

QCOSS

Queensland Council
of Social Service

*Queensland
Neighbourhood
Centres*

*Community consultation results
paper*

October 2017

About QCOSS

The Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) is the state-wide peak body representing the interests of individuals experiencing or at risk of experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and organisations working in the social and community service sector.

For more than 50 years, QCOSS has been a leading force for social change to build social and economic wellbeing for all. With members across the state, QCOSS supports a strong community service sector.

QCOSS, together with our members continues to play a crucial lobbying and advocacy role in a broad number of areas including:

- place-based activities
- citizen-led policy development
- cost-of-living advocacy
- sector capacity and capability building.

QCOSS is part of the national network of Councils of Social Service lending support and gaining essential insight to national and other state issues.

QCOSS is supported by the vice-regal patronage of His Excellency the Honourable Paul de Jersey AC, Governor of Queensland.

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Executive Summary

To inform the Investment Management Strategy process for Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland, the Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) and Queensland Families and Communities Association (QFCA) facilitated five consultation forums across the state – in Brisbane, Toowoomba, Rockhampton, Cairns, and one teleconference session. 82 per cent of the 122 funded neighbourhood centres in Queensland engaged in the consultation and participation was proportionately well distributed in terms of number of funded sites, regions and localities.

The consultation sought to gather data and narratives to describe the current context and practices of neighbourhood centres in Queensland and to gather their vision for the future of the sector. The results paint a comprehensive picture of the diverse work of neighbourhood centres, common themes and important local nuances.

Neighbourhood centres are essential local infrastructure and hubs for social service provision and community capacity building. In every forum, centres were described as “*brain banks*” of community knowledge. This knowledge is diverse, both structural and organic, and refers to:

- the history of the place in terms of development, activism and events
- services available and how to access them
- community profiling
- relationships from the familial to the political
- resources - who has what and how resources may be shared.

Throughout the consultation, awareness of the importance of community development principles and place based approaches was voiced, with centres acknowledging the importance of connection to place and people in enabling local responses and fostering stability and meaning in communities.

In regional areas, the value and role of neighbourhood centres takes on even greater significance as community members have less access to specialist services. The universal ‘catch all’ nature of the Neighbourhood Centre becomes a focal point for the community. Across Queensland, centres are acting as effective established place based services providing invaluable social infrastructure and community support.

The service mapping component of the consultation that centres are providing multiple service offerings in addition to responding to presenting needs and building the capacity of their communities. Each centre operates in a unique community and tailors responses to the evolving needs of that community whilst acting as a conduit for communities helping each other and themselves. Many neighbourhood centres are providing or supporting all service types in the community whilst concurrently supporting community-led responses and collaborative networks that are inclusive of community members, business, essential services and government. Findings demonstrate that 96.7 per cent of neighbourhood centres participate in community networks, 80.3 per cent are involved in structured collaborative service delivery and 83.6 per cent support local responses to local issues.

By not being bound by specialist program eligibility and program guidelines, neighbourhood centres are able to use community development approaches to provide flexible and immediate responses to community need. Additionally, centres work across the lifecycle and are uniquely placed to provide holistic services in early intervention, crisis and post crisis contexts. The consultation heard repeatedly that neighbourhood centres are the “polyfills” between program silos with the ability to support people through their diverse experiences and across the life cycle.

There was discussion across the forums regarding the increasing numbers of people presenting at centres in crisis. These include domestic violence, acute mental health episodes, homelessness, no income and violent behaviour. 96.3 per cent of services that responded to the survey are working with people experiencing homelessness and 88.9 per cent report working with people experiencing domestic and family violence and people with lived experience of mental health issues. These figures highlight the vital role neighbourhood centres play in working with socio-economically vulnerable and disadvantaged people. These stories also highlight the complexity of neighbourhood centre work.

Centres talked about the meaning of universal services and universal access. The notion that 'universal' infers a low-risk service context or low-complexity clients was strongly challenged. Participants widely reported that people came to neighbourhood centres for everything - many centres stated "*we never say no*" and "*we do what it takes to help*". All centres strongly supported being able to work with people with varying needs without the restriction imposed through program eligibility.

Centres described significant safety concerns for workers and other clients due to low funding, inadequate staffing models and described feeling unrecognised by government for the front line nature of their work. Base neighbourhood centre funding allows for up to 1.5 FTE staff which consultation participants described as inadequate to manage the complexity of running a universal service and community development activities. Resource constraints add to the complexity of neighbourhood centre work. Staff are often required to wear 'multiple hats' e.g. Managers frequently engage in service delivery and administration work to enable the functioning of the service. Many centres also reported staff regularly contributing volunteer hours to enable programs and events to run effectively.

Neighbourhood centres receive funding from a variety of sources including local donations and project grants but the majority is provided by the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services (DCCSDS). Many centres described the difficulties and workload associated with applying for and managing additional grant funding, donations and income streams to meet the needs of their communities. Rural, regional and remote services working in impoverished and/or low population communities described the challenges of attracting donations in these areas and the further inequity this creates in the funding landscape of centres. Additionally, there are significant infrastructure inequities across the neighbourhood centre sector in terms of physical infrastructure, building maintenance arrangements and information technology which need to be addressed.

The consultation asked services what their service could be in the future and what they would need to achieve this. Responses to this question were consistent across the state. Neighbourhood centres want to exist as they do now, to operate within the same flexible framework, but with the addition of adequate infrastructure and funding. Centres describe feeling stretched to the limit between responding to local need, working collaboratively with their communities and meeting funding requirements. They articulated wanting to be able to do more; to operate safe working environments; and, to be recognised as essential social infrastructure.

Introduction

The Queensland Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services (DCCSDS) has adopted the Investment Management Standard (IMS) framework as the preferred process for directing resources and achieving best outcomes for investment in program areas. As part of this statewide shift the DCCSDS hosted developmental meetings with key DCCSDS staff and sector representatives in late 2016 and early 2017 to define the scope of the work, methodology and roles of partner agencies. DCCSDS then engaged Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) to consult with Queensland Neighbourhood Centres to gather data and narratives to inform the IMS for this investment area.

