PERCEPTIONS OF NEIGHBOURHOOD AND COMMUNITY CENTRES

RESEARCH REPORT 2022

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1.   Acknowledgements

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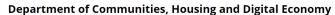
2.   Executive Summary

Amidst an environment of compounding community needs, Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs) are increasingly being relied upon to provide essential services, adapt to community demands, and cultivate connection and resilience. In spite of this, NCCs' role and value largely remain ambiguous to both the social services sector and the community. In response to a paucity of research which investigates these key sites of social infrastructure, Neighbourhood Centres Queensland (NCQ) requested this qualitative study to explore how sector stakeholders perceive NCCs. Investigating perceptions of and interactions with NCCs, we interviewed 25 participants across the following stakeholder groups: large non-government organisations (NGOs), government agencies, community-based organisations (CBOs), and peak bodies. This research was intended to assist in articulating the value of NCCs, clarifying their role to the sector, and enabling them to better serve community needs.

To interpret our findings, we drew upon Margaret Wheatley's (2006) conceptualisation of critical systems theory, examining the social services sector as an interconnected system. Our findings were categorised into perceptions of NCCs, nature of interactions between sector stakeholders, and challenges for NCCs and the sector. First, NCCs were perceived by participants as a place for everyone to feel welcome, as referral points for service navigation, and as facilitators of community development. Research participants overwhelmingly expressed that stakeholder interactions were shaped by interprofessional networks, sector capacity constraints and competition. Participants also identified that the rigid funding structure of the sector and lack of consistency across centres were two major challenges for NCCs.

In applying critical systems theory, participants evidently valued NCCs for their ability to offer holistic support and contribute diversity to the social services system. Whilst these values are significant in aiding the health of the entire system, they are at odds with the rest of the sector. Tensions arising from key organisational differences between NCCs and other sector organisations have given way to misaligned expectations of the role and nature of NCCs. In responding to these misaligned expectations, we suggest that NCQ expand their Strategic Framework to clarify a shared purpose, collective principles and values that resonate across the wider NCC network. The development of community awareness strategies and a detailed NCC directory page are also recommended.

3.   Introduction

Considered by many to be the 'brain banks' of community knowledge, Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs) are woven within the fabric of Australia's social services sector (QCOSS, 2017, p. 4). Neighbourhood Centres Queensland (NCQ), the state's peak body representing NCCs, define them as independent, community-based centres that provide context-specific support, services and connection (NCQ, 2022b). Recent neoliberal policies and New Public Management (NPM) reforms have encouraged corporatisation in the sector, contributing to a competitive rather than collaborative culture (Nahum, 2020). Amidst these shifting political dynamics, Queensland's social services sector has experienced significant changes, creating operational challenges and unsettling the position of smaller organisations such as NCCs (Mundy, 2019, p. 3). All of these shifts put into question what role NCCs play in this changing sector and further, how NCCs are perceived in this new landscape.

This research aimed to explore the perceptions of NCCs in Greater Brisbane's social services sector. We focus on the perceptions held by other stakeholders as the social services sector is interdependent and thus, the whole of the system must be brought into the fold of analysis. Understanding of these vantage points are lacking in research, yet vital in understanding the role NCCs play in relation to the environment they operate within.

To understand where NCCs are placed within the sector, we examined relationships and interactions between NCCs and other stakeholders including: large non-government organisations (NGOs), government agencies, community-based organisations (CBOs) and peak bodies. Three fundamental questions guided our research:

1. How are Neighbourhood and Community Centres perceived by key social services stakeholders within Greater Brisbane?

2. What is the nature of the interactions between Neighbourhood and Community Centres and key stakeholders within the social services sector in Greater Brisbane?

3. What factors influence stakeholder perceptions of Neighbourhood and Community Centres in the Greater Brisbane social services sector?

This report details the implications and recommendations of the research for NCQ and contributes to the broader literature surrounding NCCs. The research will assist in advocating the value of NCCs, clarifying their role in the sector, and enabling them to more effectively serve community needs. This report first entails a review of the relevant literature pertaining to NCCs and the social services sector more broadly. Following this, our

conceptual framework guiding this research—critical systems theory—is outlined. Subsequently, the methodology that underpins the trajectory of the research is presented. The findings then follow, alongside the discussion. Finally, recommendations will be made for both NCQ and future research.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Neighbourhood and Community Centres and Their History

Despite NCCs being located at the heart of communities globally, current literature lacks an established understanding of their value, thus they remain largely underresearched (Choo, 1969, p. 99; Macarov, 1978, p. 157). Due to the diverse range of services and support they provide to communities, defining and researching NCCs proves difficult (Healy, 1989, p. 285). Some scholars (Barton et al., 2021, p. 358; Medved, 2017, p. 164) view NCCs as crucial to developing neighbourhood identity, community resilience, and social cohesion. Their ability to reduce isolation, create connectivity, and provide safe spaces further emphasise the impact they have on communities (Delgado, 2017, p. 69; Warrell & Ingamells, 2014, p. 24). NCCs deliver countless services to communities, including food and emergency relief, and operate as launchpads to refer community members to other service providers in the sector (Mundy et al., 2022, p. 5).

In their 2021 Sector Impact Report, NCQ identified 127 state funded NCCs in Queensland, with 37% of those located in major cities (Mundy et al., 2022, p.6). NCCs' adaptability and resilience was highlighted in their responses to recent crises such as COVID-19 and increasing housing scarcity, illuminating NCCs as key sites of social capital-building amidst times of hardship (Community Support and Services Committee, 2021, p.4). Until recently, funding increases have not reflected the far-reaching, indirect impact that NCCs bring to communities. Between 2016-2021, Neighbourhood Centres received only marginal funding increases from the Queensland Government (Mundy et al., 2022, p. 24). However, upon the release of the Queensland State Budget 2022, the 127 state-funded NCCs are set to receive over double their current amount of operational funding (NCQ, 2022a).

Emerging in the late 19th century, the settlement house movement in the United States conceptualised what we now know as community-centred development (Köngeter, 2020, p. 15). The movement's initial aim was to "create productive citizens as agents" and "overcome the divides within the population" (Köngeter, 2020, p. 26). This has since evolved and been adopted globally, most prevalent today in the form of NCCs. Historically, NCCs have

maintained a preference for small-scale operations to ensure maximum participation from communities. Their focus on community-based issues, which are context-driven, has traditionally brought people together and fostered social interactions (Neville, 1996, p. 78). This legacy of NCCs is evident within the context of Australia, where social services and welfare has been underpinned by the notion of a "fair go" (Gray, 2011, p. 4).

