



# CaDDANZ

Capturing the Diversity Dividend  
of Aotearoa/New Zealand

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## LIVING WITH DIVERSITY: NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCE IN NORTHCOTE

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### Researching home, place, and community in Northcote

This document is part of a series of four project briefs (CaDDANZ briefs 8-11) which collate distinct but interrelated sets of key findings from a research project that examined how older adults of 65 years and above create and maintain a sense of home and community in the Auckland neighbourhood of Northcote.

This study forms part of a wider suite of projects within the MBIE-funded CaDDANZ research programme which collectively investigate facets of population change and diversity in a range of different contexts. Overall, CaDDANZ aims to develop greater understanding of how diversity affects society and how, in turn, institutions and communities can better respond to diversity.

This neighbourhood-based study sits within a growing body of social science scholarship that has recognised the importance of 'the local' because this is where diversity is lived and negotiated in everyday interactions. While much of the academic literature and policy discourses tend to focus on ethnicity and culture, we would like to stress that diversity is complex and multiply determined by a broad range of factors, including gender, age, ability and socio-economic status.

We selected Northcote<sup>1</sup> as a research site for a number of reasons. Situated on Auckland's North Shore, Northcote is typical of Auckland's suburban landscape insofar as it largely features standalone homes in a residential area serviced by a local town centre. Its resident population of approximately 8,000 can be described as diverse with respect to socio-economic and educational backgrounds, professions, age groups and ethnic profile but the demographic profile of the suburb has shifted over time and there is significant geographic variation in the area. Northcote is a medium-income suburb but median personal incomes range from approximately \$22,000 in Akoranga and Northcote Central to \$39,000 in Northcote South and Tuff Crater. These intra-neighbourhood discrepancies largely reflect the presence of a significant public housing tract and are also evident in neighbourhood deprivation scores which are 8 and 10 respectively for Akoranga and Northcote Central but only 3 for Northcote Tuff Crater and Northcote South. As housing has become less affordable, home ownership among Northcote residents has decreased from 56 per cent to 40 per cent between 2001 and 2018. Northcote's population is age-diverse but there is a higher-than-average presence of residents aged 65 and over. In Akoranga, home to a large retirement village, the median age is 43.9 years and 56 per cent of the resident population are not part of the labour force. With respect to migrant populations and ethno-cultural and linguistic diversity, at the time of the last available Census in 2018, more than 43 per cent of all Northcote residents were overseas-born.

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this project Northcote comprises the Statistical Areas (SA2) of Akoranga, Northcote Tuff Crater, Northcote Central and Northcote South. See Figure 2 for details.

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Since the 1990s, Northcote has become home to a growing number of migrants from Asia. In 2018, 24 per cent of Northcote residents had been born in an Asian country. The share of residents who identify as 'Asian' has increased from just over 20 per cent in 2001 to 30 per cent in 2018. The largest ethnic group within the broad 'Asian' category were people identifying as Chinese, who made up 17 per cent of residents. This is also reflected in Northcote's language profile: Sinitic languages are prominent in most parts of Northcote. The suburb is also home to many Pasifika and Māori residents (nearly 10 per cent each). However, they are spread unevenly across Northcote with higher shares in those areas where public housing is situated.

Northcote is also currently undergoing a large-scale housing development programme and the revitalisation of the neighbourhood's town centre is scheduled to begin in 2021. Densification and a mixed housing approach (including public, affordable and market homes of varying sizes) will lead to significant population growth, a change in Northcote's demographic profile and a substantial transformation of the built environment.

Urban change, including population growth and the emergence of new kinds and expressions of diversity, raises important questions for policy makers, community service agencies, and local residents alike. These project briefs are designed to provide research findings related to the meanings and practices of community within neighbourhoods (CaDDANZ Brief 8), how people see difference and how diversity impacts residents' sense of home and community (CaDDANZ Brief 9), the significance of the local neighbourhood for the wellbeing of older adults (CaDDANZ Brief 10), and residents' perceptions and experiences of the Northcote Development (CaDDANZ Brief 11).



