

# LCSA

## NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRE POLICY

### April 2003

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper documents the history, philosophy, activities and structures of Neighbourhood Centres. It uses 'Neighbourhood Centres' to refer to organisations which may have a variety of names and appearances - Community Centres, Community Development Projects, Local Development Projects, Community Aid Centres, Neighbourhood Houses, Community Houses, Community Learning Centres, etc.

The Local Community Services Association (LCSA) is the peak body for Neighbourhood Centres in NSW. LCSA was founded in 1974 to act as the representative coordinating body for Neighbourhood Centres. Neighbourhood Centres have formed regional networks or forums which select a representative to be part of the LCSA Management Committee. Regional Representatives maintain a direct information exchange between Neighbourhood Centres and LCSA, and amongst Neighbourhood Centres in their region.

LCSA:

- ♦ provides effective communication between Neighbourhood Centres in NSW
- ♦ resources regional networks and individual Centres
- ♦ organises relevant, accessible and appropriate training
- ♦ advocates on issues affecting Neighbourhood Centres, their communities and service users
- ♦ produces regular newsletters and on-line information
- ♦ supports Centres with operational issues
- ♦ produces and distributes publications, leaflets and other resources
- ♦ represents Neighbourhood Centre interests to government.

LCSA specialises in assisting community organisations with community management and community development strategies.

LCSA has produced this paper at the request of our members, for several reasons:

1. to document the common approaches and purposes of Neighbourhood Centres, while recognising differences in organisations and services
2. to reveal the diversity and wide scope of Neighbourhood Centres and their work
3. to promote Neighbourhood Centres' core features and ongoing achievements
4. to remind policy and decision makers of the purpose and need for Neighbourhood Centres
5. to encourage Neighbourhood Centres, communities and the service users to utilise their strength and capacity to make real improvements at a local level
6. to celebrate Neighbourhood Centre achievements and their place in the community.

The LCSA *Neighbourhood Centre Policy* is the result of distilling the writings about Neighbourhood Centres over many years. It has had comment and feedback from many people. The Policy will change and develop with Neighbourhood Centres.

## 2. HISTORY

Neighbourhood Centres have existed in NSW since at least 1961. They grew along with the movements for self help, resident action and welfare rights. Neighbourhood Centres reflect a move away from dependence on traditional welfare that will result in disadvantaged people and communities participating in the decisions which affect their lives.

NSW Government funding began with small seeding grants in the late 1960s and was boosted by Australian Federal Government funding through the Australian Assistance Program (AAP). The AAP emphasised the development of local initiatives and participation.

The number of Neighbourhood Centres steadily increased as funds were made available. The Department of Youth and Community Services (which became the Department of Family and Community Services and is now the Department of Community Services) funded 32 centres in 1977. In 1978, this rose to 59, increasing to 143 Neighbourhood Centres by 1984-85.

From 1976 the Department operated a Neighbourhood Centre Programme specifically orientated to Neighbourhood Centres. This was amalgamated with the Community Information Centres Programme in 1980 - Neighbourhood Centres came under both. In conjunction with LCSA and Neighbourhood Centres, the Department developed its own *Neighbourhood Centre Policy* in 1985. The Policy was launched by the Minister at the LCSA Annual General Meeting - Neighbourhood Centres being the only program area to have a specific policy of this nature.

In 1991, Neighbourhood Centre funding was incorporated into the Community Services Grants Program which funds a range of community services. The Department of Community Services remains committed to financial support for a large number of the 300 Neighbourhood Centres in NSW.

Many early Neighbourhood Centres began as Community Aid Centres, Citizens Advice Bureaux or Community Information Centres. Since the 1970s, many Centres have adopted a community development focus. In recent years, the diversity of Neighbourhood Centres has increased, as Centres adapt to meet changing community needs. A number of Neighbourhood Centres now act as multi purpose community service centres while others focus on one or two services or activities.

Neighbourhood Centres are different in each community - rural, provincial towns and cities, outer metropolitan Sydney, inner urban Sydney. Some of these differences reflect historical and political events and pressures. Other differences come from conscious choices and strategies to meet specific local needs.

This LCSA policy recognises the diversity and distinctiveness of individual Neighbourhood Centres.

## **3. PHILOSOPHY**

All Neighbourhood Centres share some common principles and philosophies about their purpose or role. These come under three broad categories:

1. affirmative action towards disadvantaged people and groups
2. local participation and control
3. community development role.

Neighbourhood Centres follow these according to the resources and skills they have available.

