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Social and Economic Impacts of Community and Neighbourhood Centres in South Australia

Summary report

lga. South Australia

Community Centres SA

Background

This is a summary of the *Economic and Social Impact Study* of the Community and Neighbourhood Centre (CNC) sector in South Australia (SA). The report was commissioned by LGA South Australia and supported by key project partner, Community Centres SA.

The study builds on the foundational 2013 impact assessment by the South Australian Centre for Economic Studies and is informed by more recent sector impact work in other jurisdictions.

Key findings

Community and Neighbourhood Centres are an essential part of South Australia's social infrastructure, providing trusted, welcoming spaces that support connection, wellbeing and community participation.

Based on survey responses from 77 community and neighbourhood centres, representing 60% of centres across the state, together with seven case studies, the study highlights the sector's substantial social and economic contribution.

Centres deliver a broad range of integrated services, helping people meet immediate needs while building confidence, resilience and pathways to ongoing participation.

The findings show that these centres provide important early intervention and support services that help prevent more complex issues. This reduces demand on higher-cost health and human services while fostering stronger, more connected and resilient communities.

With 45 per cent of surveyed centres managed by local government, councils continue to play a significant role in delivering these community outcomes across South Australia.

The case studies and stories in the report show how the positive social return on investment plays out in real life for individuals, families and communities. The study suggests that it will be important to prioritise stable operational funding, fit-for-purpose spaces, workforce and volunteer capacity, and consistent data collection to track and strengthen impact over time.

COMMUNITY CENTRE
OPEN
NO PARKING

Community centres across South Australia generated

$99.31 million

in economic and social benefits in one year.

Community centres are trusted first points of contact, connecting people with support, learning and participation, while strengthening wellbeing, inclusion and resilience.

3,831
Volunteers each week
Working a total of 10,928 hours per week.

637
Staff members
Total number of full-time and part-time staff employed.

$15.8 million
Diverse funding streams
Centres secured funding from a range of sources.

535,476
Volunteer hours
For every one hour of paid work, volunteers contribute about 3.3 hours of service.

51,407
Weekly attendance
2.57 million visits annually.

61 per cent
Adult education programs
Comprised of numeracy, digital and financial literacy.

42 per cent
Not-for-profit
Operating as independent, community-governed entities, commonly incorporated associations or not-for-profit organisations.

45 per cent
Local government
Total percentage of centres funded by councils.

