



COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND SERVICES COMMITTEE

Members present:

Ms CP McMillan MP—Chair
Mr SA Bennett MP
Mr MC Berkman MP
Mr JM Krause MP
Ms CL Lui MP
Mr RCJ Skelton MP (virtual)

Staff present:

Ms L Pretty—Acting Committee Secretary
Ms C Furlong—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS IN QUEENSLAND

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

THURSDAY, 30 SEPTEMBER 2021

Nambour

THURSDAY, 30 SEPTEMBER 2021

The committee met at 10.35 am.

CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. I declare open this public hearing for the Community Support and Services Committee's inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. We are very fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whose lands, winds and waters we all share. I respectfully acknowledge my colleague Cynthia Lui MP, member for Cook, who is a First Nations woman, a Torres Strait Islander woman, and we feel very honoured to have her as a representative in the Queensland parliament.

On 27 May 2021, the Legislative Assembly agreed to a motion that the Community Support and Services Committee inquire into and report on social isolation and loneliness in Queensland, with a reporting date of 6 December 2021. My name is Corrine McMillan. I am the state member for Mansfield and chair of this committee. Mr Stephen Bennett, my colleague the member for Burnett, is the deputy chair. The other committee members are Mr Michael Berkman, member for Maiwar; Mr Jon Krause, member for Scenic Rim; Ms Cynthia Lui, member for Cook; and Mr Rob Skelton, member for Nicklin, who is on the phone at the moment. I hope Rob does not mind me saying that he is awaiting a negative COVID test result, otherwise he would be here. We hope to see Rob in the coming hour or so, once he gets that result.

The purpose of today's hearing is to assist the committee with its inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland. The committee's proceedings are proceedings of the Queensland parliament and are subject to the standing rules and orders of the parliament. The proceedings are being recorded by Hansard. Media may be present and will be subject to the chair's direction at all times. The media rules endorsed by the committee are available from committee staff if required. All those present today should note that it is possible you might be filmed or photographed during the proceedings by media, and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. I ask everyone present to turn mobile phones off or to silent mode.

Finally, while the current COVID-19 restrictions for South-East Queensland remain in force, all persons present at committee proceedings will be required to wear a face mask, to be removed only when speaking during the proceedings. We will also be adhering to limits on the number of people present in the hearing room today, although we are very lucky to have a very big room so we should be okay. I thank everyone for their understanding. The program for today has been published on the committee's webpage and there are hard copies available from committee staff if anyone is interested.

DE GARS, Ms Teula, One Roof Project Worker, Maroochy Neighbourhood Centre Inc.

ELLIS, Mr Mark, Coordinator, Community Development Program, Maroochy Neighbourhood Centre Inc.

HENNING, Mr Michael, Chief Executive Officer, Maroochy Neighbourhood Centre Inc.

CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you for being here. I will ask you to make an opening statement, after which I am sure committee members will have plenty of questions for you. Tell us about the great work that you do, Michael.

Mr Henning: I would like to thank the committee for creating the opportunity for us to speak. This is a fairly crucial issue for us, particularly with the Maroochy Neighbourhood Centre. Very briefly, the Maroochy Neighbourhood Centre is a small, not-for-loss community-based organisation. It has been around for 38 years. We run two partially funded programs: Community Development, which is with Mark, and Family Support.

One of the major pieces of work that we do is the One Roof Project. It is a wraparound service to address the issue of homelessness. We are not a housing provider and have never sought to be; however, we provide a significant wraparound service including laundry, meals, medical assistance, counselling, food, showers—all of that sort of thing—for the homeless.

The work that we do has been significantly activated since COVID from last year. A number of services had closed down at the beginning of last year and, as a consequence, we decided to remain open. Fortunately, we had a number of restaurants and cafes that were also forced to close down and they provided us with a whole lot of food, both perishable and non-perishable, so that we were able to provide hampers to those people. The target for the homeless or those who were really struggling during that period really changed because a number of people had lost their jobs so they had rental issues and accommodation issues. We were able to provide food hampers in that context for them. I think in the first two weeks we provided 78 hampers in the first instance.

The other piece of work that we were doing was helping a number of people who were for the first time dealing with the bureaucracy of Centrelink in terms of how to fill in forms and all that sort of thing. For them it was mind-numbing, so we were able to provide a fair bit of support on that basis.

Essentially, the Community Development program has been focusing a lot on homelessness and housing issues and being a fairly strong advocate program in dealing with that. The One Roof Project is a piece of work that is completely unfunded. I want to make that really clear: it is an unfunded piece of work. Although the government applauds the work that we do and has said that we are an awesome group, nevertheless we receive no funding for that. How does that actually work? It works because the community have come on board and have embraced what we do. We have had some very generous philanthropists who have come on board and decided to provide funds. Unitywater have also come on board and decided to provide funds to employ Teula in the work that we do. It is a first for a corporate organisation to actually do this sort of thing. Generally speaking, it has been the broader community that have seen what we do, like what we do and have decided to chip in, whether it be through funds, resources or volunteers. It has been an extraordinary piece. This is where community-developed principles come in very strongly for us as an organisation. We have engaged and connected with the community in that respect to be on board and to be on the journey that we have.

I know that the panel is looking into social isolation and loneliness. It is an issue for us. With COVID, of course, there has been a whole range of issues where people have been isolated and have felt quite lonely. The dinners have been a really good example where people engage and connect and remain connected on a twice-weekly basis when we do the meals. In this instance, we still maintain those connections. We do not do the sit-down dinners, but we do a takeaway service. The wraparound services like the medical consultations, the laundry and so forth are still being conducted but at a reasonable distance—they are done outside—so people are still engaging and still connecting. That is it from me for the time being.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Michael. Mark or Teula, do you have anything to add?

Mr Ellis: No, not really. I think he said most of it. That is why he is the boss! One thing I will say around loneliness is that a lot of people come into my office just to connect. I have had four people come into my office just this week with suicidal ideation because of loneliness and the isolation. Even though there are people around, they do not connect. This year and last year I have been dealing with a lot of people with suicidal ideation and then connecting them to counselling and that sort of thing. A lot of my time involves just sitting down and having conversations with people. I was having lunch with Michael only last week and we had a fellow walk in and he sat down and said, 'Hey, Mark, I just popped in to have a chat,' because he felt so lonely. They come to the centre because they can feel the connection. For us, it is about that connection. Even with the meals, it is not just the meal; it is, 'How are you going, mate? What's happening for you?'—that sort of thing. I am seeing a lot of people suicidal over this COVID period and it is not getting any better.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mark. Teula, do you want to add anything?

Ms De Gars: Yes, it is the same; at One Roof it is all about connection. Not only are they connecting with the centre itself through me at that program; I am then connecting them straight into other services as well as connecting them amongst each other. I think peer support is a really big thing here and that is what they also get at our program. It is also about connection for the volunteers. A lot of volunteers are coming in for that exact same reason; I think that needs to be acknowledged as well. It is all across the board, not only the vulnerable and our homeless; it is those people who are functioning in society, whether they be retired or something like that, but they are also needing that connection, and that is what they are getting through our program as well.

Mr BENNETT: Good morning. Thank you very much for your attendance and contribution to your community. It is great. I am interested in the One Roof Project being expanded out. Secondary to that, Michael, could I ask you to consider matters around the homelessness issue and the issues of accommodation? I was talking to Angela earlier about the fact that even here in Nambour there

are charities that are providing tiny house solutions to accommodation issues. Statistically, as governments or other agencies of government engage with you about numbers of homeless, has it increased with this pandemic across the state?

Mr Henning: It is an interesting question.

