

Shared Commitment to Collaboration for Neighbourhood and Community Centres in NSW

A commitment from the NSW Department of Communities and Justice, Local Community Services Association and Neighbourhood and Community Centres to work together for strong, vibrant local communities in NSW.



Acknowledgement of Country

The NSW Department of Communities and Justice, and Local Community Services Association acknowledge Aboriginal people as the first peoples and custodians of the lands on which we live and work in New South Wales. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

We recognise and celebrate the rich diversity of First Nations peoples across NSW and their role in building and strengthening our communities. The Local Community Services Association and neighbourhood and community centres draw on the collaborative social practices of First Nations communities, who have worked in this way and on this continent for millennia. More engagement with practices that have worked well for thousands of years would be an asset to Australian governments, communities and community organisations.



Visitors to the San Remo Neighbourhood Centre engage and learn from cross cultural experiences with members of the local community and schools.

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1 Minister's Foreword

Every day across NSW, neighbourhood and community centres open their doors to welcome individuals and families, offering a safe space for connection and support.

Neighbourhood and community centres play a fundamental role in fostering resilience and building capacity in countless communities. Their close connection to the communities they support ensures services meet local needs.

This Shared Commitment to Collaboration recognises the invaluable work of neighbourhood and community centres and their contribution to enriching the lives of people in NSW. It honours the important partnership between the NSW Department of Communities and Justice, and Local Community Services Association and captures a vision for future collaboration. It commits us to working together to meet community needs, and to develop programs that prioritise connectedness, self-determination and belonging.

This shared vision recognises the expertise of neighbourhood and community centres in leading meaningful community development and encourages us to build on this approach to better serve our communities.

The NSW Department of Communities and Justice is determined to help build NSW communities that are safe, just, inclusive and resilient. These objectives can only be achieved through purposeful partnership with those that are deeply connected to the communities they work alongside.



I thank everyone who runs and supports neighbourhood and community centres. Your efforts make NSW a stronger, more caring state.

I look forward to seeing this landmark shared commitment pave a new future of collaboration between the NSW Department of Communities and Justice, Local Community Services Association and neighbourhood and community centres. Together, we'll build a better NSW.

Kate Washington

***Minister for Families and Communities
Minister for Disability Inclusion***

2 Local Community Services Association Foreword

Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs) have long served as the heartbeat of local communities across New South Wales.

These independent, locally-governed organisations provide a trusted, accessible, and responsive presence in the places where people live, work, and connect. From metropolitan neighbourhoods to remote towns, NCCs work alongside local people to create safe, inclusive, and connected communities that support individuals and families to thrive.

Rooted in the values of social justice, human rights, community participation and diversity, NCCs offer more than services — they enable local leadership, build community resilience, and empower people to shape their own futures. They respond flexibly to complex and emerging issues at the local level, whether it be the social impacts of economic hardship, recovery from disasters, or efforts to create inclusive spaces for all members of the community.

As the peak body for NCCs in NSW, the Local Community Services Association (LCSA) has been a steadfast advocate for this work since its establishment in 1974. LCSA's membership includes over 175 locally-based organisations, forming the largest community-led social infrastructure network in the state.

This network is diverse, dynamic and driven by the belief that local communities hold the knowledge, strength and solutions to their own challenges.



This Shared Commitment to Collaboration represents a significant milestone in the relationship between the community sector and government. It acknowledges the pivotal role of NCCs in the broader community services system and affirms the value of place-based, community-led approaches to building stronger, fairer and more resilient communities. Through this agreement, LCSA and its members signal our commitment to working in partnership with the NSW Department of Communities and Justice, guided by mutual respect, shared goals, and the collective responsibility to advance community wellbeing.

We thank the Hon. Kate Washington MP, Minister for Families and Communities, and the Department for their leadership, vision and willingness to engage meaningfully with the sector. This partnership affirms that lasting social change is possible when communities are resourced, empowered and supported through genuine collaboration.

As we move forward together, LCSA remains committed to ensuring that the voices of local communities continue to shape policy, investment and practice — so that all people in NSW can experience a sense of belonging, connection and opportunity.

