About Western Sydney Community Forum (WSCF)

Western Sydney Community Forum (WSCF) is a regional peak organisation that provides regional leadership, facilitates collaborative action and develops resources to enable community organisations to effectively address issues relating to social justice and social inclusion.

WSCF strengthens the work of community organisations across Western Sydney region in order to increase the capacity and resilience of disadvantaged communities. WSCF works with and for funded community-based services and organisations working for social justice in Western Sydney.

WSCF has a cross-regional membership of 180-plus community based organisations which provide services and resources to the residents of Western Sydney. WSCF supports and resources collaborative effort around social justice and social inclusion at local, sub-regional, regional and state levels. This involves partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders, both government and non-government.

The Forum provides services and support across fourteen Local Government areas of Western Sydney:
- Auburn
- Bankstown
- Baulkham Hills
- Blacktown
- Blue Mountains
- Camden
- Campbelltown
- Fairfield
- Hawkesbury
- Holroyd
- Liverpool
- Parramatta
- Penrith
- Wollondilly

WSCF's perspective

Our perspective about the contribution of the non-profit sector comes from over 25 years (since 1984) of working with small, community-based organisations, They use government funding to pay for staffing, rented premises, equipment, project expenses and overheads. Most have a community development focus as well as providing support service to disadvantaged and vulnerable members of local communities such as children, youth, migrants, Aboriginal people, people recovering from mental illness, frail aged, people on low incomes, sole parents etc.

We assume the Productivity Commission will have had many submissions on the contribution of the sector. Our submission will focus on employment and retention challenges, the value of small organisations and the importance of Community Development strategies to address the causes of social disadvantage.

Staffing and small community organisations

It is essential that we plan for the future of the not for profit sector by ensuring the retention and growth of the community sector workforce. Community organisations are a major employer – the community and health sector represent approximately 7% of the workforce and contribute 7.5% of GDP.

The latest ACOSS Community Survey Report (2009) reports that 63% of NSW respondents indicated that they had experienced difficulty attracting appropriately qualified staff in the past year - It also reports that in 2007/8, NSW respondent agencies employed 1484 full time equivalent staff and lost 1253 full time equivalent staff. This means that average staff turnover is nearly 40%. This is in an environment of increased demand for community services – increased disconnection from community, a growing population of people with disabilities, mental health struggles, older people living longer after retirement and traditional family reduced availability to fulfill home-based caring roles.

The community sector is characterized by low wages and conditions, with remuneration at approximately 75% of that of similar positions in the public sector. Wage levels differ across states.

An area such as Western Sydney, with many disadvantaged residents and a wide cultural mix, has particular difficulty in recruitment and retention of skilled and experienced staff. The staffing situation in many small community organisations in our area is becoming untenable. NGOs cannot compete with government departments to pay graduates in the social sciences the salaries that would encourage these workers to work for them.

"One end result is the employment of highly-motivated, but inadequately skilled workers who soon burn out working in less than desirable conditions in difficult neighborhoods. They are not getting justice for themselves or the neighbourhood communities where they work.
"Another result is the poor health of under-recognised skilled workers who have been toiling away in neighbourhood or community centres for upwards of 15 years, with little support and few resources. They know how their communities tick and what they need, but they are rarely listened to or awarded large grants which would make a difference in the local area, as local knowledge can't compete with perceived economies of scale or the introduction of 'new players' to inflate the 'idea' of the diversity of the sector."
(Community organisation Manager with 25 years experience in the sector)

Recommendations:

- Increase Social and Community Services (SaCS) Award wages for community workers nationally
- Meet the recommendations of the CARE Campaign (ASU NSW)

- Government funding recognize the complexities of working at the coal-face and fund projects accordingly, so that skilled and experienced workers can be attracted to work with local communities and small local organisations
- Increase funding to those geographic areas regarded as difficult to work in due to lack of transport infrastructure, poor and unsafe environments, communities suffering access and equity disadvantage.

Contribution and value of small community based organisations

The ongoing survival and vibrancy of small local organisations is paramount to the general health of communities and democratic processes .Small locally based community organisations play an integral role in the building and maintenance of healthy local communities. They promote social and local justice, the building of social capital, cooperation between people in different communities and sectors, democracy and other values related to not-for-profit activities. Small community based organisations are well placed to know their local communities, networks and culture, and have working relationships across a range of local services and agencies. Small community organisations ensure the valuing of all community members, with a particular focus on disadvantaged communities and individuals. They provide infrastructure and innovation that allows people to contribute their time and skills to participate in their community and develop community identity, creativity and connectedness. They often provide a vehicle for leadership locally and in the broader sector. (See attachment 1)

Stresses on community management

Small organisation face particular struggles with many workers grappling unproductively with the original tenets of community based management which flowered in the 1970s – the idea of local people running local services, activities and programs and having some modicum of local control.