In the 1980s, New Public Management (NPM) was adopted in the sector to improve efficiency and productivity. This contrasted with NCCs' horizontal focus on identity and relationships (Neville, 1996, p. 75). The adoption of NPM,and its implications, will be discussed below in relation to changes within the Australian social service sector. During this time, according to Healy (1989, p. 287), NCCs filled a gap in service delivery as their position allowed them to support communities in ways that other organisations could not. Their growth and success of operations enabled NCCs to shift from being solely volunteer operated to receiving increased government funding to employ staff, thus making them particularly sensitive to political changes and disruptions (Mundy et al., 2022, p. 5; Neville, 1996, p. 76). However, it has been found that NCCs' are still largely maintained through voluntary work. Rooney (2004, p. 204) highlights how NCCs have often been overlooked due to this smaller administrative capacity in comparison to larger organisations.

4.2   The Social Services Sector: Changes and Challenges

The social services sector — in which NCCs operate within — has been subject to decades of restructuring and concentrated reform by successive governments (Carey et al, 2020, p. 6). A number of scholars attribute neoliberalism, an ideology that favours economic capitalism, individualism, privatisation and market dominance, as a key driver of these changes with regard to funding and governance (Brady et al., 2014, p. 38; Garrett, 2010, p. 340). Primarily funded through grant schemes and subsidies, non-government organisations in the social services sector prior to the 1980s were guaranteed a degree of autonomy as funding was not allocated for specific services (Carey et al, 2020, p. 13). However, during the Hawke-Keating administration, a transition was made towards competitive tendering arrangements and contractual funding (Wallace & Pease, 2011 p. 133). Under the later Howard Government, these strategies — supported by neoliberal ideas of cost-saving and the "rolling back" of the welfare state — were further expanded (Carey et al, 2020, p. 13). Consequently, there has been a growing reliance on non-government organisations to drive social service provision in Australia (Goodwin & Philips, 2015, p.97), as is evidenced by the 2010 Productivity Commission (2016, p. 7).

Emerging from these neoliberal trends, NPM reforms took hold of the Australian public sector in the late 1980s (Johnston, 2000, p. 357). According to Shaw (2012, p.120), NPM "describes the application (and often adaptation) of private sector management disciplines and techniques to the deployment of resources in the public sector". Essentially, NPM adopts private sector ideas and tactics in attempts to increase public sector efficiency. However, above all else, NPM prioritises contractualism (Lane, 2000, p. 4). The consequent contracting processes have produced substantial challenges for the sector, particularly for small community-based organisations (Cheshire & Lawrence, 2005, p. 435).

Resulting from complicated funding and reporting mechanisms in tandem with a shift towards business models, organisations have been compelled to divert significant resources away from their community-based work and towards professionalising their workforce and supporting core management functions (Carey et al., 2020, p. 14). Speaking to the challenges for community development, Carey et al. (2020) argue that this "decreased autonomy reduces the ability of many non-government organisations, particularly the small ones, to work effectively and innovatively in communities" (p. 14). Whilst there has been emphasis on the expansion of non-government service delivery, investment and funding from the government has not kept pace, with many parts of the sector, most notably NCCs, being left critically underfunded (Blaxland & Cortis, 2021, p.11).

Similar changes in Queensland's social services sector were established following the 1970s and 1980s when the Bjelke Petersen Government underinvested in education, health, and welfare (Marston, 2014, p. 154). This legacy continued in Queensland following the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 when the Newman Government made extensive cuts to government expenditure on social services (Marston, 2014, p. 154). The Queensland Council of Social Services (QCOSS, 2012, p. 6) estimated that expenditure on social services and support as a percentage of total government expenditure was reduced from 12.96% in 2011-12 to 10.72% in 2012-13 (Marston, 2014, p. 154).

Reflecting the impact of NPM policies, many organisations in the sector have shifted away from their original community-based approach and toward an outcome-focused business model (Gray et al., 2015, p. 370). Research has demonstrated that the autonomy of stakeholders has been impacted by increased competitive practices in the sector (Evans et al., 2005, p. 73). Some argue that this can be resisted if stakeholders work alongside each other in building new alliances, engaging in collective activity and political campaigning (Carey, 2007, p. 94; Gray et al., 2015, p.194). Thus, these changes to autonomy have

unsettled the role and relationships between stakeholders, particularly in the case of NCCs (Evans et al., 2005, p. 73).

These differing approaches and recent years of rapid change, put into question what role NCCs play in this changing sector and further, how NCCs are perceived in this new landscape. Our research addresses this critical gap in the literature by examining how NCCs are perceived by sector stakeholders, their value within the sector, and the ways in which NCCs can better service and support communities. Understanding of these vantage points within the social services sector are lacking in research, yet they are vital in understanding the role NCCs play in relation to the environment they operate within.

5.   Critical Systems Theory

Critical systems theory formed the basis of the conceptual framework underpinning this research (Wheatley, 2006). Miller (1995, p. 17) defines systems as "a set of interacting units with relationships among them". There are biological systems (such as digestive systems), ecological systems (such as river systems), as well as social, economic, or political systems (such as capitalist systems).

The major premise emerging from this theory is that natural systems, and the laws that govern them, can serve as a model for understanding the relationships within any system. Holistic analysis of entire systems is a key consideration that underpins this theoretical approach (Forbes et al., 2021, p. 3). Wheatley (2006, p. 140) examines the world as a network of living systems and advocates that "from a systems consciousness, we understand that no problem or behaviour can be understood in isolation". The whole of a system must be brought into the fold of analysis, Wheatley (2006, p. 140) argues, even as we work with individual parts or smaller micro-systems.

Wheatley (2006) demonstrates that what constitutes healthy living systems is their self-organising nature, suggesting that ecosystems serve as an ideal example. These self-organising systems are characterised by having the "great capacity to adapt as needed" and "organising into whatever form it determines best suits the present situation" (Wheatley, 2006, p. 86). More traditionally, organisational systems have been developed by insulating them against disruptions, creating internal stability. However, Wheatley (2006, p. 82) argues that self-organising systems "stay strong by staying open" to their environment, enabling them to become more adaptable and resilient to change over time. For Wheatley (2006), this is clearly demonstrated in the functioning and development of ecosystems.

We conceptualised the social services sector as a complex and adaptive system comprised of multiple interacting systems, parts and relationships. To illustrate this concept, some of the elements and micro-systems that orbit within the social services system include: individuals, families, communities, community organisations, NCCs, churches, health services, schools, peak bodies, NGOs, and government (local, state and federal). These more tangible parts of the social services system also interact with political and economic changes, cultural shifts, and social attitudes over time. Consideration for these elements and micro-systems within the sector informed our decision to focus our research on four stakeholder groups: large NGOs, government agencies, CBOs, and peak bodies.

More specifically, the literature points towards the capacity for NCCs to self-organise, primarily through their ability to build relationships (Schmidtke, 2021, p. 70). Thus, aligning with the community development literature, we understood NCCs as systems holding the capacity for self-organisation, contributing to the overall health of the broader social services system they operate within. Systems thinking has crucial synergies with foundational principles held in community development (Ife, 2016, p. 253), thus, bringing these two paradigms into conversation is key to our research.