Mr BENNETT: It is about data collection. If we are going to advocate, we need evidence.

Mr Henning: Yes, it is. We do a lot of data collection ourselves. We as an organisation run a biannual survey of all the people who are homeless, and it is an extraordinary piece of work, particularly what Teula puts together, on the causes of homelessness—why people are homeless, why they are seeking services and all those sorts of things. We do not necessarily get much data from other services in relation to homelessness. It is a critical issue and a critical problem here on the coast. Whilst we feel there is a level of inertia and a level of paralysis in doing something with that, and whilst we are not a housing provider, we as an organisation try to look left of field in terms of what is available that we can do. As a result, we have been in contact with an organisation called the sleepbus in Melbourne. Again with the support of the broader community, we have organised two sleepbuses—one for men and one for women—which the community have paid for through fundraising within the community. It took us 15 months to arrange the bus for the men and took us 2½ weeks to raise the funds for women and children. Those buses are \$100,000 each. They are actually made in Melbourne. We have the first bus arriving towards the end of October/early November from Melbourne. We do not see that as a panacea to address the issues of homelessness, but it is an opportunity for people to sleep in the bus. These buses have 20 sleeping pods, all with their own TVs, all with USB ports so they can charge up their phones, their iPads and so forth. There are toilets on there.

We have engaged the community to be involved in this process. CDC bus lines have decided to volunteer all their drivers for that. They have also decided to pay for the fuel and to do the maintenance. Orange Sky laundry have decided to do all the washing of the linen and so forth. It is about engaging the community to be on this.

It is an exciting piece of work because they are the only two such buses in all of Queensland and the only two such buses in the Sunshine Coast region. The impact of all of that has far-reaching consequences because we have had people from Byron Bay, Taree, Adelaide and Hervey Bay who are very keen and very interested to find out how on earth we raised the funds, and they have been so inspired that they are doing the same thing, too. The issue of homelessness is a critical issue right across Australia, and this is just one way of addressing it.

In the short amount of evidence that we have found from Queanbeyan with their sleepbuses, people who actually slept on those buses had a higher chance of attaining longer term accommodation. That is only a really small amount of evidence and it is mostly anecdotal. We thought this was a really good opportunity for that to happen here. We are proud of our community in doing this and we are really proud to be able to lead that process.

Mr KRAUSE: Good on you.

CHAIR: Well done. That is great, Michael. Member for Nicklin, are you available there on the line?

Mr SKELTON: Yes, I am listening. I find it a bit hard to hear. I am able to hear you and that side of the room quite well, but it is a bit difficult to hear everyone giving their statements and when they are replying.

CHAIR: I am conscious, Rob, that you are the local member here. Do you have a question for the Maroochy Neighbourhood Centre?

Mr SKELTON: They have covered everything that I would have asked. Obviously I cannot be there physically, but I will be catching up with these three groups in the near future. Notwithstanding that, there is one question I would like to ask. Are there any issues unique to the Sunshine Coast with regard to social isolation?

CHAIR: That is a good question, member. The member's question is: are there any particular issues that are unique to the Sunshine Coast that you would like to share with the committee? During holiday time you have a large tourist population and perhaps a little bit of transience, but are there any issues unique to the Sunshine Coast?

Mr Ellis: Unique? Probably not. I think it is right across the board. We do have transients. That transience is around people coming here and not actually finding work. The cost of housing has gone up phenomenally and matters like that. Uniqueness? Probably not. It is right across the board. We

are finding that a lot more families are seeking support. Again, it is around isolation and loneliness. They come up here and their family is down in Victoria, New South Wales or wherever they may be, even in Brisbane. I find that personally a lot of families are coming in and, again, they are just wanting to have that conversation. Yes, they will come in and ask for some food and ask for assistance, but it is also about a conversation.

Loneliness is not a new thing. It is not a COVID thing. Loneliness and isolation have been around for a long time. I will give an example. In 2010 we built a community garden at the centre. There were people living in the same unit block who would walk past each other like ships in the night; they would not even acknowledge each other. It was not until they came to the garden and they said, 'You are my neighbour; I have seen you in our block of units,' that they started the conversation because they found it to be a safe place and a place where they were not going to get rejected. A lot of people find that if they try to strike up conversation with people they just go, 'I don't want to talk to you,' but when they come and they are doing something—head down, hands dirty—conversation is actually much easier. It is about providing a place where people can come and actually feel safe to open up and not be rejected or feel that someone is rejecting them. We all live in places now with six-foot or seven-foot fences. We all just go inside, lock the doors, 'thank you very much'. A lot of the neighbours do not even chat these days. It is not a new thing.

Mr Henning: One of the unique characteristics of the neighbourhood centre is that we really are a great place for engagement and for connections to occur. I am sure the panel would have heard that time and time again, but that is the reality. If a crisis occurs or people are feeling isolated or feeling lonely, where do they go? They go to a neighbourhood centre because they know there is a whole range of connections, whether it be services, programs, networks or whatever it is. We find that constantly, with all genders and all ages. I think that is the unique factor.

One of the unique things since COVID is that we have had a lot more people engage with us as an organisation. We have had a lot of people wanting to donate to us as an organisation, particularly after the bushfires in 2019-20, where a lot of people were disappointed with the large corporations that were in receipt of funds from the community. We have found, from our experience, that a number of people are donating to us. That has been really good from our point of view because it has enabled us to provide a range of services. There is also the fact that we are very flexible. We are very adaptable. We can do things. For example, we have had to stop all of our classes and courses that we were doing and turn to doing things online. We are still maintaining the connections with people.

The Family Support program that we operate has seen really big issues in terms of domestic violence and homeschooling, particularly when you are dealing with families who have trouble with literacy and numeracy and then having to homeschool their kids—huge problems. We set up virtual homework classes using Zoom and Microsoft Teams and that sort of thing so the connections can happen there, too. When an issue happens, we look at how we can address that in one way or another. It is that degree of flexibility.

Another issue involves circumstances around rental increases and unaffordable housing here in this region. That creates a lot of situations. We had one family where the husband was stuck in India and the wife and kids were home. It is a sad case. Unfortunately, they were evicted because the landlord decided to increase their rent. They ended up living in their car. The husband could not do anything. The wife felt quite isolated. She engaged with us. We were able to offer a whole range of support networks. She came to the dinners, we were able to provide hampers and we were able to provide a lot of support in terms of schooling through our volunteers, to ensure that level of support was there. Whatever the situation is, we are able to step in and value-add what is needed.

CHAIR: That is great.

Mr Ellis: If I can add to that, the One Roof Project is only run on Tuesday and Thursday nights, but up until 28 September, which is only a couple of days ago, we gave out 3,346 meals. For me, that means 3,346 conversations, because it is not about, 'Here is your meal. See you later'; it is, 'Here is your meal. Let's have a chat.' Over the last six years that we have been running this program there have been 22,122 conversations from just those two nights per week, not over the whole week. This year alone we have probably had about 10,000 conversations with people within our community on all sorts of weird and wonderful things.

Ms De Gars: Even though we have so much through the One Roof Project that they can come and connect with or even grab a meal, still a lot of people come down and it is purely social. They do not access anything at all except for the social conversations. It is incredible that they can come down and have that space, even during physical distancing and everything.

Mr BERKMAN: It is so valuable for us to hear about the different work that the various neighbourhood centres do. Thank you for your time. One of the universal themes is that you rely on and can tap into volunteer support in a way that very few organisations can, which is magnificent. You mentioned before how there is a value-add for a lot of the volunteers as well. The flipside of that is that the staff you have on are no doubt working far beyond what they are actually paid to do. The deputy chair and I heard from one of the volunteers at the centre yesterday. I am keen to get on the record and to hear your reflections about just what additional staff funding would mean for your centre.