### **3.1 Affirmative Action**

Neighbourhood Centres recognise that resources must be directed towards the most disadvantaged and least powerful groups in the community. The development of community networks, mutual support and collective action can improve quality of life for an entire community. Neighbourhood Centres offer staff with social policy knowledge and social action skills which build on local community resources.

Opportunities, resources and power are not equally available to all people. Particular groups and individuals experience disadvantage and discrimination. They may include:

- Koori (Aboriginal) people
- people from non-English speaking backgrounds, ethnic or racial minorities, recent migrants or refugees
- women
- people with physical, intellectual or psychiatric disabilities and their families
- people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness
- lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transsexuals
- sole parents, carers and others with family responsibilities, families under stress or in crisis
- people with chronic health conditions
- people with low incomes
- people outside the paid workforce, particularly long term unemployed
- people excluded because of attitudes toward their old age or youth
- people isolated by lack of services, transport and distance.

Neighbourhood Centres are based on the belief that all people have equal right to the benefits and opportunities of our society. Priority is given to particular disadvantaged groups within each local community, according to the changing characteristics of that community in order to share these benefits and opportunities.

## 3.2 Local Participation and Control

Neighbourhood Centres are based on the belief that local action can affect local issues and concerns. These changes can influence wider change and development.

Participation by service users and members of the community provide direct accountability for Neighbourhood Centres. Both Neighbourhood Centres and government policy hold that local residents and groups can identify community needs, plan and develop effective services, and take part in the management and control of those activities. Neighbourhood Centres *belong* to their local communities.

When people face problems, they turn first to families, friends and neighbours. Neighbourhood Centres are an extension of this local, familiar support and aid network. They aim to be friendly places where consumers and community members are treated in an integrated way (as 'whole' people) and know they are welcome.

Neighbourhood Centres are different from other more bureaucratic services which often only deal with one part of the person. Because Neighbourhood Centres are for the whole community, they do not stigmatise and marginalise individuals or groups whose needs are greater. They integrate a range of services and activities into one organisation which is accessible to all in the community.

At the same time, there are conflicts and competition in all communities. Neighbourhood Centres believe that priority should go to those people who have traditionally been excluded from participation, from access to information, and from access to resources. Local skills, knowledge and understanding provide the foundation on which Neighbourhood Centres build new and different skills and understandings to tackle problems and issues.

Neighbourhood Centre services may be built on a community of interest or a geographic community.

## 3.3 Community Development role

Neighbourhood Centres believe that the effects of social problems can be reduced or eliminated by working on the causes of problems as well as the symptoms. Neighbourhood Centres resource and support those most affected by the problems and issues to become active agents instead of being encouraged to remain passive dependants in the welfare system. Self help, mutual support, community education and collective action are Neighbourhood Centre strategies.

There is a place and a need for crisis community services which deal with immediate problems and dangers. Neighbourhood Centres developed to ensure that these short term and emergency responses are complemented by long term, developmental and preventive action. As local community needs change, Neighbourhood Centres alter their work and priorities. Community development is the service strategy which underpins all Neighbourhood Centre functions. This developmental role is centred on increasing access, equity and participation. Neighbourhood Centres are flexible, innovative and responsive to their local communities.

Neighbourhood Centres use LCSA to assist them with practical support in their community development work.

## **4. ACTIVITIES**

The activities of Neighbourhood Centres vary greatly. They depend on:

- each community's needs and characteristics
- community priorities at the time
- the availability of resources - money, people, facilities and equipment
- the existence and work of other service providers
- previous work on the issue or concern.

In general, Neighbourhood Centres carry out five main areas of work:

1. social research and planning
2. service development and delivery
3. community activities
4. community information, education and advocacy
5. individual counselling and direct assistance.

### **4.1 Social Research and Planning**

Neighbourhood Centres are in direct contact with a wide cross section of their community, developing legitimacy and authority within that community. They are well placed to:

- gather local information about issues of concern
- complement quantitative information (statistics) with qualitative information about the collective experience of social problems and issues
- contribute to planning of services
- involve consumers, disadvantaged groups and community members in planning decisions
- use action research methods in which positive change can occur as an outcome of the research process.

Neighbourhood Centres facilitate and foster communication between policy or decision makers and those directly affected by their decisions. Feedback from those affected assists Neighbourhood Centres ensure social planning is effective, relevant to local needs and realistic. This feedback is essential to the success of all social policy.

### **4.2 Service Development and Delivery**

Neighbourhood Centres are uniquely placed to provide a range of social and community services to their locality and to specific target groups within that community. This includes:

- identifying gaps in existing services
- developing new services
- consolidating, adapting or improving existing services

- ensuring community and consumer participation in the development, management and evaluation of services.

