

Council-managed neighbourhood centres in Melbourne's growth areas

COMMUNITY

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Acknowledgement of Country

We at RMIT University acknowledge the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nation on whose unceded lands we conduct our research, teaching and service. We respectfully acknowledge Ancestors and Elders past, present and emerging who have always been caring for Country. We pay our respects to Country, the lifeworld that sustains us all.

Our research, education and service are already in a relationship with Country and the people of Country, here and in all the places we undertake our business. As mostly non-Indigenous people, we acknowledge our obligation in this relationship: to uphold the ngarn-ga [understanding] of Bundjil and practice respect for community and culture. Though there is much we still need to learn, especially about ourselves, we affirm our dhumbali [commitment] to that work. We hold as central to our business, dhumbali to a shared future with Indigenous peoples everywhere and especially Kulin Country and peoples.

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Executive summary

Ongoing misalignments between patterns of population growth and social infrastructure investment in Australia's peri-urban growth corridors continue to impede social cohesion in areas of greenfield development and limit opportunities for its residents to develop social connections. The State Government's commitment to existing social infrastructure limits its ability to expand its network of neighbourhood houses to growth corridors. In response to persistent gaps between demand and provision, local governments on Melbourne's fringe are increasingly expanding their responsibilities for building, maintaining and running neighbourhood centres. As such changes are occurring in relationships between the domains of government and community. This scoping pilot research explored the benefits and challenges of councils taking on this relatively new role.

The research consisted of two local government case studies. Research methods were designed to focus on the everyday rhythms and sociality of individual centres and to understand those in the context of local government management strategies and practices. As such, methods included focus groups with council staff who are located in neighbourhood centres and who manage the centres, focus group with council staff who are located in the respective council's central office and who supervise centre managers, participant observation in centres and interviews with users of its services and programs.

The case studies presented in this report show that councils are providing an invaluable social infrastructure by managing neighbourhood centres and offering programmed activities. The case studies highlight that provided opportunities to meet others are especially valued by senior residents and by residents with backgrounds of migration. These centre participants emphasised that the council managed centre they attend help them combat loneliness and that the not-for-profit offering ensures that their access and inclusion needs are met.

These good results were not achieved without challenge. Firstly, the report shows that local governments' ways of working place considerable administrative responsibility on centre managers and this can limit the time they are able to spend in conversation and engagement with residents. Secondly, it shows that the centres' ways of working are shaped by local governments' ideas about the limits of their responsibility for creating community cohesion. Not wanting to create reliance on local government initiative, some councils manage centres in ways that require residents to come forward and lead social initiatives. While this creates a strong incentive for grassroots leadership, the report also identifies the risk that centres become meeting spaces for people who are already familiar with councils and their infrastructure. Thirdly, in wishing to foreground grassroots capacity, centres can inadvertently place strain on volunteers. Councils that manage centres and that encourage volunteer roles in group leadership may consider developing robust guidelines to reduce risk of volunteer burn-out and to ensure volunteers are well supported.

Overview of recommendations

Recommendation 1: Councils that take responsibility for neighbourhood centre management should be prepared to continue in that role, as transition to independent grassroots management has proven unfeasible.

Recommendation 2: Council managed centres can continue to reach new people in the area and people unfamiliar with a centre if they invest in performing outreach work.

Recommendation 3: Intentions to place activities in the hands of members of the community are best accompanied by elaborate systems of support as the confidence to take on volunteering is unevenly distributed.

Recommendation 4: creating a small budget for program development in each centre can facilitate Council-organised activities inside and outside the community centre or neighbourhood house that enable new people to be drawn in.

Recommendation 5: creating a protocol or guideline for volunteer support can help prevent volunteer burn-out and can help ensure that there is clarity between volunteers and Council staff about volunteers' motivations and expectations.

Recommendation 6: minimising administrative workloads of centre staff ensures that centres can deliver accessible and inclusive centres as staff play a pivotal role in making participants feel welcome.

Recommendation 7: Invest in communication strategies such as neighbourhood centre open days, bring-a-friend days and visits to organisations such as aged care residences, schools and sports clubs to replace administratively burdensome communications strategies.

1. Introduction

Local governments are increasingly managing community centres and neighbourhood houses. This is a relatively new role for local governments as these spaces and their services have traditionally been managed by grassroots community groups with the support of state government funding. This trend is especially noticeable in Melbourne's metropolitan fringe where local governments are planning and building neighbourhood centres in areas of rapid population growth and greenfield housing development.

Despite the growing number of Council-managed Neighbourhood Houses in urban peripheries, these organisations tend to be viewed as exceptions or as temporal solutions for a lack of community capacity to independently manage neighbourhood houses. However, as urban growth accelerates unabated and infrastructure provisions continues to lag behind growth, it is highly likely that Councils will continue to be involved in the management of Neighbourhood Houses in the foreseeable future. It is important that Councils are well supported to do this work, because it secures the availability of the support, services and capacity building that Neighbourhood Houses offer to the diverse and at times economically and time constrained populations of urban growth areas.

As Councils are now actively involved in neighbourhood house management and coordination, there is a need to understand how Council-managed neighbourhood houses operate, what they are able and not able to provide to their local government area residents and under what conditions. This includes understanding what additional resources Councils might need to maximise the support they are able to offer through their neighbourhood houses. In addition to strengthening the work of Councils that are already invested in neighbourhood centre management, these insights are also valuable for Councils that are considering such investments in the future. This is why the research presented in this paper sought to understand the opportunities and constraints that are at play in of Council-managed neighbourhood houses on Melbourne's metropolitan fringe.

The research was conducted in partnership with two growth area Councils that are pro-actively investing in the provision and management of neighbourhood centres in their respective regions. These are the City of Wyndham and another council which chose to participate in the research under the condition of anonymity, and which will be referred to in this report as the Rosebush Council.

The research set out to:

1. Identify policy settings that structure the functioning of council managed neighbourhood centres;
2. Understand how neighbourhood centre managers respond to opportunities, constraints and community needs;
3. Analyse the experiences of centre users in council managed neighbourhood centres;
4. Create an evidence base for advocacy that can strengthen resourcing in council managed neighbourhood centres.

This report presents the findings of this research which took a mixed method case study approach consisting of focus groups with managers, focus groups with community development leadership teams, interviews with centre managers and participant observation in two council managed

neighbourhood centre. The limited resourcing for this project and relative novelty of Council's role in centre management necessarily made this an exploratory project. The report seeks to highlight initial insights and recommendations and seeks to set the agenda for deeper research engagement with Council's changing role in community service provision and community development in growth areas.

