandparents on how to respond to drug use in their families and community (1.8).

Over time, these efforts were largely successful in reducing crime in Springvale, and with the lessening of drug use on the streets retail trade revived. However, Springvale's reputation was slower to recover, as were the reputations of its largest cultural communities. Stigmatisation in the broader community persisted long after the drug problem was brought under control, requiring its own targeted response:

Senior Sergeant Stokes will join other community representatives next week at a special Myths Busted [meeting] hosted by the Springvale Drug Action Community Forum Sen Sgt Stokes will tell residents how Springvale has improved since its 'Heroin City' days to become a 'safe market town'. He said all that remained was a bad reputation that could take years for people to forget. "Six or seven years ago there were headlines in the daily papers calling Springvale 'Heroin City', with a picture of a young woman openly injecting while sitting in a car," Sen Sgt Stokes said. "There was quite blatant drug dealing occurring on Springvale Road, up and down the shopping centre precinct, and it was occurring on a daily basis" Sen Sgt Stokes said a survey of 40 central Springvale traders conducted in November 2005 showed 70 per cent felt Springvale was safer, and 83 per cent believed the drug situation had reduced dramatically (Star Journal, 'Heroin City "no longer relevant"', 30 April 2008).

Social infrastructure: laying the foundations for strength



Yet Springvale's troubled past is only one element of its story. At the same time the suburb was encountering these very significant challenges, it was creating a social fabric that would provide a firm foundation to respond to another difficult period: the pandemic.

Sociological literature refers to this 'fabric' as social capital, evident when people work together to solve problems or form organisations. There are two main types of social capital: bonding social capital, which describes social connections within groups that have shared characteristics, and bridging social capital, which describes connections across social cleavages such as class, religion, ethnicity and race.

Springvale's strength — its social capital — has developed through the efforts of individuals, organisations and institutions that have invested in community building over many decades.

Those deeply involved in this process have sought not only to strengthen groups but to establish 'bridges' between groups and organisations. Springvale has become an exemplar in responding to change through activist organisations that have not only provided aid but sought social change and acceptance of cultural diversity, through migrant community leaders who have linked cultural organisations to local government, and through the Greater Dandenong Council's shift to become an important provider of human services. In the words of Merle Mitchell, a Springvale resident who would become pivotal to contributing to this social fabric, "strong communities don't just happen. They have to be worked at" (Star Journal, "There'll never be another Merle," 24 September 2021).

To understand where these efforts started, we need to return to the post World War II period.



The emergence of social service provision in Springvale

In 1950s and '60s Melbourne, local communities had few social support services available. Church-based charities such as the Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul and the Brotherhood of St. Laurence played a key role in assisting individuals facing poverty, housing challenges or other difficulties. The Springvale Benevolent Society was established around this time, an initiative of the City of Springvale's mayor, William Lees. Local churches were invited to send representatives to form a society that would provide emergency relief to families in crisis. However, few, if any, organisations specifically catered for the needs of new Australians.

One exception was the Good Neighbour Council, established in 1950 by the federal government. Local branches were run by volunteers who welcomed new arrivals and worked with churches and local service organisations to provide settlement advice. The councils were expected to promote the benefits of the immigration program in the community and help host naturalisation ceremonies. However, critics pointed out that the councils were almost exclusively English-speaking, worked mainly with English-speaking migrants and adopted an assimilationist approach to settlement and integration.

Jan Trezise, who would become the City of Springvale's first female mayor in 1983, was the Good Neighbour Council local coordinator. She was the suburb's 'link' person, providing a connection between local volunteers and new arrivals to the area, based on their family composition or interests:

I looked at what age they were, how many kids they had, what their interests were, and tried to match them up with a family in the hostel who was looking for a link in the community. Then I would contact both groups and see if we could arrange a mutual meeting (Markus and Sims 1993: 26).



Beyond a small home help service, local government provided no human services. With growing community needs in Springvale, women rose to the challenge, becoming outstanding community leaders who would transform social services. One was Merle Mitchell.

Born in 1934 in Dandenong, Merle moved to the area of Sandown Park, east of the centre of Springvale, with her husband in 1961. Noticing the lack of services in the area, she quickly became an advocate for several initiatives, including increased kindergarten facilities and the establishment of Sandown Park Primary School (later Springvale Rise).

Merle later recalled that in the 1960s, a group of people had come together in Springvale to try to persuade the Council to extend its areas of responsibility beyond the three 'Rs' — roads, rates and rubbish. At that time little attention was paid to the needs of immigrants, despite the rapidly increasing proportion of Springvale residents born overseas. The group had some success. In 1970, the City of Springvale employed Diane Bell as the first human services officer before Jenny Slade, a qualified social worker, was appointed the following year. A dynamic leader, Slade would go on to serve for 18 years as Springvale's Community Services Manager, influential in persuading the Council to expand its role.

Despite her short time in the position, Dianne Bell was important to the development of social services in Springvale. She saw that one person could not possibly oversee the 15,000 households in the municipality. Working with a local group, she convened a public meeting, where it was decided to administer a survey that would help identify community needs and those who might be willing to help. The data gathering was a huge undertaking, involving many volunteers doorknocking one house at a time. The effort was worth it. Future initiatives in the area would go on to be firmly community (not bureaucratically) based.

Eight of the nine questions in the survey were connected to volunteering: were people willing to help and if so, in what areas. The last question asked: "Are there any particular facilities or services you would like to see developed in your community?" The nature of the services envisaged was evident from the questions: child care (minding children temporarily or after school); driving invalid or elderly people to hospital,

taking them on outings or delivering meals; visiting sick or isolated people; occasional help for people in their homes; budgeting and other financial advice; hosting a migrant family from the Enterprise hostel or acting as an interpreter. More than 400 of the completed surveys contained offers of assistance (Sims 1993: 2-8). An immediate outcome of the survey was the establishment of the Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau, a place to focus volunteer efforts, provide practical assistance and advocate for social change. Merle Mitchell, a member of the planning committee, was appointed to be its first director. Merle went on to play a key role in developing welfare services at the state and national levels as President of the Victorian Council of Social Service (1984-87) and the Australian Council of Social Service (1989-1993). She was described as a "lifelong advocate for equality, community and diversity" and as "heroine of the battlers" (Faine 2021). In 1991, Merle was appointed a Member for the Order of Australia (ACOSS, Merle Mitchell).





Springvale Community Aid and Advice Bureau (SCAAB)

The SCAAB was launched in May 1971 with nine female volunteers trained by the Department of Social Welfare. It operated out of a Council-owned weatherboard house at 5 Osborne Avenue, close to the shopping centre, sharing space with the Red Cross and the Springvale Regional Library. Each week Jenny Slade gave training to volunteers in interviewing techniques and referral practices. Weekly seminars were held to review activities and to promote common responses to community problems. A key focus at the outset was providing assistance to residents of the Enterprise Hostel, whose presence was shaping the distinctive character of Springvale.

Unlike other Citizens Advice Bureaus at the time, the organisation would not only provide information and practical assistance, but would advocate for social change:

From the outset, at a time when few were interested in doing so, the Bureau was committed to reaching out to all groups in the community and providing all its services in the language of the client's choice, not the choice of the service provider ... SCAAB's work with newly arrived people, ensuring that they are in receipt of their entitlements and have access to information and support, is one of its core activities. This work has contributed substantially to the successful settlement of tens of thousands of refugee

and migrant people, which in turn has had a substantial and positive impact on community cohesion (SCAAB, 'How it all began').

The SCAAB's commitment to equipping and empowering its migrant community members reflected broader support for multiculturalism, echoed by Jenny Briggs, a Springvale-based social welfare officer funded by the Immigration Department, in the 1973 report of her activities:

It is totally unrealistic to view our society as homogeneous and our culture as being unequivocally Anglo-Saxon in orientation ... Realising that the various ethnic groups in Australia continue to retain their traditional values and ways of life in varying degrees, it is evident that in fact Australia is a multicultural society. Thus, the basic philosophical concept was evolved that in any one community each individual has the right to retain his own cultural identity and to become a respected member of that community ... Further, each individual has the right, in times of need, to assistance, which is based on understanding and acceptance of his general value system (Chauvel and Petyanszki 1986: 27).



The first service provided by the SCAAB was the Migrant Hosting Program, which ran in parallel to the services provided by the Good Neighbour Council. Through this program volunteers would visit newly arrived families and offer information and practical support such as transportation for hospital visits, childcare, and interpreting.

Another early initiative was establishing contact with Italian men in the community. A volunteer would visit local coffee shops, providing information and answering questions with the assistance of an interpreter. Further services included an ethnic teachers' aide and Meals-on-Wheels, all run by volunteers. In the 1970s, the SCAAB played a leading role in the establishment of a local network of emergency relief agencies.

In the 1970s and '80s, government and philanthropic funding enabled the SCAAB to expand its work and hire a social worker and administrative assistant for short-term appointments. Increased funding following the election of the Whitlam government in 1972 allowed the office to employ a volunteer co-ordinator and its first housing worker.

Recognition of language and cultural barriers in Springvale took time but in the 1980s, efforts were made towards providing information in languages other than English, covering workers', tenants' and consumer rights, and how to access government services.