Figure 1 Northcote town centre

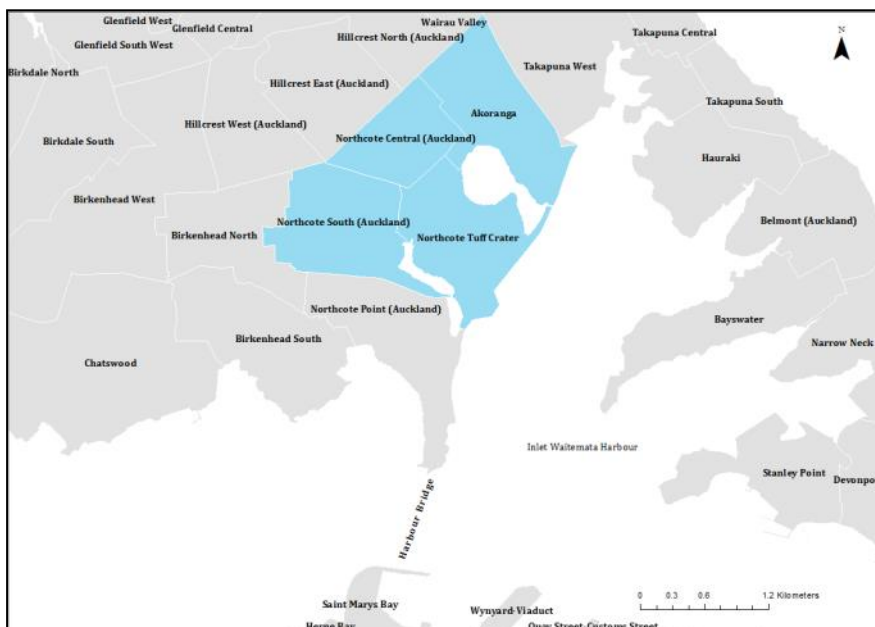


Figure 2 Northcote location



## The research design

We designed a qualitative research project that employed multiple methods (semi-structured interviews, walk-along interviews, focus groups and visual methods) to better understand how older adult residents of Northcote generate and maintain a sense of home, place and community.

We engaged with each participant across five stages of the research. The first stage of individual interviews established residents' story of coming to live in Northcote, situating their life in the neighbourhood within their wider life story. The second research stage sought to better understand participants' sense and understanding of home, while the third explored their relationship to the local neighbourhood using walk-along interviews. The fourth stage of the research was a focus group with attention centred primarily on residents' ideas of what constitutes 'community'. The focus group also discussed residents' perceptions and experiences of the ongoing Northcote Development. The final research stage involved returning to participants' homes once more to talk about their experience of taking part in the project.

Sixteen people, aged between 65 and 89, took part. Out of these, 6 were between the ages of 65 and 75 and 8 were older than 75. Half the participants have a long-term history in Northcote, half are more recent arrivals in the neighbourhood, but not necessarily the country. Out of the 16 participants, 12 were women and 4 were men. Nine participants were born in New Zealand while the remaining participants arrived in New Zealand from China (4), South Korea (2) and the UK (1). Three participants identified as Māori. Five participants lived in owned family homes while 11 lived in public housing properties. Five participants lived in multigenerational family settings.

## Findings

This brief summarises research findings that illuminate how older adult residents respond to, and make sense of, the changing population in Northcote. Residents acknowledge that Northcote is diverse in many ways, but they are most aware of ethnic and linguistic diversity. The brief highlights the ambivalent viewpoints held by both migrant and New Zealand-born residents, as well as outlining the practices employed by residents to aid their negotiation of difference.

### Diversity is more than ethnicity

Discussions of diversity in academia, policy documents and the media often centre on ethnic diversity. Certainly, participants discussed ethnicity – their own and others' – in their interviews with us. But they also referred to other kinds of diversity in our conversations, especially around age, mobility and physical ability. For example, when asked specifically what it means to live in a diverse community, one focus group participant immediately referred to people who have a physical disability which might make them "stand out", as well as her own use of a walker to aid mobility. One of the most notable patterns of difference discussed by participants were old and new class distinctions. Long-standing residents, reflected, for example, on the way that local students used to attend the local schools, irrespective of income level or ethnic background. Many had observed a change over time, however, with increasing numbers of Pākehā and/or wealthy families sending their children "out of zone" (Māori, female). More recently, this class distinction is exacerbated further with Northcote earmarked for significant urban regeneration and renewal. A number of participants raised concerns about the disproportionate impact of this on lower income residents who might be "pushed out" of the area due to increasing house and rent prices, a process one resident described as "social engineering" (Māori, female) (Terruhn et al., 2020). These concerns were also underpinned by an awareness of the disproportionate impact that the development might have on minority ethnic groups, in particular Māori and Pasifika. Although diversity was conceptualised quite broadly, ethnicity, along with cultural and linguistic differences remained most prominent in interviews.