Tairyn Vergara, LCSA President (Acting), Can Yasmut, LCSA Chief Executive Officer

3 Partners of this Shared Commitment

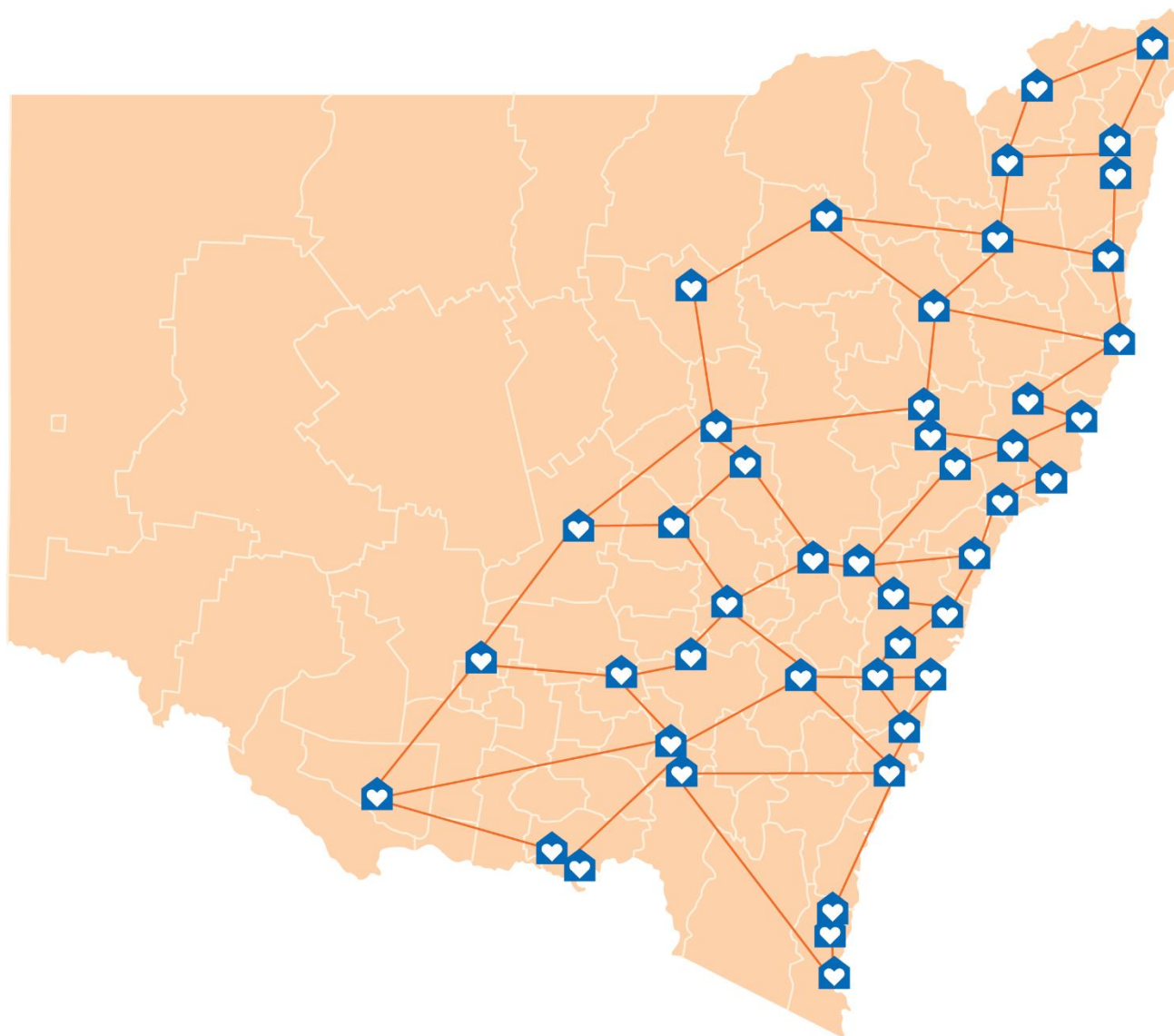
3.1 Neighbourhood and Community Centres in NSW

Neighbourhood and community centres (NCCs) in NSW are community led, not-for-profit organisations that work with local people to build safe, strong, resilient and connected communities. NCCs are place-based, locally-governed and deeply embedded in their local areas.