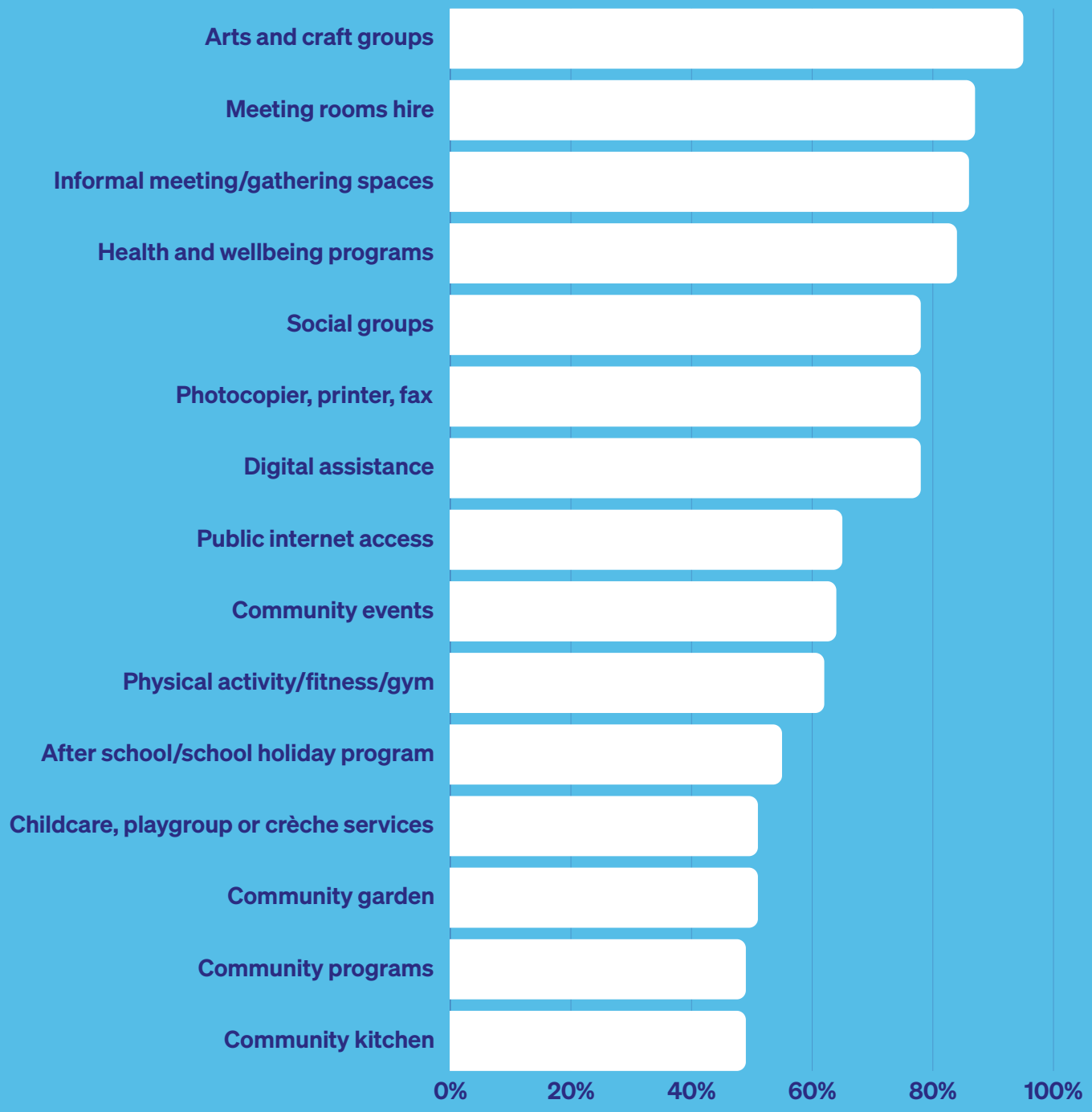
54 per cent
of visitors are aged 60+

27 per cent
are from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds

46 per cent
are people on low incomes

12 per cent
are people living with disability

Top 15 programs and services identified



Impact measured:

For every $1 of income received by the CNC sector $2.59 in social benefits is returned to the community in South Australia.

The analysis identifies four key areas of impact: social connectedness and wellbeing, empowerment and leadership, inclusion and equity, and resilience.

Value of community centres:

Social connection

$34.9 million

Value of social connectedness and wellbeing over the year.

Volunteer contribution

$31.1 million

Contributing a total of 535,476 hours a year.

Facilities hire

$13.5 million

A total of 312,101 hours of room hire has been recorded.

Community bus hire

$7.6 million

74,455 hours of transport services were provided.

Volunteer wellbeing

$4.6 million

The quality of life contributed from volunteering.

Counselling

$4 million

Legal or financial counselling was provided.

Childcare services

$1.6 million

Total of 6,935 sessions with 2,359 participants per week.

Social enterprise

$1 million

Positively impacted inclusion and equity.

Food & non-food relief

$449K

59 community centres provided food relief and 42 provided non-food relief.

Case studies summary

Seven case studies were undertaken across metropolitan and regional South Australia, representing both council-managed and independent community centres.

Despite their diversity, all centres demonstrated a shared capacity to strengthen connection, inclusion, participation and wellbeing through locally responsive, place-based approaches.

Diverse models, shared purpose

Each centre reflected the needs and characteristics of its local community.

The case studies included:

- **Milang Old School House Community Centre**
  (regional, independent)
- **Strathalbyn Neighbourhood Centre**
  (regional, independent)
- **Camden Community Centre**
  (metropolitan, independent)
- **Ngutungka Henley**
  (metropolitan, council-managed)
- **Woodcroft Morphett Vale Neighbourhood Centre**
  (metropolitan, independent)
- **Kilburn Community Centre**
  (metropolitan, council-managed)
- **Elizabeth South Community Centre**
  (metropolitan, independent)

The case studies showed that regional centres were more likely to focus on ways to address social isolation, ageing populations, transport barriers and access to services, while metropolitan centres placed greater emphasis on multicultural inclusion, settlement support, food relief, youth engagement and responding to complex social needs.

Key community contributions

Centres acted as trusted local hubs where people could access practical support, build relationships and participate in community life. Common activities included:

- social connection programs and community events
- food relief and emergency assistance
- information, referral and advocacy services
- aged care and ageing-well programs
- family and children's services
- education, digital literacy and lifelong learning
- volunteer opportunities and community leadership development
- health and wellbeing programs.

Distinctive strengths

While sharing many common features, each centre demonstrated a unique strength:

- **Milang** provides an integrated rural service model incorporating childcare, aged care, transport and youth engagement
- **Strathalbyn** plays a critical advocacy and service-navigation role for older residents and those experiencing isolation
- **Camden** combines food security, outreach services and volunteering opportunities through a highly diversified model
- **Ngutungka Henley** demonstrates the benefits of an integrated library and community hub
- **Woodcroft Morphett Vale** offers a wide range of affordable programs across all life stages through a modern co-located facility
- **Kilburn** provides culturally responsive services and settlement support for diverse migrant and refugee communities
- **Elizabeth South** uses volunteering and social enterprise to foster belonging, confidence and participation within a community experiencing significant disadvantage.

Key themes

Several themes emerged consistently across the case studies.