2. Context

Australia's network of a thousand neighbourhood centres forms a vital but understudied and underfunded part of the country's community services sector. Neighbourhood centres routinely engage with disadvantaged community members – such as people with disabilities, elderly people and migrants – who consistently prove hard-to-reach for services that lack the resources to develop trusting relationships (e.g. Fincher and Iveson, 2008; NCOSS, 2019). Because neighbourhood houses and community centres offer a unique combination of social activities and services, including employment support, affordable childcare, digital skills training and emergency food relief, they are uniquely able to offer centre users personalised and trusted referrals to services and other sources of support (O'Neill et al., 2013; NHVic, 2019). This unique ability is invaluable as growing inequality and cost of living pressures is creating new groups of disenfranchised people who are at risk of falling through the cracks of the country's service sector (ACOSS and UNSW, 2018).

Research on community centres in Australia has thus far focused on independently managed neighbourhood houses, and has analysed how these community spaces create opportunities for inclusion for discrete groups of people such as refugees (Gibson-Pope, 2017), women (Harrison, 2018), mature-age students (Rooney, 2011) or people with intellectual disability (Van Holstein, 2021), leaving centres' strategies for creating trusting relationships and safe spaces diverse peoples voices grossly understudied. As a result, little is known about neighbourhood centres' ability to engage and be welcoming to different groups of people who might have different interests and needs. The field of research has thus far also overlooked that independently managed neighbourhood houses are not abundant in the urban landscapes in which the largest part of urban growth is currently occurring. In urban growth areas, local government managed neighbourhood houses and community centres are the dominant form in which this social infrastructure is provided. While it is not uncommon to see Council managed centres in inner-city local government areas, in growth areas, these centres are commonly the only option for residents as there may be fewer or no independently managed centres in their vicinity.

The State of Victoria's population is growing rapidly and Melbourne's peri-urban growth corridor accounts for 40 percent of that growth (Infrastructure Victoria, 2021). Growth areas offer residents more affordable housing than established parts of the metropolitan region, but a lack and lag of employment opportunities and social infrastructure continues to be identified as a substantial challenge in these regions (Brain et al., 2019). Growth areas have a higher proportion of Aboriginal Victorians and migrant communities than other parts of Victoria (Infrastructure Victoria, 2021), and which are groups at higher risk of experiencing exclusion and marginalisation than others in the general population. Concurrently, a lack a social infrastructure in growth areas has been identified as creating a lack of social cohesion, feelings of belonging and trust in others (Brain et al., 2019). Meanwhile, reports on infrastructural challenges in growth areas tend to focus foremost on those infrastructure that are considered to support essential needs: public transport, schools and medical services. Social infrastructure that supports people to come together and socialise also requires attention, as does the 'politics of provisioning' by which social infrastructure is distributed and made accessible (Latham and Layton, 2019).

Most of Victoria's approximately 400 neighbourhood houses are funded by the State Government's Neighbourhood Houses Coordination Program (NHCP). This program funds the salaries of neighbourhood house managers and covers some operational costs so that a stable foundation is

provided on which the organisation can then develop activities, services and programs based on resources such as grant applications, fees paid for services and room hire fees. The bulk of Victoria's neighbourhood houses came under NHCP funding when the program was launched in 1986. Since then, the addition of new neighbourhood centres has been piecemeal. Except from one expansion in 2018 by which 27 neighbourhood houses were added, 10 of which in metropolitan growth areas (Premier of Victoria, 2018). Funding is seldom expanded to new neighbourhood houses, even when the concentration of Melbourne's population is shifting to its peri-urban fringe.

In response to these trends, Councils in growth areas are expanding their traditional role by investing in the building and staffing of neighbourhood houses and community centres. These initiatives relate to the State Government's program in different ways because some Council managed centres receive NHCP funding while others do not. Neighbourhood houses that are registered under the State Government coordination program are also members of the NHCP funded peak body 'Neighbourhood Houses Victoria' which provides policy and advocacy advice to neighbourhood houses in the State of Victoria. This report presents research that explores how Councils navigate their expanding tasks of managing neighbourhood houses and community centres, how residents of growth areas experience these spaces, and how Council staff might be better supported in taking on this important work.

3. Methods

This scoping research developed exploratory case studies of neighbourhood houses and community centres in Melbourne's peripheral growth corridor, where an increasing proportion of centres is managed by local governments. Case study research is especially well suited to research questions that require detailed attention to social and geographical context (VanWynsberghe and Khan, 2007). Case studies generate and draw together different sources of data about a particular social phenomenon, in this case, council managed neighbourhood houses and community centres. It allows research to consider the phenomenon from different angles and from different stakeholders' point of view.

One case study was City of Wyndham. This local government area is one of the fastest growing demographic areas in greater Melbourne. At the time of writing, nineteen community centres and neighbourhood houses were located in this local government area, of which Wyndham City Council managed nine. Of these nine, two received NHCP funding, while the remaining seven were supported by local government funding and staffing.

The second case study will be referred to as the City of Rosebush for the purpose of this report. Rosebush is also a rapidly growing local government area in greater Melbourne. At the time of writing, twenty staffed community centres and neighbourhood houses were located in this local government area, one of which was managed by an Aboriginal Corporation, two of which were managed independently based on NHCP funding, and seventeen of which were managed by Council. Of these seventeen, two were registered neighbourhood houses affiliated with the peak body organisation 'Neighbourhood Houses Victoria', while the remaining fifteen were managed and promoted as Council managed community centres.

In each of the two Council areas, a council-managed neighbourhood house or community centre was selected to serve as a case study. This selection was made in collaboration with the partnering Councils based on the profile of offering in their various centres. The two selected centres were considered to offer relatively broad range of programs and services, enabling the study to gain insight into the breadth of activities and opportunities Councils can offer residents through such centres and what resourcing these different types of engagement require. Before developing detailed case studies of a selection of neighbourhood houses, the research explored how neighbourhood house resourcing and governance is organised in the two Councils. This was achieved through two sets of focus group discussions, one set with the managers of neighbourhood centres and one with the team of team leaders who direct and support these managers.

3.1 Focus groups with neighbourhood centre managers

A roundtable conversation was organised in each of the two Councils bringing together neighbourhood centre managers. Centre managers are employed by Council to oversee the program and the administration of one large or two smaller neighbourhood centres. Managers have their office in their respective neighbourhood centre. Roundtables were held in person in a centrally located centre in the LGA. Discussions explored the pressures and opportunities that managers experience in their roles and the strategies managers develop in response to these influences. Roundtable conversations that take a focus group format enable groups of research participants to explore their experiences collectively by comparing commonalities and differences

(Cameron, 2005). Questions focused on the challenges they face in their work, the strategies they employ to respond to challenges, support they can access or are offered through Council, their views on the accessibility and diversity of their centres and ways to promote these, and their experiences of being a Council employee who works outside of Councils' town hall offices and outside of Council's traditional remit. These prompts garnered detailed insight into managers' ways of working and into their views about the centre's roles and objectives. While each manager works in and on their respective centre, they function as a team and are supported and managed as a team in both Councils. The next step in the research focused on understanding what forms of support and direction managers receive from higher up their respective organisations.