NCCs are essential social infrastructure across NSW and form part of a diverse, capable and responsive community services system as service providers.

Social infrastructure and service delivery in NCCs are embedded in the principles of community development. This means that NCCs work with communities rather than doing things for or to them. NCCs support communities to flourish by fostering independence, focusing on capacity building and helping communities identify and enact solutions to issues.

For more information on who NCCs are and what they do, please refer to Local Community Services Association's 2024 NSW Neighbourhood and Community Centre Policy.



A statewide network of NCCs working across communities in NSW

3.2 Local Community Services Association

Local Community Services Association (LCSA) is the peak body and membership organisation for NCCs and community development in NSW. Their purpose is to represent the interests of diverse member organisations with a particular emphasis on the practice of community development. LCSA's organisational vision is 'vibrant local community organisations supporting stronger, more inclusive communities'.

LCSA's network of 175 NCCs is the largest community-led social infrastructure network in NSW.

www.lcsansw.org.au



Members participating in activities at our Neighbourhood and Community Centres.

3.3 NSW Department of Communities and Justice

The NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) is the lead agency in the Communities and Justice portfolio of the NSW Government, which aims to create safe, just, inclusive and resilient communities through its services.

DCJ enables services to work together to support everyone's right to access justice and other help for families, and strengthen the promotion of early intervention and inclusion, with benefits for the whole community.

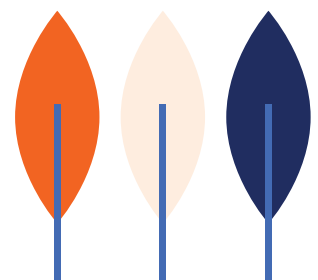
DCJ's ongoing partnership with LCSA and NCCs is critical to building strong communities and responding to individual, family and community needs as they emerge and change over time.

4 Our Shared Vision

The shared vision of LCSA and DCJ is for NCCs to be recognised for their extraordinary social value and their place as part of an essential social infrastructure network, and for their potential to be realised through coordinated action, policy and investment. LCSA and DCJ agree to work in collaboration towards achieving this shared vision.

We see a NSW where NCCs:

- Are locally-led, strength-based community hubs for people to connect, participate in community events and activities and find support.
- Strengthen communities by increasing social capital and helping communities increase protective factors for children and families.
- Are part of systematic approaches that provide holistic, preventative and protective support, while helping address social determinants of poor wellbeing. NCCs contribute to sustainable social and structural change and to community wellbeing.
- Continue to be inclusive, accessible and safe spaces where all community members feel they are welcome and belong.
- Are key for genuine co-design and for fostering authentic partnerships with community, that elevate the diverse voices of community members and lead to an increased sense of community ownership.
- Leverage the broad range of assets in communities pivotal to success, including the skills, capacity, knowledge, interests, networks, and connections of community members as well as local associations, organisations, institutions, and physical and economic resources.
- Actively reach out to vulnerable community cohorts to increase social inclusion and reduce gaps in life outcomes.
- Continue to provide advice and referrals to people who are experiencing more acute or severe distress or hardship and connect them with services that can provide appropriate support.
- Continue to support communities to become more resilient and prepared for adverse events such as natural disasters by building formal and informal support networks and by contributing to the development of infrastructure that supports resilience.



We see a NSW where DCJ, LCSA and NCCs:

- Commit to an ongoing partnership and together we seek to build and strengthen our communities for the benefit of individuals and communities living in NSW.
- Continue to work together to maintain a strong foundation for the ongoing growth of the NCC sector.

4.1 The Purpose of a Shared Commitment to Collaboration

The purpose of this Shared Commitment between DCJ and LCSA is to:

1. Strengthen the partnership between the two parties,
2. Embed genuine community development practice in government processes between government and community organisations and between government and communities.

