

FEEDBACK TO NATIONAL DROUGHT POLICY REVIEW

Community and Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association Inc. (CANH) response to the Productivity Commission recommendations.

Background

The Community and Neighbourhood Houses and Centre sector has been working in local communities for over 30 years, building their capacity for inclusion and empowerment, community interaction, wellbeing, resilience and social cohesion. This is achieved through the provision of services, programs and activities in an inclusive and supportive environment with a focus on prevention and early intervention and on identifying the unique needs of their community.

They encourage personal and community development and an overall sense of empowerment through involvement. Their target groups are often individuals and families most disadvantaged, socially isolated and disengaged from mainstream services. They actively encourage participation, understanding that engagement in any form of activity can facilitate positive change, improve well being and can be a stepping stone for personal and community growth. Most importantly, they value and recognise the diversity of their community and actively seek and value the contribution of all people's knowledge, skills, abilities and life experience.

Houses and centres are usually incorporated community managed organisations governed by a volunteer management committee with a part time community development worker working with a team of volunteers. Currently there are 89 community and neighbourhood houses and centres throughout South Australia with **23 of these in rural areas**. A recent survey indicated that in SA there were more than 2 million user contacts a year.

Community and neighbourhood houses and centres enrich the quality of lives of their community members by providing a place for:

- reducing social isolation through friendship, support and building networks
- the sharing of information, resources and a linking and referral service
- programs and services for strengthening individuals and families
- life-skills, health, recreation and education programs
- encouraging preventative practices through health, welfare and social justice
- taking the next steps in life

Originally, neighbourhood houses provided services such as playgroup and child minding facilities, craft courses and a social meeting point. Over time, houses and centres have become more pivotal in actively addressing the needs of their community. This is in a climate of increased complexity of social issues for individuals, families and communities which may include challenges relating to social isolation, mental illness, housing/financial/parenting stress, racial discrimination and

environmental issues. This is particularly relevant for farming and rural communities where the effects of drought have had such a significant impact on individual, family and community health and well being.

Houses and centres are often a hub for community participation, engaging with people who are most disengaged and disadvantaged and providing existing infrastructure and networks that place them in an ideal situation to contribute to the aims of the Rural Productivity Commission. What must be understood is that houses and centres play a pivotal role in building community capacity but this is largely unrecognised, specifically in regards to resourcing. For example, country centres are reporting that there have been significant increases in people presenting with depression. Often houses and centres are the first port of call for people as they are places where they feel comfortable, accepted and trust the staff. The centres provide the most appropriate support that can be given within their limited resources that may include someone to talk to, “accidental” and formal counselling, referral and linkages, crèche, adult community education (including multi literacy development across financial, prose and document, health, numeracy, problem solving and technology, personal development and employment skills), support groups, recreational activities and volunteering opportunities.

This submission recommends that instead of “reinventing the wheel:

- ***A community partnership approach is adopted.***
- ***Financial resources are allocated to community houses operating in drought affected rural communities to give a platform for working in collaboration with other government and non government agencies to include and empower individuals, families and communities in making changes that improve their lives and encourage sustainable practices.***
- ***Existing adult community education infrastructure is identified and further developed to make best and most effective use of available resources and valuable community assets in relation to training and professional development.***