3.2 Focus groups with the leadership teams

The two Councils each have a team consisting of three senior managers who support neighbourhood centre managers. These workers play the role of intermediaries between centre managers who face residents' needs and demands on the ground and managers and councillors who are positioned higher up in Council and who seek to realise Council policies, and political and strategic objectives. Senior managers are a central conduit through which centre managers receive information about the functioning of Council and about the role that centres are expected to play in Council. As such, these workers, their experiences and practices, offer important insight into the ways Councils as governmental organisations structure the work that is and can be done in its neighbourhood centres. Focus groups with these teams were conducted online and participants were asked questions about how they understand the reasons for their respective Council to invest in managing neighbourhood centres directly, what they see as their roles and how this differs from the roles of centre managers, and what they see as the key challenges of managing a neighbourhood centre as local government.

3.3 Participant observation in neighbourhood centres

The final part of the case study method consisted of in-depth engagement with one centre in each of the two local government areas. This was achieved through the research practices of participant observation and centre user interviews. Participant observation is an immersive research method in which a researcher acknowledges that interviewing and other methods that rely on participants giving an account of their experience can overlook routine dimensions of people's experiences of place and community (Laurier, 2010). Participant observation will focus on routine everyday practices of staff and neighbourhood house participants that support trust and familiarity between participants and with staff, but that might be too mundane for people to bring up in an interview. Participant observation was conducted in most activities in each neighbourhood centre. Some activities were excluded because they were organised for underaged children and parental consent could not be obtained in the required timeframe. One activity was omitted from the research schedule because the group in question convened based on shared experiences of trauma, which the researchers judged was best left uninterrupted. Participant observation in remaining programs and activities included a gardening group, sewing and craft classes, playgroups, settlement service workshops, gentle exercise classes, foodbank pick-up and interstitial moments of unprogrammed activities such as walk-ins, impromptu performances and practices of waiting for school pick-up. In addition to providing immediate insight into the rhythms and routines, participant observation also offered opportunities to get to know and develop rapport with neighbourhood centre users. This way, observation formed a pathways toward the selection and recruitment of interview participants.

3.4 In-depth interviews with centre users

Many informal conversations with neighbourhood centre users were recorded in fieldnotes as part of participant observation and these conversations offer important insight into the diversity of neighbourhood centre user experiences. Additionally, nine neighbourhood centre users participated in a more formal, audio-recorded interview. Most of these interviewees led a group activity in a neighbourhood centre. Interviews included questions about how the participant became involved in the neighbourhood house, what skills, connection resources and opportunities they have gained because of their involvement and how their experience with being involved in the neighbourhood house has changed over time.

3.5 Ethics in research

All participants in this research were asked for permission prior to research activities taking place. Participants in focus groups and interviews gave written consent, while participants in observed activities and spaces gave verbal consent. Participants who did not participate in the research in a paid capacity were thanked for sharing their time and expertise with a \$40 dollar gift card. Participants names are omitted from this report and pseudonyms are used instead. These elements of the research protocol conform to ethics approval received for this project from RMIT University's Human Research Ethics Committee.

3.6 Analysis

All data was collated in NVivo software for qualitative data analysis. Data was analysed with the dual focus to identify challenges, opportunities and strategies that emerge when neighbourhood centre are managed by a local government department; and to assess how these dimensions shape centre users' experiences and engagements. The coding categories used in the analysis therefore included 'challenges', 'opportunities' and 'strategies' to address the first component and categories such as 'service profile' and 'accessibility and diversity' and 'grassroots influence' to create insight into the latter. Within these categories further inductive analysis created more nuanced insight into relationships between centre governance and user experience. The next section sets out the key findings that emerged from analysis.

4. Social snapshots

The following sections offer insight into the range of groups that meet at the Council managed centres. The discussion of these groups and the activities they engage in is not intended to be exhaustive. The ones that are included here serve to illustrate the demographic breadth of centres' user base and to illustrate the wide variety of objectives that may be served by Councils' management of this infrastructure.

4.1 Stories from Wyndham

The centre in Wyndham is located on an arterial road in a peri-urban suburb. The centre is co-located with a library, a day-care centre, youth services, and the consulting rooms of child- and maternal health nurses. In addition to this, the centre has three relatively large community activity rooms, a smaller meeting room and a fully equipped kitchen that comes with a public facing dispensing counter that can be opened and closed with a roller shutter door. The spaces in between these different functions are furnished with tables, chairs, lounges and high-top seating. Seating near the kitchen counter combined with the provision of relatively affordably priced barista coffee, tea and warm lunches, gives this part of the community centre the atmosphere of a community café.

Thee Coffee Table

Thee Coffee Table is a volunteer-run group that meets four days per week at Manor Lakes community centre. The group started as a support group, and while the organiser stresses that it is open to all, at the time of research it exclusively consisted of women. The organiser of the group described its practices as being that:

we'll come together as a group. And then we ask, 'how was your week? How's everybody doing?' We ask them and they share. And then when sharing, the others hearing it, it also helps them to connect with one another, and help them with their issues or problems.

The group evolved into an informally run social enterprise when community centre staff offered them use of the centre's professionally equipped kitchen. They now provide low-cost lunches to centre visitors as well as coffee and other café products. On Wednesday when the foodbank organises a pick-up at the community centre, the group provides a free breakfast of eggs of toast for people who come early to wait their turn for their allocated food. The group also continues various aspects of their support group dynamics, for instance by organising craft workshops and by encouraging women to start businesses.

The organiser explained that her motivation for starting the group was based in her experience of moving abroad for a few years and seeing many people still stuck in unemployment when she came back.

And I realized that there are some people who are left behind while everybody else move on. So that's the reason I came up with the community to find out how and what I can do to motivate them.

She has made it her goal to create opportunities for these people whom she sees as needing support, encouragement and motivation. This community organiser is the central person in the group as she is present on all days that the group operates the kitchen and she develops personal relationships with most people who attend the café. For instance, at the time of the interview, someone in the café who was surrounded by their friends or family was having a coughing fit and she excused herself from the interview to go and talk to them. This way, she has established herself as someone who is familiar to many people. The organiser said that when she started at the centre the space was 'clean'. By this she meant that it was empty and quiet. She said that because of this people didn't realise that the centre was a place where you could go if you need help:

So the community needs to know that at first community didn't know, for example, we have some members that has been in here for 30 years, they never stepped foot into the community center. If they didn't feel that, there's some help there. Yeah, so it works both ways. The Community needs to know, and the community center also must have the kind of atmosphere to make the community feel at home.

This community leader understands it as her role to say hello to people and to be welcoming so that people can join her group and use the wider community centre.