This role may be played by Neighbourhood Centres acting alone, using their consumer and community knowledge. Centres also act in conjunction with other organisations and service providers eg. joint projects, or provide support and resources to other groups working for service development. Neighbourhood Centres advocate and encourage others to provide new services or improve and adapt existing services. Neighbourhood Centres play an important role facilitating or coordinating the development of local services.

Neighbourhood Centres provide the constituency, management and administrative base for a range of services. These services may be part of the Neighbourhood Centre itself. Or they may be auspiced (sponsored) by the Neighbourhood Centre until they become independent. Other services may be co-located, or outposted to the Neighbourhood Centre. Many Centres offer a central point for most of the social and community services in a particular community.

Services offered by Neighbourhood Centres as identified in the 2001 Census of Neighbourhood Centres undertaken by LCSA are:

**A. Information advice and referral** – provided by 90% of Centres

**B. Community development policy and planning**

Community/group development and support – provided by 80% of Centres

Government policy and social planning - provided by 30% of Centres

Resource development - provided by 40% of Centres

**C. Groups/courses/classes**

Self help groups - provided by 55% of Centres

Support groups - provided by 65% of Centres

Social action/advocacy groups – provided by 45% of Centres

Adult and Community education groups/courses/classes – 64 % of Centres

Prevocational/vocational groups/courses/classes – 35% of Centres

**D. Individual and Family Support**

Telephone interviews/support - provided by 65% of Centres

Face to face interviews in the office - provided by 70% of Centres

Family Support Service - provided by 25% of Centres

Financial counselling – provided by 20% of Centres

Other counselling - provided by 40% of Centres

**E Emergency relief**

Emergency relief and material assistance - provided by 30% of Centres

**F. ChildCare/Children**

Long Day Care/Family Day Care/Preschool - provided by 5% of Centres

Occasional child care - provided by 10% of Centres

Before and after school care - provided by 20% of Centres

Vacation care - provided by 25% of Centres

Play groups - provided by 35% of Centres

**G. Accommodation and placement**

Crisis accommodation - provided by 5% of Centres

Other accommodation - provided by 5% of Centres

**H. Youth services/young people**

Youth club activities - provided by 30% of Centres

Youth camps during school holidays - provided by 10% of Centres

#### **I. Aged/Disability services**

Respite care - provided by 15% of Centres

Neighbour Aid/home visits - provided by 15% of Centres

Meals - provided by 10% of Centres

Home Modification and Maintenance - provided by 10% of Centres

Transport - provided by 20% of Centres

**J. Transport** not for aged people - provided by 15% of Centres

**K. Other - provided by 40% of Centres**

Increasingly, some Neighbourhood Centres are becoming 'one-stop shops' for a wide range of community services. These Multi Purpose Neighbourhood Centres may offer a variety of services from one organisational base and one building.

At the same time, these Neighbourhood Centres work to ensure that the management and administration of these services does not prevent the Neighbourhood Centre 'core' from continuing its community development, preventive role.

### **4.3 Community Activities**

Group activities and classes are offered by Neighbourhood Centres or from Neighbourhood Centres, including personal development, leisure and vocational education. These activities might include:

- support groups for unemployed people and their families
- back to study groups
- back to work groups
- English as a second language classes
- literacy, numeracy and reading groups and classes
- support groups for people in personal crisis eg. divorce, bereavement, accident or injury, victims of crime
- food co-operatives
- recreation, leisure and craft courses
- exhibitions and displays
- health and fitness classes
- outposts of other health/ welfare/ social services

Self help groups, social action groups and other community organisations use Neighbourhood Centres as a physical base or low cost venue, and may be resourced by Neighbourhood Centres. Centres provide offices, meeting rooms or halls, and community access computers, photocopiers, facsimile machines, video recorders or other media equipment.

These classes and groups develop skills, build confidence, develop social networks and reduce social isolation. They also feed into the social research, planning and service development functions of Neighbourhood Centres.

Some activities may be Neighbourhood Centre projects funded by grants, donations or fees. Other activities are run by other funded service providers or self funded by user groups.

## **4.4 Community Information, Education and Advocacy**

Information is power. Neighbourhood Centres provide community information backed up with personal support, advocacy and collective action on issues affecting the local community. Neighbourhood Centres use this information to guide their own services. Information provision contributes to Neighbourhood Centres' developmental role, and is linked especially to welfare rights and individual advocacy.