6.   Methodology

Our research aimed to make explicit the perceptions of NCCs amongst other service providers in Greater Brisbane, as well as to explore the relationships between these stakeholders. To do so, a qualitative research design using the interpretivist paradigm was utilised (Lincoln et al., 2013, pp. 202-206). This approach to research "seeks to understand subjective meaning and reconstruct latent meaning" (Rosenthal, 2018, p. 18). To address our research aims, participation was delimited to four stakeholder categories within the social services sector: large non-government organisations (e.g. Anglicare), government agencies (e.g. Queensland's Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy), community-based organisations (e.g. Micah Projects), and peak bodies (e.g. QCOSS). To distinguish CBOs from NCCs, the former refers to smaller-scale organisations that address specific societal issues (e.g. homelessness) within a local context, whilst the latter utilises a generalist approach (Carleton University, 2022).

6.1 Data Collection

To ensure representation from each stakeholder group, purposive sampling was used in identifying the most relevant participants. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed, drawing upon the existing networks of NCQ, our Academic Advisor, and recruited participants. Doing so expanded our outreach while ensuring additional participants were relevant to the research (Flick, 2007, p. 28).

Our aim was to have a sample size of approximately 15 participants to reach conceptual saturation with representation across the four stakeholder groups (Lewis & Nicholls, 2003, pp. 57-58). We ultimately conducted 25 interviews with participants from all stakeholder groups, as well as a sector expert with both academic and professional experience, to further solidify our understanding of the research context (Table 1).

Stakeholder Group	Number of Participants
EXPERT (Sector Expert)	1
PEAK (Peak Body)	3
CBO (Community-Based Organisation)	5
GOV (Government Agency)	7
NGO (Large Non-Government Organisation)	9

Table 1: Representation of research participants across stakeholder groups

We involved stakeholder representatives with experience working within the sector, particularly focusing on roles such as community development officers, CEOs, and directors. Participants were invited to speak to their professional experiences. We intentionally delimited our sample to the Greater Brisbane area due to resource and time constraints.

We conducted semi-structured interviews in September 2022, mostly held via online platforms. Questions explored participants' observations and perceptions of NCCs, trends in the social services sector, and interactions between stakeholders (Appendix A). In line with an interpretivist paradigm, this interview style provided rich data for analysis as it was adaptable to participants' responses (Cross & Galletta, 2013, pp. 45-46). With the consent of the participants, we audio recorded and transcribed interviews which were then sent to participants for verification.

Audio recordings and transcriptions were stored securely on The University of Queensland's Research Data Manager (UQRDM). The details of each participant were anonymised from the point of transcription, with each participant being given a pseudonym and codes for identifying information. While all quotes and other uses of the data were anonymised to protect individuals' confidentiality, participants had the option to have their organisation acknowledged in our report. In total, 17 of the 25 participants agreed for their organisation's contribution to be recognised in the acknowledgement section of this report.

6.2   Data Analysis

We thematically analysed the transcripts which enabled findings to be "stimulated through interaction with that empirical world, not in isolation from it" (Dey, 2004, p. 84). Thematic analysis of data occurred in three stages: open coding, axial/selective coding, and identifying themes (Clarke, 1997, pp. 63-94; Dey, 2004, p. 81). The ability of thematic analysis to move "back and forth between empirical materials and efforts to conceptualise them" (Clarke, 2019, p. 6) guided our identification of the predominant themes arising from the data (Dey, 2004, pp. 80-81; Flick, 2007, pp. 18-20). For the most accurate analysis and consistency across coding, cross-examinations were conducted by the research team. A Participant Feedback Sheet summarising preliminary findings from the first seven interviews was created and disseminated to all participants (Appendix B).

6.3   Ethical Considerations

This research was provided with ethical clearance by The University of Queensland's Human Research Ethics Committees [ethics ID number 2022/HE000893].

Our research used publicly available contact information to recruit participants and only collected non-sensitive data. Therefore, our project was considered low risk with only two potential ethical concerns identified: consent and privacy. To mitigate issues surrounding consent, participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) outlining expectations of their involvement, and a Consent Form (Appendix D) to be signed prior to data collection. Participants were required to obtain permission from an appropriate senior manager/CEO prior to participation to maintain transparency with their employer.

6.4   Limitations

A prominent limitation of the research was the inequity of representation across stakeholder groups. This arose from a multitude of reasons, namely, time constraints of participants, alongside disproportionate numbers of organisations across the sector (e.g. there are fewer peak bodies in comparison to large NGOs). Further, the research was constrained to the urban context of Greater Brisbane, thus findings do not accurately reflect rural contexts. However, this research could be applied to other metropolitan areas in Australia. In response to NCQ's request to examine social services sector perspectives, this research did not consult NCCs and the community members that utilise them. However, there is an opportunity for future research to bridge the gap between these differing perspectives.

7.   Findings

7.1   Context

Our findings, grouped into perceptions and nature of interactions, were strongly influenced by trends of increasing demand and complexity of needs in Greater Brisbane's social services sector, and Australia more broadly. Recent disasters such as COVID-19, floods, and the increased cost of living, compounded the existing needs of communities. These also strongly informed the current perceptions held by those working in and navigating the sector.

7.2   Perceptions

Interviews indicated that participants held a variety of perceptions of NCCs which were grouped into three sub-themes: a place for everyone, a referral point, and a facilitator of community development.

7.2.1 NCCs as a Place for Everyone

Stakeholders predominantly perceived NCCs as inclusive and open places for everyone. Some participants emphasised that NCCs' "catch-all approach" to service provision is particularly beneficial for vulnerable community members who "fall through the gaps" (CBO 5). Others stressed that "they're not just places where poor and vulnerable people go" (NGO 7). They perceived NCCs as key sites of social infrastructure where people of all ages, cultures, and socioeconomic demographics can gather to engage in a range of community-building activities. In being localised and place-based, NCCs represent a neutral and non-judgemental space for the community in which they operate.

> *The value of neighbourhood centres is that they're everyone's space. So when the people that we work with go there, they meet new people, they make new networks, they learn new skills, they get to share their culture, they get to share their skills. (NGO 7)*

While participants overwhelmingly perceived NCCs as neutral places, some stakeholders indicated that NCCs are not always sites of inclusivity and diversity.

> *I would generally view them to be less inclusive or welcoming of diversity… If a bunch of queer people rocked up, how might that be viewed? So for me, it's very specific about which ones I would approach and I wouldn't necessarily say all neighbourhood centres are places where queer people can go and gather. (CBO 1)*

This alternative perspective demonstrated a hesitancy by some stakeholders to engage with unfamiliar NCCs due to concerns about their receptiveness towards marginalised community members.

7.2.2 NCCs as a Referral Point

Across stakeholder groups, it was largely echoed that NCCs act as a referral point for people to access more specialised services, such as domestic violence support and mental health services. Stakeholders recognised the value of NCCs in being able to determine when a person may need assistance. Value was also attributed to the knowledge NCCs are able to provide regarding the type of local services on offer.