The presence of Thee Coffee Table volunteers adds routine and sociality to the community centre. The tables and chairs that are located immediately in front of the café counter are regularly occupied by women who are arriving, leaving or taking a break from cooking. Having affordable food for sale also makes this part of the centre a destination for people who want to meet up with a friend but for whom conventional café pricing may be unaffordable. Through the Coffee Table café, I met various people who seek to expand their opportunities for employment through the centre. For instance, one man handed out business cards for his knife sharpening services which he offers at the centre every Wednesday. Another man had started to run free counselling sessions at the centre and, according to his partner who participates in Thee Coffee Table, this is because he is completing his counselling degree and he is without work at the moment. Offering sessions for free creates hope that paid work might follow.

Quilters

A proportion of groups that meet in Council managed centres existed prior to them starting to use the centre's spaces for their meetings. For instance, at Manor Lakes in Wyndham, a group of patch workers, also known as quilters, meet twice per month. This group has a total of sixty members and on any of their Saturday meet-ups an average of approximately thirty people attend. Prior to meeting at this centre, the group convened in a church hall where they were charged 150 dollars per session. At Manor Lakes, members only require to pay three dollars per attended session to cover the cost of tea and coffee.

It is valuable that groups that promote social connections among people at risk of social isolation, such as this one, are easy to find for potential new members who are interested in joining because this makes the group more accessible. Accessibility is also promoted by keeping costs to an absolute minimum. These aspects of the group are facilitated by their ability to meet in a Council managed venue as the group receives a subsidy from Council which covers the room hire fee.

According to the president of the group, they are eligible for this subsidy because some in the group have disabilities.

The group largely consists of pension aged women and various women described lives in which much time is spent alone at home. Quilters expressed the importance of this group in their lives in terms such as a 'glimmer of light' and a 'lifesaver'. Quilters also talked about the importance of the club and its meetings for its members' mobility. Their coming together in a club enables them to ride share to the meetings, enabling people who no longer drive themselves to stay connected to friends and to their hobby. Members' mobility is further promoted with a yearly bus trip that visits hobby and craft stores that are far afield and that are otherwise not accessible to a proportion of members.

The quilters have a community governance system by which the group has a president, a vice president, a treasurer and various general members who make up a committee. The president is relatively new and described having been chosen for the leadership skills she acquired in her professional life. This person also described that the previous present had lacked some of these skills and had been poorly equipped to manage the behaviour of a member with Aspergers syndrome in a respectful way. The president highlighted that disrespectful responses in delicate situations can make a club less inclusive and less welcoming.

While the existence of the group is not the result of community development efforts of council staff in the centre, important outcomes are achieved in having the group meet there. Firstly, the meeting is made more affordable and therefor more accessible for this group of pension and superannuation aged quilters. Secondly, the group is this way also brought into different lines of communication. The group receives important information from Council about opportunities and upcoming events that may benefit their members, and the group is also potentially more visible and visible to a different group of people when it does not meet in a church hall. This way the activity can become newly accessible to people who may be interested in joining.

Indian seniors club

On any given weekday, a group of senior Indian men can be found at Manor Lakes centre, drinking tea and playing cards. This group has met at the centre since 2015. They started off as a group of 5 friends who met in the park. When they found out about the centre and realised that they were welcome there, they have been meeting daily. Once they met regularly at the centre, they were dubbed club 60 by the centre manager. This act of naming the group and their having a regular place to meet enabled the group to grow from five to approximately 200 members. As in the example of the patch workers, this shows that a central and welcoming meeting place enables group to be accessible to newcomers.

In addition to its growth, club 60 has also benefitted from being at the centre because of the activities this has allowed them to develop. Strong relationships between club leadership and the centre manager has enabled them to collaborate on a range of initiatives such as tailoring talks by Services Australia representatives to the needs and interest of club members, organising outings by bus and applying for, and winning funding from Football Victoria to run weekly walking football sessions on the oval behind the centre. These are valuable achievements because as the leader of the club said repeatedly during an interview about the centre and the club, 'senior migrants are very lonely'. They appreciate the centre as a place where you can go regardless of visa status.

Club 60 leadership did describe initially not being sure about the function of the centre and whether they would be welcome there. The group leader emphasised in the interview that they did not know anyone at the centre and that there was nobody who could introduce them:

Club 60 leader: Because they've no known cause, we don't know. We are not introductions any others not sitting there known to us. So, that is why we hesitate where we will when we are there and we are sitting. Due to that reason after some time we feel [...] community centres is for learning something.

Facilitator: So I just want to check that I heard what you said correctly. Would you say that it's good when you're introduced to people?

Club 60 leader: Yes.

Facilitator: Did the manager do that? Has anyone ever introduced these other people while you were in the community centre?

Club 60 leader: No no, we are coming here and we introduce each other.

This quote illustrates that some luck was involved in this group becoming established at the centre because they did not have a clear sense of what the centre was for and whether they would be welcome.

4.2 Stories from Rosebush

In contrast to the centre at Wyndham, the centre in Rosebush is not co-located with other services such as a library or a maternal health service. This means that people who visit this centre do so because they are interested in a particular aspect of their program. It's location in a residential suburban backstreet makes it less likely that people 'happen upon' the centre and walk in walk in out of curiosity. This makes it harder for this centre than for its counterparts with co-located services to attract new centre users. Nonetheless, this centre offers a rich and varied program of activities that spans leisure, education and health. The building has two community activity rooms, a shared lounge and kitchen area, a covered patio with garden beds and two offices, one located by the door which is used by the manager and another one which is full-time hired out to a disability employment service.

Sewing classes

This centre has an exceptionally well-attended and popular program of sewing classes. The centre runs sewing class 6 days per week for adults as well as teenagers. The classes are very popular and there is a waitlist of new students who wish to join a class. The classes meet various people's needs as some are structured and run by a teacher while others are a self-guided social get-togethers for people with pre-established skills.

In the teacher facilitated classes, students can use a sewing machine from the centre to work on a project of their choosing. Students pick the pattern and material for their project with feedback from the teacher. The teacher also offers support at crucial steps along the way and offers help when students do not know how to progress their project or need help addressing mistakes. In the class for teenagers, the teacher was a valued source of advice. The teenage girls appreciated the teacher's expertise and they interacted in a familiar and amicable way with her. This expressed itself in mutual fondness and in light jokes about differences in taste between the retirement-aged teacher and the teenage girls. Some girls in the class have been coming for many years and the

girls described that they have developed friendships in this class. They also explained that they enjoyed the opportunity to spend time learning something that is not taught or tested in structured way but that is instead guided by their own creativity and initiative.

In the social group, attendees also bring their own craft projects. Most women in this group were of retirement age and they brought their cross-stitch or crochet projects with them. During the three hours that they meet, the women discussed many personal challenges related to dynamics in their respective families, relationships with their partners and concerns about their health.