Through the Council's newly developed Access and Equity policy, multi-lingual resource kits were made available for use in schools and libraries.



New connections: the SCAAB and local government

A 1980 survey conducted for the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs ('Survey into the information needs of migrants in Australia') revealed the concerning finding that only two percent of those who used local government services were immigrants. This finding provided support for a growing partnership between the SCAAB and the Council in the development of local services, a relationship that would be central to the development of social services in the municipality:

The SCAAB and Council worked together, with the Council providing financial support and facilities. From this emerged a division of labour, with the Council concentrating its efforts on the Australian-born and British and Irish settlers while the SCAAB worked with the residents of non-English-speaking background, particularly those recently arrived. This development was facilitated by the presence of a few councillors prepared to promote welfare initiatives. These councillors, together with the Council social worker and the SCAAB Director, have formed a personal rather than institutional network, which has been to a great extent responsible for the ... range of health and welfare provision in the municipality (Chauvel and Petyanszki 1986: 10).

As migrant communities gained government funding for part-time social workers, the migrant organisations were encouraged to locate their staff on the SCAAB premises. Although it was at times crowded, the SCAAB provided a central location for the training and resourcing of staff working with Springvale's cultural communities, not to mention a place where individuals could network, overcoming the problem of isolation among lone workers. Key positions based at office included:

1973 – An Italian worker, one day a week

(in 1976 an Italian women's group was formed)

1977-79 – Greek, Turkish and Spanish part-time welfare workers

1978 – a Timorese worker; play groups for Greek and Yugoslav children established

1980 – Telephone Interpreter Service staff (based at the SCAAB two days a week)

1981 – A Vietnamese social work student, with later funding for a social worker to work with Indo-Chinese youth who had arrived without families

1986 – Funding for a Vietnamese worker and a Laotian women's worker; and community information service for the Ethiopian community.

By 1981 all major Springvale language groups were represented at the SCAAB, either by volunteers, paid-staff, bi-lingual workers or interpreters.

The SCAAB educated Springvale's local community to recognise the needs of its culturally diverse population and encouraged groups to organise to serve their own communities. It strove, not always with success, to ensure that the new services were appropriate to meet the needs of specific communities, as well as to support local government to develop co-ordinated services.

The SCAAB was also instrumental in providing administrative and financial support to several migrant organisations that emerged in this period, including the Springvale Indo-Chinese Mutual Assistance Association (SICMAA), the only organisation in Victoria to cater for the needs of all ethnic groups from Indo-China.



Further service provision, growing interconnectedness

Knowing that the localisation of support services would best meet people's needs, staff members from the SCAAB went on to serve on the planning committees that established further service providers in Springvale, including the Springvale Monash Legal Service, Springvale Neighbourhood House, the Family Conciliation Centre (subsequently named the Family Mediation Centre) and the Springvale Community Health Centre.

As each new service was developed, so was the infrastructure to connect service providers. As Chauvel and Petyanszki write in their 1986 study of community relations and service provision in Springvale, the Council and the SCAAB developed a service provision network that featured a system of interlocking membership of committees of management, together with more informal liaison arrangements with each other and with professionals in other agencies.

In the 1980s, the SCAAB's reputation for service provision won it national prominence:

The SCAAB, and the associated Springvale Legal Service, have acquired a high profile and progressive reputation in welfare and legal aid fields. The ability to involve the Monash University Law School and to attract state and federal grants has reflected well on the Council and Springvale (Chauvel and Petyanszki 1986: 11).

To combat growing space limitations at the original weatherboard premises, funding was obtained through various sources to expand its facilities. The new building was officially opened in May 1988 by Labor Premier John Cain. In the same year Prime Minister Bob Hawke launched his government's Social Justice Report at the Bureau. Since the SCAAB's establishment, nearly every Minister for Immigration has spoken at its AGM. Federal and state ministers and staff from their departments have also visited its premises, as did Governor-General Bill Hayden and Governor Davis McCaughey. These visits shed light on the prominence and importance of its work.

Springvale Monash Legal Service (SMLS)

As the SCAAB continued to expand its work in Springvale, other services were also emerging. In 1971 Springvale Free Legal Service began as a telephone referral service run by Monash Law students and academics for those who were unable to afford legal assistance. A year later the Service established a physical presence at the SCAAB, with students and non-legal volunteers assisting with client interviews under the oversight of volunteer solicitors. Early supporters of the service included Merle Mitchell and Jenny Briggs from the SCAAB and Jenny Slade, the Council's Community Services Manager.

The legal service tapped into a significant need for legal assistance and information in Springvale. In 1973 it handled more than 700 cases between February and August alone. Between February and September the following year that number increased to more than 3,000. Despite the need, the legal service struggled to secure consistent funding, particularly for the administrative assistance needed to support its volunteer workforce. Substantial support was provided by Springvale Council but a major advance occurred in 1975 when Monash University's Faculty of Law launched its 'Professional Practice' unit at the service, which meant students could receive academic credit towards their degree for a semester of working at the service under a supervising lawyer or mentor (Greenwood 1994).

The Springvale Monash Legal Service (SMLS), as it is now called, has continued to collaborate with Monash University's Faculty of Law to offer a clinical legal education program for law students, helping them to develop the confidence, skills and ethics of lawyers in a community environment. In addition to free legal advice, it offers duty lawyers at court and information and community legal education to disadvantaged local residents. Those eligible for its services include people of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background; young people; people experiencing financial difficulties; single

parents; people experiencing or at risk of homelessness; those at risk of family violence; people with a disability or those experiencing mental health issues.

Drawing upon its experience in the community, SMLS has also developed a significant policy, advocacy and law reform program that highlights the needs of refugees and people seeking asylum, including unaccompanied humanitarian minors and women escaping family violence. A specialist family violence clinic was established in 1995 to assist clients with child protection, child support, intervention orders, parenting plans and court representation. Its Integrated Services for Survivor Advocacy provides legal advice, assistance and representation to victims/survivors of sexual assault, and to family members affected by assault other than the offender. SMLS has assisted more clients than any other community legal centre in Melbourne (South-East Monash Legal Service).

Springvale Neighbourhood House

In 1983, Springvale Neighbourhood House was built as a SCAAB-initiated community project, using the labour of local unemployed youth to make its mudbricks from clay provided by a local quarry.

The House was created as a meeting space for small community groups, providing resources, support and advice — essentially a home away from home. It serves as a place for social activities, learning opportunities and cultural celebrations, combatting social isolation and loneliness, something very much part of the migrant experience. It is part of a network of over 400 Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria.

The SCAAB maintained close ties to the House, which was made easier because the two centres were located on the same large block of municipal-owned land. But more than that, the organisations benefited from the strong community development networks that had grown during the previous 20 years in Springvale, at first under the guidance of people like Merle Mitchell and Jenny Slade, but later extended by the staff of both centres. The House receives local government funding that continues to ensure its strong presence in the community.

Before the pandemic, many cultural groups used the Neighbourhood House's facilities to meet and conduct activities. For those without support networks, the House runs a drop-in Welcome Café. The House's manager established it some years ago, recognising the need for a place where new arrivals can find their bearings:

You don't have to register, you don't have to be eligible for anything. That's how we first started meeting the Rohingya community. They came into the Welcome Cafe because there weren't any people already in the community, so there were no leaders... One time I was talking to people about which

country they were born or "Where did you come to Australia from?" And there was a woman who came from Tibet. She'd been here for a week. I'm like, "How did you come here?", because we don't advertise. And she goes, "Oh, someone in the community told me I should come here." So, it's kind of embedded in the community that people will come (2.4).



The emergence of migrant and faith organisations

A range of other organisations, networks and services also developed in Springvale in these years. As migrant communities put down roots in the area, their attention turned to putting in place structures and services to meet their needs. This philosophy of self-help led to the establishment of community organisations centred around Springvale’s major cultural, linguistic and ethnic groups.

SICMAA was established in 1982 to provide community services for Vietnamese refugees who had fled the communist regime of Vietnam. Initially focusing on settlement and housing, its services expanded over the coming decades to include gambling counselling and support, family violence support, tax help, English language programs, active living groups to support the wellbeing of its aging members and a cooking school to promote Vietnamese cuisines. Over time, its clientele expanded to include other southeast Asian ethnicities living in the area.

Several years later, in 1985, the Cambodian Association of Victoria was established to specifically provide for the needs of the Cambodian community. Initially focusing on disadvantaged members, the organisation now provides a wide range of social supports, including housing assistance, help with navigating public transport, counselling, consumer, health and financial advice, settlement services, employment and small business

training, advocacy and support for elderly Cambodians, as well as a Khmer language program on 3ZZZ. In 2022, the organisation received significant federal funding to provide culturally specific services to elderly Cambodians, including food assistance, transportation, exercise, shopping, outings and information related to health and ageing. The organisation is also involved in funded projects targeting gambling addiction and family violence in the Cambodian community.

