

Beginnings of SDN North Sydney

sdn
children's services

"... women who have to go out working all day can leave their children at the Nursery assured that they will be well looked after and well fed"

— Newspaper article, Northern Suburbs Day Nursery, 11 December 1926

SDN Children's Services begins in 1905

In 1905 a determined group of women from Sydney's upper classes who understood 'the difficulties that beset the paths of working mothers' founded the Sydney Day Nursery Association (now SDN Children's Services). The Association aimed to improve the welfare of children whose mothers were facing poverty and had to work to provide for their family. Infant mortality was high and the Kindergarten Union was only able to provide day care services for a few hours a day. With no other option, these young children were often left to fend for themselves among the streets of working class Sydney.

In response, the Association opened its first Day Nursery in a terrace house in Dowling Street, Woolloomooloo in 1905, the first long day care centre in NSW. For just three pence a day, babies and children were bathed, fed, clothed and cared for from 7.00am to 6.30pm.

Due to overwhelming demand, the Association opened Day Nurseries in other locations in the inner city soon after. These were all areas of need in Sydney with large working populations.



Above: Crows Nest cottage, c. 1885. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

History of Crows Nest

The traditional owners of this area are the Cammeraigal people of the Eora nation¹. Many engravings and rock paintings are found in the area, and evidence shows that shellfish was an abundant food source.

Crows Nest was named after the northern suburbs home built in the 1820s by merchant Edward Wollstonecraft, due to its elevated position and view of the harbour.

Originally a rugged landscape, the early 1900s saw a large number of apartments being constructed on the north shore, with an increasing working class population using the ferry system to travel to the city (before the Sydney Harbour Bridge opened in 1932).

In 1917, the North Sydney Trades School opened in Rodborough Avenue.

"The building is of one storey, facing east, with a small sunny garden on either side, where

the members of the Northern Suburbs Committee look forward with pleasure to seeing the little ones in their red frocks playing safely and happily."

— Sydney Day Nursery Association Annual Report 1925-1926

Looking for a home

The Association had opened nurseries in the inner city areas of Sydney, but by the early 1920s they recognised the need for a nursery in the northern suburbs. Indeed, some mothers travelled into the city to drop their children at one of the Association's nurseries, before travelling back to the northern suburbs again to their workplaces.

An Association committee was formed in October 1923 to find a home for a nursery in the northern suburbs of Sydney, and in 1926 proudly announced that a property, 'Tramore', had been purchased in Rodborough Avenue.

Below: SDN President, Mrs Donalda McElhone, at the fundraising fete on Rodborough Avenue, for the Northern Suburbs Day Nursery and Nursery School, 1957. SDN Archive.



According to the 1926-27 Annual Report, the building's location was 'centrally situated, to serve the working class districts in North Sydney, Crows Nest, Willoughby, Wollstonecraft, and the Northern Suburbs generally' and 'the Nursery should prove of great value to working mothers and their children'.

The bungalow was purchased for £2,600. Alterations to make the house appropriate for a nursery cost an additional £1,000.

"Its opening has been a source of great satisfaction to the present members of the Committee, who have seen the task, commenced by a few ladies in October, 1923, at last accomplished."

— Sydney Day Nursery Association, Annual Report 1926-1927

The Northern Suburbs Day Nursery opens!

The Northern Suburbs Day Nursery was open for children on 6 December 1926. Prominent Sydney businessman and Wollstonecraft resident Sir Clifton Love officially opened the nursery on 11 December 1926, alongside his wife, Lady Love, who was on the nursery's Committee.



Above: 50th anniversary of the Northern Suburbs nursery, 1976. Source: SDN Archive

The 'Dorothea MacCallum Cot Room' was named in honour of the then President of the Association,



Below: Community fundraising street fete on Rodborough Avenue, for the Northern Suburbs Day Nursery and Nursery School, 1957. Source: SDN Archive.

Lady MacCallum, who had personally donated £100 towards the nursery.

The Committee raised almost £500 for the nursery in the first year through jumble sales, dances, bridge parties, tennis tournaments and donations.

From the very start the local community supported the nursery — North Sydney Municipal Council donated £10, and the children's garments were made by nearby college students, who also donated pillowcases and toys. The neighbouring North Sydney Trades School (now a TAFE College) also gave items. Families gave when able to — often food such as cakes, butter, fruit and vegetables.

First staff members, Matron Peberdy and Nurse Eason, provided skilled care and 'close attention' to the children. Dr Todd, the nursery's volunteer doctor, checked that the children were in good health during his weekly visits.

On 17 July, 1933, a nursery school was added to the day nursery, to provide an educational program for children 2 years to school-aged. The director, Miss Hutchinson, was one of the first graduates of SDN's nursery school teacher training college, which had opened in 1932.

A new building

In 1974, work began to demolish the old cottage and construct a new building on the site. Staff and children moved temporarily to 4 Rodborough Avenue, and back into the new centre on 19 May 1976, in time to celebrate the centre's 50th birthday in December with an open day and a birthday cake!

The new building was officially opened by Association patron Lady Cutler at the Annual General Meeting at the centre on 27 May 1977.

SDN North Sydney today

Since its beginnings, SDN North Sydney has undergone many changes, reflecting a strong connection with our families within a vibrant and diverse community. This is most recently reflected in its name change to SDN North Sydney from its original and longstanding name of SDN Northern Suburbs, to better reflect the centre's location.

The changes in the sector to increase the quality of early childhood education and care have affirmed our own approach to professional skilled staff and services since our beginnings.

What hasn't changed is our vision and commitment to addressing social inequalities, improving children's quality of life and enhancing the life chances for all children.



Above: Storytime at SDN North Sydney, 2019

¹Spelling sourced from the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council

About this history and the SDN Archive

This history was put together from documents held in the SDN Archive, and information from the North Sydney Council and the Dictionary of Sydney. The SDN Archive, established in 2002, is a unique resource in Australia's early childhood education sector. SDN Children's Services runs 26 children's education and care centres throughout NSW and the ACT, as well as 2- programs supporting children and families and other sector organisations.

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