> *They can be a great initial contact for someone who just doesn't know what to do, or where to go. (CBO 4)*

The role of NCCs was compared to that of a 'General Practitioner' of the social services sector. One government representative advocated that, in being provided extra funding, "their role will increase and could increasingly become, if anything, a specialist in facilitation and referral, rather than trying to meet the needs of everybody directly" (GOV 1).

This community-based "non-threatening entry point" into social services was valued greatly by participants as varying levels of stigma, and even risk, can be attached to a person accessing specialised support. Another government representative spoke of the value that skilled NCC coordinators bring in being able to quickly refer and connect someone to the

specialist care they need. This was especially the case in situations where someone is involved in domestic violence;

> *[they] weren't going to the neighbourhood centre as a victim of domestic and family violence… and therefore didn't feel like their husband might see them. They were simply taking the kids there for playgroup, knowing that there was some good caring people there who would refer them on to other services (GOV 4)*

Participants also identified NCCs not only as a physical meeting place, but also spoke to how NCCs act as the 'glue' and 'focal point' for community organisations to come together. Whilst predominantly perceived as a referral point, some representatives from CBOs noted that they would, in fact, refer people *to* NCCs. Community connection and longer-term personal support that NCCs provide were cited as the basis of these referrals. This reversal of the referral dynamic points to another vital role of NCCs identified: being a facilitator of community development.

7.2.3 NCCs as Facilitators of Community Development

Most participants identified NCCs as integral in facilitating long-term community development. The relationships NCCs have with their local communities extend beyond the short-term interactions of other service providers. One participant reflected on the longevity of support that NCCs provide, especially in the case of settling refugees within communities:

> *...community centres, and neighbourhood centres are really critical in that space, they are the ones that have the relationship. And also they're the ones that are going to be there long after people are no longer eligible for our services… (NGO 7)*

Through being 'hubs of community knowledge', NCCs were seen as well placed to connect community members and develop their social capital. Their approaches were recognised as being localised and adaptive to the community, thus essential in capacity building and resilience during times of disaster.

> *So I think community centres are those spaces that build the fabric so that when the crises happen at a community level, [and]… at a personal level, there's still a fabric there to rely on. (NGO 7)*

By viewing individuals as community members rather than service recipients, NCCs' approach to community largely differs from other organisations. The range of opportunities provided by NCCs for community members to get involved with their local community was seen as "a wonderful conduit for people with resources to engage directly with their neighbours in ways that are helpful to them" (NGO 8). Furthermore, NCCs were referred to as not only facilitators for connections between community members, but also for those between service providers in the broader sector.

7.3 Nature of Interactions

Interviewee's perceptions of their interactions with other sector stakeholders showcased the nature of how and why organisations engage, collaborate, or interact with each other, as well as the factors influencing these interactions. Three key themes emerged: the importance of personal networks, the lack of capacity in the sector to foster interactions, and competition felt between organisations.

7.3.1 Interprofessional Networks

The role of interprofessional relationships in shaping collaboration within the sector and NCCs more specifically, emerged as a key finding. Our research revealed that sector stakeholders value collaboration and strong networks. Many participants identified that stakeholder interactions with NCCs are contingent on networks at an interprofessional level, rather than an inter-organisational level. Highlighting the centrality of professional contacts in the sector, one participant from a peak body stated that "It takes a long time to build up those contacts, but they're one of the most valuable things working in the community services sector" (PEAK 1).

The development of trust in established personal networks was recognised by some participants to critically influence who an organisation may collaborate with. Hesitancy to initiate new relationships is underpinned by the absence of trust and uncertainty. Hence, stakeholders noted that they were more inclined to collaborate with familiar NCCs.

> The NCCs I would engage with would be organisations who I know, who I've had the chance to engage with already so I know a little bit about their values, or that they already reside in an area where there's been a long history of queer communities being visible and present. (CBO 1)

Here, the strength of collaboration was found to be dependent on the trust in individual staff and the operational model of specific NCCs. The reliance on professional networks between individuals can be considered both a strength and a challenge within sector interactions. Extending beyond one-to-one networks was seen as a particular challenge in cultivating strong partnership development. In addition, one participant identified the impact of negative personal relationships in limiting the likelihood of inter-organisational collaboration. This foregrounds the value of maintaining and nurturing informal networks, with a greater possibility for strengthening and extending future collaboration in the sector.

7.3.2 Lack of Capacity in the Social Services Sector

Interviews indicated that levels of interaction between stakeholders are shaped by time and resource constraints. Numerous participants communicated the importance of developing relationships with other stakeholders to improve their operations. Due to the sector relying heavily on volunteer-based work, participants felt that sector constraints were a primary barrier to collaboration. Additionally, stakeholders identified the difficulty of networking when resources are not allocated to do this within service agreements.

> I think that if we want organisations and the sector to work collaboratively, there needs to be some room built into service agreements to fund them to do that. (PEAK 1)

Coupled with scarce resources, stakeholders attributed increased community need as a compounding factor preventing collaboration.

> We as a sector should be trying to engage those relationships better. A lot of it is the fact that we just don't have the time … service delivery can be very taxing on your time. … For every person, there's another 10 people on a waiting list. (CBO 4)

Thus, the nature of interactions within the sector is affected by the sector's capacity to foster these connections and provide time and resources to allow for collaboration.

7.3.3 Competition

Lack of coordination and overlapping service programs to meet increasing demands were seen as factors exacerbating competition within the sector.

> *We all have these programmes and wonderful things we want to do. And sometimes it's a matter of who can shout the loudest...as much as you want to help someone, you also want to get your stuff off the ground. (NGO 2)*

Participants spoke of how the tendering process often privileges organisations with broad-based administrative capacity. Large organisations that can measure their outcomes and have the capacity to advocate for themselves are perceived to be recipients of more funding through outcompeting appeals made by smaller organisations, such as NCCs. As such, participants identified larger organisations are expanding in an insular manner, where "little social services empires build and spread because they just continue to get the funding because they're good at meeting KPIs" (GOV 6). Smaller organisations, through lacking the capacity to compete for such funding, therefore remain under-resourced despite a large increase in service recipients.

7.4 Challenges

7.4.1 Rigid Funding

The funding structure of the sector was identified by participants as a significant challenge for NCCs. The recognition of NCCs operating with limited funding was highlighted across all stakeholder groups.

The privileging of service delivery models within government funding allocation, largely being issue-based (e.g. homelessness, domestic violence, drugs and alcohol), creates challenges for organisations that operate through a more holistic approach. NCCs' ongoing community development work was also said to be incompatible with the predominance of short-term funding arrangements in the sector.