Another significant entity to emerge was the City of Greater Dandenong Interfaith Network, Australia’s first such network. Bringing together representatives of the area’s faith communities – Baha’i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, Sikh, Sathya Sai and the Brahma Kumaris – the network aims to promote peace and harmony within the municipality. The local government’s first Equity and Access Officer, Joyce Rebeiro, established the network and today it is coordinated by Helen Heath, who has been recognised for her many contributions to the local community. It is regarded as the pre-eminent local government interfaith model in Australia and continues to serve as a model for other local government areas.

A cursory internet search finds more than 20 faith communities based in Springvale and many cultural associations and organisations serving its diverse community. In more evidence of the range and diversity of such groups based in Springvale, the Council provided grants to 22 different cultural groups between 2017 and 2022.





The reorientation of local government priorities

Just as the SCAAB was instrumental in developing the network of service provision that was emerging in Springvale, it also played an important role in shaping another local institution — the Council. The close relationship between the two bodies gradually turned the outlook of Springvale’s councillors towards embracing the needs of its diverse population.

The first step in this process was the establishment of the SCAAB at the Council premises on Osbourne Avenue. Since this relationship required regular interaction, including building maintenance, the Council was kept abreast of the SCAAB’s work in the community, particularly with migrants. Acknowledging the growing demand for the SCAAB’s services, the Council contributed significantly to funding its building expansion.

By 1985-86 the Council was providing significant funding to the SCAAB via an annual grant of \$75,000. Thereafter, the Council funded its work on a triennial basis, providing the SCAAB with significant financial security and a legitimacy that enabled it to access further state and federal funding. By this time, several Council members were represented on the SCAAB’s committee of management, establishing a conduit for information about community needs and options for service provision back to the Council.

In 1983, the Council also granted newly established SICMAA use of a Council-owned building — the first time the right of an ethnic community to its own premises was recognised. In 1987, the Council established an Access and Equity committee to advise on how to enable community members to participate in Council programs, services and facilities, and contribute to decision-making.

Local representation

In another important step in the growing relationship between local government and the Springvale community, local residents of immigrant background or with close community links began to stand for Council. Jan Trezise, one of the early activists to play a role in establishing SCABB, was the first of the latter cohort, serving as mayor from 1983 to 1984. A few years later, Andrew Papapetrou, a member of the Greek Orthodox community, was elected to the role, serving as mayor between 1986 and 1987. These individuals paved the way for greater representational diversity in the coming decades. By 2018, seven of the 12 councillors serving Greater Dandenong were of migrant backgrounds, including four individuals of Asian ethnicity.

- Councillor Eden Foster, of Indian heritage on her mother's side, served as mayor from 2022 to 2023.
- Cr. Jim Memeti, who arrived in Australia as a two-year-old from Albania. He has served five terms as mayor, first in 2009 and most recently in 2021-22.
- Cr. Youhorn Chea, who arrived as a refugee from Cambodia in 1982. As Australia's first Cambodian-born councillor, he has served the municipality for more than two decades, including five terms as mayor between 2001 and 2019.
- Cr. Roz Blades AM arrived from England in 1969. She served as a councillor for more than 25 years and was previously mayor of the City of Springvale and three time mayor of Greater Dandenong (1998-99, 2010-11, and 2018-19).
- Cr. Meng Heang Tak came to Australia from Cambodia when he was 16. He served as a councillor between 2012 and 2018 and as mayor in 2015-16.
- Cr. Pinar Yesil arrived in Australia as a teenager from Turkey, served one term (2008-09) as mayor. She was the Council's first Muslim to hold the position.
- Cr. Maria Sampey was born in Italy and migrated to Australia at the age of 7; elected major in 2004.
- Cr. Naim Melhem migrated from Lebanon in 1977. In 1997 he was the

first Lebanese-born mayor to be elected in Victoria.

Deputy mayors of migrant background in Greater Dandenong include Sophie Tan, the first Cambodian woman to serve on Council, and Richard Lim, owner of Lim's Pharmacy and founder of several Cambodian community groups, who is the current deputy mayor.

Several of immigrant background have also represented the community at other levels of government. These individuals, all Australian Labor Party members, include Lewis Kent, who was born in Yugoslavia and was a Holocaust survivor, who represented the seat of Hotham (which includes part of Springvale) in the federal House of Representatives between 1980 and 1990.

Eddie Micallef, who was born in Australia to Maltese parents, served as the member for the state seat of Springvale between 1983 and 1999. He is well known for his support and advocacy for migrant Australians, including as long-serving chairperson of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria.

Hong Lim, of Chinese-Cambodian background, held the now abolished state seat of Clayton between 1996 and 2014, then the seat of Clarinda from 2014 until his retirement in 2018. Like Eddie Micallef, he was actively involved in cultural communities, serving as chairman of the Victorian Indo-Chinese Communities Council, president of the Cambodian Association of Victoria, and a commissioner of the Victorian Ethnic Affairs Commission between 1985 and 1992.

Since 2018 Meng Heang Tak has served as the member for Clarinda (which encompasses Springvale South). Eden Foster won the seat of Mulgrave (which includes part-of Springvale) in the 2023 by-election that was triggered by the retirement of Daniel Andrews, Victoria's former premier.

These individuals, with their deep links to the local community, have been instrumental in raising awareness of the needs of new arrivals and of Australians from culturally diverse backgrounds,



and in bringing Springvale's voices to the attention of other levels of government.

Funding for cultural communities

Council also funds multicultural organisations via its small but growing grant program. In 1985 the City of Springvale funded only two such grants: one to an elderly Italian citizens group and the other to an aged care home for individuals from ethnic backgrounds. The following year the number of grants increased to six, broadening funding to organisations of Turkish, Greek, Indo-Chinese and Spanish backgrounds. By 1992, the Council was funding 13 organisations, representing groups from Italian, Greek, Indo-Chinese, ethnic Chinese, Afghan, Cambodian, Hungarian, Macedonian, Māori, Yugoslav, French, Ukrainian and African backgrounds.

In recent years funding has increased even more. In the 2018-2019 financial year funding to cultural community organisations and social support organisations reached close to \$2 million, a transformation that is unprecedented in municipal spending. Today, cultural organisations in Greater Dandenong can access a variety of funding opportunities, alongside long-established associations and groups such as the Volunteer Resource Service, Lions clubs, YMCA Youth and Community Services, City of Greater Dandenong Band, the Dandenong and District Historical Society, and the

Annual Dandenong Show.

The Community Support

Grants Program allows not-for-profit groups to apply for funding of up to \$20,000 to support projects, programs and activities that will benefit residents of the City of Greater Dandenong. In 2018-19 the Council provided \$376,026 in separate grants to cultural communities: Afghan (3 grants); African; Antiochian; Hazara (3); Vietnamese women (2); Bangladesh; Cambodian (5); Tamil (4); El Hokamaa; Fijian; Greek (2); Hispano; Indonesian; Maya; Polish; Somali (2); Vietnamese (5); South Sudan (2); Mandarin network (2); Sudanese; Thai; Indian; Chinese Association.

The Community Response Grants

Program is open to both groups and individual residents of the City of Greater Dandenong. Not-for-profit community groups can apply for up to \$1,000 for projects, programs, or activities that will benefit local residents. Individuals can apply for up to \$500 for travel and accommodation expenses to participate in an elite-level sporting tournament, artistic or cultural performance, scientific, technological, environmental or sustainability related activity, community sector or civil society forum, or to receive a highly esteemed individual award.



The Sponsorships Program supports major events and other activities that attract a significant number of visitors to the municipality, thereby boosting the local economy and promoting Greater Dandenong. In 2018-19, the Council provided \$200,000 in funding for such events, including \$32,500 for a Latin Festival, \$35,000 for the Springvale Asian Business Association's Lunar New Year Festival and \$35,000 for a Vietnamese community festival.

The Community Partnerships Funding Program funds key service organisations within the municipality for a three-year period. These longer-term agreements aim to provide greater certainty and continuity for organisations. In 2018-19, \$1,121,777 was spent under this program, including for the Cambodian Association Youth program (\$22,627); Interfaith Network of Greater Dandenong (operational support, \$91,225); Southeast Community Links (operational support, \$438,136) and Springvale Neighbourhood House (\$71,295).

The Greater Dandenong Volunteer Resource Service Council provides funding to support the Greater Dandenong Volunteer Resource Service, which assists local residents to find suitable volunteering opportunities and

supports local not-for-profit community organisations to recruit and train volunteers.

The Material Aid Response Collective Impact Grants Program was developed in response to the growing need for material aid and emergency relief. In 2018-19, \$103,614 was spent on this program, including grants to Friends of Refugees for food aid (\$29,206) and to Life Without Barriers to support people seeking asylum (\$40,000).

The Venue Hire Fund enables voluntary organisations to obtain waivers for Council venue hire fees for significant one-off community events.

The largest single funding allocation in 2018-2019 was awarded to South East Community Links, an organisation formed in 2015 from the merger of the SCAAB with the Dandenong Community Advisory Bureau and the Southern Ethnic Advocacy and Advisory Council, the largest provider of financial counselling for diverse communities in Victoria. This development expanded refugee and migrant settlement services and a housing program for families on low incomes and young people (Greater Dandenong, Annual Reports).

