

Local Community Services Association Policy Platform for enhancing Economic and Social Community Resilience

Introduction

The Local Community Services Association (LCSA) represents around 200 Neighbourhood Centres across NSW. We advocate on behalf of our members, represent their interests to government and provide them with capacity building and organisational governance support.

Neighbourhood Centres are an essential part of a diverse and capable community services system. To ensure the long-term sustainability of Neighbourhood Centres, new policies are required that:

- Recognise Neighbourhood Centres as part of *social infrastructure*, along with other public facilities such as libraries and parks; and better utilise the opportunities afforded by Neighbourhood Centres to engage local communities and deliver government funded services
- Strengthen the role of community development in the FACS portfolio responsibilities including Child Protection.

The LCSA is seeking a commitment from the major political parties to implement within their first year in government after the 2019 NSW State Elections, policies consistent with the Four-Point Plan proposed in this paper. This is a summary document containing high-level policies. A more comprehensive paper detailing these policy proposals will be provided in due course.

Neighbourhood Centres

Neighbourhood Centres (also known as community centres) are place-based, multipurpose organisations, which are community-led with strong local connections. Their key purpose is to build strong, safe, resilient and connected communities.

Neighbourhood Centres are outcomes-driven organisations that across NSW contribute to all domains of the NSW Human Services Outcomes Framework:

- **Social & Community:**
All people in NSW are able to participate and feel culturally and socially connected
- **Empowerment:**
All people and communities in NSW are able to contribute to decision making that affects them and live fulfilling lives
- **Safety:**
All people in NSW are able to feel safe
- **Education & Skills:**
All people in NSW are able to learn, contribute and achieve
- **Economic:**
All people in NSW are able to contribute to and benefit from our economy
- **Health:**
All people in NSW are able to live a healthy life
- **Home:**
All people in NSW are able to have an affordable place to live

Whilst their core function is community development - 95% of LCSA Members receive Community Builders funding through the FACS Targeted Early Intervention program - many Neighbourhood Centres access a range of government program funds to provide various services such as out of hours school care, disability support services through the NDIS, aged care services and financial counselling.

The size of Neighbourhood Centres range from smaller entities, such as The Hub in Guyra with a part-time coordinator and part-time administrator, to large organisations such as Lifetime Connect in the Northern Rivers with 61 FTE staff and an additional 90 volunteers. Their service provision is place-based and dependent on a community strength and connectedness.

Numerous government program reforms introduced over recent years have led to a significant change in the provision of welfare and community services by the non-government sector. The larger not-for-profit charitable organisations are successfully expanding their geographic and programmatic footprints to provide services that were previously performed by governments or smaller locally based and managed organisations. However, a strong and dynamic welfare and community system *must include a diversity of service types* and models:

- Neighbourhood Centres provide a viable, sustainable and economically sound model for the provision of government funded services to families and communities. Neighbourhood Centres are critical to our social infrastructure, because they build the social capital in communities by linking government agencies, services, businesses and local people.
- Neighbourhood Centres are often the first responders to individuals and families. They provide a soft entry point to the community welfare system and are able to triage clients, and where required, make the appropriate referrals to other professional services and link up clients with like-minded community members and community-based activities.
- Most importantly Neighbourhood Centres are deeply rooted in the communities in a way that the bigger players cannot be. They have strong relationships with other welfare organisations and possess the flexibility and agility to provide timely responses to local issues and implement a broad range of government funded welfare and community services that enhance the wellbeing and economic and social resilience of their communities.
- Neighbourhood Centres are well placed to be powerful economic agents in their local communities. Economic activities range from working with local businesses to enhance commercial activity, investing in local job creation initiatives that provide training and job opportunities for people at risk of long-term unemployment, and facilitating economic resilience through strengthening community connectedness and forging trusting relationships.

In addition, Neighbourhood Centres provide high-quality services with good client outcomes on limited resources. Their unique ability is to value-add to government funding by securing further investment from the public, private and philanthropic sectors into local economies. Their work is supported by a large and increasing number of volunteers and many are receiving financial and in-kind support from private businesses rather than the traditional government sources to expand their services.

Four-Point Plan

1. Recognise Neighbourhood Centres as essential social infrastructure (Department of Planning and Environment)

- a) Establish a *new and separate* program budget for Neighbourhood Centres that provides core funding for physical premises, essential staff (coordination and administration) and overheads

This approach is currently successfully implemented in Victoria and Tasmania and provides Neighbourhood Centres with greater certainty and ability to carry out place-based community development activities that meet local needs.

Core funding would recognise the current role of Neighbourhood Centres as soft-entry points to the service system and as places for local people to connect and participate in community life. It would free up the capacity of Neighbourhood Centres to deliver more targeted outcomes under existing funding contracts including Community Builders and other programs.

In the first instance, it is proposed that the new funding program is established under the NSW Department of Planning and Environment, with a view to transferring the program to the proposed Office of Communities, discussed below.

- b) Integrate the costs of establishing and operating new Neighbourhood Centres into the planning for new housing estate and suburb developments, along with other social infrastructure

Establishing Neighbourhood Centres at an early stage of development of new housing estates and suburbs will help develop strong communities and avoid isolation and disengagement. Section 94 of the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* requires developers to contribute to public spaces via making available physical space or a contribution to local council for the provision of public amenities. There is no specific requirement on developers or councils to provide *funding for local community-led organisations* for community development activities or services.