> *The government does tend to be focused on outcomes, KPIs, and numbers…but I think that there's probably a lack of understanding of some of the other non-measurable outcomes that can come out of the neighbourhood centres. (NGO 1)*

Challenges to obtaining funding are concurrent with the difficulties in measuring the impact of NCCs on individuals and the broader community. Rigid funding models also limits the opportunity for NCCs to respond to new and emerging needs

7.4.2 Consistency

Many stakeholders highlighted that a challenge for NCCs is the need to establish a level of consistency across different centres, while also maintaining their diversity. By nature, NCCs are highly varied due to their responsiveness and ability to adapt their focus to the specific needs of their community. For example, areas with a high homeless population may offer frequent food giveaways or care packages compared to areas where homelessness is not as prevalent. Our findings revealed that the major strengths of NCCs: their uniqueness, small scale, and localised nature, paradoxically also create challenges to sector collaboration and awareness of NCCs' role and purpose. Some research participants expressed their desire for NCCs to form a "united front" (NGO 9) through the implementation of consistent governance, resource-sharing, and marketing. One participant felt that "people don't necessarily know what services they provide" (PEAK 4). Others asserted a need to improve these collective processes without compromising the small, localised and diverse nature of NCCs, commenting that "when NCCs become too big and too service driven, they lose a lot of that localised magic" (GOV 4).

8.   Discussion

By framing our findings within a critical systems perspective, NCCs were seen to be valued by participants for providing *holistic* support and bringing *diversity* to the social services system. These concepts are central to Wheatley's (2006) critical systems theory and underlie community development research and praxis (Ife, 2016, p. 255). However, our findings indicated that NCCs' operation model—through being diverse and holistic—is at odds with the current social services system, which is predominated by an NPM approach. Key differences and tensions between organisational models within the sector have created misaligned expectations on the role and nature of NCCs. Below are the two primary contradictions that emerged through our research.

8.1 Misalignment 1 - Holistic Approaches vs Fragmentation

Holism refers to the understanding that every event or phenomenon is considered a component of a whole and can only be understood in relation to a broader context (Ife, 2016, p. 50). Our findings indicate that NCCs were largely valued for the holistic community support they provide. Their holism at the individual level prompted NCCs to be valued for the way they work with individuals as 'people' rather than as 'problems'. Whilst this way of operating is perceived as a unique strength within the social services system, it exists in tension with the specialised service delivery models that are privileged in the sector.

As seen by our findings, a main strength and expectation of the role of NCCs was their treatment of people as whole individuals rather than separate problems. NCCs' funding for community work rather than service provision has enabled them to maintain their holistic approach and uphold their firm roots within the community, rather than service delivery becoming the primary objective. The issues that communities encounter do not exist in isolation and are often interconnected (Wheatley 2006, p. 140). Thus, a holistic approach avoids a potentially dehumanising experience of defining people by their situation, often leading to a strengths-based rather than a deficit focus (Browne & Adelman, 2013, p.121). This, in turn, removes the stigma associated with accessing support services. NCCs aid the health of the whole system by holistically representing 'community' as an active stakeholder, rather than a recipient of services. Wheatley's (2006, p. 102) framework calls attention to this value of NCCs in approaching individuals holistically, whilst also bringing a "whole of system" perspective to the broader sector.

However, this holistic view that allows for the visualisation of complex needs sits in stark contrast to the rest of the social services system (Grell et al., 2022, p. 297). It has been widely echoed that the sector is characterised by "fragmented silos", with services often being funded and delivered through issue-based frameworks, such as homelessness and domestic violence (Productivity Commission, 2016, p. 65). One report emphasised "the need for governments to coordinate social services systems to prevent silos" to ensure that the sector does not lose sight of communities' *overall* well-being (Carey et al, 2020, p. 26). Thus, whilst participants held the expectation that holistic support should remain central to the work of NCCs, the short-term contracting model of the NPM paradigm constrains the autonomy of NCCs to maintain this holistic and longer term work. Hoggett et al. (2008, p.140) argue that these NPM agendas challenge the very basis of community-based work, where it prioritises

"the achievement of short-term objectives over and above the longer-term processes of building relationships for sustainable community development". This has important implications for ensuring that NCCs can continue to do the holistic work that is expected of them and is ultimately highly valued by the rest of the social services system.

8.2   Misalignment 2 - Diversity vs Uniformity

Ife (2016, p. 50) suggests that *diversity* ensures the strength and resilience of a system as a whole. Resonating across the findings, NCCs, above all else, were considered to be diverse. This diversity directly grows from the way NCCs are shaped by the communities that surround them (Schmidtke, 2021, p.70). While this was overwhelmingly seen as an asset, some participants spoke of the challenges of an increasingly competitive social services system and of the need to establish consistency across NCCs. A disjuncture exists as to how NCCs can coherently communicate their role to the sector whilst also maintaining their diversity.

Local governance remains central to the philosophy that drives NCCs, with community dynamics, demographics and aspirations informing how a centre operates. This ensures that community needs are met effectively rather than providing a uniform approach to service delivery and community development. In a sector that has become increasingly driven and defined by efficiency, structure and uniformity, the diverse and organic models of NCCs allow the sector to be populated by many local processes of community-driven activity. Wheatley's analysis (1997) challenges the bureaucratic norm that centralised control leads to system stability and effectiveness. Alternatively, it is when a diversity of community-driven initiatives is encouraged, that these benefits extend to the broader system. The ongoing local support NCCs offer to the sector has benefits for community strengthening. Sprouting from NCCs' facilitation of long-term community development, the cultivation of social capital has benefits that hold longevity and ripple across the system. Wheatley (1997) argues that these sites of local activity ought to remain localised, with attempts to replicate and scale-up these processes having adverse effects on community ownership.

The social services sector—which places a heavy focus on competition, short-term contractualism and quality assurance (Carey et al., 2020, p. 13) — was characterised by stakeholders as becoming increasingly onerous. Additionally, NCCs within these contexts were expected to manage the demands associated with an increasingly marketized social services system (Hoggett et al, 2008, p.140). NCCs were expected by participants to remain localised and resist a 'scale-up' mentality, yet this is made difficult by the reality of

competitive tendering processes. Indeed, the Productivity Commission (2016) identified that "compliance activities that impose excessive cost burdens can have a proportionately larger effect on smaller providers" (p. 11) and can "lead to a loss of provider diversity" (p. 151). From a systems theory lens, imposing control and homogenising the operations of local actors threatens the systems survival (Wheatley 2006, p.89). Instead research has suggested that "there is a need for governments to invest in the agency of local actors to solve system problems at the local level based on their unique vantage point" (Carey et al., 2020, p.36).

Whilst participants clearly advocated for NCCs to consolidate their community development role, stakeholders echoed the need for consistency in how the role and activities of NCCs are communicated. The call for consistency that resonated across stakeholder groups spoke to an identified need to more clearly determine and communicate a "clear sense of collective purpose" (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1998). Hurth (2017, p.2) argues that setting and communicating an organisation's purpose and identity is critical to support highly localised processes. Under a deeply shared purpose, diversity "becomes a contribution rather than an issue of compliance or deviance" (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1998).

9.   Recommendations

The findings and discussion above suggest the potential for the following recommendations:

1. NCQ could consider expanding its strategic framework to articulate a shared purpose, collective principles and values that resonate across the broad network of NCCs. This will allow NCCs to establish framework consistency across all centres and coherently communicate their role in the sector while also maintaining their diversity. The framework may include:

    a. A clear articulation of 'who we are', 'what we do' and 'how we do it';

    b. NCQ's approach of community development;

    c. Key relationships, partnerships and modes of engagement;

    d. Detailed information on implementing the framework at an individual NCC level.