### Negotiating ethnic diversity in Northcote

As described above, the ethnic mix of Northcote residents has changed considerably in the past two decades, with increasing numbers of residents arriving from across Asia. Some New Zealand-born participants felt that those who were part of earlier 'waves' of Asian migration were more "willing to communicate" than more recent migrants from China, for example, who "don't mix as much" (Māori, female). But many participants told us that they appreciated the intercultural connections that these demographic changes bring.



A Pākehā male participant, for example, described hosting a group of Chinese migrants in his home for Chinese New Year and others described enjoying seeing informal expressions of cultural difference in the local shopping centre, such as Chinese residents playing “Chinese Checkers” or practising Tai Chi in shared outdoor spaces in the local town centre. Residents also appreciated more formally organised events such as annual festivals that afforded them the opportunity to learn about and enjoy other cultures:

*Well, they have the festivals out at the shopping centre to celebrate Chinese New Year for instance, and [...] they have special sorts of displays and things, and then they have a stage that they put up in the shopping centre and there is dancing and music and that, and everyone is very welcome to go down and watch and that is really good.* (Pākehā, female)

“Everyone is very welcome” stresses the inclusive nature of the event and contradicts an oft-reported idea that new Chinese migrants tend to stay together: “Some Kiwis used to complain, you Chinese always group together” (Chinese migrant, female). In fact, a number of non-Chinese participants reported that ethnically Chinese residents often invited and welcomed them to participate in their activities.

*The [Chinese] people in there, they are playing checkers or whatever that Chinese game is, I don't know, but you get the thing, we can call it checkers, but they are always there and there is usually a language class and things, and that sort of stuff going on all at the same time, but it is all in the same spot and you feel part of it, it doesn't matter if you speak to people or not, you are in a group feeling and it is lovely, and as I say, the girls down there, I think they really do a good job, they are so friendly.* (British migrant, female)

Although non-Chinese participants articulated their appreciation of these invitational gestures, this did not always translate into practices that promoted intercultural connections. Indeed, some participants expressed hesitation about joining in what they considered to be *others'* spaces.

*Now, every morning, I think it still happens but down at the library they have Tai Chi, you know with exercise to music, and a couple of times I went down and they were 'come, come', very welcoming, but I felt strange, you know? [...] I didn't know any of the Asian people there.* (Pākehā, female)

The ambivalence about joining in expressed here is indicative of what Wise and Noble (2016, p. 425) describe as the everyday practice of “rubbing along” in a multiply diverse neighbourhood. They argue that everyday life in newly diverse contexts is not solely positive but also includes “negotiation, friction, and sometimes conflict” (Wise & Noble, 2016, p. 425). Although New Zealand-born participants did not speak outrightly of intercultural conflict, a degree of conflict – at the very least, internal conflict – was evident. This materialised as reticence regarding who might use public spaces and under what conditions. Indeed, seeing others at home in the local town centre caused some New Zealand born residents to feel excluded from what they considered to be their “own country” (Pākehā, female).

Other kinds of community spaces were also experienced as exclusionary by a small number of participants. In the first of two focus groups, a resident shared her lack of knowledge about the local marae and her unease about visiting uninvited:

*Can I make a confession? I have lived here all my life, well, all my married life, my children have grown up here but I have never been to the marae because I have always been under the impression that you have to be invited onto a marae.* (Pākehā, female)

Lack of awareness about the local marae also emerged in the second focus group but extended to the local community centre, located on the edge of the town centre. The community centre website states that it aims:

*to provide the support to lessen the impact of stress on individuals, families and the wider community. In order to do this, Onepoto Awhina encourages active involvement and participation in the community and helps establish social networks for individuals of all ages and ethnic backgrounds.* (Northcote Community, 2020).