Managing diversity: the challenges



It has taken several decades and the investment of key individuals and institutions to build a resilient social fabric in Springvale. The building blocks have been painstakingly constructed, almost one organisation at a time, laying the foundation for strong social support. This journey has been fraught at times. Springvale's extraordinary religious and cultural diversity has created complex human challenges. Change has, at times, been uncomfortable for established residents. Significant levels of vulnerability have had to be accommodated in the community and some individuals have fallen through the gaps. Service provision has developed imperfectly and providers have had to find the right balance between supporting communities and imposing structures upon them. Building something new and strong sometimes involves tearing things down. And some things needed to change before new foundations could be laid.

Ad-hoc service provision

While increased social service delivery in Springvale was crucial for responding to the significant and complex needs of its residents, establishing such services was by no means straightforward. Through most of the development period, service delivery was gradual, and ad hoc at best. In the early years there was little coordination between service providers and sometimes even overt competition to attract scarce government funding. Sometimes the level of funding provided would just not make do.

The Springvale Community Health Centre provides a striking example. It was established in 1985 after the Victorian government announced funding for services that would provide for the diverse ethnic character of a community. After a public meeting and further discussions, it was decided that the service should provide a balance between clinical case work, preventative work and educational services, with staff to divide their time equally between prevention, promotion and case work.

Funding was initially provided for two full-time Ethnic Health Workers and a part-time administrative assistant, yet public consultations revealed that bilingual workers in seven major community languages (Greek, Vietnamese, Khmer, Italian, Turkish, Yugoslav and Spanish) were most needed. With limited state government funding, the two full-time positions were converted to four part-time positions, with funding for administration diverted to hire a fifth. However, these compromises did not work well. The restricted nature of the positions meant that community needs were not met. At the same time other needs were emerging, including demand for a community nurse, occupational therapist, psychiatric nurse, psychologist and half-time medical practitioner.

Inadequate record keeping by social service organisations in these years also meant that data to evaluate the impact of their programs or emerging community needs was not collected, which further hampered strategic service planning in Springvale (Chauvel and Petyanzski, pp. 24, 32).



Staff shortages, rising tensions, growing needs

Some community groups had such a high level of need that organisations struggled to respond. In its early years the SCAAB relied almost entirely on the efforts of volunteer workers with little training. Even when funding became available, many organisations struggled to recruit skilled workers. Qualified workers in health-related areas, who had proficiency in Springvale's primary community languages, were especially difficult to find. At times there were tensions within organisations or between service providers and the broader Springvale community. As migrant community groups became more confident in their ability to gain funding and set policies, they sought to establish greater autonomy and began to push back against organisations that had initially equipped and supported their establishment. Immigrant groups resented outsiders speaking on their behalf; they wanted to stand on their own feet and tackle issues such as drug trafficking and the provision of assistance to asylum seekers that some established organisations were unwilling to take up.

It was a difficult transition. Groups felt gratitude for the help that the SCAAB had provided, but also wanted independence to speak for themselves. Some felt the "white welfare organisations" were patronising. Individuals like Merle Mitchell, who was lauded for her work in the community, also faced criticism:

I think she was very articulate and able. She had the ... skills to be able to talk to bureaucrats. She had that power of presenting and the language. She was very effective and powerful. [But] Merle wanted the control ... Merle even tried to control the Springvale legal service (1.8).

Moreover, divisions emerged between cultural groups and religious communities. This recollection about the Greater Dandenong Interfaith Network reflects early fears that such differences would not be overcome:

The one thing that struck me was the Catholic Church priest who spoke about Christianity and so on. And he sang this song about one true God ... and he sang some hymn or something which expanded on that ... I felt very uncomfortable ... I was a bit worried at one stage that that group would fold in time or be acrimonious, but it didn't. It kept going, ... it did quite a bit of good work with the healing after the Bosnian War (1.8).

A further difficulty was that power brokers with links to political parties and government, who were not necessarily appointed by consensus or representative of majority interests, rose to prominence in some community organisations.

Those falling through the gaps

Despite significant efforts, some people fell through the support services gap. One particular cohort of vulnerable individuals were a group of ‘detached refugee minors’ (numbering at various times between 20 and 80 adolescents) who had arrived in Australia by boat, seeking asylum to join a close relative: a brother, sister, aunt, uncle or grandparent. However, by the mid-1980s, care arrangements had broken down and they were living independently of their care-giver, with no government department assuming responsibility. Brutalised by their experiences of war, life in a refugee camp and piracy, many struggled to cope with daily life and school and became street kids, vulnerable to drug use and crime in an environment in which a high number of Vietnamese and Cambodian young people in Springvale were unemployed. (Chauvel and Petyanzski, pp. 40, 50).

Springvale – pre-pandemic

On balance, Springvale has an extraordinary list of achievements. Although struggling under the weight of socio-economic disadvantage and managing a level of cultural diversity that few communities have faced, it has developed a strong social fabric. While other less diverse areas have succumbed to tension or even open conflict, Springvale has never suffered from sectarian or communal violence. In the words of Eddie Micallef, former state member for Springvale, “the place is so diverse now, that the diversity has, shall I say, smothered the racism.” There is no doubt that the work of social support agencies has played a key role in fostering social cohesion and social capital in the suburb. Today, Springvale is seen by its residents as a vibrant community (1.3, 1.5, 2.3). For many, day-to-day life is very much lived around its shopping and market precincts. Locals are out and about, buying their daily groceries from the marketplace, socialising with vendors, purchasing food from local restaurants and eateries. The compact nature of the retail precinct (and the competition for parking) mean that many walk to the shops. As two local

employees say:

We have traffic counters, meaning foot traffic counters, where we can measure the flow and the approximate numbers of people through our three largest shopping districts, being Springvale, the Dandenong Plaza area, and Noble Park, and Springvale always comes out the most. There’s more foot traffic in and around the Springvale shopping precinct from the station down towards the Springvale Community Hub. We always knew that. I find it a vibrant area. I find there’s always something going on. There’s always people around. There’s a really big food scene there. There’s lots of cafes and lots of supermarkets. I find it quite, what’s the word, exciting? Invigorating? Every time I go to Springvale because there’s always something to see and do. It’s always quite good (1.5).

You walk down through the central business area and it’s vibrant and thriving and you’ve got a mix of people down there from all sorts of backgrounds. And you’ve got the people who live there who walk to the shops with their little trolleys every day to grab fresh produce, whatever they’re cooking that day. You’ve got the tourists that are coming in who come to visit Springvale because they want to get a bun from Bun Bun’s and go have a look at the shops and get an egg tart from a certain bakery that’s got good reviews and stuff. And then you’ve got other cultural groups that might not live in Springvale but who travel in to do their shopping because there is culturally appropriate food at reasonable prices in the market (2.3).

In recognition of Springvale’s growing prominence, government has invested substantially in physical infrastructure. The removal in 2014 of Springvale’s level crossing, ranked the second most dangerous in the state, eased traffic flow and addressed a major constraint for the central Springvale shopping precinct. The removal project was the most expensive undertaken in Victoria, costing \$159 million, including construction of the new railway station. The following year the landmark ‘Asian Gateway’ was constructed through a partnership between the Springvale Asian Business Association, the state government and local council, celebrating the suburb’s Asian cultural heritage.

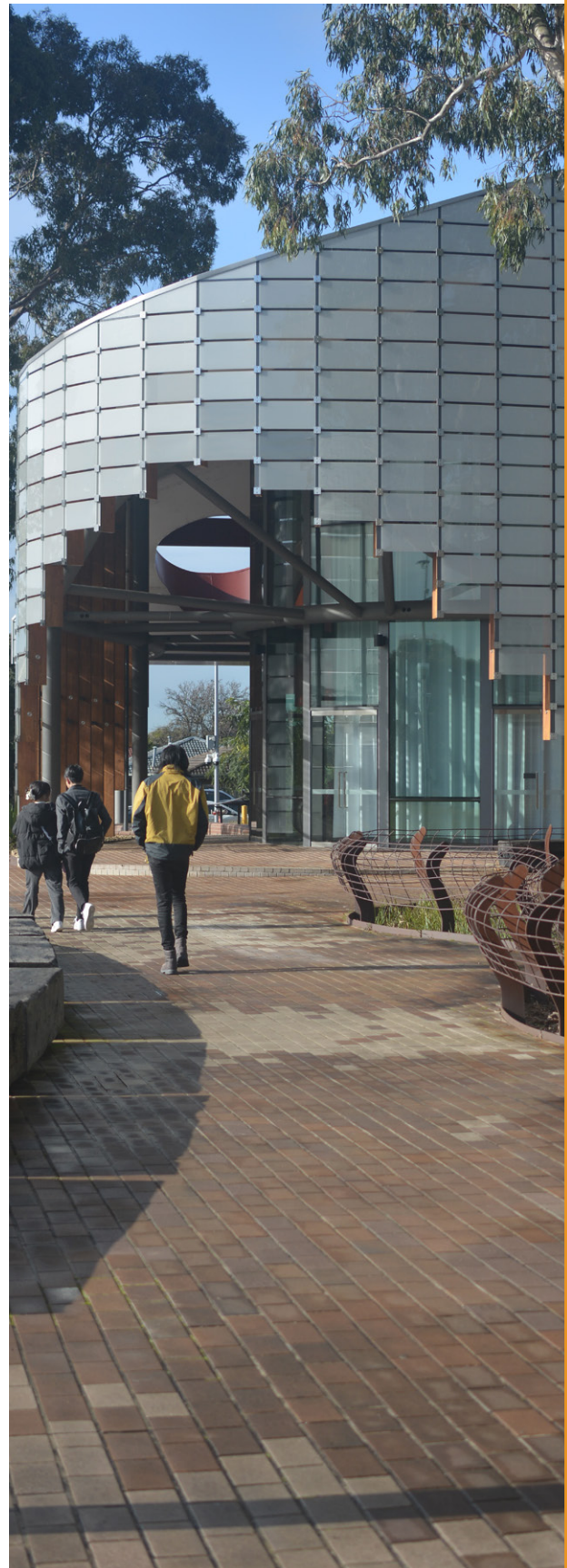
In 2020 the new Springvale Community Hub and library was opened, creating a new civic and community centre surrounding government offices. The \$53 million development was partly funded by the sale of the former Springvale depot. The architectural design of the Hub reflects the multicultural identity of Springvale and contains elements that pay homage to its history, including the Enterprise Hostel. The project has received the 2021 Australian Institute of Architects Victorian Chapter Award for Urban Design and the William Wardell Award for Public Architecture.