Neighbourhood Centres aim to:

1. provide information and advocacy support to individuals and groups
2. develop relevant information systems appropriate to their local community
3. refer consumers to other services and sources of assistance as appropriate
4. provide information in plain language and numerous forms eg. written, spoken, audio-visual, pictures and posters
5. use interagency meetings and networking to facilitate information flow.

Depending on resources, Neighbourhood Centres provide multilingual information which is culturally sensitive and accessible to people with disabilities.

Neighbourhood Centres complement and work with other information providers, (such as public libraries). Community information will have a high priority in some areas where no other services are available eg. isolated rural areas and new settlement areas. However, information about community services, events, resources and contacts are essential to the functions of all Neighbourhood Centres.

At a broader level, Neighbourhood Centres require their own links with regional, statewide and national services, policy makers, supports and resources. Regional networks and forums and the LCSA provide a major information channel and support system for individual Centres.

Community awareness, attitudes and perceptions affect quality of life and access to services and resources. Neighbourhood Centres also work on community education about social issues affecting the local community, and disadvantaged people in particular.

## **4.5 Individual Counselling and Direct Assistance**

Some Neighbourhood Centres provide one or a variety of crisis and emergency services. Because of their developmental role, Neighbourhood Centres use the demand for these services as an indicator of unmet needs. Centres may carry out this function for a limited time in order to establish need which can be used to advocate for preventive or developmental services.

Emergency and crisis services include:

1. individual personal support and counselling
2. financial counselling
3. emergency cash, food or clothing
4. electricity or food vouchers
5. personal assistance such as shopping, transport and friendly visiting
6. emergency accommodation or refuge.



Other Neighbourhood Centres deliberately connect crisis services to their developmental role. For example, a Neighbourhood Centre may have assisted a number of people in crisis because of the unfair practices of a credit company. The Centre might work with these people to form an action group to campaign for the company to change its practices. The Centre might also support the group to find and use legal services to challenge the company in court.

In many areas, there are other service providers who have chosen to provide emergency services. Many Neighbourhood Centres advocate that emergency and crisis relief services be provided by other organisations who have chosen this role.

Some Neighbourhood Centres have chosen not to provide any emergency or crisis services because they fear the huge drain on their limited resources. Other Neighbourhood Centres fear they may lose their developmental focus as the community comes to see them as a place where you get 'handouts'. Some Centres have found their focus has been shifted into crisis and short term 'band-aid' measures instead of longer term, preventive services.

At the same time, there are increasing pressures for Neighbourhood Centres to take on this role, especially when other services are closed in times of recession and growing demand.

## **5. STRUCTURES**

While Neighbourhood Centre structures vary, there are common themes in:

- management
- human resources
- funding
- legal framework
- physical base.

### **5.1 Management**

Neighbourhood Centres are based on the principle of community management. This means that members of a community have power and control over the Centre and the services it provides. Paid workers are accountable to the management committee as employer. Neighbourhood Centres are accountable and responsible to their communities, members and service users.

Neighbourhood Centres are managed by voluntary committees or collectives elected by members. The Management Committee are voluntary and have overall responsibility for the Centre's:

- overall setting and achievement of goals
- legal status and responsibilities
- financial viability

- staff employment and employer role
- policies, planning and evaluation
- accountability to members, consumers and funding bodies
- operations, administration and premises
- promotion and publicity (its public profile).

The Management Committee has to make sure the Centre's resources and services are directed towards the goals and aims of the Neighbourhood Centre. They may not personally carry out all the tasks and activities themselves, however it is their job to ensure these things are done. One of their important tasks is to define the various roles of Management Committee, Sub-Committees, Coordinator, other paid staff, unpaid workers (volunteers) and members.

Neighbourhood Centre Management Committees are open and accessible to all members. They should be representative of the local community, and include people with a variety of views, skills, ideas and resources. Neighbourhood Centres particularly ensure local representation, participation by service users, involvement of disadvantaged groups and the recruitment of community members with special skills such as financial management, legal knowledge, or group process and meeting skills.

Management Committees must also be aware of their ethical and legal responsibilities, along with potential conflicts of interest. Management Committee members should always act in the best interest of the Neighbourhood Centre rather than one particular group or individual.

Another essential role of the Management Committee is to maintain and develop a wide and involved membership so the Centre can have a strong Management Committee that continues to develop and adapt to changing circumstances. Management Committees and Neighbourhood Centres need new people, ideas and energy to continue being effective.