A British migrant explained that she had visited the community centre on numerous occasions and had always been welcomed. Most locally born, non-Māori participants, however, were not aware of it at all, and if they were, thought it offered support to *other* people in the community rather than them. When viewing a photograph of Onepoto Awhina, for example, a participant explained:

*If you had shown me that picture [of Onepoto Awhina] I wouldn't have known what it was ... And I think it was probably established for the people living in the state housing area who perhaps were more transient so that this became a hub for them whereas the rest of us, who lived in the other part of Northcote, didn't know about it.* (Pākehā, female)



It is unfortunate that many older Northcote residents do not know about the centre and the services it offers. But the mistaken belief that those services are designed for other, perhaps marginalised and/or vulnerable Northcote residents reveals class and ethnic tensions and divisions that exist in the community that are not always articulated explicitly.

Residents who had migrated to New Zealand and settled in Northcote from non-English speaking countries also reported feeling appreciative of opportunities for a range of social interactions. They described the town centre as an important place for meeting co-ethnic residents which afforded them a sense of community and belonging in Northcote. But they also appreciated opportunities to connect with locally born residents. A Chinese migrant, for example, explained that she did not want to attend the Chinese Association with other Mandarin speakers. Instead, she wanted to attend community events where she would be exposed to the spoken English language and activities that would foster a deeper understanding of everyday life in New Zealand. Similarly, a Korean migrant described the volunteer work she has carried out for 18 years which helped her to “learn Kiwi culture”. But, for some migrants, the desire to learn about the local “culture and customs” was underpinned by a personal sense of responsibility to do so:

*I think it is good to have the combination of Chinese and the Western, because you can also learn something of the West. Since you are living in this Western place, you need to learn some of their culture and customs [...] I'm willing to learn something new.* (Chinese migrant, female)

Although not overtly articulated, the discourse of personal responsibility evident in this quote, alongside a telling reference to “*their* culture and customs” (emphasis added) reveals that negotiating new levels and kinds of diversity in the community falls heavily and unduly on those who have arrived in New Zealand from offshore.

### **Cross-cultural communication is challenging but not impossible**

As the population of Northcote has grown and changed, so too has its linguistic diversity. Although 88 per cent of Northcote residents speak English, one-quarter speak another language, reflecting the demographic diversity of the area (New Zealand Parliament, 2018). Navigating linguistic barriers was certainly difficult for some participants; many talked about the challenges of not being understood by their fellow residents. A number of New Zealand-born participants expressed regret that they did not always understand their non-English speaking migrant neighbours; they wanted to build new friendships with them but found it difficult to move beyond a fairly superficial greeting.

*I just think they have come here to live and I have lived here too, and I give them a wave or a smile and you will get a response but a lot of them are older and they probably don't speak English.* (Pākehā, female)

While some Pākehā participants *expected* non-English-speaking migrants to learn English, others understood how challenging it must be, especially as older adults arriving in New Zealand from a non-English speaking country (see also Ran et al., 2020).

*And because Mandarin is so hard to learn and English is not an easy language for the older Chinese to learn, I think language is the biggest barrier to stop people intermingling but also cultural differences, I mean there are huge cultural differences between the old Chinese and the Europeans.* (Pākehā, male)

Despite the challenge of learning a new language as an older adult, a number of participants did attempt to learn English after arriving in New Zealand, declaring that they felt a sense of responsibility to do so given English is the most commonly spoken language in New Zealand. One participant, for example, who was born in mainland China and arrived in Northcote more than 15 years ago, took English lessons at the local community centre for some years but found it challenging to learn enough that she could converse with her (native) English-speaking neighbours. Not understanding English stopped others from joining local activities or taking advantage of available services, including those designed specifically for non-English speakers. Chinese participants, in particular, described their reticence about joining social groups but also had no expectation that others should adapt to their language needs, suggesting that “we shouldn't ask for too much. This is their country. They shouldn't do so much for us” (Chinese migrant, female). Again, it seems the burden of negotiating difference rests with migrants who, in this example, must not expect too much.

Several participants chose not to pursue relationships with other Northcote residents who spoke a different language from themselves, deciding that “it is better to avoid any complications” by avoiding a conversation entirely rather than risk misunderstanding. This was especially the case for Chinese residents.



The following quote illustrates one participant's frustration at the limits of communication between herself and English speakers as well as being misidentified as Japanese.