The library, within the Hub, features new information technology and equipment and spaces to promote learning, leisure and cultural experiences. Playgroups, new parent groups and maternal health groups all use other Hub spaces, along with wellness groups and registered training providers. Young people play sport on the multi-purpose court and the playground, with its water play area and sandpit, are favourite places for many families.

Each year the community gathers for the municipality's largest festivals – Lunar New Year and Snow Fest – allowing many families to experience snow for the first time. These events bring thousands of newcomers to the suburb to share its community spirit and experience the cultural heritage of the area.

Springvale's retail precinct has been protected from large scale development, allowing the shopping area to retain its street-market character and the flourishing of social activities like traditional Asian board games.

On the eve of the pandemic Springvale was moving forward. While it was still struggling with considerable challenges – homelessness, gambling addiction, drugs and domestic violence, not to mention its lower socio-economic status – the basic physical and social resources for ongoing strength had all been put in place.



The pandemic



Some residents would say that Springvale was prepared for the pandemic. Even before the official public health orders were issued, rumours of a new virus in Wuhan had reached Springvale's streets. People started pulling back from social engagements and going out less, hearing stories of "what was coming" from their friends and relatives overseas (2.3). Mask wearing, already socially acceptable amongst Springvale's Asian residents, started becoming more visible.

Everyone is wearing their mask. You rarely saw anyone without... People were like, "Well, this is normal anyway." A lot of them were like, "Well, in China you're going to wear a mask if you're sick already anyways." There was a lot of cultural practices already in play in this community because people have maybe gone through pandemic like experiences already or because they come from places that may be densely populated. They're already sort of aware of trying to give space when you can. The practices were there already... (6.1).

As official public health orders were issued, people went home and Springvale's usually chaotic streets were quiet. Shops in the retail precinct closed their doors and the usual foot traffic around the marketplace area ceased. Even when daily exercise was allowed, people still tended to stay home:

I think everybody just took it really seriously and people just stopped. It was very quiet, which isn't normal. You go out on the streets and there would not be people out. Especially once those harder lockdowns hit, people just avoided everything. Even if they needed to go out, they would rather go and do a massive haul for the month and then just stay at home. Even when we went for walks, you wouldn't see people going for walks. I had a one-year-old then that had just started walking, so they wanted to explore. We'd go for walks every day and wouldn't see anyone. And it's a townhouse estate, so people don't actually have place at home. People weren't leaving their houses (6.3).



There was fear, but also a familiarity with health measures that were needed to prevent virus infection and spread. So, the community buckled down with an attitude of “we’re all in this together” (4.3, 6.1). According to the Council, there wasn’t the kind of pushback against the public health orders that had been reported in other communities. Both the Council and residents observed a willingness to comply in Springvale that stood apart from other areas of Greater Dandenong:

I found it easier dealing with a community who were motivated to keep themselves safe rather than having to suggest to people that would be a good idea. We found other CALD communities within Greater Dandenong more of a challenge (1.5).

No one batted an eye at following orders here, whereas I think in other parts and other communities, it was kind of like, “Ah, we’re still going to do what we want.” There was more resistance. Whereas here, people just followed (6.1).

Of course, there was some non-compliance in Springvale but overall, there was a sense that people were willing to do what they could to protect themselves and others in the community. In the words of one resident, “We just treated it as normal in a way... there was no panic or anything. As long as we’re looking after each other, it will be fine. We’re not scared of anything” (4.13).

Community impacts

While the community was arguably prepared for the virus, preparedness for lockdowns was another matter. The stay-at-home orders devastated Springvale, as they halted important facets of its economic and social life – and Victoria was to endure one of the longest periods of lockdowns in the world, with six lockdowns over a total of 262 days between March 2020 and October 2021.

Public and community spaces in Springvale bring people together. It is on the streets, in the marketplace, at the library and through community organisations that relationships are created:

My cousin remembers coming to Springvale when he first migrated over and seeing another random Vietnamese person. They were so happy to see him that they invited him to their wedding, even though he had no idea who he was (2.7).

In Springvale, perhaps more than in other communities, a cultural preference for face-to-face interaction drives people together on the streets and in public spaces. Family time is valued and is often multigenerational:

People in Springvale get their socialisation from actually just being out rather than interacting online. There was so many of them, all the hustle and bustle is basically people out there socialising with their communities rather than doing it at home (6.3).

Similarly, business and trade in Springvale are conducted predominantly through relationships and often negotiated in person. The public health orders halted the most fundamental elements of day-to-day life in Springvale, preventing residents from accessing their primary social and economic networks. The ability to meet was taken away, and this became one of the primary challenges of the lockdowns (1.5). As time went on, other challenges would also emerge.

Springvale’s economy relies on retail and food services. Many of its more than 3,000 small businesses had to close. Even among those who could continue trading ‘essential items,’ patronage decreased from the loss of foot traffic. Springvale’s usually competitive restaurant scene also suffered. Many eateries were not able to pivot to take-away offerings, and even when they did, their lack of an online presence made it difficult to attract customers (6.4).

The lockdowns threw many small businesses into financial distress. According to Council statistics, the number of people accessing Job Seeker and Job Keeper, the Australian government assistance programs for businesses and employees who lost their jobs, was amongst the highest in the state. While government assistance was available to most, inaccurate reporting of business income in Springvale before the pandemic meant that many owners received little assistance and were forced to cut costs, lay off staff or, in some cases, permanently close their doors. Those with insecure employment, including those working cash-in-hand in Springvale's "extensive cash economy," often ineligible for government payments, quickly found themselves in precarious circumstances when the pandemic hit (2.3).

As these economic impacts began to bite, food insecurity was immediate and widespread. One resident working at the front line of providing material aid in the suburb recalled that it was only a week and a half into the lockdowns before Springvale residents began approaching local organisations for food assistance (2.7).

Mental health deteriorated as the pandemic wore on, as fear of the virus, anxiety and social isolation all rose. The lockdowns severed Springvale's migrant population from the networks and social groups they had relied upon in the absence of family and friendship networks:

It's hard. During COVID, we don't see each other. So, the people who don't have, as I mentioned you, family, we feel very lonely. We can't see each other and then we can't go to the Neighbourhood Centre, even the library. And especially the people like us, non-English speaking background and also from Asian country or a different foreign country, we don't have many friends or many family here (4.10).

Technological disadvantage in the community meant that residents could not easily take advantage of the online services and communities that emerged, isolating them even further. One resident, from a refugee background, recalled the impact:

Even here, the most peaceful people that I know in our community, they started to lose it (6.4). Some people cut themselves off, while others turned to drugs or alcohol, which had further ramifications for the broader community (4.5).

Incidents of family violence, already a significant local issue, increased under lockdown, especially among people living together in close quarters for an extended period of time, often in cramped, multigenerational households:

So crowded housing, lack of food and basic essentials and above all these things, what we also found was because people didn't have work rights, there was a lot of family issues. Family violence was a lot more. Idle minds and idle hands leads to the devil's workshop or something they say (4.5).

The demands of home schooling also increased pressure at home, particularly for families not proficient in English. Many parents did not have the capabilities to assist their children with their schoolwork. Those who had children with additional needs and refugees, often carrying the trauma of past experiences in their home country, fared worse. Primary school teachers saw significant disengagement from school, whereas many tweens and teenagers struggled with the isolation of the lockdowns and returned to school with mental health issues or depression (2.6, 4.5).

Lockdowns made some groups particularly vulnerable. International students, drawn to Springvale by its proximity to Monash University, lost their casual employment. Ineligible for government support, they relied on the provisions of community organisations to survive. The manager of Springvale Neighbourhood House recalls the accidental discovery of a whole group of students during COVID:

We also found, just through community connections, a whole group of Brazilian overseas students who were living just outside of Springvale who were not eligible for any support services or income support. We never used to provide food and things like that, because we're about social connection and culture, and looking from a strength-based perspective of working with communities. But when they're in need, you have to jump in (2.4).