Mr Henning: Where do we start and how long have you got?

Mr BERKMAN: Perhaps more specifically the staff who are on the books, how many of them are there and how much you think they are working beyond what they are actually paid to do?

Mr Henning: All of us are part-time staff. I only work 24 hours a week, but I do a 40-hour week, the same as Mark. Teula works 18 hours a week, specifically Tuesdays and Thursdays. The family support worker works 30 hours a week. We have a horticulturalist on board who we have employed because what used to be the community garden has now become our urban farm and that is a social enterprise business in terms of growing produce to sell to cafes and restaurants and so forth. He is employed on a 30-hour week. That income is self-generated; that is not a funded piece of work at all. There are only seven of us.

Mr Ellis: That is it.

Mr Henning: Some are working six hours a week; others are working 30 hours a week. There is a real variance. In terms of funding, as I said earlier in my spiel, we are only partially funded for two specific programs—Community Development and Family Support. They are five-year grants. We are up for review for those grants at the end of 2022 for the new grant to come in in 2023. Our issue for us is that the grants that we have, particularly in the Family Support program, have not kept up to the level of work that is actually required. We are still being funded at 1990 levels of funding but the work has just grown exponentially.

The family support work we used to do we called ‘doing fluffy stuff’—dealing with families who had just had their first child or who had moved up to the region and were isolated and that kind of thing. Now we are dealing with families who have mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues, and domestic violence and the trauma involved with that. It also includes housing and rental susceptibility now. Poverty is a big issue. Most of the families that we deal with are at that level. It is the pointy end of work. We rely heavily on our volunteers to stop-gap that sort of thing.

The One Roof Project, again, is a piece of work that is completely non-funded. We have had some extraordinary philanthropists involved. We had one group who did a big fundraising event and they raised \$42,000 collectively for us to be able to support that program financially. That is brilliant. That will be an ongoing piece of work.

We have a number of donors who have decided to donate funds to us on a quarterly basis in perpetuity to support the work that we do. That is fantastic. To get a corporate on board like Unitywater—they have decided to provide us with a three-year grant, which commenced earlier this year, because they love the work that we do and because we engage them as a business to be part of the solution. It is trying to not only engage the community but also encourage the business to have that civic responsibility or social responsibility to be part of that. Unitywater just embraced it and came on board. They partially fund as well. That is really great.

We are able to do this sort of thing mostly through community donations and funds. We have also set up an op shop at the centre purely to raise funds to keep the unfunded programs going. We acknowledge there is very little in the way of funds. What funds we do have are really small and it is really tight so we have to look elsewhere at how we attain our funds. If we can go through corporate sponsorship—fantastic. If we can generate social enterprise business to raise income—fantastic. That is how we do it.

Mr BERKMAN: I would imagine additional government funding for ongoing roles would be of benefit.

Mr Henning: The Queensland Families and Communities Association have been talking about neighbourhood centres receiving a base funding of \$134,000. We do not get that. We do not receive any funding to operate the organisation, like some of the other neighbourhood centres do. We only get funded or partially funded for project funds, and that is Family Support and Community Development, and they are specifically for wages. Only two per cent of that grant is actually to administer those programs. We get no operational funds from government at all. The operation of our centre is through self-generated income. I want to make that really clear. We are one of those

organisations. Why is that the case? Probably because we are not in a government owned building. We are in a council owned building. We had one of those rare opportunities because it was the community overall that built the centre, not the council and not the government. It was the community that built that purpose-built centre for our organisation. Council have taken over that, so we pay a peppercorn rent on a 10-year lease. In terms of maintenance, that comes off our shoulders. We do not get any operational cost to do that.

Mr BERKMAN: Brilliant work. Thank you, Michael.

CHAIR: Thank you very much to you Mark, Michael and Teula. Unfortunately, we have come to the end of this session, but certainly feel free to stay around and listen to the other community members and presenters. The committee very much thanks you for your time this morning. Particularly the committee is very proud of the work you do and we thank you immensely. We do not overlook the importance of the work you do.

COUSINS, Ms Vikki, Coordinator, Gympie Community Place

GRANT-TAYLOR, Ms Abbie, Secretary, Gympie Community Place

CHAIR: Thank you for your time in appearing before the committee this morning. The community is very much looking forward to hearing about your great work and your feedback around the issue of social isolation and loneliness in Gympie. I now ask you to make an opening statement. Then the committee will follow up with some questions.

Ms Grant-Taylor: Thank you for the opportunity for us to be here today. I would like to speak briefly on some of the key points of our submission. For all of us involved with Gympie Community Place, social isolation and loneliness are not abstract concepts. They are the reality that we see every day and something that affects us and the many people who access our centre. We see people with complex vulnerabilities. There are many drivers and a combination of factors that result in people experiencing vulnerability. It is not simple. For every person we see there is a different story, a different set of circumstances and a different way forward. While there may be common factors behind that vulnerability, for us it is the individual, the person we are connecting with, that is the focus of our attention.

One of the great things about neighbourhood and community centres is that we see anyone who presents. While that is a great thing, it also means that community centres increasingly are seeing people with complex vulnerabilities who slip through the cracks of the mainstream service system because they do not fit the specific eligibility criteria, or because the service they need is not available locally or only available as an occasional outreach service from a larger centre, and that probably impacts more in the regional areas than in the metropolitan areas.

We see that technology, while an important part of our lives, can be a burden and a barrier for many people. We see many agencies, government and non-government, who demand that people access their services online or on the phone and that phone is no longer a local phone number. Barriers to access technology manifest in different ways, from being unable to afford the cost of the smartphone or the device itself to the cost of a data package that goes with it and to the actual reliability of that data package, the black spots for phone or data coverage, and the speed or lack of it for internet access. Frighteningly, we see people with impaired decision-making capacity being asked to do things online.

We see that poverty—a lack of adequate resources—exacerbates these issues. People cannot afford to participate in their community if they cannot afford the basics. Anything that the Queensland government can do to influence the Commonwealth to increase pensions and allowances would certainly help in this area.

We see people who are truly alone—people without any community connections; no family, no friends, no community connection at all. For many of those people, the act of reaching out is in itself a struggle.

We spend quite a bit of time helping people navigate a complex service system, and the ‘anecdotal’ that we receive in feedback can be at the same time heartwarming, heartbreaking and truly tragic. One specific example I am thinking of is a woman who had no connections in Gympie. She wrote to thank us and in that letter she said that without our support she would not be alive, and that is a tragedy.

At Gympie Community Place, we have adopted the motto that ‘community happens when people are connected’ because we know that one of the biggest protective factors that mitigates against social isolation and loneliness is connection with others. We know that people flourish when they are connected with their communities and that communities flourish when people are connected. That connection is what neighbourhood and community centres do well and could do more if we were adequately resourced.

Currently we are funded on a single-worker model. Over the 30-plus years we have been operating, the administrative burden on that single worker has grown exponentially, as have the volume and complexity of the work that they can do, which reduces the time they can dedicate to community work, and there is simply no more capacity within the current system.

With some additional funding, community and neighbourhood centres such as ours are well placed to support connection and address social isolation and loneliness. For us, our two most recent strategic planning exercises have highlighted a need for additional staff to carry out that vital community work. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. We are happy to respond to any questions you may have.

Mr BENNETT: Good morning. It was nice to chat privately before the committee hearing started. Abbie, thanks so much. It has been a consistent theme, this issue of base funding. Is that the terminology: the single-worker model?

Ms Grant-Taylor: Yes.