In June 2017 QCOSS partnered with the Queensland Families and Communities Association (QFCA) to co-design and deliver this community engagement component of IMS preparation. Engagement with neighbourhood centres explored current service offerings and relationships and tested the relevance of original program modelling against the contemporary context and community challenges. The unique offering of neighbourhood centres and the value they provide to individuals, communities and government via the foundational infrastructure provided by the DCCSDS Neighbourhood Centre program were also explored.

Key objectives of the consultation were to:

- capture and articulate the value of neighbourhood centres
- understand the complexity of neighbourhood centre work
- understand regional influences on the program model
- identify key themes across neighbourhood centres
- seek input into a future funding approach.

This report is based on the extensive consultation undertaken by QCOSS and QFCA and is directly drawn from the information and views provided by neighbourhood centres across Queensland. The report and findings will be presented to the DCCSDS IMS working group to inform the development of future neighbourhood centre strategy and program logic. The DCCSDS will provide the sector with information pertaining to the IMS as part of their communications strategy.

Community consultation process

QCOSS and QFCA facilitated five forums across the state in Brisbane, Toowoomba, Rockhampton, Cairns, and with one teleconference session. A total of 117 people from 73 centres attended these half-day sessions. These were followed by a survey sent to all 122 funded neighbourhood centres across Queensland reiterating the questions asked at the workshops. Responses were received from 67 centres, 27 of which had not attended the workshops. These additional 27 centres combined with the 73 centres who attended forums constitute 82 per cent of the Queensland neighbourhood centre sector and a substantive sample.

QCOSS and QFCA staff who facilitated the workshops have previously managed neighbourhood centres in Queensland and have strong existing relationships in the sector. Workshops were well attended and centre staff and management actively discussed the challenges, benefits and achievements of working with their communities. Consultations involved the use of participatory process to facilitate conversations and maximise collective intelligence of participants.

Workshops consisted of an overview of the IMS process presented by DCCSDS followed by a participatory service mapping activity to describe the breadth of work being done by centres. This process identified both the common and unique offerings of each service.

A World Café process was then used to explore:

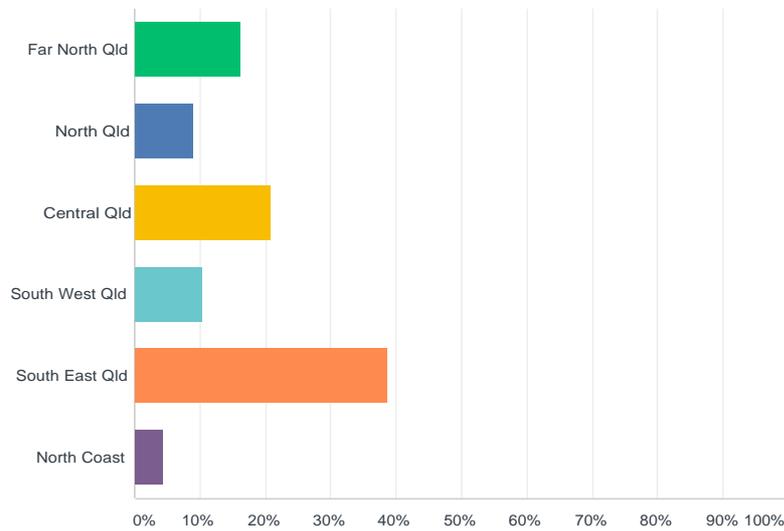
- the value of neighbourhood centres to their local communities
- the value of neighbourhood centres to the broader service sector
- the individual and collective unique offering of neighbourhood centres and
- the future of neighbourhood centres in Queensland.

Findings

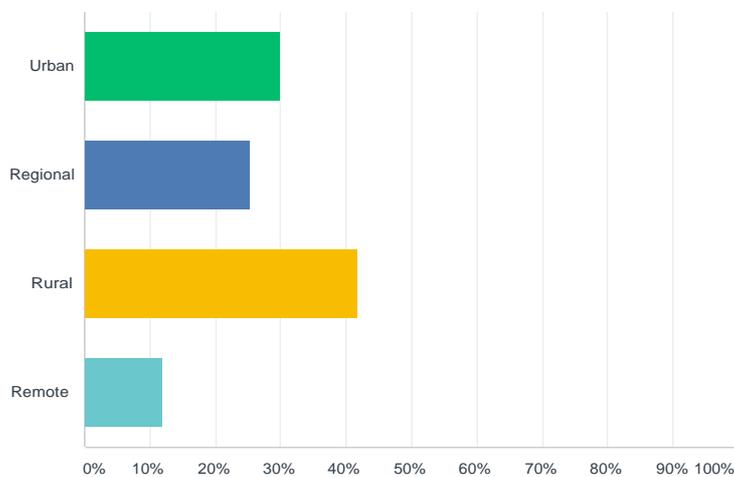
Representation

Participation in the consultation process was proportionately well distributed across the state in terms of number of funded sites, regions and localities. This is demonstrated in the tables below:

Regional Representation



Location of Neighbourhood Centre



Service mapping

Each session commenced with a service mapping activity to demonstrate and share the breadth of work undertaken by neighbourhood centres. The results provided a visual base for the broader discussions that followed and allowed services to share their experience and knowledge. The exercise demonstrated the place-based nature of neighbourhood centre work and the spectrum of presenting cohorts and need. One participant summarised:

"I'm glad to hear of the variety of services offered by neighbourhood centres. I hope we can get it through to DCCSDS that we are not all the same nor are the clients or communities we serve. There has to be a bit of flexibility and understanding of what will work in our local area." Forum participant

Neighbourhood centres describe either directly providing or supporting other services to provide:

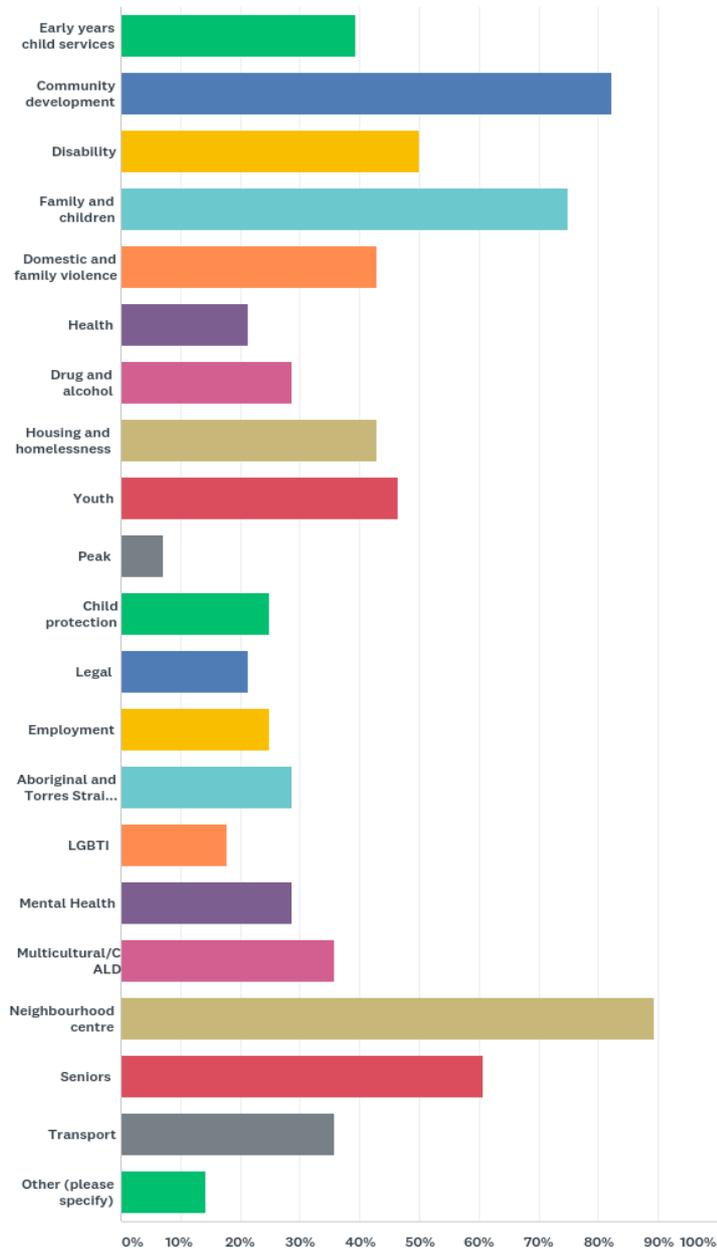
- financial support services
- family support
- domestic and family violence support services
- children's services
- youth programs
- food security
- legal services
- health services
- counselling and mental health support
- crisis services
- housing and homelessness services
- community development
- activities
- community events
- governance (auspicing, network secretariat, community leadership).

Neighbourhood centres are the conduit for communities helping each other and themselves and are effectively providing and/or supporting all service types in the community. They are also supporting community-led responses and collaborative networks that are often inclusive of community members, business, essential services and government. 96.7 per cent of neighbourhood centres participate in community networks and 63 per cent host them. 80.3 per cent are involved in structured collaborative service delivery and 83.6 per cent support local responses to local issues. This is a significant achievement and relies on the workforce context of volunteer staff who often outnumber paid staff 10-1 in neighbourhood centres. A key element of the neighbourhood centre model is that they are run by local people usually in a voluntary capacity through participation on the management committee. In Queensland 75.4 per cent of neighbourhood and community centres are run by local people.

The following graph from the workshop evaluation survey provides a snapshot of service types. Although the sample is small the proportions are reflective of the full data set. For a full breakdown of service types and activities please see Appendix 1.

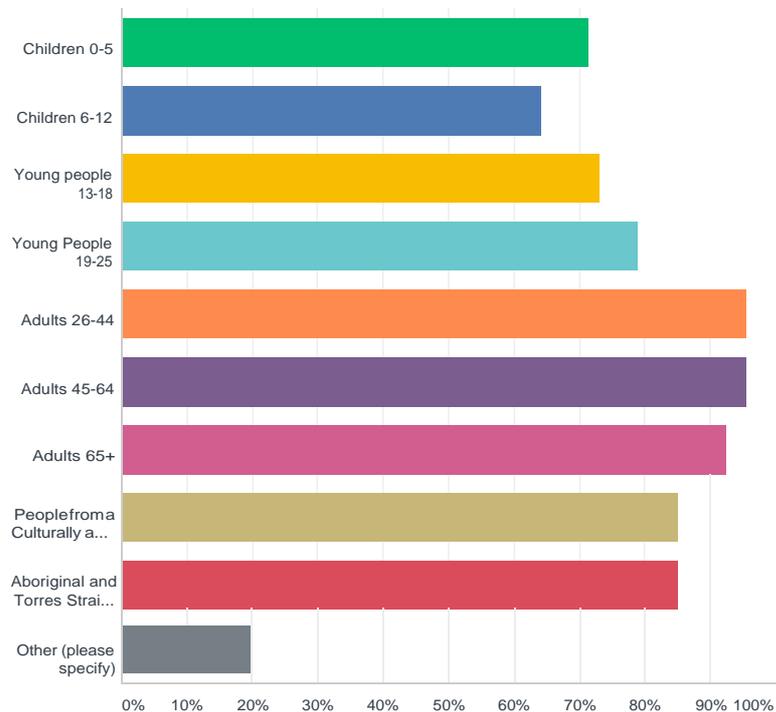
Q11 Which services does your organisation provide?

Answered: 28 Skipped: 0



Services are provided to all people in the community, people across abilities and age groups. Neighbourhood centres describe working with the community “from the cradle to the grave” and this is demonstrated in the following table.