Homelessness in Springvale rose by more than 150 percent and individuals were left behind as face-to-face service provision

ended and welfare organisations moved online (Star Journal, 1 February 2022). Elderly residents living in Springvale's Public Housing Units, many of whom had fled the Balkans during the war, also fell through the gaps:

The elderly persons mostly live by themselves. One of the older persons died during COVID. The neighbours were all concerned, trying to get someone to help. But it was a couple of months before they found the person dead. It had a traumatising effect on the forty people who live there on that site (2.4).



Meeting the rising challenges

While many of these challenges were not unique to Springvale, they were extraordinarily pervasive in the community. Council, social service and community organisations faced unprecedented pressure to meet the suburb's needs. It required a considerable mobilisation of human and material resources. The table below details some of the organisations that provided support:

Table 7: Springvale organisations involved in the COVID 19 response

Organisation	Type of support
City of Greater Dandenong	Public health information, groceries, SIM cards, nappies,
Springvale Traders Association	Public health information, transmission of public health orders (in-language)
Lim's pharmacy	PPE, public health information (in-language, Facebook), online health seminars (live streamed), combatting misinformation, medicine delivery, groceries, travel permits
Red Cross	Groceries (particularly assisting asylum seekers)
Salvation Army	Groceries
Monash Health	Vaccinations, including on-site visits, public health information
Cambodian Association of Victoria	Public health information (in-language, phone calls, Facebook, SBS), combatting misinformation, PPE, groceries, social support
Springvale Indochinese Mutual Assistance Association	Public health information (in-language, phone calls, Facebook, SBS, Vietnamese newspapers), combatting misinformation, groceries, technological assistance, travel permits, welfare checks, PPE, social support
Friends of Refugees	Groceries, PPE, social support
Cornerstone	Groceries
Helping Hands Centre	Groceries
Springvale Benevolent Society	Groceries
Springvale Neighbourhood House	Public health information (online, Chinese, Vietnamese, Spanish, Arabic, Italian, Rohingya, Tamil, Singhalese, and Islander), groceries, laptops, technological assistance, welfare checks, social support
South East Community Links	Groceries
Anti-poverty Network	Groceries
Sandown Greyhounds	Cooked meals
Springvale Rise Primary School	Public health information (in-language, Rohingya/Burmese, video, WhatsApp, iMovie), combatting misinformation, transmission of public health orders (in-language), groceries, laptops/tablets, technological assistance, welfare checks, nappies, social support
Olinda Avenue Kindergarten	COVID tests, public health information
Springvale Learning and Activity Centre	Groceries, public health information, social support
Burmese community organisation	Transmission of public health orders (in-language, Facebook), social support
Afri-AusCare	Groceries, PPE, social support
Somali community organisation	Public health information, groceries, transportation
Local religious organisations/ places of worship	Groceries, cooked meals, social support, welfare checks
Interfaith Network of Greater Dandenong	Public health information, social support, welfare checks

The following case studies provide insight into Springvale's frontline response to the pandemic.

City of Greater Dandenong Council

Local government, under the provision of the Emergency Management Act, is designated as the lead initial provider and coordinator of relief to the community. The City of Greater Dandenong council was one of the first local councils to respond to the pandemic, funding assistance by slashing expenditure on capital works by over \$11 million (City of Greater Dandenong, COVID-19 Recovery Plan; 1.3).

Aware of the immediate need for material aid, due to job losses and rising food costs, the Council quickly pivoted resources towards grocery provision, in partnership with fourteen local agencies. The Springvale City Hall, a 200-person venue, became a material aid distribution point (2.4). Once a week food trucks would come and residents could go to the venue to collect groceries. A door-to-door delivery service was put in place for those who were not mobile enough to come to the site. Over the course of the pandemic the council provided 275 tonnes of material aid to more than 3,000 people a week at the peak, at an overall cost of \$490,000. Local businesses contributed an additional \$54,000 worth of produce and personal protective equipment (PPE), while the Victorian government provided \$204,000 (City of Greater Dandenong, COVID-19 Recovery Plan). In the words of one Council worker, we provided "whatever they needed to follow the rules, look after themselves and essentially keep themselves alive" (1.5).

Along with groceries, the Council provided basic medicines, nappies, baby formula and mobile phone SIM cards to residents. It reduced or waived rates, provided commercial tenants of Council premises with rent-free arrangements and then a reduced rental period, and provided grants to small businesses supplementing government entitlements. The Council supported its libraries and cultural programs to transition to online provision and to deliver requested books

to homes. It also funded increased tele-health support to young people and vulnerable families dealing with mental health issues.

With face-to-face Council services and facilities closed, all customer service staff were redirected to the COVID response. With commitment from the top that no one would lose their job, these staff answered phones, organised warehousing, packed food and personally delivered groceries. They became the Council's feet on the ground, often going house to house to check on the isolated and the vulnerable:

They would go into our rooming houses and they would go into our caravan parks, and they uncovered some awful situations and literally saved people's lives. People who had other health issues or alcohol dependency issues or other addictions... I remember one particular gentleman who hadn't washed in a very long time, was chronically ill, with broken windows in his room. Other people in the rooming house were stealing from him. He didn't have any money, literally couldn't get out of bed, and he was taken in an ambulance to hospital. So, without that type of work, people probably wouldn't have made it through the week, let alone recovering from the pandemic (1.5).

The Council's "Concierge Program" helped traders to meet the public health regulations that would allow them to open their doors. Again, going door to door, staff met with small business owners, providing them with PPE and printing off QR codes or social distancing instructions with a portable printer, doing what they could to help them begin trading again. For those spearheading the local government response, 12-hour days were considered "light" (1.5).



Springvale Rise Primary School

Springvale's largest primary school is Springvale Rise. It educates about 500 students across two campuses: the Springvale Campus, located on Springvale Road, just near the main shopping strip, and the Heights Campus on Wareham Street, near Sandown Racecourse. Almost 85 percent of students come from culturally diverse backgrounds and speak a language other than English. To provide additional support for its families, the school runs a Community Hub, in conjunction with Community Hubs Australia, funded by the Scanlon Foundation and government, where parents can access playgroups, conversational English classes, other skill-building programs and friendship groups. The Hub plays an important role in connecting families into the school network and assisting them to access social services and settlement support.

Springvale Rise was another significant provider of material aid during the pandemic. Through the school's networks it supplied food to more than 270 families. At times, it also provided food to staff whose family members had lost work and were struggling to make ends meet. In the words of a senior teacher, "we just did whatever we had to do..." (2.8).

School staff refer to their COVID response as "Operation Springvale Rise." From the first week of the lockdowns, the school was aware that the support it would need to provide families would go well beyond online learning:

We did everything, I guess... You were not just doing the coordination of the teaching and learning. To me, the community engagement stuff was so important because our community was so lacking in information and from day dot they were lacking in food.... There were people who had worked in environments where they were paid in cash... [They] had no employment straight away, and no money to fall back on. So, we were delivering boxes and boxes of food. I was conveying Coles online orders to families ... There was food. There was sanitary items. There was sanitizer. There was coordination of you name it, we did it (2.8).

Even before the pandemic, many of the school's 500 or so students were living in precarious circumstances. It was not uncommon for children to come to school not having eaten that morning (the school's breakfast club helps meet this need) or lacking a fresh uniform for the week. According to state government metrics (the Student Family Occupation Index), the Springvale student population experience a high level of disadvantage. A third of students come from a refugee background, and many of these face "dire financial circumstances" (6.2).

Operation Springvale Rise therefore had several facets. As with other schools, the teachers had to quickly pivot to remote learning. However, to create an environment in which learning could occur, the school took on the task of ensuring families' wellbeing, not an easy task when there were often significant communication challenges.

The lockdowns threw them "straight into the deep end," one teacher remembers. There was a flurry of communication with families – phone calls, emails etc. before putting in place homeschooling arrangements such as learning packs – old fashioned pencils and worksheets. A Community Hubs staff member recalls personally delivering up to 40 learning packs a day to families, along with skipping ropes and balls and other things to help children stay busy and engaged. But the problem was that even if the students were completing the work, teachers could not check their progress without a means to receive it. And some parents just didn't understand the tasks the students had to complete (2.7, 2.10).

As the weeks went on, processes for online learning via WebEx were put in place. This made it easier to connect with the children, at least in theory, but Springvale Rise's families differed from many others in Melbourne – most lacked the technological or data resources to get online. One junior school teachers recalls:

We had a bunch of teachers who are ICT [Information and Communications Technology] savvy and they skilled themselves up so we could start to deliver content. But there were so many other undercurrents of issues with that. Some children didn't have a device. We weren't supposed to drive and drop off devices, we had to get parents to come in. A lot of our families didn't have connections to the Wi-Fi or they were on dial-up or old-fashioned forms. So, it was going to cost them a fortune to access this content (2.11).