Mr BENNETT: Maybe we should do our own research, but are you aware of how many different models exist?

Ms Grant-Taylor: I will look to Vikki for that one.

Mr BENNETT: We heard yesterday there is a base funding model of \$130,000 for community centres.

Ms Grant-Taylor: Perhaps if we go historically, it has been different in different areas and, without being too political, a number of years ago funding was withdrawn from the sector. It has been difficult to bring that back up. There has been a push to make sure some centres that were unfunded have become funded. For us around here, that has included the centre at Pomona which has been fantastic. The centre at Maleny has also recently received some funding. So there has been some progress in that area.

Mr BENNETT: Single-worker model?

Ms Grant-Taylor: Some of those are part-time—even less than what we have.

Mr BENNETT: There is a whole heap of different elements?

Ms Grant-Taylor: There are different levels within that. I think sometimes it depends on the population, but it also depends on historical funding. Sometimes that funding has been there because there was a centre, and that is what it is. Then there are other centres that are unfunded.

Mr BENNETT: The people in Gympie, I believe, are culturally and linguistically diverse. Is that increasing dramatically in Gympie? You are not getting a refugee race?

Ms Grant-Taylor: No. We do have services, but we do not have a particular increase in the culturally or linguistically diverse. We do have the 457 visa holders, and I could not tell you what is happening with that with COVID and the restrictions on international travel and all of that, but there are some of those sorts of situations there. We do have proportionately a reasonably large Indigenous population—that is one of the fastest growing in the younger sector—and again, fortunately, we have some great services that work in that area as well.

Ms LUI: Thank you, Abbie, for your time this morning. We have heard some really valuable contributions from other speakers over the past couple of days and it is good to hear your contribution today as well. You mentioned that you accept anyone who walks through the door and unfortunately you get to see a lot of clients with complex vulnerability. You mentioned that those clients who walk through your door often do not fall into the eligibility criteria for other services. Can you please expand on that?

Ms Grant-Taylor: The basic one is people with a dual diagnosis—mental health and drug and alcohol use. Again, it is limited in areas like ours where we do not have a lot of the services available. There are those barriers as well.

Ms Cousins: With presentations at the community centre—and this has been increasing, I would say, over the last six or seven years—I have noticed an increase in what we call complex presentations. These are people who have lots of things going on and often have gone from service to service to service looking for help, but they do not ‘tick the boxes’ so they do not meet the criteria for those services. One of our greatest strengths as community centres is that we do not have criteria. I like to say that we are like the butterfly net that picks these people up. Once you have picked them up and you start to look at what they need in the way of help, you unmask those complex issues. There is never one; there are never even two or three. There are often multiple issues going on. Then we do what we can in that space.

We are fortunate at our centre that we have a Community Connect program which is funded on its own and lives at the centre. That gives us a worker who can do some work in that space with people who present with complex vulnerabilities. My position has no capacity to do that. It has become common. Those presentations used to be occasional, but now they have become common.

Ms Grant-Taylor: I think some of it does relate to the fact that—I draw a line on the map basically just north of between Noosa and Gympie. In this area, we are in the south-east corner. Once you get through to Gympie, we are in the regional areas so we do not have the range of services. There simply might not be a service that is available for people that they would find if they were in a Nambour

metropolitan area, like access to health care, access to housing. Housing we will not even speak about at the moment; that is a whole other matter. I was thinking of access to allied health professionals, access to mental health services and those sorts of things. For us it is not easy for people with mental health issues because they need to come out of the area to get the help that they need and then they may be unwell and not necessarily picked up by services in town. That is exacerbated in Gympie because we are quite a big region. We cover a very big geographical area and we have a number of satellite areas which have even less services than we have in Gympie. Sometimes it is the lack of services.

The other matter we find at the moment, which I alluded to, is what I call the dreaded 1300 number where people are asked to ring a number and it is not a local phone number. The people who are responding to them, if you can get through, do not know anything about the local landscape, the local service system and those sort of things. There is a lot of that that happens. We struggle a lot. For us in Gympie, we are part of the Sunshine Coast health system, so for those with complex cases or even young parents or young mothers with a difficult pregnancy, they have to come down to the Sunshine Coast for health care.

We also find other issues in relation to planned release from hospitals and planned release from prison. Those sorts of factors can have a real impact where those things are done last thing on a Friday afternoon or at a weekend when there are not any services available or when Centrelink is not open. We would really like to see some coordination among agencies and government agencies with regard to releasing somebody at 10 o'clock in the morning versus releasing them at four o'clock in the afternoon if they are going to be travelling to different areas. There are a whole range of those factors.

Michael was referring previously to the issues around housing and homelessness. For us at the moment it is in crisis, and I do not use that term lightly. We are seeing auctions for rental properties. We are seeing families who are unable to be housed. People with good rental histories are no longer able to get into properties. We are just stunned at how much prices are going up. We have the added impact at the moment of the highway bypass going through and two separate contracts going through with that which means that whereas normally we might be able to put somebody up in a motel for a night that is not an option for us at the moment. One of the things that we do through the community centre is run what we call the Gympie homelessness forum, where we are drawing together both individual service clubs and agencies working in that space to try to look at what we can do as a community to try to address that and coordinate all our efforts.

Mr BERKMAN: I really appreciate your time today. I do not know if you were here when I asked the question of the Maroochy Neighbourhood Centre. I am keen to understand similarly for your organisation. You mentioned the single-staff funding model. How many staff do you have? How overworked is everyone? What would your priority be if you had additional funding?

Ms Cousins: The community centre has one full-time staff member. That is me, and I am supported by a part-time administrative worker and a receptionist, but we fund those positions ourselves. They are not funded in our operational funding. We also, as I mentioned, have a Community Connect program that is also funded by the department of communities, but it has its own portion of funding. As a community centre, we have a responsibility to that program to actually make sure it has what it needs. We take some financial responsibility for that program on our budget, which is less than theirs. We have a wonderful community centre that the department of communities provides for us and we hire out rooms and offices. That is how we generate our income to pay the other staff.

Abbie has already talked about the one-worker model. I have been in this role for 11 years, so I have been doing this for a long time, and the growth in our centre and in the complexity of people we are seeing has just been non-stop. With regard to my job, if you had a look at what I am doing, I am doing two jobs. It is so busy. There is so much to do all the time and then there is so much that you cannot get to. Abbie mentioned some of it already and we talked a bit about it, but the growth in reporting load and compliance takes away from my time to do that direct work with the community and people, because I am too busy writing reports and policies. It has become huge. It used to represent 10 per cent of my role. Now nearly 40 per cent of my time is tied up in those red-tape requirements. That is significant. It is significant in how we can support our community and support people and do what we want to do. Extra funding to us would make a massive difference to how we could work in that space and how we already work in that space.

I can tell you many a story of me sitting down, having blocked out my afternoon to do a report or a policy, and a person in crisis will walk in and I will spend three or four hours with them. It is represented in our data with a tick in a box that says I gave a person information, but I spent three

hours with that person so that we could get an outcome for them and that they were not just left with, 'Sorry, we can't help you. We don't have time.' That is common; that is what happens. It is part of the issue with regard to the workload.

A second full-time worker who can really get out in our community is needed. In particular, we are a regional community and we have these broad pockets that we do not have the opportunity to tap into, but we know that when we connect with them they will say, 'Oh, we did not even know.' They are disconnected from us. It is geographical, but they are disconnected. I can see that another worker would not only really boost the centre for people who present at the centre who are looking to connect but also we could go out to those regions and say, 'Hey, how can we connect with you? What can we do with you?' When you are talking about social isolation and loneliness, the answer is connecting and it is about connecting in person. It is not about Zoom meetings and it is not about Facebook; it is about connecting in person and having that real time with people. That is what we need. You heard what Michael was saying from Maroochydore. For us, it is no different. We need, as Abbie will say, warm bodies on the ground. We need people who can be there to do that.