Service User Profile

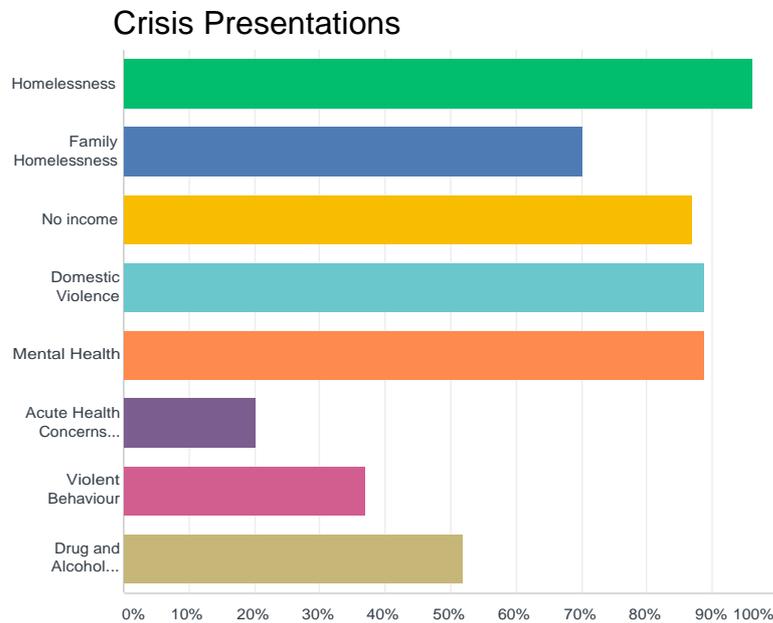


In addition to the broad program offerings of neighbourhood centres they are also supporting a huge range of drop-in and recreational activities that provide practical help, a creative outlet and social opportunities for community members. These range from the much touted “tea and tai chi” to showers and laundry facilities, community gardens, computer and internet access, wellbeing and educational groups. These activities reduce social isolation for individuals and support the social fabric of communities.

Centres described a wide range of events and activities promoting diversity including the wonderful “blindfold dinner” where people met and ate together without being able to make visual judgements and also got an insight into what life was like with a visual impairment. Many centres also talked about the central role they play in disaster management for their communities. Neighbourhood centres are where people come to connect, celebrate, contribute and to get help when they need it.

There was discussion across the forums regarding the increasing numbers of people presenting at centres in crisis. These include domestic violence, acute mental health episodes, homelessness, and violent behaviour. 96.3 per cent of services that responded to the survey are working with people experiencing homelessness and 88.9 per cent report working with people experiencing family and domestic violence and those with a lived experience of mental health. Working with people contemplating suicide was frequently mentioned in the forums.

The following table represents the proportion of neighbourhood centres responding to common crisis presentations.



Services attributed this increased need to increased poverty and desperation in their communities. People come to the neighbourhood centre when they need help because as it is a universal service and they will not be turned away. For some people the fact that Neighbourhood centres offer anonymous services, which can be accessed without fitting a criteria is important. Others present in crisis because they have a strong relationship with the neighbourhood centre and know and trust staff.

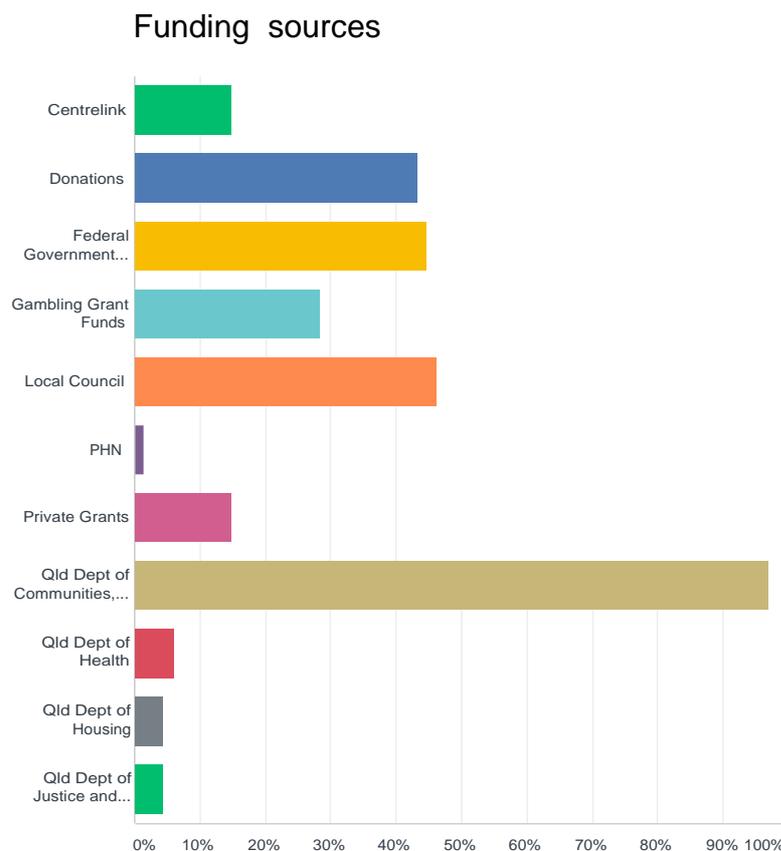
In some places the desperation related to lack of or change in employment opportunities within the community particularly those impacted by the resource boom. In some places it presented as substance abuse with subsequent impact on families and relationships. Services that act as Centrelink hubs/ kiosks in remote areas reported increased violence following the increased digitisation of centrelink and more recently the automated debt collection introduced in 2016.

Centres talked about the meaning of universal services and universal access. The notion that 'universal' infers a low-risk service context or low-complexity clients was strongly challenged. Participants widely reported that people came to neighbourhood centres for everything - many centres stated "*we never say no*" and "*we do what it takes to help*". Centres described feeling unrecognised by government for this work and expressed frustration at different understandings and use of these terms. They also described feeling the need to justify why they did this work when they were only funded to provide information and referral. In many places specialist services are not available or took too long to respond if they were provided by outreach from the nearest large town.

All centres strongly supported the approach of being able to work with people across presentations and without the restriction imposed through program eligibility. They also described significant safety concerns for workers and other clients due to inadequate staffing models. This discussion is continued in the funding section of this report.

Infrastructure and funding

Neighbourhood centres receive funding from a variety of sources including local donations and project grants but the majority is provided by the DCCDS as shown below. Many centres described the difficulties and workload associated with applying for and managing additional grant funding, donations and income streams to meet the needs of their communities. Rural, regional and remote services working in impoverished and/or low population communities describe the challenges of attracting donations and this creating a further inequity in the funding landscape of centres.