The Shared Commitment to Collaboration is designed to foster a constructive relationship between DCJ and LCSA, promoting cooperation and shared responsibility, aimed at achieving positive social outcomes for NCCs and their communities through collaboration, consultation and policy development.

In working towards our vision, both parties agree to adhere to the principles of mutual respect, transparency, accountability, and acknowledge LCSA's independence as the peak body for NCCs. Both parties agree to communicate effectively and support opportunities for ongoing consultation, ensuring LCSA and NCCs have a voice in policy-making processes and that DCJ includes the perspectives of civic institutions and communities.



Locals enjoy a free lunch, entertainment, prizes, social interaction and access to information on services and programs offered by Orana NSW at the annual Community Matters Open Day event.

5 Our Shared Commitment to Collaboration



LCSA and NCCs commit to:

1. Work with DCJ to build and strengthen local partnerships to ensure activities and programs are accessible to everyone and adapted to meet the needs of local communities.
2. Establish processes of genuine co-design, community engagement and community development to ensure that the voice of communities is front and centre on issues that directly affect their lives.
3. Meet individuals where they are and link them up with government and non-government supports.
4. Promote the values of social justice, self-determination and the right of choice for First Nations peoples.
5. Build strong partnerships with local Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).

DCJ commits to:

1. Recognise NCCs in NSW as essential social infrastructure.
2. Consult and engage in tangible ways with NCCs on issues best managed at the local, place-based level, and collaborate on solutions.
3. Work in partnership with LCSA and NCCs to incorporate community development practice into DCJ's consultation processes.
4. Communicate this Shared Commitment to Collaboration with departmental and other government staff and encourage collaboration with NCCs on relevant projects.
5. Promote and encourage departmental staff to develop effective working relationships with NCCs where relevant to their roles and projects.
6. Work with LCSA and NCCs to enhance community access to culturally safe and responsive services and spaces.

Together, LCSA, NCCs and DCJ commit to:

1. Engage locally to understand the issues facing communities and together develop solutions.
2. Ensure NSW communities can participate in community development processes that meaningfully achieve their aspirations.
3. Leverage the NCCs social infrastructure network to roll out statewide supports in NSW.
4. Drive policy investment in communities using qualitative data provided by NCCs.

In recognition of the value of NCCs' ongoing commitment to social and community development, DCJ and NCCs will work together to identify how they can assist local communities to benefit from opportunities for social, community and economic growth opportunities across NSW.

This shared commitment to collaboration will operate for five years and will be reviewed in 2030.

6 Neighbourhood and Community Centres are Essential Social Infrastructure

LCSA is supportive of social infrastructure definitions as outlined in the International Comparative Review on Social Infrastructure by the United Kingdom based Institute for Community Studies and the Bennett Institute for Public Policy Cambridge¹, who note that specific definitions most commonly revolve around three key approaches:

1. Social infrastructure as the physical places that encourage social interaction.
2. Social infrastructure as created through public services, laws, and institutions.
3. Social infrastructure as voluntary and community sector infrastructure.

NCCs are physical places that encourage social interaction and are part of community sector infrastructure locally and statewide, and they support the social infrastructure created through public services, laws and institutions. They are the 'glue' linking and holding together different actors and different services, as well as filling gaps.

NSW NCCs are part of three distinct social infrastructure networks:

1. Local social infrastructure networks which include NCCs, schools, health services, local councils, charities and other stakeholders.
2. The NSW NCC network of 175 member-centres across NSW.
3. The Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association (ANHCA) network of 1,000 NCCs. LCSA has also facilitated member access to the International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres (IFS), the international network of NCCs with over 11,000 associated members worldwide.