Ms Grant-Taylor: From a management committee point of view, I mentioned that we have had two rounds of strategic planning to look at where we can go in the future, and for us it has been identified that an additional worker to do some of that community-based work—to really do that engagement, to run those social groups, to bring everybody together, to go out into our regional areas—would be just a blessing for us.

There are another couple of staff that we have on programs that Vikki did not mention that you might be interested to hear about. One of the other things that we do, in partnership with Act for Kids, is run the Gympie Region Local Level Alliance, which is based on the child safety reforms. We are doing that through a collective impact approach, and we also do that by having a number of subgroups. That has been providing us with some interesting material. For example, there is a group that we have had going out at Tin Can Bay and they have been able to bring people from the health department to a particular childcare centre to get a lot of assessments and those sorts of things done there. It is more that type of thing.

We run another program that we have funded through the primary health network called Healthy Play, where we are trying to help kids through early identification of developmental delays and get that support before they enter school so we can start improving outcomes with the AEDC data. While we thought that might have been quite simple in working with the kids, we are finding a need to be working with the parents as well. We envisage that with additional workers we could then provide support to people from the different groups who experience social isolation, and sometimes it depends on mixing with people of the same group and or in the same location.

We also know that Gympie is an incredible community, an incredibly resilient community, and there are lots of groups and lots of services that are doing wonderful things in our community. It is a matter of getting people linked into those. That is where I think the community centres become that hub. We do not have to do it all, but we have to be able to work within our community and support our community.

Mr KRAUSE: Thank you for coming in and for the work you do. In another hearing it was put into evidence that there was research which showed that people who are unemployed gain extra social benefit from engaging with neighbourhood centres. How much of a role do you think unemployment plays in the issues that you are seeing, especially as it relates to loneliness and isolation in the community, coming through your centre?

Ms Grant-Taylor: I used to work in the employment field, so I have some background in that. Poverty goes with unemployment. The benefits are so low that people cannot afford to do things. Where people are really good at being able to budget and to work within that limited budget, they do not have the additional funds to go and engage with their community. That is where places like community centres become important, but we do not specifically—

Mr KRAUSE: That is the result of unemployment, though, is it?

Ms Grant-Taylor: In our region we have a quite high reliance on social welfare payments, so it is not just unemployment, even though the Wide Bay unemployment rate is usually higher than the national average. It is hard for us to differentiate somebody who may be unemployed from somebody who may be on a carer's benefit or on a disability pension or on a sole parent benefit. It is all of those things. Things like employment in general are very much protective factors against things like social isolation because you do have that interaction with people and things that are happening. You have the work and the self—I cannot think of the word I am looking for.

Mr KRAUSE: Do you get many attendees at your community centre who are full-time employed?

Ms Cousins: There is no doubt that a high percentage of people who come into the community centre are unemployed. That is linked to the fact that when people have income and employment they have more social connection anyway. There is more around them. They are more resilient if they are experiencing isolation. Most people who come into the community centre have multiple things going on. Unemployment may be one of them. Lack of financial resources is another one. They are needing assistance. They do not have the same resilience and same ability to tap into things as other people might. It would be a factor, definitely.

Ms Grant-Taylor: We also see people who are older and people with disabilities. It is a whole range of circumstances that can happen. I always get concerned that we have quite a low socio-economic area. The IRSD—the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage—for the region basically says that nobody in the Gympie region is in the most advantaged categories. We simply do not have that ability to work on those things. It will be interesting to see the result of the Census we have just had to see whether that has changed. With the highway opening from the Sunshine Coast we are seeing a change in the demographic, but it will be interesting to see how that pans out in the future:

CHAIR: Ladies, the time for this session has come to a close. We thank you for the work you do. We recognise how hard you work and the challenges that you face in the Gympie community. Thank you for sharing your experience with us this morning. We look forward to seeing how we can make things a little different for you in the future.

RONDO, Ms Angela, Acting Manager and Thriving Families Coordinator, Nambour Community Centre

CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you for your time and for appearing before the committee this morning. We ask you to give a brief opening statement around some of the work you do, and then I am sure our committee will have some questions.

Ms Rondo: Thank you for your invitation and allowing me to present on behalf of the community centre this morning. I would like to acknowledge the First Nations people here, the Kabi Kabi/Gubbi Gubbi people, and their elders past, present and emerging. The community centre at Nambour is a 40-year-old centre. It has longevity here. I would like to acknowledge the role in connection for all community centres. The Nambour one can be really identified with the example of the Woodford Folk Festival. Forty years ago the community came together at what was then the Meeting Place, where they wanted to build opportunity for people to share their artistic expressions and their life journey and to empower themselves. Together that community brought about what is now an international folk festival that attracts many thousands of people every year here in Queensland. From humble beginnings, a real grassroots opportunity for people to come and connect now attracts international connection.

As a centre, we also feel isolated and alone sometimes in our work in how we deliver and we are always seeking our own connection with the broader service sector and the other organisations that are there to support us—particularly in Nambour with the local businesses, our local members and our local council. It is really important to acknowledge that no work can be done in isolation. As human beings and energetic beings, connection is only what is going to grow and make us stronger.

The philosophy of the centre from its beginnings in 1981 was about bringing together group activities. We still continue some of those group activities today. Things like yoga and meditation occur weekly at the community centre. Mr Des Ritchie, from what was then the Meeting Place, now the Nambour Community Centre, speaks to the fact that if you allow a whole host of people to be creative, to do their thing—not my thing, not your thing but their thing—as a community, as a group of people, magic can happen. We still work with that philosophy today. We welcome everybody into our centre.

This morning I was not sure I was even going to be able to make it here. Whilst we are sitting here, there are about 30 women in our back garden, all coming together, sharing their life journeys, their experiences, their joy and their sorrows. There is a First Nations woman facilitating art today and a didgeridoo healing. There is a group of people coming together. We have about 15 volunteers who are also setting tables, cooking meals and cleaning the centre so that at 12 o'clock we can serve 50-plus meals to the community. While I was there this morning I sat with four different people, engaging them with emergency dental appointments, linking them in with housing providers and supporting them with phone calls to court and also with their NDIS workers.

The Nambour Community Centre is a very dynamic and very busy centre. We touch about 40,000 people in a given year. We distribute over 200 frozen meals a week to people seeking support. We have food delivered to our door every day which we then distribute to the community. Every day people can come and access food. They do not need to ask. We set it up. People can come in and access that food. That is on top of the Thursday lunches we provide.

This morning, as every morning when I open the door, I am opening the doors to people not only looking for the human connection through the yarn while we are setting up the coffee but also looking to access the showers and washing machines. Every day, as my colleagues mentioned, you can make your plans for your day that never come to fruition. It is always a challenge. This is the grassroots work that the centre provides to our community. We are positioned in the heart of the community and we are often the first point of contact for people. We are also that soft entry point into other funded services.

People who are presenting are people who come from migrant backgrounds, maybe newly arrived in Australia, new parents, the ageing population and people from other diverse and minority groups. We have a large LGBT community accessing our support and we do a lot of First Nations work and engagement. Nambour has about four per cent First Nations population which is significantly higher compared to the rest of the Sunshine Coast, so we work really intensively there.