Neighbourhood centres are housed in a variety of settings including purpose-built new premises, council offices, in old houses, dongas and for some mobile services not at all. Nearly half are collocated with other services and most rent out or provide free space to other groups in their community. Some services are required to pay private rent and some contribute a peppercorn rent attached to their government owned building. Some centres are required to pay for the entire maintenance of their buildings while others pay for certain items and others are not required to meet these costs.

With low basic program funding these arrangements limit service delivery outcomes and frustration was expressed at the inequity of physical infrastructure arrangements across the program. The sector requested greater transparency and acknowledgment of the time and resources required to maintain a building. A few unhoused mobile regional services expressed preference for a full bells and whistles mobile home to meet the needs of their dispersed community.

Neighbourhood centres also raised concerns regarding IT Infrastructure. With increased expectations of quality management and diverse reporting regimes, services are required to collect accurate data and to describe their client and social outcomes. Centres want to do this well but do not have dedicated IT staff and describe frustration at trying to assess the best systems and software in addition to their other work. The expense and time limited relevance of some technologies was also discussed as a concern for services. The sector would welcome discussion with DCCSDS regarding the establishment and maintenance of digital infrastructure including the allocation of appropriate additional funding.

The base funding for neighbourhood centres is limited and varied and is inadequate to provide adequate staffing for service delivery and centre coordination. This resource constraint equates to limited opening hours and exposure to staff having to work alone. Many centres rely on volunteer rosters to provide extra support but this help is sometimes unreliable and often under or untrained. One rural centre manager said *“I want someone else here to call the ambulance if I get hit”*.

Many centres also raised the impact of the SCHADS regulation upon the sustainability of centres. As neighbourhood centres were not classified as front line services they did not receive supplementary funding to meet the back pay obligations contingent in the changes to the Award. Many services described having to use their small reserve of accumulated funds to meet this financial burden and/or to reduce service delivery hours or restructure positions to maintain viability. Anecdotal centre staff and management described contributing regular volunteer hours to continue service delivery.

The value of neighbourhood centres

Summary

Neighbourhood centres are hubs for social service provision and community capacity building. In all the forums, centres were described as *“brain banks”* of community knowledge. This knowledge is diverse, both structural and organic, and refers to:

- the history of the place in terms of development, activism and events
- services available and how to access them
- community profiling
- relationships from the familial to the political
- resources - who has what and how resources may be shared.

As such, centres are often consulted by government and researchers to identify emerging and ongoing local issues. They are the barometer of local communities and through their networks and relationships can provide accurate information and gather support for initiatives. They are also able to advocate on behalf of their communities.

As outlined by the service mapping, neighbourhood centres are providing a broad range of services. By not being bound by specialist program eligibility and program guidelines they are able to fill gaps in community service provision and provide flexible and immediate responses to community need. Additionally, centres work across the lifecycle and are uniquely placed to provide holistic services in early intervention, crisis and post crisis contexts. We heard repeatedly that neighbourhood centres are the *“polyfilla”* between program silos with the ability to support people through their journey. One centre summarised:

“We provide a safe, trusting and welcoming space for people who are socially isolated, vulnerable and in need of support where there is no criteria. Our centres promote social justice principles of inclusion. The centres also provide a space where people can learn, participate and contribute and thus have a sense of belonging and improved wellbeing. This can provide the opportunity for skill

development and volunteering/work experience that may lead to employment outcomes. The centres provide a place for a diversity of people to connect with their neighbours and build bridging social capital and therefore community resilience and cohesion. They provide spaces for people to unlock their skills, talents, assets, gifts and potential and support community ideas using community development processes. Our centres are responsive to community needs and as a generalist program, we are flexible depending on what the particular issues and needs are at local community level. Our centres can also provide place-based responses and advocacy.” Forum participant

Centres are valuable not only to the residents of the local area, but provide an important conduit to the community for services. By hosting other services and brokering relationships, neighbourhood centres provide a safe accessible space, familiar to local people and improve the other services ability to meet their clients’ needs.

An important point raised by several rural services is that they are a valuable part of the local economy and provide work and governance experience that individuals then utilise in other settings such as employment and sporting groups.

One centre described the program as a good investment that deserved recognition:

“If we are now working from a business model it’s worth considering the ability of centres to value add to the community centre funding provided by the Department of Communities through attracting additional investment in their communities. Last year the income for community support sat at around \$112,000 however our organisational income was around \$1.8m. I suggest that for an investment of \$112,000 this was a pretty good return and this does not include the infrastructure. While the department funded the construction of the main hub, our organisation has secured additional funding from other sources to construct new buildings and extend existing ones. This initial investment has allowed a range of place-based services to be delivered in our community. If I were an investor I would consider this a pretty good return on my investment.” Forum participant

Consultation Forum Responses

Part of the consultation process included a world café process focused on three questions:

- What does your neighbourhood centre bring to your community?
- What does your neighbourhood centre bring to the community service sector?
- What is the unique offering of neighbourhood centres?

The collated themes from the responses to these questions at the five workshops are presented below.

What do neighbourhood centres bring to the community?

- universal services
- hubs for place-based services premised on local inclusion and participation
- advocates for the community
- provide a conduit for interconnectivity between the community and service providers
- capacity builders for community
 - supporting engagement of the community via volunteering
 - training across governance/ volunteering promoting and prompting advancements through the community
 - encouraging and empowering new leaders

- accessible non-clinical services – you don't need a diagnosis to attend and a diagnosis will not exclude attendance. Services are tailored to the needs of each individual.
- “never say no” – centres are risk tolerant, respectful and realistic
- fill the gaps other services do not, cannot or will not address
- provide a safety net
- work across the generations, cultures, abilities - we accept everyone
- breakdown barriers
 - access to other services
 - support with forms, paperwork and practical needs
 - empower people to follow through with support opportunities and navigate systems
- low or no-cost services and activities

“Our community centre offers residents from surrounding suburbs a place where they belong, they feel at home, they feel valued, respected, accepted, welcomed and able to contribute to their own community.”