*I think the most difficult thing in my life here is the language. Other things are alright. You see, if I meet someone, we both smile and nod. The man from Unit 4 would say to me: 'Ni Hao!' He asked me if I was Japanese. I said I was Chinese. He spoke Japanese to me, but I said I was Chinese. When we meet, he would say, "Ni Hao!" and I would say 'the Chinese Ni Hao means how are you in English'. But if we repeatedly say these things every day, we'd be bored. (Chinese, migrant, female)*

Later in the interview she expressed concern that if she was to speak, "they would laugh at me, and I'll be embarrassed". Cross-cultural communication in English is clearly risky for non-native English speakers in a way that it is not for those who speak English as their first language.

Others, however, were less concerned about bridging linguistic differences. They found that being understood was fairly straightforward and it was also relatively easy to understand the intentions of local businesses and grasp what other local residents wanted to say. Restaurants with menus solely in Chinese, for example, could easily be deciphered when visual images accompanied the text; an English speaking British migrant described visiting a Mandarin-speaking hairdresser and having no trouble making her needs understood using a combination of signage and gestures; and a Chinese participant explained that she uses a translation App on her phone to communicate with her neighbours. Body language was also important for communicating with others:

*Body language is enough for me to connect with them. Even if I hardly speak English, I can still understand what they are trying to say and they also understand what I am trying to say. And when you are old, you don't need a huge conversation but just see how they are getting on and checking on each other is more than enough. (Korean migrant, female)*

Intercultural communication does not only depend on the English language capabilities of residents. Each older adult resident has a repertoire of communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal, on which to draw. However, support for older adults to build community across linguistic difference is important if residents are to benefit fully from all the neighbourhood and wider community has to offer. Inability to bridge linguistic differences in a rapidly diversifying neighbourhood potentially limits opportunities to practise community and generate intercultural social networks and appears to contribute to a sense of isolation for some residents (see also Ran et al., 2020).

## **The town centre is perceived as a site of both inclusion and exclusion**

Participants talked a lot about the diversity, or the lack of diversity, in the local shopping centre. A number of New Zealand born Pākehā participants, especially those who had lived in Northcote for most, if not all, of their adult lives, lamented the loss of what they considered to be a diversity of shops in the local town centre. In the past two decades, the shopping centre has reportedly shifted from being a traditional local shopping centre where "we had everything there, we had clothing shops, hardware shops, banks, post office, two supermarkets we had, a vegetable shop, book shop, virtually everything you needed was there in our shopping centre and it was wonderful" (Pākehā, female) to a centre with a large concentration of shops, cafes and restaurants managed and/or owned by Chinese nationals, and ostensibly catering to a largely Chinese clientele. And for some long-term resident Pākehā, the concentration of ethnically Chinese stores was problematic.

*Now looking along there, that really tells you 'little Asia' [...] There is not a shop over there that is not run by Asian people. I have got nothing against Asian people but what upsets me is when I can't even read what they are advertising because they are advertising in their own language. (Pākehā, female)*

*Well I am probably the only European in the library [...] I feel like a stranger in my own country [...] Well, not my country but Northcote is no longer... Northcote to me is like little China Town [...] And walking through Northcote I don't feel like I am in Northcote and if you walk into most of the shops and close your eyes and then you open them, you would either think you are in Singapore or China [...] It doesn't really bother me but it makes it hard to do your shopping and things because most of them ... I just feel that the community has been taken over. As I say, if we walk there now we would be lucky to see a European between here and the shops and it is definitely a feeling that it doesn't really feel like part of my country. (Pākehā, male)*



In both of these comments about the changes they had witnessed, there is a distinct racial undertone. Unlike others who appreciated visual images being used to do the necessary translation work, the first quote illustrates the relationship between not understanding and *feeling* excluded. And while the second quote makes reference to it being “hard to do [his] shopping”, a racialized trope reveals discomfort about feeling as though he is in a minority and “stranger in [his] own country”. This sense of exclusion, the loss of familiarity, and the apparent lack of diversity in terms of the kinds of shops available resulted in some locally born participants choosing to shop elsewhere. The following exchange with a long-term Pākehā female resident of Northcote attests to this:

Pākehā, female: *I used to come here and knew most people, I would stop and chat, stop and chat, say hi, not necessarily a long conversation but just say hi, [I] come here now and I might be the only white person in the area, I think that is sad.*

Interviewer: *What did that mean for you?*

Pākehā, female: *Comfort, I am comfortable.*

Interviewer: *And so, the loss of that, what does that mean for you?*

Pākehā, female: *I need to go to another area, which is usually Glenfield where I feel that I am part of the community*

The participant’s reference to Glenfield refers specifically to the Glenfield Mall. In contrast to the local town centre that developed organically in response to the emergent culture of the local community (Spoonley & Meares, 2011), the mall offers a sanitised, standardised and homogenous environment redolent of many other malls around the world. The mall is less convenient for her, requiring a taxi or a friend or relative to drive her there. But, along with a number of other New Zealand-born participants, she values the fairly generic space in which everything is familiar and certain, and she can feel surety about her sense of belonging there.

In contrast to some of the Pākehā, longer-term, Northcote residents who had started to shop further afield, the local shopping centre, and its ‘linguistic landscape’ of shop signs in Chinese characters, served as a vital hub for Chinese migrant residents of Northcote. It was a place where they could purchase familiar foods and be served in a familiar language.

*Yes, [Northcote is] very important. There are many Chinese residents, and they regard Northcote as the hub of their life, just like a China Town in other parts of the world. So, when one Chinese resident greets another one, they’d say, ‘Going to Northcote?’ ‘Yes, to Northcote to buy some veggies’. (Chinese migrant, female)*

The Northcote shops remains an important feature of everyday life for many of our participants that affords them a sense of belonging, familiarity, and community.

## Implications

This project brief was concerned with older adult residents’ perceptions of difference and diversity in their local neighbourhood. Interesting differences and similarities emerged between and within resident groups. For many New Zealand-born residents, especially those who had lived in the area for many years, diversity was met with ambivalence. Some residents reported being open to new kinds of diversity that was evident in the local neighbourhood, including age-, mobility- and ethnicity-related diversity. Regarding the latter, they spoke of their appreciation of other cultures and the new local shopping experiences available to them (Chinese restaurants and supermarkets, as well as weekend festivals, for example). But this did not always translate into neighbourhood practices that forged intercultural social relationships. Conversely, other locally born Pākehā residents expressed concern about what they perceived to be a loss of the community as they had always known it, especially a sense of familiarity, both in terms of the people who live in the area and the shops available to them. And yet despite these concerns, the same participants *were* able to negotiate difference in their everyday lives, finding ways to generate a sense of community across cultural and linguistic barriers. To put this another way, a contradiction often emerged among senior residents between the way they *talked* about diversity in their local community and the *practices* they engaged in.



More recent arrivals to Northcote, especially those who had migrated to New Zealand and settled in Northcote from across Asia, also expressed contradictory viewpoints about their observations and experiences of diversity, but for very different reasons. China- and Korea-born senior residents expressed a desire to connect with others in the neighbourhood, but linguistic differences presented a significant hurdle that was not readily overcome. But perhaps more importantly, they expressed a keen awareness and, in some cases, a sense of responsibility, that the flow of migrants from Asia to New Zealand had resulted in changes to the demographic profile of the local community and the diversity of shops in the local town centre. In this context, they carried the weight of change and were cognisant of their 'otherness' and status as (relative) newcomers, resulting in some avoiding intercultural interactions. Like Pākehā senior residents, a contradiction is apparent between a reported desire to build intercultural connections and the practices required to build those connections.

Local neighbourhoods are not neutral. They have patterns and histories that shape residents' expectations of place and community. The long history and prominence of Pākehā in Northcote provides a degree of surety about Pākehā senior residents' place within the community, including the authority to comment on their observations of change while retaining, unquestioningly, a sense of belonging. The same sense of belonging appears, however, a little more precarious for Chinese and Korean older residents who must negotiate myriad challenges and tensions as they make a home for themselves in the Northcote community. As the demographic profile of the Northcote resident community diversifies once again in response to the regeneration of the town centre and a housing development that will "largely cater to mid-income professionals" (Terruhn, 2019, p. 178), questions are raised about the implications for older adults, both longer-term residents and more recent arrivals, who must renegotiate their place in the Northcote community.

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