I know there is conversation around communication and technology, but really what we are seeing is people wanting to come back and contribute themselves through not only formal volunteering but also just coming in to help. Every morning I am heartened to see people walk through the door and say, 'Where is the mop bucket, Angela? Can I mop the floors for you? Let me help you

bring the washing in' et cetera. People come in to connect, not just to have the conversations or the yarns but to feel like they have meaning and purpose by giving back for the greater good. It allows them to feel that they have some value and worth.

We all know that isolation and loneliness can lead to a spiral of depression, anxiety and really poor mental health. Community centres are really the antidote to that, where everyone can just come in and be who they are without feeling judged or discriminated against.

Part of the isolation, I think, as a community centre which we feel often is around accessing some of the key services where we require support from agencies. Often we are left with really unwell people in our space and are unable to engage them in meaningful outcomes for themselves because other services are not available or they do not fit the box that we have to tick to say they are 'this person with these needs'. If I make a phone call to a mental health service and they are unable to deliver, it is then left with our workers and our volunteers to sit with that person and hold space for them until they are able to feel better about themselves. The centre has really a good relationship with our local police and ambulance service which is really important to us. We call them often. We have a really good relationship with the local council here, which is really important, and our local businesses.

Mr BENNETT: Angela, it was nice talking to you earlier. I understand that with the local networks, how you operate is significantly different to somebody else, but picking up on the theme over the last couple of weeks, and particularly this morning as well, about the place based solutions and acknowledging that not one mould will fit every centre, I am curious to know if there is any work being done that you are aware of or that you have been engaged with that captures how that can be best duplicated or triplicated or used elsewhere?

Ms Rondo: When I think about picking up a model and taking it somewhere else, I think it really lacks the depth and the nuance for the community where you are taking it. The place based model is really important for that grassroots development. Cookie-cutter service delivery is not going to work. The nuances of the community are what you need, so it is around having a very strong community development lens and engaging the people. Even this morning I had a conversation with a woman who is convening Reimagine Nambour and wanting to look at responding to some of the youth issues we have in this space. She was talking about bringing services together and program models and I said, 'But Nambour is Nambour. Can we not talk to the community, talk to the parents and talk to the young people themselves?' There is no point in building something if it is not what people want or need in their life.

Mr BENNETT: How do we make that happen without, to use your words, ticking boxes for compliance or whatever you need to do to make sure you are doing everything right? That is driving activity or patterns, but place based solutions are the best way to go, right?

Ms Rondo: Definitely—having the conversations, really actively listening to what is happening for people in their lives and in their journey in the community, and then bringing the community along. 'Oh, Joe said that, Mark said that and Angela said that. Let's bring those three together. They can invite their friends. Let's invite the community and have a really good conversation. Let's do a few models around circles and how we facilitate the issues and bring them up.'

This afternoon we have a homelessness circle happening for women. In the last 13 months, three homeless women have died in this space, so we are looking at how we talk with people who have lived experience of homelessness but then bring in the broader community. We document those. We record them visually. We have to keep some understanding of the process. It really is a community development model.

Mr BENNETT: It may be a question for some other time, but the model we are hearing is a community hub type model with all the service providers and all those skills pretty much in one area so we can leverage off each other and get those efficiencies as well. That is a conversation for another day.

CHAIR: We have the member for Nicklin, Rob Skelton, on the line. Rob, I am conscious we have Angela here from the Nambour Community Centre, which is in your patch. I know you are having trouble hearing us all, but do you have a question you would like to ask?

Mr SKELTON: Yes, I am, but I have met Angela quite a few times and I will no doubt be speaking to her after this. I thank Angela for coming along. I think we gave only relatively short notice for people to attend, so I am really pleased that she came along and was able to mention the great work they do out of the Nambour Community Centre. I concur with the deputy chair that they are a hub of the community and they do bring people and services together and they are really important.

Anything we can do to improve things moving forward will be fantastic. I will catch up with Angela later. My apologies for not being able to attend. I am listening and I am trying to catch up with people, but I will certainly catch up with Angela.

Mr BERKMAN: I appreciate your time as well, Angela. I do not mean to just rinse and repeat the same questions, but I am really keen to hear and understand your experience at the Nambour Community Centre. As I have asked the other folks this morning, what is your current staffing capacity? Where does that come from? How overworked is everyone who is volunteering and keeping the centre afloat?

Ms Rondo: The Nambour Community Centre, in comparison to other community centres, has a different staffing ratio. We have 11 paid staff but not all are full-time. We only have two full-time members and that is our manager—only up until recently, though; it was originally only at 32 hours a week—and an administration manager. They are very key roles. The rest of us are either 24 or 32 hours a week. Having said that, in the last 12 months, one of the funded programs, which has our highest number involving the Thriving Families team, which I coordinate, has seen an additional 1,500 presentations access the service. Just in 12 months that has increased, yet our staffing and funding have not met that increased need. I also said that I did not think I was going to be able to make it here today because we have people on leave, and with all of the different activities happening in the centre and the overwhelming need and some of the displays of behaviour that were occurring in our centre this morning I felt that, in terms of our risk management, my staying there would be of much greater importance.

Having the opportunity to increase our staffing levels and additional funding would give us opportunities to have better recording so that we can have a very clear demonstration of what we are seeing, who we are seeing and where we are seeing them. Our data recording now is not awesome. We do not have case management systems where we collect great information. When we are writing funding or grant applications, it is based on our stories and what we are experiencing rather than the numbers that are asked for, so that opportunity would be awesome.

Mr BERKMAN: There is an obvious tension between the time spent on recording what it is you are doing at the centre and actually doing it.

Ms Rondo: That is right. In terms of our funding, we put it into the human staffing, which means there are no additional funds to support human beings in terms of crisis and emergency resources. We have no brokerage funds or emergency relief. We are always reaching out to everyone else who is also scrambling from that pool. We rely on our community Facebook posts: 'We have run out of soap. We have run out of toothpaste for the bathroom.' That takes time as well.

Mr KRAUSE: Thank you for your time here and for your work. Did you say something about behaviour that was occurring at the centre this morning?

Ms Rondo: Generational trauma is really a large impact for people here, particularly our rough-sleeping population. Generational trauma often manifests when people—I believe behaviour is communication, so when people are not feeling well or feeling fearful or unheard, their behaviour will start telling us what it is they need, or that they need something different to what is going on. So really listening or, in this instance, understanding the visual cues for people and their trauma and what that means is required. We have lots of poor mental health and lots of addiction presenting at the centre, and that accumulation with community violence and trauma can sometimes bubble up.

Mr KRAUSE: Thank you very much for joining us.

CHAIR: We certainly understand the stresses that people are under, particularly people, as you said, who are experiencing a whole range of different measures of poverty, whether that be addiction or sleeping rough or what have you. As a follow-on to the question asked by the member for Scenic Rim, do you feel that there is support for the staff who are appointed at the centre to develop the capacity to deal with some of those complexities?

Ms Rondo: When recruiting the staff, we look for people with that experience and knowledge already. In our funding—and this goes back to the previous question—there is not a lot of opportunity for ongoing professional development. We are presented with new experiences or new complexities all the time. We are not specialists in addictions or mental health or even domestic and family violence, but we find ourselves working at that pointy end, as Michael was talking about before. We are an early intervention, grassroots community organisation, but we work with extremely challenging life experiences, stories and people. We often find ourselves in a place where we are, as I said, looking for our own connections to build the resources to support families and individuals

CHAIR: You do a very good job at that, Angela, so thank you. Thank you for your time this morning. As the member for Scenic Rim alluded to, you could have been, should have been, would have been somewhere else, but the fact that you chose to be with us we really do appreciate, and we were certainly all ears on your contribution. The committee wishes you well for this afternoon and the rest of the day. Thank you for your time today.