2. NCQ give consideration to developing a community and sector awareness-raising strategy to communicate the highlights of the strategic framework; namely their role, values and activities. The purpose of this strategy would be to increase the visibility, and strengthen the profile, of NCCs and NCQ to both the broader sector and Queensland's communities.

3. To mitigate uncertainty regarding an individual NCCs scope of operations, it may be beneficial for NCQ to further develop their 'Find a Centre' searchable database. The database currently includes information on the location of NCCs across Queensland, their contact details and a link to a website, if applicable. However, our research suggests that it would be beneficial for more information to be included, such as key programs, activities and events offered by various NCCs. This would further enable both community members and other stakeholders to have greater understanding of what is offered by their local NCCs. This also would enable their diversity to be more greatly understood, appreciated and utilised.

By implementing these recommendations, the diverse and local activities of NCCs will be supported by further consolidating their role and difference they contribute to the sector. The connectivity between NCCs and the sector will also be strengthened, and NCQ will be better positioned to navigate interactions with other stakeholders and advocate on behalf of centres across Queensland.

10. Conclusion

This research project, partnering with NCQ, investigated the perceptions of and interactions with NCCs held by key stakeholders—large NGOs, government agencies, CBOs and peak bodies—in Greater Brisbane's social services sector. Overall, NCCs were considered a highly valued asset to the sector, with their holistic community support, prioritisation of locally-driven activity, and diversity emphasised in the data. However, perceptions of and interactions with NCCs were notably varied across participants, demonstrating a need for greater clarity regarding NCCs' purpose and sector position. Our research revealed misalignments towards the expected role and operations of NCCs, highlighting a key tension of maintaining their community development activity rather than moving towards the defined service delivery approach dominating the sector.

By virtue of it being a complex system dealing with human issues, the social services sector holds countless perspectives unable to be fully represented by the scope of this project. It must be acknowledged that our research, whilst covering four stakeholder groups, reveals

only a partial vantage point into the perspectives held by the sector. Due to the physical constraints of this research, we had to delimit our study to Greater Brisbane. Therefore, this research does not capture perceptions of rural NCCs, rather, it is representative only within a metropolitan context. As such, the findings and recommendations of this study are most accurately applied to other urban contexts in Australia.

NCCs directly support communities to tap into local people's ideas and resources. The importance of connection within our immediate community will be an ongoing endeavour; in this venture, NCCs are vital. This research will assist in elevating and communicating the critical role and value of NCCs within Queensland's social services system and communities. The explicit focus on the perspectives of the broader sector will better position NCQ to navigate interactions with other stakeholders and advocate on behalf of centres across Queensland. Findings will inform future strategies and aid in developing clarity of the purpose, values and principles held by NCQ and the centres they represent. Most importantly, this research signifies a consolidation of a community development approach through the key finding that NCCs were most valued for this defining attribute.

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12. Appendices

12.1 Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Research Questions:
1. How are Neighbourhood Community Centres <u>perceived</u> by key social service stakeholders within Greater Brisbane?
2. What is the <u>nature of the interactions</u> between Neighbourhood Community Centres and key stakeholders within the social services sector in Greater Brisbane?
3. What <u>factors influence</u> stakeholder perceptions of Neighbourhood and Community Centres in the Greater Brisbane social services sector?
4.

Key themes to explore:
1. Perceptions of NCCs
2. Nature of interactions with NCCs
3. Influencing factors

Resources required:
- Ensure you know where the interview is and the person's full name
- Participation Information Sheet
- Participation Consent Form
- Pen
- Recording device

PRE-INTERVIEW PROCESS:

A. **Introduce yourself and thank them for agreeing to participate**
"Good Morning/Afternoon/Evening, my name is xxx and I am an undergraduate student from The University of Queensland. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview, I really appreciate you taking the time out of your day to be here".
B. **Confirm they have read the information sheet and understand the purpose of your study. Ask them to tell you what they think it's about.**
C. **Address terms of confidentiality and sign consent form.**
D. **Turn the audio recorder on. TURN ON ZOOM RECORDING AND OTTER**
E. **Explain the purpose of the interview:**
"Today I would like to have a chat with you and hear about your experiences with Neighbourhood and Community Centres".
Emphasise that there are no wrong or right answers – you are interested in their honest thoughts and beliefs
Explain how Neighbourhood and Community Centres will be referred to as NCCs throughout the interview
F. **Provide an opportunity for them to seek clarification and ask questions**
G. **Interview questions/themes**: As a semi-structured interview process, the interview will be based on four main themes with possible probe sub-questions as listed below:
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Professional Background

First we'd like to know a little about your role and your organisation.

1. What is your current role at [organisation]? *[prompt: current role/responsibilities]*

    a. How long have you worked in the social services sector and in what area of the sector?

Social Services Sector

Before we explore questions about NCCs themselves we'd love to gauge an understanding of the broader social services sector in the Greater Brisbane area. The following questions will look at the broader Social Services Sector in the Greater Brisbane Area.

2. Can you please tell me about the broad trends you have observed in the Social Services Sector in Greater Brisbane? *[prompt: government/political change/funding]*

    a. How have challenges to the community (e.g. covid/floods) affected these trends?

    b. How have funding changes impacted stakeholders in the sector?

    c. How have this broad trends impacted the relationships/collaborations between stakeholders?

3. How does your organisation/workplace understand place-based approaches?

    a. Do you think place-based approaches are valued in the sector (government, large NGOs)? If so, why? How are they valued?

Neighbourhood and Community Centres

The following questions will focus on Neighbourhood and Community Centres in particular.
Definition of NCCs from NCQ if needed: "independent community based non-profit organisations". There is 143+ centres in QLD.

4. What role do you think NCCs play in the social services sector and in the community? *[prompt: offer definition of NCCs, What needs do you think they meet?]*

    a. What needs do you think they meet?

    b. Does the role of NCCs differ depending on whether they are located in urban or regional/rural areas? How do they differ?

5. As a peak body for NCCs, how can Neighbourhood Centres Queensland better facilitate relationships/collaboration between NCCs and the rest of the social services sector?

6. How do you think your organisation/workplace perceive NCCs?

    a. Have these perceptions changed over time?

     b.   If yes, what do you think triggered this change?

7. How aware do you think sector organisations/communities are of NCCs?

     a.   What do NCCs do well?

     b.   How could they better service communities?

8. What interactions, past or present, have you had with NCCs? What is the nature of these relationships with NCCs? *[prompt: types/lengths/do you draw on NCCs]*

     a.   What are the barriers/challenges for establishing relationships with NCCs?

     b.   What opportunities for future engagement with NCCs can you envisage?

     c.   How could interactions improve?

     d.   What stakeholders in the sector have you/your organisation not had much interaction with?