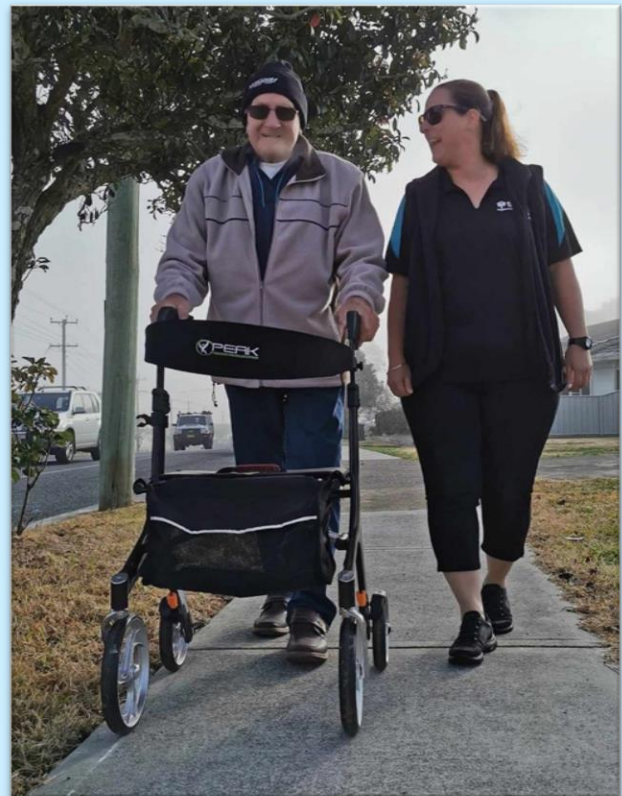
In defining and practising social infrastructure and community development, LCSA and NCCs draw on the collaborative social practices of First Nations communities, who have worked in this way and on this continent for millennia. More engagement with the kind of social infrastructure that worked well for thousands of years would be an asset to Australian governments, communities and community organisations.

¹ Hollis et al. (2023). *Social infrastructure: international comparative review*.
https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Social_infrastructure_international_comparative_review.pdf.



‘Just as electric lighting is not a safety net catching a person who faces darkness each night, routinely provided preventative healthcare is not a safety net catching someone who faces the challenges of maintaining a healthy body each day... All people in society need social infrastructure.

[The Washington Center for Equitable Growth](#)



7 Neighbourhood and Community Centres as Service Providers

NCCs are flexible and responsive and continuously adapt and improve their programs and services.

NCCs do not necessarily follow the same specific program models because the needs of every community are different. NCCs deliver programs and activities that are designed specifically to meet the needs of their communities or chosen due to their effectiveness.

NCCs work across all human services policy and funding areas. Their universal nature means they are often the first place of contact by the community for services, information, advice and referrals. **They operate on a 'no wrong door and person-centred' approach, where all individuals who come to the centre are helped to navigate to an appropriate response. NCCs are not defined by a service or a target demographic.**

A core activity of NCCs is researching local needs and aspirations and designing and developing appropriate service responses in consultation with the community and other partners. Some of these services will be directly delivered by NCCs, while others may be delivered by other non-government organisations (NGOs) or in partnership.

NCCs are well-embedded in local networks and have trusted partnerships with a range of community and other organisations, services and businesses in their local area.



Staff from Community First Step assist community members at reception, providing information and connecting them with the right services – from emergency relief and form filling to support groups, case management, parenting programs and playgroups, and referrals to other essential services.

8 Community Development

Community development is a practice, or process, in which social issues are addressed on a grassroots level from the ‘bottom up’, usually guided by community development practitioners.

Community development aims to do things **with** people, rather than **for** people or **to** them.

NCCs support communities to flourish by fostering independence, focusing on capacity building and helping communities identify issues and solutions.

LCSA is supportive of Assets-Based Community Development (ABCD) which identifies strengths, assets and resources in local communities and activates them to address identified issues. LCSA has promoted the Public Innovation Approach (Harwood Institute) with its members, which is a community development practice stemming from the principles of ABCD.

Genuine community development is inherently a co-design and place-based process.

Community development acknowledges community members as experts in their own lives and empowers and facilitates engagement from community members in decision making in their communities.

Through community development processes, NCCs become holders of local knowledge, which uniquely places them as reliable conduits between communities, governments and other stakeholders.