Management Committees vary according to the needs of their Centre. They are also under pressure to change and adapt as new requirements and more complex responsibilities are required of them. Some of the additional administration requirements are:

- employment of staff, including a new award
- insurance, especially public liability and workers compensation
- occupational health and safety
- requirements of the new child protection act, including staff screening and mandatory reporting
- complying with new privacy legislation
- accountability to government departments for funding.

Management Committees have the right to training and support to enable them to carry out their role effectively.

Neighbourhood Centres use LCSA to assist them with practical support in community management.

## 5.2 Human Resources

Neighbourhood Centres run on 'people power'. Enormous amounts of time and energy are given to their work. While some of this time is paid, a great deal comes free of charge and reflects the commitment to Neighbourhood Centres. In particular, unpaid management committees and direct service volunteers contribute to Neighbourhood Centres.

Some Neighbourhood Centres encourage volunteer effort in services, others direct this unpaid time and energy into their management, or into social action and advocacy to ensure local needs are met.

Many Neighbourhood Centres also have independent groups which use their buildings and facilities. Other services may be located in the same premises (or co-located). These people may or may not be directly involved in the Neighbourhood Centre.

## 5.3 Funding

Neighbourhood Centres operate using a variety of funding sources. Some operate on local community contribution alone. Others have a small grant. Others receive grants and contributions from a wide variety of Australian Federal, NSW and local government agencies for a range of projects and services. Many Centres work to obtain resources from service clubs, corporate sponsorship and donations.

There is growing pressure on Neighbourhood Centres to find more resources from non government sources. Community fundraising is also more difficult when there is high unemployment. Neighbourhood Centres require a stable level of core funds for their effective operation. A solid core can then allow Centres to attract other resources from corporate, government and community sources.

Some grants may be tied to specific items eg. salary or rent only. All grant funds are now tied to the provision of specified services and accountability requirements are rigorous. There is a tension between Neighbourhood Centres' accountability to funding bodies on one hand, and to service users, members and the community on the other.

Disadvantaged groups and communities cannot 'pull themselves up by the bootstraps'. They need additional resources to change their situation. Neighbourhood Centres assist by directing resources to the most disadvantaged and least powerful in the community.

## 5.4 Legal Framework

Most Neighbourhood Centres are incorporated bodies, set up as Companies, Co-operatives or Associations under NSW law. Some Centres come under the legal umbrella of local government, churches, large welfare agencies, charities or other bodies. Incorporated bodies must comply with a range of Australian Federal, NSW and local government laws and regulations. These include industrial awards, occupational health and safety, anti discrimination, defamation, and criminal laws.

All Neighbourhood Centres are non-profit organisations and do not make money for the individual benefit of members. They operate with a constitution or set of rules with agreed goals and aims. These rules have been adopted by meetings of members who also confirm the activities and future development of the Centre at Annual General Meetings. Management Committees or Collectives are elected at these meetings.

This legal framework forms the focus for Neighbourhood Centres' accountability back to their local community.

## **5.5 Physical Base**

There are a variety of arrangements used by Neighbourhood Centres to carry out their functions. The presence and visibility of a 'centre' in the 'neighbourhood' is an important aspect of the work of most Neighbourhood Centres. Most Centres operate from a single building while others work from several buildings or offices, or have 'outposts' to isolated districts. Other Neighbourhood Centres have an office in a local community hall or local government facility. Still others are 'mobile' - they go out to the community as needed. Some Centres have purpose-built facilities while others work from whatever is available in their locality.

Irrespective of the way that Neighbourhood Centres deliver their services, all operate on the principle that all people in the community should have equal, open access. This includes disadvantaged groups including ethnic minority and non English speaking background groups, people with disabilities and people isolated by lack of transport or other mainstream services.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This paper has described some of the variety and uniqueness of Neighbourhood Centres in NSW. There are features in common: community management, community development, local participation and control, and affirmative action toward people who face disadvantage or discrimination. There are common features in the major types of Centre activities: social research and planning, service development and delivery, community activities, community information, education and advocacy, individual counselling and direct assistance.

Neighbourhood Centres also vary and have their own special characteristics. Centres adapt and change in response to the changing needs of their local community, and to wider influences on them. This paper has discussed some of the major differences and diversity.

LCSA celebrates the common perspectives and approaches along with the variety and contrast. These contribute to the large body of knowledge, skills, understanding and experience held within Neighbourhood Centres and the Local Community Services Association. The network of Neighbourhood Centres and direct services provided by the LCSA are based on these strengths.

*Policy \ Internal – LCSA Policy \ NC Policy*