9. What do you think the future of place-based organisations are?

Additional Questions

10. Do you have any other observations or insights you would like to share? Are there any other questions that we should be asking?

POST-INTERVIEW

H.   Thank them for participating. Let them know how they could contact you if they have any questions or concerns. Let them know they'll receive a copy of the transcript. If we have any further questions, is it okay if we reach out to you via email?

Discuss that they will receive a participant feedback sheet.

NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRES QUEENSLAND

THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND
AUSTRALIA

PERCEPTIONS OF NEIGHBOURHOOD AND COMMUNITY CENTRES

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Often described as 'brain banks' of community knowledge, Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs) are an essential form of place-based infrastructure. In a sector that is predominantly defined by single service delivery models, the context-specific community support that NCCs provide is vital in a time of ever-changing needs. Recent socio-political changes have impacted the landscape of the Australian social services sector. While research is available on how the sector has changed, the impacts of these trends on NCCs remain significantly under-researched. We have partnered with Neighbourhood Centres Queensland (NCQ) to address this uncertainty surrounding how NCCs are perceived by the broader sector.

THE AIM

Through seeking input from large non-profit organisations, government agencies, community-based organisations, and peak bodies, this project aims to explore the perceptions of NCCs and where they are situated within Greater Brisbane's social services sector.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1 How are NCCs perceived by key social service stakeholders within Greater Brisbane?

2 What is the nature of the interactions between NCCs and key stakeholders within the social services sector in Greater Brisbane?

3 What factors influence stakeholder perceptions and relationships of NCCs in the Greater Brisbane social services sector?

METHODOLOGY

We invited representatives from the four stakeholder groups as well as a sector expert, to participate in a semi-structured interview. Questions explored observations and perceptions of NCCs, trends in the social services sector, and interactions between stakeholders. Participants were given the opportunity to speak to their professional experiences, informed by their current role at their organisation. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and anonymised prior to data analysis. Our initial key findings emerged from analysing the first seven interviews conducted. Initial participation did not include any community-based organisations, however, they have since been engaged and will be included in the final research report.

PARTICIPANTS

2 Government (GOV)

1 Sector Expert (EXPERT)

3 Large NGOS (NGO)

1 Peak Body (PEAK)

SIGNIFICANCE

At the conclusion of the project, our research findings will be presented in a final research report. This report will detail the implications and recommendations of the research for NCQ and contribute to the broader literature surrounding NCCs. This research will assist in advocating the value of NCCs, clarifying their role in the sector, and enabling them to more effectively serve community needs.

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KEY FINDINGS

Through our conversations, NCCs were described as:

"dynamite of the community services sector" (PEAK)

"key conduit" (EXPERT)

"neutral space" (NGO)

"facilitators" (GOV)

"soft entry" (PEAK)

"the door that's open to everyone" (PEAK)

"key sources of local knowledge" (NGO)

"a critical resource" (EXPERT)

"everybody's turf" (PEAK)

KEY PERCEPTIONS

Whilst perceptions varied among stakeholders, NCCs were ultimately valued for the way they support and adapt to the communities they are situated within. Participants consistently spoke of the vital role NCCs play in supporting the broader social services sector, highlighting that "we would be lost without them" (PEAK). Multiple participants identified NCCs as key sources of local knowledge, valuing them for their ability to provide "solid community development" (PEAK).

"When NCCs become too big and too service driven they lose a lot of that localised magic. Because when they are a little bit unseen, their magic is amplified." (GOV)

MISALIGNED EXPECTATIONS

During our conversations with participants, it became clear that social service stakeholders held various misaligned expectations towards NCCs. Presented below are the primary contradictions that emerged through the initial interviews:

The increasing levels and complexity of community needs has generated an expectation for NCCs to accommodate the "spill-over" (GOV) from other services. → However, some participants advocated for NCCs to maintain their role as a source of holistic community-based infrastructure, rather than becoming a "service delivery vehicle" (EXPERT).

Stakeholders identified NCCs' holistic focus on community as a strength compared to the single service delivery models prevalent in the sector. → On the other hand, the disjuncture between the issue-based framework of the sector and the broader community focus of NCCs was seen as a barrier to collaboration.

NCCs were perceived as playing an integral role in facilitating connections between the community and the broader sector. → Yet, many stakeholders pointed to the challenge of collaborating with NCCs when service agreements do not allocate the resources and time to do so.

Many stakeholders echoed the expectation for NCCs to remain place-based, localised and independently governed. → Whilst other stakeholders expressed the need for consistent governance across different NCCs.

"And I think that if we want organizations and the sector to work collaboratively, there needs to be some room built into service agreements to fund them to do that" (PEAK)

"We don't fund them to do casework, we don't fund them to provide intensive support to people. But in the absence of anything else they're being increasingly asked by the people in their communities to provide that level of assistance." (GOV)

INTERACTIONS GROWING OUT OF PEOPLE-CENTERED RELATIONSHIPS

"It takes a long time to build up those contacts, but they're one of the most valuable things working in the community services sector" (PEAK)

Across these initial participants, there has been a predominant focus on the importance of people-centred relationships in determining the level of collaboration between stakeholders and NCCs. Participants demonstrated that their interactions with NCCs largely stem from networks at an individual rather than organisational level. These individual relationships open pathways for collaborations with NCCs. General perceptions of NCCs were largely influenced by personal experiences that stakeholders have had with particular centres and their staff.

For some stakeholders, trust in an individual influenced their likelihood of holding a collaborative relationship with an NCC. All stakeholders identified the value in building strong partnerships within the sector extending beyond individuals, however, some identified challenges in developing such collaborations.

"We can try to build partnerships that extend beyond the individuals... but it's not possible with a volunteer-driven organisation" (NGO)

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Participant Information Sheet

Research Title: Perceptions of Neighbourhood and Community Centres in Greater Brisbane

Researchers:
Hello, our names are Emily Rexa, Rauha Firaq, Zoe Nethery, Rowena Johns, Bronte Bratton and Emily Scott. We are undergraduate Social Science students at The University of Queensland (UQ) and we are conducting this research on behalf of our Industry Partner organisation, Neighbourhood Centres Queensland (NCQ). The research is conducted as part of the year-long course in the Bachelor of Social Science (coordinated by Professor Paul Henman).

Professor Paul Henman (p.henman@uq.edu.au), who teaches in UQ's School of Social Science, is the Chief Investigator for this research project. Dr Lynda Shevellar (l.shevellar@uq.edu.au) is a Senior Lecturer based in UQ's School of Social Science. She is the Academic Advisor of this project.

To contact members of the research team, please do so via email: SOSC3201_NCQ@uq.edu.au.

Project Information:
Thank you for your interest in participating in this research project. Please read the following information about the project so that you can decide whether you would like to be involved. Please feel free to ask any questions you might have about your involvement in the project. If you decide to participate in this research, please remember that your involvement is voluntary. If you decide to take part and later wish to withdraw, you are free to do so at any time without explanation. Upon withdrawing, you will be given the option to remove your data from the project. Withdrawing from the project will not affect your relationship with UQ or NCQ. Upon reviewing this Participant Information Sheet, you will be given a Consent Form to sign should you wish to participate.