Community management is the means by which local people can directly participate in the direction of their community service organisation and needs to be valued more by government. However the number and complexity of management tasks and accountability requirements have increased dramatically in the past decade. The level of knowledge and skill required of committees and paid managers is significantly greater.

There are inherent dilemmas in clients/volunteers participating in management, however the "greater good" is to support and empower their participation for the skills that can develop from this experience.

Marginalised groups, especially indigenous groups, can have the greatest difficulties in managing an organisation due to varying levels of skills, access to information and pressures in the individuals in their daily lives. Yet it is these communities where it is most important to have community based self-determining services and projects.

Empowerment is a sorely-tarnished word in today's world – it takes many bits of information to make one small piece of power. Local control is now a myth, with most planning exercises taking place at a state or federal bureaucratic level. With the exception of some local government consultation over their social plans, there is little or no input into strategic and program planning from community workers, let alone residents. Instead, residents and community workers involved

with community-based management committees are coping with an ever-increasing load of accountability requirements and bureaucratic nonsense just to get a small amount of funding.

The multiple levels of accountability add complexity to community management.

Recommendations:
- Reduce the levels of accountability and compliance – eg Audited Annual Reports should be the sole accountability requirement for community organisations receiving $200,000 or less annual grant funding.
- Government Community Program Officers (CPO's) role to resource community organisations to achieve their stated goals, rather than monitoring expenditure and 'milestones'.
- Government initiate programs to enable established and recognized small community for organisations (those with 20 years or more service to communities) to buy local real estate as a base their operations. These programs could be funded by a mix of stakeholders.
- Government resource local community and regional planning initiatives driven by communities, free of government intervention.
- Government fund programs in schools which promote working with local community organisations as rewarding and fulfilling jobs
- Demonstrated local knowledge and recognized local community achievement be included in the criteria for funding of all programs and should be heavily weighted.
- Government should increase funding for regional resource workers to assist small organisations with funding applications together with collaborative initiatives striving for better quality of life and inclusive practices in communities.
- Government should set up small units in states and territories to handle funding programs and measurement of results across all government departments to assist with uniform grant application processes and evaluation which can be refined and improved as necessary.

The need for a community development focus

The contribution of local neighbourhood groups and organisations, hinges on their success in engaging people around them to strive for a common cause which improves quality of life in the area. Many hours must be spent talking and listening to residents to gain a deep understanding of what local concerns and issues can possibly be tackled. This is not an agenda which can be set by bureaucrats or government. We cannot stress enough the importance of considering local conditions before embarking on time and results driven projects.

Funding available for community development PROCESSES has been steadily eroded in NSW since the 1980s, with neighbourhood and community centres and some regional organisations such as WSCF, bravely carrying the banner forward. Many neighbourhood centres have been forced to diversify into service provision, which has become their main focus, leaving community development behind. This may be the reason for the current popularity of what's called ABCD – Asset Based Community Development in child and family intervention programs. Prior to ABCD, social capital was the buzz word. Whatever the nomenclature, the need for valuing exchanges between people in a neighbourhood is paramount, especially those viewed as disadvantaged,

where suspicion and avoidance of government services and intervention is rampant.

Government appears to favour awarding funding for short term projects in lieu of a short, medium and long term strategic approach. Any new community development project in an area needs at least a two year grounding, followed by another four years to carry out projects identified in the first two years. Government need adopt a policy of funding for five to six years minimum, with an option to renew where projects have achieved tangible and obvious benefits to communities. It goes without saying that it will take longer to achieve results in those communities which do not have a rich social mix

Recommendations……

- Fund community development as core community strengthening / community capacity building strategies.
- Fund community development re-currently or for at least six years – stop the practice of short term contracts.
- Identify long term community development practitioners in the community, with a view to building on their experience for future generations. Some have been now been working in the community sector for over 30 years, others volunteer their time and efforts and have achieved remarkable results. A well-resourced 'mentoring in place' program or a series of weekend seminars 'in place' could be instituted. Nominations by peers of suitable practitioners for the program could be broadcast throughout community networks as well as national media.
- Governments needs to evaluate its Expression of Interest (EOI) processes, which engender competitive environments and work against trust so necessary for meaningful exchanges between people and organisations. Community development thrives in an atmosphere of co-operation and collaboration. Without this atmosphere, fragmentation and duplication occur.

Supporting documents attached…..

- Western Sydney Community Forum Annual Report 2007/2008
- Western Sydney Community Forum Strategic Plan 2008-2011
- "To Market to market - Competitive tendering and the purchase of service in the community sector" Michael Darcy, Mary Waterford and Jane McIvor, May 2009
- "Making great interagencies, networks and forums – A resource and information kit." WSCF. Revised 2008
- "All Aboard! Getting involved in Transport Issues in Western Sydney. WSCF. April 2009
- Voice for SONG (Small Organisations Non Government) – The way forward: Tackling the issues confronting small community organisations. Tirrania Suhood, Chris Marks, Mary Waterford and Voice for SONG members. March 2006
- Voice for SONG – Think local. Why local small organisations are important to healthy democratic communities, especially now. WSCF. 2008
- "HACC volunteer services in Nepean and Cumberland/Prospect Project Report." WSCF. 2006

Other useful documents…….