The sewing classes are a great success which has generated demand for more classes. The manager expressed uncertainty about how to best navigate this demand. On the one hand popularity offers insight into a community need and demand and it is part of the neighbourhood centre's objectives to facilitate activities based on need and demand. On the other hand, neighbourhood houses and community centres seek to develop a variety of activities so that its program offers different things that appeal to different people. To balance these two intentions, the manager made the decision to create a waiting list and to not offer sewing classes in addition to the daily ones that are already offered. A commercial management logic would lead to the expansion of programs that are in high demand which can make an organisation's offering less varied. This choice demonstrates the value of organisations and meeting spaces that provide leisure activities that are not commercially managed.

Yoga for seniors

The centre organises exercise classes for seniors. The class takes the form of gentle yoga, in which students are encouraged to use chairs and the wall to ensure they can participate in the exercises safely. For some attendees, the class is purely valuable as a regular, affordable and age-appropriate form of exercise, while for others the class is also important as a social occasion. To accommodate these different needs, students are invited to stay for coffee or tea in the centre's kitchen after each class and a few do stay back sometimes to have a cup of tea and a chat. These classes started many years ago and some participants have attended the class continuously for over eight years.

When I asked how people had originally heard about the class, some said they received a flyer in their mailbox and others said they were familiar with the centre because they used to be invited by Council to take a free class when they volunteered in a Council conservation program. For all attendees I spoke to, the low cost of this class was an essential part of its suitability. One student said that 'the price is right' and another said that yoga sessions cost 25 dollars in another nearby place. The students concluded that 'the Council is very generous'. The students also appreciated the small group size of 10 people and they applauded the exclusive focus on older people. Some students had been disappointed when exercise classes for older people in a gym they attended had gradually become open to younger people as this had made it harder for them to keep up.

The yoga class also illustrates how important community centres can be for seniors' ability to regularly engage in exercise and how important it is to offer such classes in accessible and affordable formats.

Playgroup

The programming at the Rosebush centre is mostly organised at the main centre, but some programs are held in another Council-owned community space that is located a 5-minute walk away next to a kindergarten. The playgroup is organised at this smaller centre because Council wanted to facilitate convenient drop-off and pick-up for parents who also have a child in kindergarten and imagined that some parents with young children might hear about the playgroup this way.

The playgroup is one of a few activities that is organised and led by Council and that does not rely on prior expressions of interest or requests from members of the community. Council seeks to start playgroups, which are get-togethers for mothers and their pre-school children, and once they are up and running, to transfer these into the hands of community volunteers. In order to start up a group, a Council employee advertises a new playgroup through Council channels, such as maternal and child health clinics and mothers' Facebook groups. The staff member then hosts the playgroup and initially she opens the room up every week, but with time, a parent is expected to volunteer to do this for the group. Because the idea is that the group will become self-sustaining, she does not organise activities as this may erode people's confidence to take responsibility for keeping the group going. In line with this, she explained that she sets up the room with toys the first few times so that parents do not walk into an empty space, but that she subsequently starts asking parents to help her set up the room and to take the toys they want for their children out of the storage room themselves.

The playgroup leader explained that Rosebush City Council promotes and hosts each of its playgroups for a year before it expects the group to become volunteer led. During that first year Council waives public liability insurance fees and room hire. After a year, a parent in the group needs to take responsibility for opening and closing the room and for collecting money from all parents to cover 50 dollars in insurance fees per year and 11 to 16 dollars per hour in room hire fees. The playgroup organiser explained that she was able to transition a few playgroups to self-managing the group, but that it did not seem likely that the same would happen for the group that met that afternoon. The group's attendance fluctuates and none of the parents have put themselves forward to take on the responsibilities. As a result, the group will cease to meet in three weeks' time.

The three parents who did show up with their children reported that they had observed how their child had become more confident in their play with other children. Parents talked about the quest for a volunteer leader as something that was beyond them. One parent for instance said that they did not have the confidence to talk to all the other parents. The staff member explained that Council may try to start a new group up in a year when new people might have moved into the area or when new people in the area may have had children. She said that there is no point in starting the group up before that time has passed, because it will lead to the same result.

Afternoon social catch up

Every weekday at around 2 o'clock a group of about 10 to 15 women who speak Arabic as their first language and whose children attend the international school across the road visit the centre. They come in one by one over the scope of an hour and they sit together in the lounge area of the centre. While the women have chat, their youngest children play with the toys that are a permanent feature of the centre's lounge room. The women visit the centre to wait for school to go out.

Parking around the school and the centre is limited, and the women arrive up to an hour early for pick-up to be guaranteed a parking spot. The women used to wait in their cars and on sunny days they would stand together in the centre parking lot. This is when the centre manager invited them to wait inside.

Since the women have started to spend time waiting in the centre, they have been able to let more women know about the possibility to wait in a comfortable environment. The manager has also endeavoured to optimise the situation by embedding the group in the centre. A flyer was created to advertise this group as 'afternoon social catch up'. Conversations between the manager and the women also led to the centre organising Arabic classes for the women's children. The women explained that they did not see sufficient improvement in their children's proficiency in Arabic from what they are taught in school. The after-school classes at the centre were a success in the first term. However, during its second term, attendance dropped. Because it was a great achievement to develop an activity based on a need identified by members of the community the manager was disappointed to see attendance drop over time. This illustrates that community needs and preferences can change rapidly. The manager asked the women whether any changes to classes were required and explained to them that there are many things they could change, including the day, the time or the teacher. However, the group did not come forward with any such feedback, and the class continued to run below capacity.

At the same time, the catch-up is highly valued by attendees. In an urban environment in which driving to services is required and parking is tight, the women said that they appreciate being able to wait somewhere where it is cool on warm days and warm on cold days. Women also explained that they are sometimes able to get some work done while waiting. They can take an online meeting while their child plays with other children and with centre toys. Another woman explained that being welcome to wait at the centre enables her to fit prayer into her school pick-up routine. She comes early and uses a corner of the shared lounge area. She said that it would be nice to have an allocated place for prayer. This group shows that a community centre can be valuable in unforeseen and unplanned ways.

5. Insights

5.1 Council versus community management

Both councils initially held the opinion that their management of centres ought to be temporary, and that the responsibility for centre management should be handed over to a volunteer committee of management over time. However, both councils have since changed their position on this issue. Rosebush started managing its first centre approximately twenty years ago when an independently run neighbourhood house's committee of management disbanded. This fall-out placed that neighbourhood house at immediate risk of losing funding from the State Government and of having to close down. Meanwhile, this council's planners recognised the value of the facility for the residents of the greenfield developments that surround the centre:

The social planner at the time said, look, we don't want to lose the funding. This is a really important service for a very isolated community, because it was a new estate on the edge of [the local government area]. It didn't have any services or anything. They go, we don't want to lose the Neighbourhood House. But there was no one in the community willing to form a committee and keep it going, so they asked - it was, I think, [The Department of Human Services] at the time or whoever was managing the funds – could Council take it on for a couple of years, put in a coordinator and put together a committee to take... The committee could then manage it again.

