

Re: Proposed closure of Churinga Disability Services Centre,
Greensborough, Victoria

Provider: St John of God Accord

Dear Sir/Madam

We are parents of an intellectually disabled child who for many years has enjoyed attending a facility called Churinga which is located at 108-130 Diamond Creek Road, Greensborough. As parents we tend to use the word "child" but they are all adults now.

Our daughter is one of 150 disabled adults who attend the centre on week days. She is actively involved in many programs at the centre and Churinga is the most important part of her life. In fact, even when she is unwell she still wants to attend.

Churinga nestles on 8.65 ha of prime real estate in a delightfully peaceful setting. We are told that the buildings are in such poor condition that it is not viable to repair them. Many of the buildings are unused and no longer required. The buildings that are in use are solid and despite the need for maintenance are definitely worth saving.

It is clear that when the value and size of the land is weighed up against the cost of repairing the buildings or moving to another location, repairs are the most logical choice to make. We are told there are no funds available to cover the costs and that the buildings are not worth saving.

The parents are convinced that moving to another location is not worth considering, particularly as the alternatives on offer are unsuitable. Additionally and importantly, it would mean the end of interaction between the group as a whole.

A scenario is forming where it is clear that St John of God Accord, who own the property, sees the land as a profitable redevelopment site. Nevertheless the possibilities of expanding the present site for the purpose it is currently used are enormous. As well as enabling our children to stay there for as long as they are physically able Churinga could become a state of the art training centre; the possibilities are limitless and the need is enormous.

Many of the children do not have parents still alive and no-one to speak on their behalf, which makes Churinga an even stronger focus in their lives.

Some parents were invited to an "Open Forum" to discuss the future of Churinga but not all parents received an invitation to the initial meeting, so not all of us were aware of the devastating changes planned for the future of Churinga.

These are the meetings that we have been invited to attend so far:

2/4/11: Follow up meeting at Churinga to discuss feedback on previous meeting (which we were not invited to attend). We, along with several others, did not know until 2/4 meeting that closure of Churinga was likely. This, we feel, would explain the poor attendance at that meeting.

19/5/11: Meeting with Tony Hollamby (CEO), Heather Mates (Transition Manager) and the both of us to discuss the break-up of Churinga. At 2/4/11 meeting it was indicated that this would happen over a period of 2 years.

However at 19/5 meeting it was indicated that several clients would be moved to other locations this year.

25/5/11: This meeting was similar to 2/4 meeting, only by now more parents have heard through the “grapevine” that closure of Churinga is likely, which resulted in the number attending to be more than double that of the 2/4 meeting.

Following the two “Open Forums” that we have attended and the meeting with Tony Hollamby and Heather Mates on 19/5, we are realizing that not all families have been made aware of the intention to sell Churinga.

As there is no Parents Association we have little contact with other parents as our daughter lives in a Community Residential Unit in Mill Park and we live in Montrose.

An email tree of concerned families has now been formed and in doing so it has become apparent that many families were not aware of the proposed plan to close Churinga.

It seems the plan is to break the group into 3 “hubs” which not only means that many of the clients would not meet each other again but the premises to which they would be transferred are structurally unsuitable rental properties and lacking the conviviality that Churinga has always held. For most the change would be devastating.

Churinga is a unique property. It has many possibilities in regard to training of the intellectually disabled. It could be a model to be proud of and the need for this kind of facility is increasing, not decreasing. We feel that the closing down of Churinga is driven by money. The centre could be saved from destruction and continue to be a place of fulfilment for those attending.

There will always be a need for facilities such as Churinga and with a growing need these havens must exist – not be destroyed. To allow Churinga to be demolished and redeveloped for profit would be a shameful step back in time.

Geoff & Jan Burford