“We offer a platform for people to seek out answers that they may not actually know the questions to. Where people can come with a number of complex issues that they are not aware of what is available to assist them. Our community centre can unpack these issues and set a clear referral path of services that can assist. Offering a soft entry approach to service delivery through socially inclusive groups, specific parenting programs and community events offers many platforms for the community to engage in their community and get the support they need.” Forum participant

What do neighbourhood centres bring to community services?

“Our community centre offers a space to be accessed and used within the community service sector, it offers a resource of knowledge and access to information specific to this community and its surrounding areas.”

“We provide spaces where other services can provide their services. We provide linkages and connections to people at grass-roots level to assist in the referral pathways. We provide support to people needing information and referral about services but also support and advocacy to navigate systems including phone calls, filling out forms, transport etc. We auspice community groups who are active in the community and provide the legal framework and insurances required for small, local groups to do what they are passionate about and support that creativity and energy.” Forum participant

Summarised themes from the five workshops:

- infrastructure – provide a safe space for other services to provide outreach and specialist services. This can extend to allowing families and individuals to use the space to comply with mandated services. For example, supervised access visits and/or parental changeover. Additionally, neighbourhood centres supply space and insurance coverage to unfunded groups to support their work with the community.
- partnerships – support service networks and model collaborative practice to deliver holistic place-based services
- auspice new services
- neighbourhood centres are a constant in communities. They have a history in the community and are part of the community. They are best placed to deliver or host services. Many centres expressed frustration that contracts for servicing their communities were awarded to external providers who have failed to provide these services.

- reduce barriers to accessing services through:
 - meeting basic needs to ensure and enhance the individual's ability to accept and respond to the support on offer
 - brokering relationships between clients and other services to enable service delivery
 - assisting clients navigate service systems, complete forms and access digital information. For example, housing and Centrelink.
 - advocating on behalf of clients
 - providing pre-, during and post-support for specialist interventions
- provide crisis responses until funded/essential services are able to organise and provide a response. For example, accommodation for people fleeing family and domestic violence; stabilising a person with an acute mental health issue until treatment or hospitalisation can be arranged

"The neighbourhood centre is the 'eyes and ears' for a lot of services that are based in regional centres [Longreach, Barcaldine, Emerald, Rockhampton] and the 'go-to' place for assistance in informing the community about their services and organising meetings and activities on their behalf." Forum participant

What is the unique offering of neighbourhood centres?

Neighbourhood centres provide services to people from 'cradle to grave'. More than 95 per cent of participating neighbourhood centres provide support to people aged 26-44 years and about the same proportion for those aged 45-64 years. Almost 80 per cent also worked with young adults (19-24 years), with nearly 60 per cent providing services benefiting children 0-5 years. More than 90 per cent of neighbourhood centres also provided much needed support to our ageing population (65+ years).

Neighbourhood centres also provide inclusive services, with more than 80 per cent reaching both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and those from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. As a local hub with a universal remit, neighbourhood centres are champions of diversity and inclusion with more than 70 per cent organising welcome and diversity celebrations. It is clear that neighbourhood centres are a meeting and information point for all locals; from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to our most recent arrivals; from retired elders to new babies; from those in crisis; to those whose passion for community involvement leads them to volunteer at the neighbourhood centre.

"A community (highlight bold) based centre for the community that listens, supports and acts in the best interest of the community. Whilst services provided may have a generic program title their activities are tailored to the clients and community needs (for example, family support). Neighbourhood centres are also seen as the font of all information and the first point of call. For example we've been asked over the years to find a wife, what the lotto numbers were, find lost family members, etc. etc." Forum participant

Summarised themes from the five workshops:

- community development framework:
 - community ownership/ governance
 - open trusting safe places
 - give communities a voice
 - a platform to work together
 - provide and foster leadership
 - community-led agenda
- rapid and responsive services. Neighbourhood centres can mobilise communities to respond to disasters, and adapt activities and services to meet emergent needs.

- neighbourhood centres are genuine place based service linked to business, all levels of government, sporting groups, essential services and all levels of government. The majority of centres have local representative governance and volunteer staffing. This framework ensures engagement and relevance.
- work across program restrictions, generations, cultures and abilities. Fit the service around the need of the individual not try to fit the individual into the service systems.
- fill the gaps/ pick up the slack catching clients who fall through or do not fit into services
- longevity – many neighbourhood centres have been active in their communities for a long time fostering connections and legitimacy
- the 'someone' for those who have 'no-one'. Centres mimic a family environment
- personal face-to-face connections without a time limit
- build client relationships, providing steps to engagement with other services before, during and after contact – centres create the environment to enable other services to be effective
- anonymity. Clients do not need to identify a need or sign up to a program to be accepted into the neighbourhood centre. For clients with significant privacy concerns or barriers to accessing services this characteristic is essential and unique.
- resourceful and creative. Support our communities with limited resources. The most cost-effective program in the state.
- ability to adapt to change, to be risk tolerant, and therefore able to come up with innovative, workable solutions to complex problems.
- 'brain bank' of community knowledge/ Library of knowledge.

"Neighbourhood centres are safe and welcoming spaces that are inclusive of everyone and do not have any entry or exit criteria. They reflect the communities where they are placed and provide local connections, linkages, support, advocacy etc. They are places that can be anything and everything and have enormous potential and flexibility (with right level of funding). Neighbourhood centres provide a cost-effective service to the community and do a lot more than what are funded to do - punch way above their weight in terms of what is delivered. Have an appetite for taking on risk that other services don't and this assists people access a safe and welcoming place that cannot get anywhere else. Neighbourhood centres fill the gaps in service delivery in health, mental health, housing etc. and provide support in between the specialised service delivery." Forum participant

The complexity of neighbourhood centre work

Neighbourhood centre work is complex. As outlined in the service mapping section of this report, centres provide multiple service offerings in addition to responding to presenting need and building the capacity of their communities. Each centre operates in a unique community and tailors' responses to the evolving needs of that community.

To work effectively in this context services need to manage multiple relationships which is inherently resource intensive and complex.

