

Seniors pay the price of isolation

By Karen Hodge

SOARING living costs are putting cash-strapped senior citizens at increased risk of social isolation.

Doncaster-based non-profit welfare organisation Doncare is reporting a growth in Manningham seniors struggling to afford regular outings through its social support program.

Doncare chief executive Doreen Stoves said at least one elderly person a week could not attend desired activities for cost reasons.

Ms Stoves said Doncare would inject internal funding into the program to help, as it was the only social outlet for some seniors.

"I had one volunteer say he had picked up an older person and when she went home, she said it was back to the prison," Ms Stoves said.

Doncare receives Home and Community Care Services funding for a volunteer co-ordinator, with transport provided by Manningham Community Health Service, and seniors paying a small amount for activities.

Ms Stoves is now calling for more support for disadvantaged seniors, saying a pension increase would be a start.

She said elderly residents tended to

save for big bills such as annual council rates, leaving little disposable income.

"It (the problem) is escalating costs and the pension just does not cover the expenses they face," Ms Stoves said.

"I think there is a lot of socially isolated elderly people in Manningham and they are very proud and not used to (seeking) charity."

Doncare statistics show 15 per cent of people seeking its practical help are over 60, with 85-90 per cent using its tax help program also in the age group.

Manningham Council is applying a new rating strategy to its rapidly ageing population, as the number of ratepayers retiring or suffering financial hardship increases.

Council quality and corporate services director Mona Malouf said the council recognised that as the population aged, some would have difficulty "from time to time" paying rates.

"We have strengthened hardship provisions and appeal processes for the aged," Ms Malouf said.

She said the council would also lobby the State Government to increase the \$135 pensioner rate concession, which had not changed in 20 years.

In 2002-03, 7627 pensioners received the rebate in Manningham, of 10,429 pensioners. Rates are nearly 70 per cent of council total revenue.