Leadership focus group, Rosebush

Council received permission from the Victorian State Government to take over centre management, based on an understanding that Council management of the centre would be temporary and transitional. On the one hand, this intervention was extremely successful, because the neighbourhood house is still open and running to this day. On the other hand, the interim committee of volunteers that was formed never took over the organisation's governance. Once Council had taken responsibility of finances, it proved challenging to transfer this role back to volunteers:

But they didn't want to take on the responsibility of the finances, because they thought Council were doing a good job at that point, employing everybody. They didn't want that - they just weren't prepared. I don't know, when they had the training around the financial responsibilities, whether they got a bit scared at that point, but they just didn't want to take it on. They stayed on as like an advisory committee for a number of years after that, but we could never get them to the point to take on the funding responsibilities again.

Leadership focus group, Rosebush

For Rosebush Council, the role of managing neighbourhood houses originated in an effort to support the continuation of an organisation that was already community managed and in which residents of the neighbourhood already contributed to steering the organisation. Since its initial venture into centre management, this Council's commitment to centre management has gradually expanded. Seeing their population grow rapidly and noticing the unwillingness of the State Government to substantially expand its Neighbourhood Houses Coordination Program by funding new neighbourhood houses, they now manage fifteen community centres and two neighbourhood houses. Most of these centres were purpose built by Council as assets that would be managed by

Council staff indefinitely. As such, the practice of working on centre governance with an advisory committee was not expanded to new centres.

In contrast, Wyndham City Council entered into neighbourhood centre management by launching its own centres from the start. They did so in response to a lack of service provision and community engagement opportunities in its emerging suburbs.

When we started it was just like, we just need to start speaking to our community and start, you know, enabling our community to connect with each other. Because I think one thing that Wyndham is quite conscious of is that government doesn't build community, communities build community, but our job is to enable that to happen.

Leadership focus group, Wyndham

One of the senior managers remembered that the social planners who were on Council's community development team when the first centres opened did have an understanding that centres ought to be community managed:

I remember talking to the initial team, that community, community governed centers was seen as the ideal and something we would work towards. There's a lot of time and effort into transitioning from a current state to that future state and [...] it just became less of a focus as we're getting more and more centers. [...] I think it's incredibly complex to do that, especially in the local government environment, where Council and community create an expectation of a service is being provided and there would be some that would view that we're taking stuff away. [...] that Council would be seen to be stepping away from providing those services. And that would be seen negatively.

Leadership focus group, Wyndham

As became apparent from the Rosebush leadership focus group, the process of transferring a centre from Council to community management is complicated as residents could interpret it as Council divesting from service provision when it steps back from centre management, even when it does so to bolster grassroots leadership. These excerpts thus show that once a Council takes responsibility for centre management it is unlikely that a centre will be able to be transferred to a community managed model. This is an important insight for Councils who are considering to build and staff neighbourhood centres in their localities as, in addition to the initial investment in capital works it requires long-term investment in resourcing and staffing.

Recommendation 1: Councils that take responsibility for neighbourhood centre management should be prepared to continue in that role, as transition to independent grassroots management has proven unfeasible.

5.2 Community governance

While both Councils see it as their long-term responsibility to manage neighbourhood centres in their local government area, centre managers and senior managers are committed to sharing responsibility for the direction of centres with participants at the smaller scale of a centre's programming. Both teams of Council workers are of strong persuasion that centres' services and programs should be shaped not by Council employees, but by people who use neighbourhood centres. Wyndham Council's leadership team described an understanding that it is Council's role to

enable people to come together to shape the centre and not to do the work of shaping the centre for them. As articulated by a senior manager:

When I first started in hubs [the team responsible for managing centres], we used to run and facilitate a lot of programs and activities directly ourselves, whether that'd be a playgroup, whether there'd be some sort of community celebration, and over time, we would work more and more with community. And now, we're walking alongside community. If community are not starting and doing that work, we're not doing it. We're really shaped by what our community want to do.

Wyndham leadership focus group

In Wyndham this means that managers no longer initiate programs and in line with this, centres do not have a budget for program initiatives. Instead, managers are to respond to grassroots initiative. While this position can be empowering, especially in a context where there are no formal pathways such as committees through which local residents can have a say in programming at the centre, it is also important to note that opportunities for people to express initiative can be limited even when Councils do seek to encourage residents to take such a pro-active role. For instance, one woman who organises a support group for parents who home school their children described it as 'I took a really big shot' that she approached the centre because she had no prior expectation that the centre might support her initiative:

Honestly, I think I just got really lucky by asking the right question and it was more – they were more accommodating than I was expecting because I had no clue. Honestly, I had no idea what we were signing up for.

Organiser of support group, Wyndham

Wyndham Council uses centres to build and maintain relationships with community groups through which it is able to have a close understanding of needs and aspirations for the centre that people in the area might have.

we're seeing both needs or also aspirations and you know, what people are interested for, and if we, if we see that this is not delivered by one of our groups or organizations that are currently in the centre, we will be proactive in bringing a different services in or creating partnerships with groups, organizations, or individuals as well community leaders, or we provided it by ourselves as well. It's just less and less because of the relationships we've built. And because of you know, Wyndham is really lucky. Just the amount of very active citizens and groups and organizations is remarkable.

Leadership focus group, Wyndham

While the approach to firstly respond to community interest guards Council against being prescriptive in its centre management and prevents the relationship between government and citizens to become defined by service provision, it is also worth reflecting on which individuals' and groups' participation foremost encourages. The approach creates some risk that residents who already have a relationship or past experience with centres or who have sufficient confidence to address a manager or member of staff may use opportunities to play a role in developing programming. The quote by an activity organiser included above demonstrates that initiative may depend on luck more than that it is the outcome of relationship building. By interpreting individual

residents' initiative as a community wide capability, people who do not have such capacity and opportunities to engage them with community centre infrastructure may be overlooked.

Similarly, at the centre in Rosebush Council's intentions are that parents are empowered to take on playgroup leadership and that Council staff refrain from engaging in ways that may lead to parents' dependency on Council service provision. This stance is proving successful in some cases, as it has motivated some parents to play a community leadership role in facilitating a playgroup. Previous research has demonstrated that playgroup leadership is an important leadership pathway through which parents have their first experiences with volunteering and committee work which enables them to take on subsequent roles on school committees and councils (Keam et al., 2018). Council's efforts to encourage grassroots stewardship of playgroups is thus likely to produce socially valuable flow-on effects. However, the research by Keam and colleagues (2018) also demonstrates that participation in playgroups and ability to take on leadership positions is variable across linguistic, cultural and faith groups and that consequently, people require varying degrees and kinds of support to take on such roles (also see McShane et al., 2016).