Proceedings suspended from 11.58 am to 12.05 pm.

CHAIR: Good afternoon, everyone. We are now going to an open mic session. I know that the committee has a couple of follow-up questions for particularly the Gympie Community Centre. Firstly, I invite Ms Naomi Szalek. We would like to hear your story and your views.

Ms Szalek: The reason I came today is that I heard it was on and I am interested. I have come up from Victoria to live in Queensland in the last four years. I am retired and on a pension, which is great—I love having a pension; it helps. It is really good for me. I have a home; I am not renting. I know it is a lot harder when you are having to rent. Saying all that, I was a nursing sister for 43 years in an acute emergency department. My last job was in Traralgon Regional Hospital. I had a bit of a brain bleed. I had to stop work. It affected my eyesight and everything, but I have come through this really well. I am interested now in the community and getting involved. If I was to comment on anything, it would be that these groups do amazing work for the people who are a bit isolated in the community, people who do not fit in as well, and we need these things. I just encourage you, if you can, to support them financially as much as you can. That is all I have to say.

CHAIR: Thank you, Naomi. Your sentiment would be supported by many members of our community, whether or not they use the centre. If you do want to chat with any one of us, we are more than happy to have a few minutes with you. Thank you.

Ms Szalek: I do get into Rob's ear a little bit about things, so I am sure if I get involved in one of these things I will be biting on his ear and he will be biting on your ear. Thank you.

CHAIR: No problem. That reminds me, I need to get the member for Nicklin back on the telephone. We have the member for Nicklin on the line again, on speaker. We had a couple of follow-up questions for the Gympie Community Centre. The deputy chair has had a thorough chat with you both. We might pick your brains a little bit more about some of the things that have been working.

Mr BENNETT: I want to put some context around this in that I think it is important that we have a look at things that are working, things that may be considered for governments or this committee report. I understand that Gympie was a beneficiary of one of the 12 Community Connect programs that we allocated in the last budget. I think it would be really good for the committee to hear how important that has been to Gympie as a regional centre. My electorate is a bit further north, so I am a bit passionate about the bush. Then, following on from that, and not to give you too many things to think about, I want to explore the Ways to Wellness project that has been looked at particularly around social isolation and loneliness in Mount Gravatt. I believe you are aware of the program. I am interested in your thoughts around things we should be able to leverage off that are successful or seem to be successful.

Ms Cousins: I am not aware of the wellness program, so I will let Abbie talk to that. That will be through LLA. She knows lots of things about lots of things. I can talk to the Community Connect program. We were fortunate enough to be one of 12 centres which were chosen to take that funding in Gympie. I can certainly speak to the impact that has had on the community centre. As that one worker who works in the community centre, the difference that has made in bringing that full-time Community Connect position into the centre is that when somebody presents at the community centre who needs help, I do not just have this brief ability to help them; I can hand them over to somebody who can work with them for a period. What the Community Connect program really brings on the ground is someone who can hand-hold and say, 'Let's look at what is going on. Let's look at what we can pull in around you.' It enables us to give that wraparound service which I could not do before that program came along, because I had no capacity to do it.

Mr BENNETT: Can you say the number of years it has been running?

Ms Cousins: I think it would be around four years now. I think it was 2018.

Ms Grant-Taylor: We initially had a trial. We were one of the services that had a trial of the Community Connect program and I believe it has now been formally put in place as a program. Sometimes trials only last a little period of time, so we were fortunate to have it as a trial and then have it continued on because it has been incredibly valuable for us. We would love to see it integrated

and continued and know that it is there, because it really does provide a great service in the community. Our current worker doing that program has this amazing ability to work with people and to help them step through the things they need to do.

As I was saying earlier, it is the complexity that we see that can be overwhelming, both for the people concerned and for the workers if you are not really trained in that area. Having a specialist who has the skills in that area has been really good. She can get people to work through it—‘These are the steps that I will take and these are the steps that you will take’—and can really just step it through and then be able to move people on so that things are not so overwhelming for them. That is really what happens to people: by the time they get to us at times they say, ‘I don’t know what to do. I’ve tried to do everything in my power and I can’t go anywhere further with it.’ Having the Community Connect worker means that they have somebody who can walk beside them with that, can look at where they might be going and what might need to happen, and can help them to step it out and help them to make a plan to get through these things. For us, it has been good.

On the positive side, I would like to say, as Vikki mentioned, that the state owns the building that we are in. While we would love to have more space, it has actually been really beneficial. In our submission we indicated the growth. We used to be in a house, as a lot of community centres are, and the growth that we have seen since we have been in that building has been huge in terms of the number of people who come through our doors. So that has also been great.

Mr BENNETT: There are two issues that I would like you to briefly discuss with the committee: the conferences that you found very valuable that you used to go to and the Ways to Wellness program.

Ms Grant-Taylor: One of the other things that will benefit community centres, and particularly coordinators, is a statewide conference for coordinators. The community centres themselves are very isolated because they are single workers. Each community is so different. Having a conference and drawing people together means that you are sharing ideas, you are picking things up and discovering different ways of working and how different things can happen. It can be incredibly valuable for the workers themselves. Vikki is our coordinator here and it is basically her who needs to coordinate these things. As a management committee we can oversee things, but we are not necessarily there on a day-to-day basis to make those things happen. I think that would be incredibly valuable.

Before I get onto the Ways to Wellness program, the other matter I have been thinking about is that we in the community centre space like to say that each community is different and so each community centre is different and will be responding to the needs of that particular community. Some of the things that departments and other agencies can do to support that is produce what I call good practice guides, so that they can draw from what is good practice in one centre or what is a good practice in operation. Rather than saying, ‘Have this program and pick it up and run it here,’ you say, ‘Here are some ways of working. These are things that we have done that have worked well,’ and other people can get onto them and pick them up from there.

The Ways to Wellness program, particularly as a referral and accessing GPs, is a great initiative in a whole range of areas, but it is then having the ability to resource that at the community end which can be the challenge. It needs to be well thought out. That is where a GP has the ability to say to somebody, ‘You are telling me that you are lonely, so what I will do is give you a prescription to go and see the community centre or to go and see these particular people.’ Having it added in to that degree I think can work, but it needs to be well coordinated. One of the things that we are always concerned about, particularly with people who are vulnerable, is that the first thing we have to consider is not to be doing any harm. We have to make sure that we are not making expectations that we cannot meet. We need to have the ability for it to work and the understanding from everybody who is involved with it, and that is where the grassroots, bottom-up system is really valuable.

CHAIR: Following on with regard to the Community Connect program—I know you were one of 12 community centres across Queensland in high-demand or high-need areas—what was the total package in terms of monetary contribution as well as on the ground, for the purpose of the committee to understand?

Ms Cousins: The Community Connect funding amount is \$125,000 a year.

CHAIR: What did that provide for you?

Ms Cousins: That paid the worker’s wages and it provided \$15,000 or \$20,000 in brokerage, which is funding to directly support client needs. There was a two-year trial for the program and that was the amount given to the trial. We had some conversations around it when it went from trial to recurrent funding—it is now on a five-year service agreement—but there was no change to that trial

funding amount. Obviously the wage increases alone had an impact on that amount. It has had some impact on the community centre in that our funding, which is equivalent to that per year, now we provide the service with an office, pays the electricity bills. So we are paying costs for that program so that we can maintain the wage element where it needs to be.

CHAIR: I think it is important for our secretariat to pick up on the fact that the funding amount of \$125,000 has not changed since 2018.

Ms Cousins: 2018, yes.