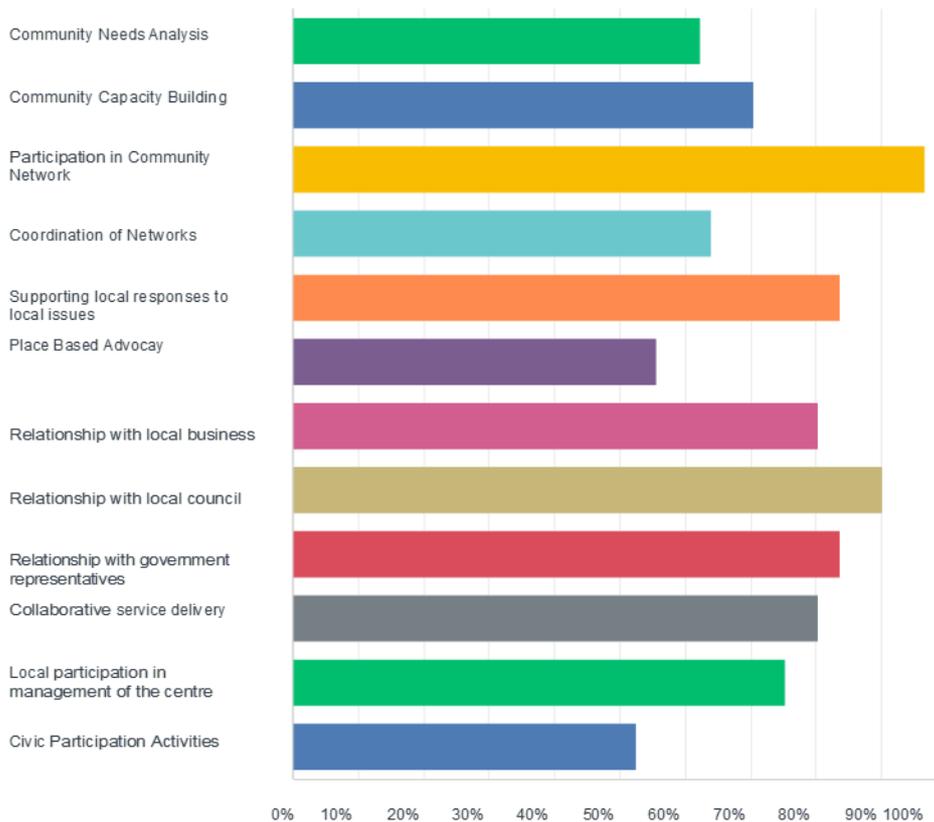
Neighbourhood centres facilitate relationships with:

- their clients
- visiting, colocated and/or referral services
- volunteers
- donors
- groups using or hiring facilities
- all levels of government

- multiple funders (see Q6 Appendix 1)
- local stakeholders

The following table demonstrates the high prevalence of community level relationships and activities maintained by neighbourhood centres:

Community Development/ Place Based Work



Resource constraints add to the complexity of the work. Base neighbourhood centre funding allows for up to 1.5 FTE staff which consultation participants describe as inadequate to manage the complexity of running a universal service. Staff are often required to wear ‘multiple hats’ e.g. Managers frequently engage in service delivery and administration work to enable the functioning of the service. Many centres reported staff regularly contributing volunteer hours to enable programs and events to run effectively.

“Community centres offer a one stop shop for people to access support whatever the need. It is the platform for all people, services and levels of government to access information, support and referrals. It is the first, interim and last place that people access as a gateway or pathway to specialised services to meet their needs.” Forum participant

To enable appropriate referrals, services need to maintain up to date knowledge of cross government systems including processes for accessing housing assistance, appropriate health care, income support and concessions, child safety and legal supports. Centres also report advocating on behalf of their clients with other services and government agencies further adding to the complexity of relationships.

Participants reiterated across forums that neighbourhood centres work across the life cycle, described by one centre as 'from the cradle to the grave'. The descriptors of 'one stop shop' and 'no wrong door' also emerged at all forums to describe the complexity of the work. In some remote services centres describe having to use their facilities to keep people fleeing family violence safe until other arrangements can be made.

Most services described working with people who are designated 'too hard' by other services; or as not meeting eligibility criteria for specialist services or as being exited due to time limited program restrictions. The immediacy of presenting need can mean that service responses to these community members may occur concurrently with the running of a playgroup or an art class in the same premises. These factors combine to create varied, dynamic and at times volatile client bases for neighbourhood centres which require skilled and flexible responses from staff.

Place-based/regional impact

Place Based Framework

In regional areas the value and role of Neighbourhood Centres takes on even greater significance as community members have less access to specialist services. The universal 'catch all' nature of the Neighbourhood Centre becomes a focal point for the community. Across Queensland, centres are acting as effective, well-established place based services providing invaluable social infrastructure and community support.

Throughout the consultation, awareness of the importance of place based approaches was voiced with centres acknowledging the importance of connection to place and people in enabling local responses and fostering stability and meaning in communities.

*"Our centre is enmeshed into the community's framework, servicing a broad client base and with the withdrawal & centralisation of services we are being relied upon even more for information, support and enabling of access to community services."
Forum participant*

The Commonwealth Place-Based Service Delivery Initiatives Key Learnings project Research Report No. 32 – April 2015 by Wilkes, Lahaussé, & Edwards defines place based initiatives as "...programs designed and delivered with the intention of targeting a specific geographical location(s) and particular population group(s) in order to respond to complex social problems."

This report identified the characteristics of spatial targeting and social targeting as defining orientations of place based initiatives. These principles are intrinsic to neighbourhood centre work.

Further the report identified common delivery and implementation elements from place based initiatives across the United States (US), European Union (EU) and United Kingdom (UK).

Design and delivery: Common elements

- **flexible delivery** - demonstrating a flexible approach to service delivery according to community needs, as well as a flexible approach to expenditure of funding;
- **local autonomy** - involving the local community (organisations and individuals) through consultation and active involvement in decisions;
- **joined-up working** - integrating or coordinating and developing partnerships between organisations within local areas across the government, private and community sectors; and

- **governance** - agencies having good checks and balances in place regarding community discretion in the allocation of government resources,

Program implementation: Common elements

- **capacity development**
- **lead times**
- **long-term focus**

There was confusion amongst centres at the emerging place based policy platform of government that appears to not recognise the existing role of neighbourhood centres in this context. Centres report having the relationships and in many cases the physical infrastructure to support an upscaling of place based initiatives in their communities and would welcome inclusion in this discourse and related strategies.