Based on these reflections on both Councils' approaches to grassroots leadership, the report puts forward the consideration that it may be valuable for Councils that manage centres to develop parallel strategies by which it continues to work with people who come forward or who are able to take on leadership roles while also continuing to develop outreach, engagement and leadership training with people who do not yet express initiative or ability. This seems especially important in growth areas where new residents continuously arrive who are likely to be unfamiliar with the concept of neighbourhood centres and who are likely to be unaware of the role they might play in shaping these places.

Recommendation 2: Council managed centres can continue to reach new people in the area and people unfamiliar with a centre if they invest in performing outreach work.

Recommendation 3: Intentions to place activities in the hands of members of the community are best accompanied by elaborate systems of support as the confidence to take on volunteering is unevenly distributed.

5.3 Neighbourhood centre objectives

The research explored how decisions are made about what a neighbourhood centre should seek to achieve and prioritise through its forms of engagement, service provision and programming. Centres are limited in what they can accommodate due to their finite number of activity rooms and finite staff resources to provide administrative support to groups (see the section on staff practices for more on this). In both Councils, the programming and service profile of its centres are shaped by an interplay of resident initiative and the use of demographic data and strategic Council documents. Both Councils emphasised a yearly expressions of interest round in which people can put forward an application for use of a centre room. Both Councils described this exercise as a crucial moment in the year for establishing a centre's profile of activities and participants for that year.

The ways in which Councils do research to inform the direction of their centres aligns with the centralised research that Councils do to inform their strategic planning. This includes detailed insight into demographic changes and existing service offering in an area.

There's a system we use called 'Profile ID' at Council. Our social planning team pays for that. Essentially all the data and demographic data for each community is updated in that portal. Our team have access to that. They need to map out all of that for their local area to form that community development, essentially community engagement plan.

Leadership focus group, Rosebush

The expression of interest process enables Councils to weigh up the relative advantage of different people's suggested program ideas. At Rosebush, centre managers described that they have a matrix for making these decisions:

We've got a matrix that we use at council that talks about, well, does this align with our priorities? Yes or no. Is it open to the whole community? Say we've got a couple of competing hirers. We have a matrix. In that matrix, it actually references things like is it open to people with disability? Is it inclusive, that kind of thing? If it's not, they don't get scored highly on that. Then if another one, they'll obviously score a lot higher and get that spot in the centre.

Centre managers focus group, Rosebush

A yearly in-take process offers Councils an opportunity to curate the offering in a centre toward those activities it believes many people will need or enjoy. At Wyndham, an important criterion in the decision-making process was whether the suggested activity was for- or not-for profit and whether it would 'facilitate community':

We're very clear that a community facility or community centre, neighbourhood house is a significant investment from Council. The Council is really clear about the purpose of those buildings it's to facilitate community. So our priority is things that facilitate community. So if you just want to run a small business from our community centre, that's not a high priority really.

Leadership focus group, Wyndham

At Rosebush, managers' approach to choosing hirers was also guided by the usefulness of what the hirer would offer and managers were able to advocate for reduced fees for those hirers they believe offer a service that fills a gap in the area. However, they did experience that advocacy was becoming more challenging:

I've got a lady who runs a - and it's not - it is a private company. She does charge. But it's an autism care and support service. So she runs cooking classes for autistic children. There's not really any other service like that in the whole municipality. So yeah, I do think she should get - like she's offering a service that otherwise people are going to have to travel outside of the municipality for.

Centre managers focus group, Rosebush

The manager explained that one could look at such a hirer through a revenue lens and conclude that when a person charges for a service that they can afford to pay full price for a space. She said that 'from a community point of view it's like well, hang on a minute. Look what she's offering though.'

In general, the research detected a slight contrast between the clarity of centre objectives and the decision-making process around expressions of interest on the one hand and the reality of centre management on the other. For instance, in both centres, managers worked extensively with groups that were already present in the centre to generate new activities. The Indian seniors at Wyndham are a good example of this as in addition to starting up walking football for them, the manager also engaged them into the planning process for Centrelink talks to ensure that these events catered to their information needs. At Rosebush, a good example is the group of women who wait for school to go out and for whose children the manager created an Arabic class. These ways of creating activities are more closely related to traditional community development practices, but due to the emphasis in these two government organisations on community initiative, these practices are performed exclusively with people who already frequent a centre.

At Wyndham, managers also expressed feeling limited in their ability to bring new people into the centre:

I'd like to have a budget to run my own programs, because there are some things like just running a seniors' yoga or Thai chi isn't necessarily going to be something that's going to make money, but it's going to bring health and wellbeing and connection. So it'd be good to have a budget and freedom to do that. [...] I feel like just having that, it'd be great for bringing people in and then from that we can build things, but we don't even have that budget to do that or the freedom to do that.

Centre managers focus group, Wyndham

For staff who seek to work in a community development framework, conversations with community members inside and beyond the centre are an invaluable source of information and form of relationship building, which go the heart of what they understand community development to be. Supporting staff to perform this type of outreach work may bring new people into neighbourhood centres who otherwise would not. In light of the dynamic demographic context of growth areas, such an approach may be worth considering. Clearly articulated objectives around centre-guided programming, and an ongoing commitment to community initiative could prevent this change in direction from disempowering centre users.

Recommendation 4: creating a small budget for program development in each centre can facilitate Council-organised activities inside and outside the community centre or neighbourhood house that enable new people to be drawn in.

5.4 Volunteering

When volunteers do play active roles in shaping or leading activities in centres, both benefits and challenges emerge. With the engagement of volunteers, centre can expand the breadth and variety of their programming and user profile extensively. However, at the same time, volunteers are a highly varied group of people who can have very different motivations for engaging in volunteering and this means that resources may also be required to ensure volunteer satisfaction and program sustainability.

During observation and interviewing, the research encountered volunteers motivated to volunteer as a pathway to employment, as a way to work on a social issue for which the person is passionate, and as a way to create a knowledge or support sharing network of likeminded people.

Volunteers who experience unemployment and who seek to volunteer as a pathway toward employment stood out as a group that would especially benefit from additional guidance and support. For instance, at Manor Lakes, one volunteer indicated that she has hopes that her initiative of a women's support may lead to forms of employment. However, she had stagnated with the project because, while the next logical step would be to incorporate the group and apply for funding, this would require her to either give up leadership or to assume the role of president and forgo any employment opportunities that may come with grant success. Similarly, the centre is able to offer free counselling sessions because a counsellor in training is willing to offer these for free in the hope of acquiring experience that may lead to work. In both these cases, volunteers are offering substantial forms of support to other centre users as centre staff refer users to these services. While neither of these individuals complained, Councils that manage centres may wish to develop strategies and protocols that help their staff support volunteers, for instance by offering periodic career development conversations.