NCCs already have the expertise, networks, experience, relationships and local knowledge to identify and address issues in their communities. They have the trust of their local communities.

DCJ welcomes the offer of NCCs to co-design inclusive, participatory methods of government social responses.



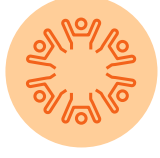
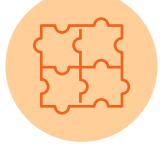
Community members gather for a monthly food swap at Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre, where surplus produce, seeds and plants grown at home can be shared with others as part of the Sustainable Nimbin Community Plan.

9 Shared Outcomes

In tandem with the value of providing essential social infrastructure in local communities, NCCs' approach to service design and delivery improves outcomes for vulnerable communities.

Evidence shows **five critical elements** programs and activities use that demonstrate improved outcomes. These allow for programs to provide evidence-based support that is flexible and can be locally designed and led by the community itself.

DCJ and LCSA commit to these five critical elements which empower NCCs to demonstrate their value:

	1. Inclusive and genuine co-design and partnership: Building authentic partnerships with community that work towards community ownership while also ensuring that the diverse voices of that community are represented.
	2. Leveraging strengths and building capacity: Initiatives that are both strengths-based and actively building community capacity.
	3. Creating safe and effective spaces: Spaces that are safe and accessible to everyone to allow for the effective engagement of diverse community members.
	4. Intersectional and safe approaches: Incorporating an understanding of how the different aspects of a person's identity (e.g. gender, ethnicity, disability) can expose them to overlapping and intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation to allow for the delivery of a more integrated, safe and holistic set of services.
	5. A whole system approach: Supports that are part of a whole system approach that interconnect multiple community cohorts and agencies. ²

Together NCCs and DCJ can create meaningful change in communities and families' lives. NCCs contribute to outcomes for communities, families and individuals that move beyond the remit of any one NSW government department or agency. Outcomes are achieved across multiple domains of the Human Services Outcomes Framework.

NCCs' holistic engagement with their communities supports outcomes including social, empowerment and self-determination, safety and wellbeing, housing, education and skills, economic and health. Measuring community development outcomes requires a community-level approach. NCCs design programs and support activities that lead to the change a community itself wants to see.

² NSW Department of Communities and Justice Community Strengthening Evidence Review prepared by the Centre for Social Impact UNSW (2022).



10 Case Study 1: Neighbourhood and Community Centres in the NSW Child Protection System

NCCs reduce risks and increase protective factors

- **Community strengthening:** offering community safe spaces, encouraging formal and informal networking, support for education and employment, drug and alcohol support
- **Healthy relationships:** mental health support, counselling
- **Child wellbeing:** offering playgrounds, parenting support, connecting families with prenatal care and child health checks

– Risks

- Poor neighbourhood environment, lack of safe public spaces
- High levels of unemployment
- High levels of substance misuse
- Inadequate family support services
- Isolation
- Poor understanding of child development
- Violence or conflict between family members

+ Protective Factors

- Safe neighbourhoods with higher quality environments
- High levels of education and employment
- Low levels of substance misuse
- Adequate and high-quality family support services
- Good parental understanding of child development
- Harmonious family relationships

NCCs' role as social infrastructure and in service delivery, both underpinned with community development practices

NCCs are capable service providers in a diverse community services system. In NSW the majority of NCCs receive Early Intervention funding from DCJ within NSW's child protection system for the provision of community strengthening and early intervention activities. This case study demonstrates the strong ties between DCJ, as the funding body, and NCCs as both essential social infrastructure and key service providers.

NCCs play a key role in the prevention and early intervention of risk of significant harm

(ROSH). More than 90% of NCCs in NSW are funded under DCJ's Early Intervention stream 'Community Strengthening'³. Effective early intervention services aim to strengthen communities, and particularly groups experiencing or at risk of vulnerability within them, by creating more inclusive, supportive, safe and empowering communities for children, young people and families.