- Working Together for NSW. An agreement between the NSW Government and NSW non-government human services organisations. NSW Department of Community Services and the Forum of Non-Government Agencies. June 2006
- Working Together for NSW: Good Funding Policy and Practice. Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS) July 2006
- Australian Services Union –Social Inclusion 2007

Attachment One:

What is valuable about local small community managed human service organisations?

- Small local community organisations are vehicles for participation in decision making - we further grassroots democracy and independent groups at the local level.

- Small community based organisations are generally guided by social justice, environmental sustainability, peace, not-for-profit and democratic values and promote the need for independent voices that represent the diversity of groups in our society.

- Service delivery is often what we do but it isn't who we are – local community organisations are set up by people enthusiastic about their community and determined to make things better. We strengthen local communities as we advocate for good social policy to enable appropriate services for the most vulnerable.

- We work with innovation, flexibility and responsiveness to addressing social justice issues, often with limited resources. Along the way we build social capital.

- We promote not-for-profit values at a time when our society is increasingly dominated by the profit motive.

- We have limited bureaucracy and more responsive decision making processes.

- We encourage cooperation above competition and build social sustainability, trust, cooperation and mutually supportive activities in and between our organisations and communities.

- We provide infrastructure to enable many skilled and innovative volunteers to make major contributions to our society through their work in many different parts of the service and advocacy sector.

- We employ many skilled, innovative and highly motivated paid workers with commitment and experience. We often have staff that choose to remain in the sector, despite poor conditions, as they see social change is best implemented at the grass roots level. Their social entrepreneur skills can be used to advantage in small structures.

- Our organisations often provide the entry point for new workers to the human services sector. They gain experience that can inform their practice throughout their career.

- We empower communities by facilitating flexible, responsive, independent projects and have the flexibility to nurture small ideas that may grow into large projects.

- We develop and support local networks and link people, working to promote local assets and attributes.

- Diverse and marginalised communities are usually represented.

- Local small organisations have a role in 'new generation' community structures to combat the effects of climate change, build local community capacity, skills of residents and developing infrastructure for disadvantaged.

- We knit communities together with multiple levels of relationships and networks, creating community harmony and addressing community conflict.

- We use minimal resources to get around because we are working locally
- We value "small" in our society at a time when structures and organisations are becoming larger.

Voice for SONG (Small Organisations Non Government) – The way forward: Tackling the issues confronting small community organisations. Tirrania Suhood, Chris Marks, Mary Waterford and Voice for SONG members. March 2006

In a nutshell – social and financial contributions

Community organisations contribute to the wealth of the community in the following ways:

Social Capital	Financial capital
By building stronger communities ~ They provide access to programs, resources and support for youth, families, children, older people and people with a disability, and other minority or vulnerable groups, which enable them to pursue quality of life. ~ They capitalise on the experience, skills, passions and commitment of community members to develop range of local projects and services. ~ Organisations bring new ideas and expertise into the local Government areas, which lead to a greater range of culture, services and opportunities for residents. ~ They work to develop inclusivity, tolerance and community harmony. ~ Skills add to the wealth of the community ~ They contribute to building relationships based on reciprocity	~ Community organisations receive recurrent funding for services: For instance in the Blue Mountains LGA neighbourhood centres alone, add approximately four million dollars per annum into the BM economy and they are just one service type among many. ~ Additionally community organisations seek funding for new ventures and projects and take up opportunities offered by State and Federal programs. ~ Management Committees contribute thousands of voluntary hours to meet the requirements of government including local government. ~ They promote a sense of belonging in the community, which contributes to individuals taking responsibility for community resources and assets.
By building networks and linking people together ~ They promote social cohesion, citizenship and a sense of community. ~ They create and maintain strategies to link residents with an extensive network of services and they collaborate to maximise resources.	~ Community organisations are a major employer -7% of the workforce contributing 7.5% of GDP. ~ They also provide training and support for volunteers, students and others seeking to increase their employment opportunities. ~ They maximise the use of resources.
By nurturing volunteer involvement ~ They provide opportunities, which increase skills, social wellbeing and a sense of value and participation.	~ Voluntary employment often leads to paid employment. ~ Skills add to the wealth of the community ~ Volunteers save the community many dollars.
By providing information and services ~ They develop and maintain essential community services that enable local residents to lead full participatory lives	~ Community services work with both crisis and preventative strategies. Preventative strategies save community funds and resources. ~ Community organisations promote the resources of an area, enabling residents

(eg childcare, housing, emergency support). ~ Community organisations facilitate the spread of local information to local people.	to find the services they need.