Recommendation 5: creating a protocol or guideline for volunteer support can help prevent volunteer burn-out and can help ensure that there is clarity between volunteers and Council staff about volunteers' motivations and expectations.

5.5 Staff practices and workloads

Centre managers were generally passionate about their work, and enjoyed great satisfaction from people's gratitude for their work. In their interviews, centre users frequently referred to the manager as a key contributing factor to them feeling welcome at a centre. The importance of managers' interpersonal work is not consistently reflected in managers' workloads and performance expectations. Managers in both Councils described growing administrative workloads and reported routinely working unpaid overtime. Time-intensive administrative tasks included paperwork related to property management such as building maintenance and room hire, the onboarding and management of staff and volunteers, compliance with a suite of guidelines and regulations, management of risk and public liability, and the generation of program logics and promotional material for programmed activities. The time a manager spends on these tasks is time they spend alone in their office and not on the centre floor talking to people. Any expansion of managers' administrative tasks in current and future council managed centres should thus be accompanied by a realisation that this may reduce a manager's ability to welcome people who require encouragement in order to be able to be included and participate.

While managers unanimously reported on high administrative burdens, they were generally accepting of this aspect of the work and saw it as a necessary part of working for government. Managers understood these tasks as contributing to the accountability and caution that the public demands of government. While staff did not suggest any tasks should or could be removed, some tasks did stand out as being especially time intensive and potentially redundant. Reducing or centralising these tasks may generate greater capacity in centres to engage and include marginalised groups and respond to emerging need.

Firstly, some centres create a flyer for each of their programmed activities each term which takes managers a substantial amount of time. Meanwhile, the majority of centre users either indicated that they had come to the centre on a whim or reported that they had heard about the centre or one of its activities through word of mouth. Flyers do not seem to play an important role in the promotion of a centre's program. Council managed centre may want to review whether this

strategy is the more effective way to promote a centre's activities. The prominence of word-of-mouth suggests that an open day or a bring-a-friend-day either instead of, or in addition to newsletters and flyers, might be a more effective way to inform people about what is on offer in a centre.

Secondly, some centres generate a program logic for each of its programmed activities. Planning with a program logic framework enables an organisation to articulate objectives and to plan what actions and resources are required to achieve project outputs, immediate and long-term outcomes. In contexts where members of the community are encouraged to articulate their objectives and to take actions toward achieving those, program logics that are filled out by council staff may not align with the intention to encourage grassroots leadership. Because program logics take some time for staff to fill out, councils that are taking on centre management and that value working with program logics, may wish to generate one program logic that articulates the rationale and intended outcomes of a council's investment in centre management rather than separate program logics for each centre or for each programmed activity. Alternatively, councils could opt to develop program logics only for those activities that are initiated by their staff. This may enable managers to gain some time to put toward other daily tasks of centre management and community engagement.

Thirdly, staff identified administrative work around risk mitigation and insurance as challenging and they especially emphasised that these challenges cause barriers for potential users of centres. Finally, administrative burdens can demoralise workers in various ways. Staff used terms such as 'glorified admin person' and one said that 'when I came into this job they said oh yeah, you'll be doing community development and then I felt like a bookings clerk'. Managers also used adjectives such as 'overwhelmed' to describe how they experience this aspect of their workload. One worker described that their administrative workload was the key bottleneck in developing additional activities at the centre she manages because she did not have time in her workweek to process the paperwork associated with starting up something new.

So I've had to switch off because I could try and work every weekend and do all this stuff and try and get programs happening and - I'd drive myself bonkers. So I'm just managing myself. I've shut down. I'm doing my venue hire, I do the odd program and I am just coping.

managers focus group, Rosebush

Another manager similarly described that she let an opportunity to increase volunteering at her centre pass because she knew that the bureaucratic hurdles to take on volunteers would be too taxing:

Manager 1: An example is that we've, you know, received inquiries from the Justice Department about supporting people who have community service hours, and just connecting them with different groups that can support that program, that we don't...

Manager 2: I deleted that. I didn't respond to that because I couldn't do that, so good argument, [manager 1].

Facilitator: Why couldn't you do it?

Manager 2: Because volunteering, there's so much paperwork. Council is so risk averse in that area. For us to put a volunteer on, it's a huge process. I thought, am I going to even go to the volunteer recruitment officer and ask her about these ones with justice. I knew it was too hard for me.

Managers focus group, Wyndham

Both councils are actively seeking to reduce administrative workloads where they can and any local governments that are considering investing in centre management should seek to minimise administrative excess. Not only does this type of work take valuable time away from staff to build relationships, create opportunities and develop programming, it also creates burn-out and feelings of being undervalued or misunderstood by the larger organisation of which managers are part.

Recommendation 6: minimising administrative workloads of centre staff ensures that centres can deliver accessible and inclusive centres as staff play a pivotal role in making participants feel welcome.

Recommendation 7: Invest in communication strategies such as neighbourhood centre open days, bring-a-friend days and visits to organisations such as aged care residences, schools and sports clubs to replace administratively burdensome communications strategies.

6. Conclusion

This document reports on a small-scale research project that was executed with modest resources in a short timeframe, making its findings necessarily provisional. The research found that Council managed neighbourhood houses create socially vital and unique experiences for people in urban environments where low threshold and affordable opportunities for social interaction are scant. The centres proved especially important for elderly people and migrants who were attracted to the centre for the affordability and unconditionally welcoming character of group activities.

The report found that centre staff experiences some constraints and opportunities in their work that are the direct result of being embedded in local government. A first important benefit was that staff have secure employment and secure resourcing which enables staff to engage in planning and to pursue career progression. A second benefit was that governments are able to create a broad platform for their centres by promoting it via Council channels such as official websites and newsletters. Two prominent challenges that the report highlighted are firstly, that local government can be hesitant to develop programming because of their efforts to promote citizen empowerment and prevent dependency. The report has argued that while this is in principle a valuable position, it may also make centres prone to becoming spaces for vocal and confident residents and miss important opportunities to build relationships with more marginalised groups in their populations. Secondly, the accountability and caution that is demanded of local government can translate into high administrative workloads that can form barriers to develop activity in centres.

In the context of rapid ongoing urbanisation and lags in the provision of social infrastructure, Councils that take on responsibility to build and manage neighbourhood centres are addressing an important and largely overlooked service gap. The report has pointed out how Councils that are managing centres or that plan to do so in the future, may make the best of their strengths of being part of local government and develop initiatives to prevent or soften challenges. It is hoped that the report will function as an agenda for future policy and research work that will contribute to better understanding the relatively new and increasingly important phenomenon of council managed neighbourhood centres.

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