“Our centre is the touch stone locally. We are the only permanent service provider/space in town” Forum participant

Drive in Drive out services

Participating regional, rural and remote centres reported frustration at the increasing prevalence of external organisations funded to provide ‘drive in drive out’ services in their communities. Centres are often required to provide the venue for these visiting services, arrange appointments with clients and provide follow up support without any additional resources. Many neighbourhood centres described a preference for being funded to deliver or to broker services as required.

In some locations these partnership arrangements are working well but the following issues were reported from others:

- small time window for appointments. Some services will travel two to three hours from the nearest town to meet clients and staff are constrained to eight-hour days. This leaves a brief window for client contact
- due to the constrained nature of the appointment system outlined above clients frequently miss appointments. This is particularly true for the most marginalised community members such as those with poor mental health or experiencing homelessness or family violence. For these people time management is difficult
- external services are not used to working in the context of their community. For example, they may recommend accessing services or treatments that are unavailable and for which the person does not have transport or finances to access
- external services regularly attend at the commencement of a contract but that this tapers off
- poor accountability for the quality or frequency of externally provided services

Digital exclusion

In some remote regions, internet access is sparse and local community members may not have the resources or skills to participate in digital platforms or to access digital information. In dispersed geographical areas, this can add to social isolation and digital exclusion. Additionally, essential government services including Centrelink and Medicare presume literacy and digital competence to access their systems.

Neighbourhood centres are providing key services in these areas through the provision of computers, internet access, training and support. The face to face connection provided by neighbourhood centres reduces isolation, facilitates connectivity and increases individual's capacity to access other supports while remaining within their own community. One service

described doing remote home visits for rural clients to configure their electronic devices and internet connection.

Transport

Providing, organising or funding transport services for clients is a key service provided by some neighbourhood centres. Centres provide local transport for those that need it and some also provide regular transport to the nearest town to enable community members to access income support, health and employment services. They do this because there is no transport or because the cost of transport is prohibitive for low income people. One service described Centrelink requiring job seekers to attend town based appointments weekly to remain eligible for benefits but that the return trip would cost \$26 return. For people on Youth allowance this expense constituted 20% of their fortnightly benefit.

Barometer

Through their connection to place and people Neighbourhood centres recognise emerging needs and themes in their local sphere. This is supported by regular needs analysis and feedback processes. They are the barometer of social trends and dynamics and are frequently consulted by governments and other agencies to ascertain the needs of the community.

Disaster response

Neighbourhood centres play a key role in responding to disasters across Queensland. Many services are included in local government disaster management plans and play a lead role in preparation and response strategies in their communities. Centres described feeling unvalued and under resourced for the provision of these services. They told of working on the ground with local people in the days following a natural disaster only to be replaced by large funded organisations who were mobilised to their area when the initial crisis had passed. Centres expressed a preference for greater collaboration and resource equity in these circumstances.

The future of neighbourhood centres

We asked services what their service could be in the future and what they would need to achieve this. Responses to this question were consistent across the state. Neighbourhood centres want to exist as they do now, to operate within the same frameworks but with the addition of adequate infrastructure and funding. Centres describe feeling stretched to the limit between responding to the needs of their communities, working collaboratively with their communities and meeting funding requirements. They articulate wanting to be able to do more; to be safe working environments; and, to be recognised as essential social infrastructure.

Summarised themes from the five workshops:

- recognition of neighbourhood centres as
 - essential social infrastructure
 - essential services
 - front line services
- adequate funding to support
 - governance
 - collaborative work and systems
 - service delivery
 - safe staffing levels
 - fair and equitable pay
 - training

- adequate and equitable infrastructure
 - buildings
 - IT
- to exist as they exist now with appropriate resourcing
- improved reporting requirements. Current systems are laborious and do not reflect or showcase the complex work done by centres

Direct responses to this question from centres:

“Purpose-built government funded building where concurrent programs/activities can be delivered and flexibility regarding timing of delivery of programs, events etc. Sufficient funding that reflects the universality of the work and the complexity and value it offers community and not just those who are at risk or vulnerable but the broader community to participate, volunteer, donate, contribute, co-collaborate, deliver services from other organisation’s, businesses etc. We would be funded across departments to recognise the work that is done in other sectors, health and housing in particular. There would be participatory research and evaluation conducted to hear the value and impact of the people that neighbourhood centres work with and investment benefit in this type of evaluation. Neighbourhood centres could be more of a community education and development hub to generate local initiatives and groups.” Forum participant

“The centre could meet more community needs and provide space and services for more people. Funding bodies need to recognise the infrastructure and position of centres that is already established and to recognise how community centres could be a great place for many community services and newly funded programs to run from.” Forum participant

“We could be the hub of information and skilling for better health and wellbeing to all aspects of community. We need acknowledgment from all levels of government and to be provided with resources and infrastructure that is reasonable to geographic catchment. This would allow the community to build resilience and not just activate programs when communities are in crisis.” Forum participant

“Bigger and better. There is room for continuous improvement and growth in community centres. Acknowledgement of the work that is done to make community centres the heart of a community, acknowledgement of the strengths each community has and how these strengths are harnessed, nurtured and enhanced through community centres. We need financial support to fund full time staffing with a minimum of two staff, costs associated with public liability and various other insurances required and the cost to deliver programs including resources and amenities. Also access to research teams or students to do regular community consultations of the changed in community and barriers to accessing services and supports - aimed at continuous improvement.” Forum participant

“Our centre s a vital resource to the local community and without our presence community members would be isolated and fall through the cracks. I believe recognition by the department and also departmental support and promotion both financial and physical would help spread and encourage value and service provision. We lack human resources due to minimal funding. The one-person model needs to be re addressed. Neighbourhood centres should have a counsellor present at each Centre due to increasing statistics with people presenting at the centre in crisis.” Forum participant

“bigger, responsive to local need and interest, open more often with full use of facilities, offering a broader range of activities and more coordination time and paid staff. We need more funding” Forum participant