One teacher recalled that the school needed to provide their community with about 370 devices, such as tablet PCs, funded out of the school's budget. Families also needed help downloading software, connecting internet dongles and navigating online learning.

Technological challenges were further compounded by different levels of computer skill and language barriers:

We had to download software, which we'd never used before. So, for instance, Google Classrooms, I had to get my head around Google Classrooms and for some of our EAL [English as an Additional Language] learners or those who are more academically challenged learners, even just getting them logged on, you could be on the phone for an hour or so trying to help them. So, it was just very hard. Once we got through that, then we had engagement issues with students as well (2.11).

Once mechanisms for homeschooling were established, the challenge was to keep students engaged. As in other primary schools, Springvale Rise teachers employed various strategies, while keeping the day as normal as possible, structured around a typical daily schedule. There was reading at 9am, then writing at around 10am, followed by Maths in the middle of the day. There was Wacky Wednesday and Crazy Hair Thursday and PE videos where the whole family could join in, but here some of the disparities between the families became evident.

On the Heights Campus, with its predominantly Vietnamese and Cambodian cohort, many parents were highly engaged. Some mums even competed with each other over their child's progress, one middle school teacher recalled:

The kids would say, "Oh, I'm on level dah dah dah." And the parents would overhear, because the parents were always in the background [and think] "Oh, that child's on 63, my child's only on 10," or whatever it was. And then you could see all of a sudden, they're just taking off. But sometimes I think the parents were sort of supporting the children to complete the tasks, which was fine (2.11).

By contrast, on the Springvale Campus, with its greater number of refugee families, some children lacked learning support:

When I was on the Springvale campus, I found it was probably a totally different ball game. The parents weren't really that involved. And for instance, I might have a little child trying to do their learning, and in the lounge room the parents were talking or the TV was on. So, they didn't understand that they need to be in a room away from distractions. Some families didn't really value what their child was trying to do at home (2.11).

Many parents who had not undertaken formal education found it difficult to cultivate a learning environment at home. Others just did not have the language skills to help their children complete tasks. Some simply focused on the more pressing priority of trying to survive:

Some families, they'd say they didn't have food or because parents weren't working, there was a shortage of money.... At the beginning it was a lot of phone calls with the families and checking in and some families were honest, they said "We don't have food, we need some food" (2.10).

For teachers, the pandemic provided a new insight into their children's lives. Through the lens of WebEx they caught glimpses of their students' world outside the classroom and the constraints on their ability to learn:

I'd see children holding babies, stirring a pot on the stove and I'm thinking, "Oh my goodness," watching the computer screen. I'm just thinking, "That's just such an unsafe and dangerous environment" ... And I'd say, "Where's mom and dad?" And they'd say, "Oh, they're sleeping, or they've gone out." You were just worried about how well students were being cared for at home. It was a tricky time (2.11).

Aware of the children's vulnerability, teachers undertook weekly welfare checks using old fashioned 'phone trees.' Each staff member was given a list of households to check on. For some mothers, these small interactions with the school would become an essential part of the week:

This school is a lot of help to me and my community. The school will always call me. They'll say, "How are you? You need help? You tell me." Listen, my heart is very happy.

It is like family, this school always calling me. Whatever you want, tell the staff. That's why it was a little bit easier, the school helped me (6.5).

But the workload on teachers and other staff to provide this support was immense. Before school began each day, teachers and support staff rang families to make sure kids were up and joining in. Then at recess and at lunch, if they had breaks, welfare checks were made, often with the help of a translator. In time, the usual boundaries between families and teachers just disappeared:

I think at the beginning we weren't giving our number out, but then in the end we were, because we were constantly communicating with them and I'd forget to switch off my phone, not to show my number. Most of them had it in the end. And then they would call. Either they would send a text, "Oh, my child won't be attending, not well," or "we're stuck on this, can I call you?" (2.10).

Meanwhile, school leaders were attending emergency response forums, advocating for the school, informing various levels of government about the reality of the pandemic in the community. Some officials involved in the pandemic response seemed unaware of the extent of isolation of some families. The systems they were putting in place would just not work:

[For example,] the vaccination push. It wasn't going to work for us to drive to Monash, [to the vaccination site]. Well, no, they don't have cars. We needed a place-based model. ... It was imperative [to sit] in on those meetings as much as possible ... to try and give a really clear picture of what our reality actually was. Because otherwise people don't hear what our stories actually are (2.8).



Springvale Neighbourhood House

Like other community organisations, Springvale Neighbourhood House provided material aid to the community. It partnered with Sandown Greyhound Racing Club, which had a catering service that had been shut down by the lockdowns but was still employing staff under federal COVID support payments. The service made enough homecooked halal food to feed 80 families, and the Neighbourhood House gave this food and other grocery items to community leaders to distribute:

One woman, who's a big community connector in that community, they don't have a formal group. Well, they have formal groups that are run by men. They have intergroup politics, so we don't go into that. But this woman is a community connector. We used to deliver 27 boxes of food and she'd have them on her front veranda and people would come and pick them up. And another woman from the Cook Islander community, she would get food and drive around with it. And another Burmese group would drive around with food and drop it off. We also supported the leader of the Somali community (2.4).

One of the House's key contributions during that time was giving out devices to

help people get online. Staff gave families or students every laptop they had on the premises – 30 or so at the time – and then they went out and sourced more. Staff personally dropped off 400 learning packs that explained to households how to connect to Zoom and other tips for connecting to the online world. The bilingual IT teacher's time was diverted into manning a dedicated support line so he could answer tech questions in English or Vietnamese.

Using their strong connections to the cultural community groups who met regularly at the House, staff worked closely with cultural leaders to help them to support their communities. Aware of the isolation of older residents, the House ensured that leaders were connecting regularly with their groups, providing weekly check in calls.

Staff developed phone lists, with each person given individuals to check in on. They also set up a support line so that community members could contact the House for support. Staff dropped off adult colouring books and information on meditation, along with boxes of food, to residents of Springvale's public housing units. They also helped residents meet their neighbours (2.4).



Communicating public health information in languages other than English

“In Springvale you can do everything in Vietnamese,” a worker from Neighbourhood House says. “There’s banking, supermarkets, car mechanics. Even at Springvale cemetery there’s the Vietnamese chapel, it’s the only chapel there that’s ethno-specific” (2.4). For Vietnamese residents, for most occasions this makes life in Springvale easy to navigate. But the downside is that there is very little impetus to learn or practice English. When needed, “people just communicate the best that they can with the English that they’ve got,” or in signs or gestures (1.3).

The pandemic placed new informational burdens on communities. Public health orders changed regularly and came into force quickly. They were also released, at least initially, in forms inaccessible to many Springvale residents: mainstream media releases, the Department of Health’s website or television press conferences. While government made some effort to produce information in languages other than English, initial translations were often inaccurate or only available in a few major languages. The information just wasn’t getting to the

smaller cultural communities, especially in Springvale.

Organisations embedded in the community realised the risk, especially in the early days of the pandemic when orders were heavily enforced. They didn’t want people getting fined. They also didn’t want Springvale, having only recently shed its reputation as a heroin hotspot, becoming known as a place to catch the virus. So the community harnessed its local resources to get the information out.

In the absence of timely translated information from the state government, the City of Greater Dandenong stepped in to provide information. Using its links to the cultural communities, it organised the translation of information into multiple languages, from simplified Chinese to Dari and Pashto. Some of its work was so efficient that it was the Council that provided translated information to the Department of Health, instead of the other way around. A councillor puts the efficient response down to the Council’s relationships in the community, and to the character of the community itself:

The community was more than happy to help because they felt like they were contributing to make their communities safer by just doing some basic translation services (1.5).

Staff at Springvale Rise Primary School, some who were bi-lingual, created videos for the community, circulated via Facebook and WhatsApp. Video content was necessary because many of Rohingya are illiterate, even in their own language. These teachers became the “COVID spokespeople” – informing the community about everything from the symptoms to look out for, to whether they could see visitors, to their driving radius (2.7).

At the same time Richard Lim, deputy major and owner of Lim’s Pharmacy, was reaching out to the Cambodian community. When a new public health order was released he’d return home from his pharmacy to jump onto various social media platforms to explain the new rules to his Cambodian followers. His interviews with Radio Free Asia, SBS and ABC and his appearances on talkback radio reached not only his community in Springvale but Cambodians Australia-wide and overseas. His medical background and strong community links established him as a trusted authority even on controversial subjects like the COVID vaccines. The Cambodian Association of Victoria and local councilor Meng Heang Tak also rallied the support and compliance of Springvale’s Cambodian community, leading to a strong vaccination response, with approximately 95% of the community eventually getting vaccinated (1.6, 1.7).

SICMAA, in turn, worked closely with other organisations to provide information in Vietnamese. It also supported Springvale’s elderly Vietnamese residents and those living in residential aged care facilities. Similarly, a Tamil community member based at Springvale Neighbourhood House worked closely with her community, providing information to allay their fears about having the vaccination. She liaised with the Council to provide reliable information, as well as assistance to navigate the online booking system (4.9).