CHAIR: The deputy chair and I have been talking about some of the recommendations we can make to the government around what is working. Is there ever any opportunity for the community centres to come together? Do you have a conference once a year?

Ms Grant-Taylor: No, they do not.

CHAIR: That would be a recommendation. Are there any informal opportunities for you to talk with other community centre leaders to share the great things you are doing? You might want to come up and join us, too, if you like, Angela.

Ms Rondo: Thank you.

Ms Cousins: Through the Queensland Families and Communities Association, our statewide peak body for community centres, we have some opportunities to come together. I have spoken to them, particularly this year but over many years now, about the need to bring us together. Prior to my working the 11 years I have been in community centres, I worked in the domestic violence sector. It is a sector. There are different organisations. You come together and you work together and have a commonality. However, community centres are a solo entity in their community; there are not others around. For someone like us in Gympie, my nearest community centre is 120 kilometres away. We do come together with some of the Sunshine Coast centres, and prior to COVID we were meeting two or three times a year. We would come together with Caloundra, Maroochy, Nambour, Maleny and Pomona to share ideas and have a common space because we do have a lot of commonalities. That fell off really last year with COVID.

CHAIR: Was that something that you all organised or was that organised centrally?

Ms Cousins: No, we organised that.

CHAIR: Secretariat, that could be forwarded around the coordination of professional development for location based centres—for example, Bundaberg getting the groups together from Wide Bay and what have you. Do you have anything to contribute, Angela?

Ms Rondo: In terms of the localised support that the community centres have, it has not occurred recently that I am aware of, but it also takes us away from the work.

CHAIR: It does. True.

Ms Rondo: If you are travelling 120 kilometres, it is a day's journey. It is really important and valuable for everyone to share our experiences and knowledge, but it takes us away from the core work that we are already underfunded to provide. That time is valuable.

CHAIR: Of course.

Mr BENNETT: I am not sure what the COVID pandemic will look like, but the Care Army was empowered under Community Connect to operate. Is there any evidence of success or otherwise that you would like to see continue?

Ms Cousins: My understanding is that the Care Army came about out through asking community centres for support. It was an interesting space because community centres were at the same time sending their own staff and volunteers home because that is what we were being instructed to do. Although I think the concept of the Care Army is wonderful, supporting the Care Army did not work for us because, again, we had no resources. 'What policies do we have around this? What protections have we got in place? What insurance do we have? How are we reimbursing travel? How are we making sure these volunteers are safe? They are not even on our books.'

Mr BENNETT: But there was a little bit of money in that for the Care Army?

Ms Cousins: No, nothing. We were asked to do that—just asked to do it. Most centres were not able to get involved for that reason—no resources.

Mr BENNETT: I must have misread something, but I will double-check that. Thank you.

Ms Cousins: We certainly were not offered any money.

Ms Rondo: I will concur with that. It was challenging. As you say, we were sending home our own volunteers who already know the community and the work we do, and then to think about bringing new people in, it was really hard.

Mr BENNETT: I thought it was important to get it on the record about the issues. Again, it is just about making sure we can improve the process.

Ms Grant-Taylor: Can I make a comment in general about volunteers? I have seen in a lot of the submissions that people talk about volunteers. While volunteers are an integral part of what happens in community centres, I do not know that we can totally rely on volunteers. COVID has highlighted the situation. I am also thinking that in our own community, for example, the Salvation Army had volunteers who were great cooks so they would be able to provide the cooked breakfasts and the lunches, but the volunteers have left. They are not able to do that anymore. It can be really challenging to maintain volunteers in areas where you do not have large populations to draw on or where there are ageing populations. It can be quite a challenge to rely on volunteers. If you have volunteers in your centre, you still have to do the coordination. You still have to make sure that they are trained, that the volunteers know what they are doing and that they are representing things correctly and, as I said earlier, that they are doing no harm in the things they are doing. Running a volunteer program in itself is almost a full-time job, or it can be.

Mr BENNETT: Through your association, are you made aware of the money that is available for extensions, new builds, modifications? Is that readily disseminated? There are grants available, I understand. I know that in my electorate it is a house that was lifted, because I did it. Are you aware that there is a fair bit of money that is committed in budgets for neighbourhood community centres?

Ms Grant-Taylor: We have been fortunate to have a new build in Gympie. In 2013 we had the new building. It has been great having it and it is a beautiful building, but I put on the record here that we are still challenged because one of our big rooms is not air-conditioned. We have been having discussions on various aspects with the department to see if we can get that happening. Because it has the flow-through ventilation, for most of the year it is a wonderful, open room, but when it comes to summer and it is over 35 degrees and humid, we really need for that room to be air-conditioned. Those are the sorts of challenges that we face.

Mr BENNETT: If you are determined, I am sure it will happen.

Ms Grant-Taylor: I am sure it will eventually. The other thing for us is that, from our point of view, the government has already invested in our community centre in Gympie. With a little bit of other resources, we can you build on that. There is so much more that can be done for very little money. Community centres operate on the smell of an oily rag and they know how to make things happen.

Mr BERKMAN: I am really interested in the tension between all of the great things you can do with additional volunteer support and the burden that places on an organisation in simply coordinating it and deploying that volunteer effort. You made the observation that a volunteer coordinator is in itself potentially a full-time role. The programs that you have described that provide for staff funding tend to be targeted not so much at particular issues and outcomes as opposed to the purely functional administrative work. That would, I suppose, naturally fall under that one full-time role.

Ms Cousins: Yes, that is exactly right.

Ms Grant-Taylor: Oftentimes what we find is that where we get additional funding it is for wages and there is no administrative side to that. Every program needs its own bit of money to do the various things it is required to do, so we are trying to meet those and it can be quite challenging. The other side of that is that some of the grant funding is for structures, like things, but does not fund wages. You are often in a challenge where you need a bit of this and a bit of that as well.

Ms Cousins: Volunteers are a two-edged sword in a community centre, for me. We have a lot of active volunteers and a lot of what we do could not happen without them. They are crucial to what we do, but they do require, as any staff does, support, supervision and training. There is a higher turnover with volunteers. People volunteer for various reasons. Some of them are looking to volunteer to lead to getting into employment, and they do—that is where they go. There is a high turnover. Every time you get new volunteers, that process starts again—that training and that induction—and that is a big space. For me, that is a really time-heavy space. It is important if you are going to use it, but the burden of that, yes, comes back onto your coordinator because it is just another thing that I need to do in that role.

Mr BERKMAN: I think it is pretty clear from your evidence so far, but a lot of the neighbourhood centres have explicitly referred in their submissions to QFCA's specific demand for workers. It is pretty clear that you support that?

Ms Cousins: For sure. We just need more hands on deck and they need to be paid, because that creates a stability that you do not get with volunteers and also creates a person to share the workload. What I do know about community centres, particularly ours, is that we are already working in this space and we have great capacity to work in this space. We are linked to our community, we understand our community and we know how to connect with the people. We have the facility—you have already provided that. We are ready to go. We just lack warm bodies on the ground. We need people on the ground who can do the work. We could do lots of things in this space and make a big difference. That is not just us; that is all community centres. We could.

CHAIR: Thanks very much to each and every one of you. This concludes our hearing this afternoon. On behalf of the committee I would like to thank all of the witnesses and stakeholders who have participated today. I also take this opportunity to thank the many submitters from all over Queensland who have made submissions to the inquiry and who have engaged with us to help us understand the issues better.

Thank you, as always, to our Hansard reporters for venturing out of Brisbane to be with us today and to support the inquiry. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's parliamentary webpage in due course. I now declare the public hearing closed.

The committee adjourned at 12.30 pm.