Anecdotal information received suggests that community spaces provided by developers could be more effectively utilised to benefit their communities and prevent social isolation, if managed by newly established or existing Neighbourhood Centres. LCSA promotes the view that a Public Private Partnership model of funding could initiate community engagement strategies in new developments and housing estates which would lead to stronger and more harmonious local communities. This model could also fund existing Neighbourhood Centres to provide outreach services in new developments and housing estates.

2. Acknowledge the significant contribution community development activities make to the economic and social wellbeing of communities (Department of Premier and Cabinet)

- a) Establish an Office of Communities within the Department of Premier and Cabinet to oversee an integrated whole-of-government approach to building economic and socially resilient communities

A new Office of Communities within the central agency, rather than FACS, would have greater leverage to implement whole of government initiatives and ensure a more integrated approach to enhancing economic and social resilience. The Office could incorporate existing state-wide place-based initiatives

such as the Regional Coordination program, and lead in any new whole of government reforms in these areas.

- b) Give responsibility for the Neighbourhood Centres program and other community development funding in NSW Human Services Departments to the proposed Office of Communities

Moving the Neighbourhood Centres Core Funding program (1a) and other NSW Government Funding Programs in Community Development into the proposed Office of Communities would acknowledge that Neighbourhood Centres have a broader role to play in developing social and economic community resilience and would allow for a better collaboration and integration with existing and new government place-based community development initiatives.

3. Recognise the significant opportunities offered by neighbourhood centres across all human services including child protection prevention and early intervention (Department of Family and Community Services)

- a) Review the current role of Neighbourhood Centres and contract length under the FACS Community Builders program to ensure that the current funding is optimised for building stronger communities both for child protection prevention and early intervention *and* the broader FACS agenda e.g. Multicultural NSW, the NSW Strategies for Volunteering, Housing, Youth and Ageing

The core objective of the Community Builders Program is to strengthen communities in response to community need and community aspiration. Community strength outcomes are achieved over long periods of time and therefore require long-term funding contracts over 5-7 years. The Community Builders program (around \$40m) currently sits within the larger Targeted Early Intervention (TEI) program within FACS, which is currently subject to a reform process. Whilst there is a strong connection between the activities of Neighbourhood Centres and early intervention and prevention, i.e. Neighbourhood Centres provide critical front-line services and a soft entry point for vulnerable and at-risk families, Neighbourhood Centres could address broader community issues.

LCSA acknowledges that FACS is committed to maintain the contribution of Community Builders activities under the Community Strengthening Stream within TEI and the important role Community Strengthening plays in the *Their Futures Matter* review. However, a stand-alone Community Builders Program, retaining its current Funding Guidelines beyond 2020, would create a more flexible and adaptive service system and provide greater returns on investment for the NSW Government across Social Policy areas contributing more broadly to the NSW Human Services Outcomes Framework.

- b) Utilise community development practices offered by Neighbourhood Centres to support vulnerable and at-risk families

Community development provides a strengths-based approach to working with vulnerable and at-risk families to build their confidence and abilities within a non-threatening environment. These activities complement, rather than replace specialist services, such as health professionals, family support workers, case managers, psychologists and counsellors. They create outcomes by breaking social isolation, developing support systems and helping individuals gain greater confidence to change and improve their lives.

Neighbourhood Centres currently have an active role in supporting vulnerable children, young people and families. However, greater recognition needs to be given to the part community development plays in empowering people and giving them self-agency.

- c) Utilise Neighbourhood Centres in the provision of broader human services, such as education, health, access to legal system and housing aimed at enhancing the economic and wellbeing of local communities

Neighbourhood Centres currently support clients from diverse communities and with diverse needs. In particular vulnerable and at-risk families present with complex and multiple needs. Neighbourhood Centres are well placed to identify needs and develop local solutions for their particular communities. There is no one-size-fits all. Each Neighbourhood Centre should be able to develop and provide services that are priority for their community.

- d) Neighbourhood Centres can provide support to government's policy development and implementation as well as commissioning processes

Neighbourhood Centres have local relationships and knowledge that contribute to a better understanding of opportunities and challenges in a local community. This gives them the unique ability to inform planning and implementation processes for government initiatives, using evidence-based strategies such as Public Innovation and Assets Based Community Development.

This proposal recognises both the community development and social infrastructure role of neighbourhood centres to ensure that government investment is best targeted and more likely to succeed.

4. Build statewide capability in the governance, management and provision of Neighbourhood Centres (Department of Family and Community Services)

- a) Fund two dedicated positions in LCSA to support capacity building of staff, management committees and local networks

The LCSA is seeking to update and implement specific service standards and support for Neighbourhood Centres e.g. Standards for Information & Referral and Triage, Standards of Best Practice in Community Development and Community Engagement. Standards will provide quality across the State and ensure that Neighbourhood Centres facilitate common agendas, capabilities, outcome measures and aligned services.

In addition the decentralisation of government responsibilities needs to be met with a better resourced state peak body to provide in-depth and accurate assistance to government in planning, policy development and implementation.

- b) Invest in research, evaluation and innovation to better inform and contribute to successful Government initiatives that are place-based and aimed at building strong, resilient and connected communities

LCSA advocates for the value of community development and community engagement as an essential element of successful delivery of welfare and community services. The evidence base requires both input from academic research as well as learning from existing good practices in NSW and abroad. A concerted effort to bring these together would form a basis for future community development funding to be more effective and replicable.

LCSA seeks investment into innovation and trial projects which can be achieved in partnership with government, academia and local services. LCSA would act as a conduit and lead-agency for relevant partnerships and initiatives.