What is this research about?
The purpose of this study is to examine perceptions of Neighbourhood and Community Centres (NCCs) in Greater Brisbane's social service sector. NCCs are independent, community-based centres that provide context-specific support, services and connections. This project seeks input from large non-profit organisations, government agencies, community-based organisations, and peak bodies to understand where NCCs are placed in the social services sector. The research has been requested by Neighbourhood Centres Queensland (NCQ) in collaboration with The University of Queensland. This research will assist NCQ in advocating the value of NCCs, clarifying their role in the sector, and enabling them to more effectively serve community needs.

What will I need to do?
Should you agree to participate in the research, you will be invited to take part in an interview. Informed by your current role in the organisation you work for, questions will explore your observations and perceptions of NCCs, trends in the social services sector, and interactions between stakeholders. Prior to this, you will be asked for your informed consent to participate in the interview. Additionally, we will ask for you to consent to the following:
1. To have the interview audio recorded (optional);
2. To allow researchers to take notes during the interview;
3. To have the organisation you work for acknowledged in the report (optional).
Interviews will take between thirty minutes to an hour and will be occurring in August and September 2022. Interviews may be conducted in person at your place of work, a public location (e.g. cafe) or on your preferred online platform for the convenience of participants.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
Your involvement in this project will positively contribute to significant research for the sector. Benefits arising from this research may include: strengthening collaboration between social service stakeholders, clarifying the value of NCCs and place-based approaches in responding to community needs, and

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providing input to inform NCQ's strategic decisions within the sector. The final report may be shared with the Neighbourhood and Community Centres Strategic Repositioning Committee (NCCSRC). The NCCSRC aims to develop and implement a current NCC strategic framework to further assist government-funded NCCs across Queensland. Beyond contributing to key research, there will be no direct personal benefit, monetary or otherwise, to participants of this research.

What are the possible risks and disadvantages of taking part?
Participation in the study will not expose you to any risks beyond those experienced in your everyday lives. Questions will not be of personal or sensitive nature. If you feel distressed or upset at any time, we can skip questions, take a break or stop the interview completely. Participant names and other identifying information will not be disclosed in any report or publication produced from this project. Participants will be given the choice of whether the organisation they represent will be named in the acknowledgement section of the report. There is a slight risk of identification due to the relatively small number of participants in the research. However, all possible measures will be taken by the researchers to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. These include assigning pseudonyms and codes to all identifying information at the point of transcription, as well as deleting audio recordings upon your review of the interview transcript. You will be given the opportunity to review and verify the transcription of your interview.

What will happen to the information about me?
All information collected about you will remain confidential. The details of each participant will be anonymised from the point of transcription, with each participant being given a pseudonym and codes for identifying information. A record of these pseudonyms/codes and corresponding personal data will be stored as a separate document on a password-protected platform. The database is accessible by the research team only, and once transcriptions have been approved by participants, the audio recordings will be deleted from the database to further ensure confidentiality. In the actual writing of the report, a list of participating organisations will be presented in the acknowledgements of the report, should consent be given.

What will happen if I decide to withdraw?
Your participation in this research is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the research anytime without needing to provide any explanation. Should you decide to withdraw, all the personal information collected about you will be destroyed and will **not** be used in the research. Upon withdrawing, you will be given the option to remove your contribution from the project. To withdraw, please contact the research team via email: SOSC3201_NCQ@uq.edu.au.

Can I hear about the results of this research?
A Participant Feedback Sheet summarising the research findings will also be disseminated to all participants. The research findings will be presented in a written report which will be provided to NCQ for their own purposes. A video summarizing our research will also be made publicly available. In any publication and/or presentation, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified.

Who can I contact if I have any concerns about the project?
This study adheres to the Guidelines of the ethical review process of The University of Queensland and the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. You are free to discuss your participation in this study with the researcher contactable at SOSC3201_NCQ@uq.edu.au. If you would like to speak to an officer of the University not involved in the study, you may contact the Ethics Coordinator at +617 3365 3924 / +617 3443 1656 or email humanethics@research.uq.edu.au.

This research Ethics ID number: 2022/HE000893

Thank you for your participation and for contributing to an important area of social service sector research in Greater Brisbane. The project team values, appreciates and acknowledges your contribution to this study.

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12.4 Appendix D: Consent Form

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Perceptions of Neighbourhood and Community Centres in Greater Brisbane

Participant Consent Form

Researchers:

- Project team members are Emily Rexa, Rauha Firaq, Zoe Nethery, Rowena Johns, Bronte Bratton and Emily Scott. We are undergraduate Social Science students at The University of Queensland (UQ) and we are conducting this research on behalf of our Industry Partner organisation, Neighbourhood Centres Queensland (NCQ).

- Professor Paul Henman, who teaches in UQ's School of Social Science, is the Chief Investigator for this research project. Dr Lynda Shevellar is a Senior Lecturer based in UQ's School of Social Science. She is the Academic Advisor for this Project.

Participation considerations:

- I have been provided with a written Project Information Sheet in a language that I can understand. I understand what the research is about and I have been given the chance to ask questions.

- I understand that, in this research, I will be required to participate in an interview. I understand that if I feel uncomfortable at any time, I can choose to leave and end the interview.

- I acknowledge that the risks of participating in this research are no greater than the risks of everyday living.

- I am aware that I can withdraw from this research at any time. I may decide to allow the researchers to continue using any data they have previously collected from me, but I also can withdraw my data from the research if I wish to do so.

- I understand that my details will be anonymised from the point of transcription, with pseudonyms and codes assigned to identifying information. I am aware all audio recordings will be destroyed upon my review of the transcript.

- I understand that I can choose whether the organisation that I represent will be named in the acknowledgement section of the report. However, I understand that my name and other identifying information will **not** be disclosed in any report or publication produced from this project.

- I understand there is a slight risk of identification due to the nature of the Project and its small sample size. I understand all possible measures will be taken to mitigate this and ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

- I understand that this research adheres to the guidelines of the ethical review process of The University of Queensland and the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. I have been provided with the contact details of the research team, as well as UQ's Ethics Coordinator. The contact email address for the research team is SOSC3201_NCQ@uq.edu.au and the contact details of UQ's Ethics Coordinator are +617 3365 3924 / +617 3443 1656 and humanethics@research.uq.edu.au.

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I agree to the following (please tick to indicate approval):

	Y	N
To participate in an interview	❏	❏
To have the interview audio recorded	❏	❏
To allow researchers to take notes during the interview	❏	❏
To have the organisation I work for acknowledged in the report	❏	❏
To receive a transcript of my interview	❏	❏
To speak from my professional experience in the organisation I work for	❏	❏

I have read this Consent Form and I agree with it.

Signature   ……………………………………………………………………

Please Print Name   ……………………………………………………………………

Date   ……………………………………………………………………

Ethics ID number: 2022/HE000893