Combatting misinformation was a huge challenge. The strong links Springvale residents have with their country of origin provided a steady stream of information about the virus from overseas. But it was challenging to sift the reliable from the false when residents were hearing

emotionally charged stories of deaths and devastation abroad. Organisations from the Springvale Learning and Activities Centre to Springvale Neighbourhood House, along with cultural leaders and associations, became de facto COVID authorities for their community members, allaying fears about the virus and combatting vaccine hesitancy:

Yeah, I think we were the first group to get the Chief Health Officer. We had the deputy come onto the Zoom meeting to talk to the community about COVID and then answer questions. One of the questions [was] “Is COVID anything to do with a curse or a spell that someone has put on a person?” He was really good, he just answered it, really (2.4).

We also ran a session for a group of young people who wanted some specific information so that they could take it to the parents. Because they had this tension,... parents were too scared or had doubts around things like vaccination and that sort of stuff (2.5).

Strengths revealed

The pandemic revealed many of Springvale’s strengths. Its deep-rooted social support infrastructure meant that organisations already recognised the vulnerability of residents. Once the pandemic came these organisations were ready to draw on their local knowledge and networks to respond to need. They also co-operated well together and closely co-ordinated their response. By contrast, their relationship with the state government sometimes fell down, with local organisations feeling that they were not well consulted over local needs and funding decisions.

Organisations shared resources and used their flexibility and agility to step into gaps in service provision, as a support group for refugees and asylum seekers, Friends of Refugees, explains:

We meet once a month. Because we receive a lot of food donations and there are certain foods that are not culturally appropriate, we go share it with other organisations. Even big organisations like the Red Cross. South East Community Links always come and ask us because they don't do major food drives like us, so we go drop it off for them. We also support Cornerstone. They are a charity that supports homeless people. We work very closely with them to provide anything that we have, we share with them (4.5).

The social services sector and local government worked together to support each other's efforts. Although coordination was messy and imperfect, often each party had resources that the other lacked. The social services sector had strong links in the community and the means to provide services on the ground, while the Council could access funding and resources to equip these organisations to do the work.

The Council was also willing to work with and alongside cultural associations and faith communities to reach Springvale's multicultural communities. It recognised the key role of community and faith leaders as trusted individuals and the importance of their local knowledge. The Council conveyed information from those working on the ground to state and federal governments, which prompted adjustments and refinements to the pandemic response. A Council official commented:

Once we had that relationship, then it was easier to talk to those leaders and say, "This is what we'd like you to do. This is why." And it was an easy conversation. We had conversations that weren't as easy with groups in [other areas]. I found personally that those working relationship and the goodwill the community seemed to have to promote those health messages, that was easier for me to do in Springvale (1.5).

Strong cultural and faith networks

Cultural and faith community infrastructure, already present and active in the suburb, was also harnessed towards the pandemic response. This was particularly important in Springvale,

with large numbers of residents not only needing material aid but culturally appropriate health information conveyed in their language. Springvale's faith and cultural community networks were crucial for providing this information, and as the pandemic progressed they became contact points the government needed to reach residents.

Community resilience

Springvale embodies the resilience and tenacity of its predominantly migrant community. Many of its residents had already been through pandemics overseas. For others, COVID 19 was not the worst experience they had been through:

I remember when the whole [shortage of] toilet paper situation was happening, and obviously that was causing a lot of angst for everyone, right? I remember speaking to a parent about it and going, "Oh, can you believe this is happening?" Even myself, I think there must have been anxiety coming out from me because I've never experienced anything like this before. So, for me, not being able to shop for simple basic human items caused a little bit of stress. This particular parent looked at me and went, "Yes, so what?" Looked at me like, "So you don't have toilet paper, big deal." Honestly, "I've been through worse than this. It's just toilet paper." Then I walked home, I think I went home that day going, "Oh, okay. No big deal" (2.7).

Community cohesion

A large proportion of Springvale's residents come from collectivist cultures, where values focus on the group, rather than the individual. Mask wearing, for example, is seen as protecting not only the individual but others from infection. Shared culture and language also cement cultural bonds, especially in a new environment:

I think Springvale is an interesting community ... I think there's always been a sense of cohesiveness ... Well, definitely, the fact that it's predominantly Vietnamese and Chinese and Cambodian. So, they've got their strong culture (6.1).

The realisation that everyone was ‘in the same boat’ also bolstered community. Yet cohesion wasn’t just evident within cultural groups. Individuals stepped outside their usual social circles, reached out to others and provided kindness or support. They did what they could to help, despite their own limited means:

We were checking on each other. If someone was falling sick, we gave food, medications... I think now people actually got closer emotionally to each other. It was scary, you didn’t know if that person you were talking to has COVID or not. But still, it didn’t stop us. We would pick up the phone or go to each other’s door. That was a good thing I experienced in Springvale (6.4).

I was personally cooking food and dropping it off to people whom I heard had COVID. A lot of that was happening within our communities. We had our WhatsApp groups and our Facebook groups and as soon as we heard someone’s unwell, we rallied and supported each other (4.5).

Government support

Lastly, government financial support, including Job Seeker, Job Keeper and state and federal funding for the community sector and cultural associations, provided the means for those embedded in the community to provide the support that was needed. In the words of one community worker:

Job Keeper is one example, so we could actually afford to do the work. And when that work was done, the situation was improving (2.5).

Money resourced community leaders and individuals to provide the local, cultural and linguistic expertise that the government required to target information and the vaccination rollout. It also paid for the significant material and technological aid that was distributed to the community. Without it, the situation in Springvale would have been dire.



What does Springvale teach us about social cohesion in a time of crisis?





Both Springvale and Victoria are still taking the measure of the COVID-19 pandemic. The City of Greater Dandenong estimated that over the two financial years to June 2021, the pandemic response cost the municipality \$16.13 million. Many other impacts are hard to quantify and are perhaps yet unknown.

Even so, many of Springvale's residents and community service providers feel that Springvale came through the years of the pandemic well. A crisis can reveal a society's fracture points, but a period of considerable stress can also unveil a community's strength.

Under substantial pressure, Springvale did not fracture. Latent tensions did not rise to the surface, groups did not turn on each other. Despite government fears, there was no apparent conflict or racism on the streets. In a time of considerable uncertainty, both individual and civil society connections became deeper, relationships stronger. Opportunities to build bridges beyond the usual cultural, language, social and operational spheres were taken.

Springvale, in all its diversity, remained

remarkably cohesive, more so than other parts of the municipality (1.5).

Springvale teaches us that homogeneity is not a prerequisite for social cohesion. If that was the case, its social fabric would have disintegrated under one of the world's most onerous lockdowns. Springvale's cohesiveness came from other factors: the bonds established between local government and the social service sector and the connections with both cultural and faith groups; the connections between cultural and faith groups and their communities built around trusted relationships; and perhaps a sense of belonging to Springvale itself, which led to individuals and organisations collectively using their resources, no matter how limited, towards the greater good.

At a time of considerable fragmentation, polarisation and conflict around the world, Springvale suggests that the building blocks for social cohesion are not far out of reach. However, they do take time, targeted investment and commitment to create.



Postscript

Springvale is developing a new identity. It is throwing off its past troubled reputation and being reshaped as a place where difference is embraced and diversity is celebrated. In a sense, it is a microcosm of Australia, or at least of what Australia could be, where the lives of individuals from other places have meshed together, sometimes messily and imperfectly, to become something greater than the sum of its parts.

There are still challenges. The pandemic robbed children of years of socialisation. Homelessness, poverty, insecure housing, unemployment, domestic violence, gambling addiction, drugs, disadvantage in many forms and the defunding of service providers since COVID are all significant hurdles the community will have to overcome, yet its strength and resilience cannot be questioned.

In the words of one local MP, Springvale is positioned to be a key destination in the future. It's just going to need some support to get there.

Buddhists say that when you die you can be reborn into your 'special place.' In the words of some local residents:

When you die, you come back to Springvale..."(Sharam and Stone 2017: 22)

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Title quote comes from Merle Mitchell, local resident and community leader, from Dandenong Star Journal, 24 September 2021.

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About the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute

The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute exists as a bridge between academic insight and public thought. The Institute undertakes research to help Australia advance as a welcoming, prosperous, and cohesive nation, particularly where this relates to the transition of migrants into Australian society. In doing so, the Institute links thought to action to ensure informed debate drives the agenda and empowers the critical thinking that will help drive Australia's social cohesion forward.

The Institute publishes the Mapping Social Cohesion Report, a world-leading survey, providing a comprehensive understanding of the Australian population's attitudes to multiculturalism, institutions and government, as well as to other people and neighbourhoods.

Other publications include narratives, social cohesion insights and essays, and the delivery of podcasts, webinars, and learning programs each year. Through these, the Institute seeks to provide evidence and ideas that will inform national discourses and empower communities to maintain and strengthen social cohesion.

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Interviews

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Merle Mitchell, interviewed 3 January 1991; Eddie Micallef MLA, interviewed 17 December 1990, 28 September 1994

Interviews conducted in Springvale by Trish Prentice, 2023

31 interviews conducted with local residents, community leaders, service providers, Council staff, school teachers, past and present Members of Parliament



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