It is recognised that 'it takes a village to raise a child', but the question of who builds the village is rarely considered. NCCs help communities to build the village, which means that a commitment to community strengthening goes beyond NCCs as a 'soft-entry point' and their specific activities for prevention and early intervention. For the future of an effective child protection system,

³ Community Strengthening is made up of services that build community connection and strengthen community cohesion. This is done by connecting members of a community in need with their broader community and strengthening the community as a whole through a range of services such as social participation, education skills and training and community engagement activities.

NCCs have an important role to play. If the community is not healthy and strong, it is not a good environment for children.

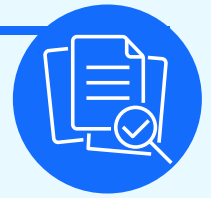
NCCs (as Community Strengthening funded services) are the gateway to all parts of the community services system, providing pathways and a secure base for community members to navigate their circumstances with knowledge and awareness. Early intervention funded activities achieve outcomes beyond child protection and across the entire NSW Human Services Outcomes Framework.

NCCs are well-placed to integrate community level support with targeted support. Supporting people presenting with more complexity and helping them navigate service systems becomes more seamless through the integration of community strengthening services with more targeted services and supports such as counselling and case management in one place.



Children participate in 'Art and Play' activities at Pottsville Beach Neighbourhood Centre, one of many services designed to assist families to overcome parenting and life challenges, so that children have a good start and families have positive wellbeing.

11 Case Study 2: Using Neighbourhood and Community Centre Social Infrastructure during the COVID-19 Pandemic



Statewide Distribution of Rapid Antigen Self-tests through NCCs to reach vulnerable communities

This case study demonstrates the way NCCs as social infrastructure can be activated quickly to lead disaster management responses, reaching the most vulnerable communities in need. NCCs are uniquely positioned to support NSW through disasters because of their deep footprint in both local communities and as a statewide network.

NCCs form one of the largest secular, independent and community-based infrastructure networks in NSW.

In July 2022, NSW was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. While public health orders were easing off, including the easing of restrictions to movement, communities remained deeply impacted and in need of support. Around this time, the Federal Government had announced phasing out access to free Rapid Antigen Self-tests (RATs) for Commonwealth concession card holders. The NSW Government needed a fast and effective solution to ensure this critical resource could continue to reach vulnerable people across the state, from large metropolitan cities to the most remote communities of NSW.

The NSW Government required an existing infrastructure network that possessed a unique blend of both statewide geographical reach and local connectedness and consistency. Service NSW centres fulfilled part of this criteria. However, it was recognised that to reach the most vulnerable populations and people reticent to access a government-run service or building, a community-based option was also needed. Recognising NCCs had already been playing a

role in keeping communities safe and connected during the COVID-19 pandemic, the NSW Government proposed a partnership with LCSA.

Within 24 hours of first contacting LCSA, a media release from the NSW Government announced 210 NCCs across the state would be distributing free RATs to those in need. Between an initial phone call asking if it could be done and how quickly, and the announcement the following day, LCSA successfully activated the NCC network and supported the creation of an interactive digital map with statewide coverage. Leveraging off existing contractual relationships between DCJ and many NCCs, the rollout was efficient and effective.

As part of local service systems, individual NCCs were well-placed to distribute RATs to those in most need and to ensure their community's continued access to this key resource. As a collective network with statewide reach, NCCs demonstrated their value as social infrastructure, providing the NSW Government quick and targeted access to local communities.

This was recognised as a landmark initiative; the first time NSW had seen a statewide activation of the NCC infrastructure and recognition of NCCs as a key service providers in times of crisis. When reflecting on the significance of NCCs' partnership with the NSW government, Can Yasmut, Executive Officer of LCSA commented, "to get into community you need community spaces, places and trusting relationships. We appreciate the opportunity to work with government to recognise NCCs as a statewide network that can be drawn upon and activated quickly. It is what we wanted all along."

6 Parramatta Square, 10 Darcy Street
Parramatta NSW 2150

Locked Bag 5000
Parramatta NSW 2124

Office hours:
Monday to Friday
9.00am to 5.00pm

T: 1800 000 164
W: www.dcj.nsw.gov.au