Building social connection and belonging	Centres create opportunities for people to develop friendships, strengthen social networks and feel connected to their communities. Reducing isolation was a significant outcome across both metropolitan and regional settings.
Supporting inclusion	Centres actively engage people who may experience barriers to participation, including older residents, migrants and refugees, First Nations people, people with disability, families and those experiencing financial hardship.
Early intervention and practical support	Many centres provide practical assistance such as food relief, transport, information and referrals. These supports often serve as gateways to longer-term participation, wellbeing and social connection.
Community participation and volunteering	Volunteers were fundamental to every case study. Beyond their significant economic contribution, volunteers provided leadership, local knowledge and pathways for community involvement.
Community resilience	Centres help individuals and communities respond to changing circumstances, including cost-of-living pressures, ageing populations, social isolation and increasing service system complexity.

Insights

Case studies showed that community and neighbourhood centres are much more than service providers. They are trusted community assets that combine practical support with opportunities for participation, learning, volunteering and connection.

Regardless of governance model or location, their greatest strength lies in fostering belonging and enabling residents to contribute, participate and thrive.

Emerging trends

Beyond the themes identified across the case studies, several broader trends are shaping the future role of community and neighbourhood centres:

Community needs are becoming increasingly complex, with residents more often experiencing multiple and interconnected challenges that require coordinated support and service navigation.

Population change is driving new service demands, particularly through ageing populations in regional areas and growing cultural diversity in metropolitan communities.

Demand for culturally responsive services is increasing, reflecting continued migration and the need for accessible pathways to participation and community belonging.

Youth engagement is emerging as a significant service gap, with centres reporting unmet needs among young people, particularly around social connection, participation, employment and education pathways.

Mental health and wellbeing concerns are becoming more prominent, often linked to social isolation, life transitions, financial stress and other forms of disadvantage.

Volunteer sustainability is an emerging challenge, with organisations increasingly focused on volunteer recruitment, training and retention to maintain service capacity.

Integrated and co-located service models are gaining momentum, as councils and community organisations seek more efficient, accessible and collaborative approaches to community infrastructure and service delivery.

Summary of impact stories

More than 40 impact stories were collected as part of the study, showing that community centres build belonging, wellbeing and help individuals practical challenges like cost-of- living, loneliness and isolation.

Connection, belonging and reduced isolation

The strongest theme was the role of community centres in fostering social connections, friendships and belonging. Through activities such as choirs, community meals, gardening groups, walking groups or cultural gatherings, centres provide trusted spaces for people to connect, particularly during times of loneliness, relocation, bereavement or life transition.

"The centre is more than a venue for activities, it is a community where relationships and belonging provide vital support during difficult periods."

"For many participants, the weekly choir session is the only regular time they leave their home and engage socially."

"The participant described the dinner as their first step toward feeling connected in their local area."

Improved wellbeing and quality of life

Many stories demonstrate that participation itself is a powerful contributor to wellbeing. Whether through exercise, music, gardening, volunteering or social groups, participants reported improved mental health, increased confidence, better physical health, reduced stress and a stronger sense of purpose.

"*Participants described feeling more connected, supported and engaged through regular participation."*

"The support she received through the Haven had been life-changing and helped her to stay safe."

"The program offered meaningful connection and respite from the day-to-day demands of caring."

Empowerment through participation, learning and volunteering

The stories demonstrate how participation in programs, learning opportunities and volunteering helps people build confidence, skills, purpose and self-belief. Many participants progressed from receiving support to becoming volunteers, mentors, leaders or employees, highlighting the centres' role in fostering individual growth and contribution.

"The participant later progressed into paid work at the centre and now facilitates the same cooking program."

"She shifted from participant to contributor, building practical experience, confidence and renewed self-belief."

"His experience demonstrates how community spaces can adapt and empower individuals, helping them rediscover purpose, creativity and social connection."

Inclusion and access for diverse communities

Community centres create welcoming, culturally safe and accessible environments for people who may face barriers to participation, including refugees, migrants, First Nations people, people with disability, older residents and those experiencing disadvantage. The stories illustrate how people find acceptance, connection and opportunities to participate in community life.

"The participant described the group as offering companionship, cultural reconnection and a renewed sense of belonging."

"The flexible drop-in model was particularly effective because it allowed people to participate regardless of which days their allocated support hours fell."

"Beyond the Labels focuses on recognising people for who they are, rather than their background, barriers or past experiences."

Practical support, early intervention and resilience

Many stories begin with people seeking practical assistance such as food relief, housing support, childcare, safety after experiencing domestic and family violence, digital support or information. Centres provide immediate help while also building trusted relationships, facilitating warm referrals and supporting long-term stability, safety and resilience.

"The response went beyond providing food, it included connection, reassurance and dignity at a time of acute need."

"The simple support provided through the Arabic Men's Group helped Yasser turn a difficult situation into a positive and empowering journey toward wellbeing, connection and resilience."

"The family had moved into safe accommodation and were beginning to re-establish routine."

Full report available

Scan QR code

Acknowlegement of contributers

We sincerely thank the community centres across South Australia who contributed their time, insights and experiences through surveys, case studies or feedback sessions. Your valuable input has helped develop this report and capture the

Helping local government build stronger communities.

GPO Box 2693
Adelaide SA 5001
T (08) 8224 2000
E lgasa@lga.sa.gov.au

lga.sa.gov.au

lga. South Australia