MEDIA RELEASE

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50 WA NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRES ACROSS STATE UNDER THREAT OF CLOSURE
‘Don’t Cut Funding to Community, Grassroots Centres’ says Linkwest

Short-Term Cost Cutting by Government Will Translate into Long Term Loss of $6.5 Million of Community Giving

About 50 local Western Australian Neighbourhood Centres – including those situated in Tom Price (Nintirri), Esperance (Escaré), Cockburn (South Lake), Manjimup (Manjimup Family Centre), Gosnells (William Langford), Perth, Albany (Rainbow Coast) and Bunbury (Milligan, Hudson Road) – are under threat as the sector faces its most acute funding crisis in its nearly 40-year history, according to peak body Linkwest.

“The State Government’s Department of Local Government and Communities is cutting funding by up to 30% and implementing misguided reforms which favour large contractors and will effectively dismantle the Neighbourhood Centre sector,” said Linkwest CEO Jane Chilcott.

“In addition to the funding cut, this move by the State Government compounds the previous Barnett Government’s action which removed accommodation certainty for many centres. A decision opposed by the Labor Party when in opposition but not overturmed by them now they are in power. Our Centres will be significantly disadvantaged if proposed new State Government policies enable open market tenders for this funding. If that policy is brought in, the biggest losers will be the Western Australian communities our members serve.”

Each week, around 27,000 people take part in activities that build their capacity and the capacity of their family and community at 180 Neighbourhood and Community Centres located across the State; 1000 community and self help and support groups call the Centres home; and volunteers give well over 4700 hours. Over a year this equates to free labour worth $6.5 million!

Neighbourhood Centres are community led and run, grass roots organisations that serve their local communities, providing a range of low and no cost services and positive activities that enable people to connect, learn and grow. As well as being able to respond quickly to local community needs – and be a one-stop-shop for community services, information and support – these Centres provide local employment and volunteering opportunities and universal access regardless of income, gender, race or faith.

That 50 of these Centres could well disappear from the local landscape is the biggest threat to community wellbeing that WA has faced in the past 30 years.

“While Neighbourhood Centres do offer some intervention and crisis management services, they operate primarily in a preventative space by giving local people a place to belong,” says Mrs Chilcott. “They build on what is strong, not what is wrong in neighbourhoods across WA.”
“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and so Linkwest would argue that instead of cutting funding, there should be a bigger investment in these local place-based services that build community.

“For the immediate future, however, what we are requesting the State Government halts funding cuts and there is an extension of Neighbourhood Centres’ contracts until appropriate consultation with key stakeholders, including local communities, can be undertaken and the Centres can broker a lasting solution to their accommodation issues.”

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BACKGROUND: Linkwest

Nedlands-based Linkwest is a small not-for-profit organisation that is largely funded by the State Government’s Department of Local Government and Communities and the Department for Regional Development. Linkwest is the peak body for neighbourhood and community resource centres in Western Australia. It offers targeted and relevant training and support to those working in small community-managed not-for-profit organisations.

Linkwest, with a staff of six, offers crucial support to more than 150 members, including over 100 regional and remote organisations. More than 27,000 Western Australians currently use these centres each week. The centres provide a friendly, welcoming place where local people can meet to learn, gain new skills, make friends and feel part of their community. They also provide a safe, affordable space for playgroups, community and support groups to gather.

Former Premier of Western Australia, Professor Carmen Lawrence, is Linkwest’s official patron. She has been a patron for the past six years.

The history behind the organisation goes back to 1978 – for many years it was known as Learning Centre Link, until it was renamed Linkwest in 2011.

BACKGROUND: Proposed changes to program that funds Neighbourhood Centres in WA

On 2 June, the Department of Local Government and Communities briefed Linkwest and its members about the proposed changes to the program that funds Neighbourhood Centres in WA. Linkwest believes that what is being proposed will destroy the Neighbourhood Centre sector in WA.

We have summarised below the risks associated with these decisions.

To community

- Reduced number of centres results in reduced participation. Around 27,000 people visit centres each week in WA. This equates to 150 people per Centre on an average week.
- Moving from a place-based model will result in the loss of trusted and safe places were people feel they can belong in their neighbourhood.
- It will remove community ownership
- External agencies winning tenders for large areas of service delivery will result in a loss of diversity in the community sector ecosystem. Each centre reflects its local community.
- Reduction in community wellbeing with the resulted increase in demand on already overwhelmed mental health, child protection and health services.
- By focusing the money on target or priority groups rather than whole of community risks the loss of social integration and social cohesion of multiple community groups within a neighbourhood.
The value of money flowing into the local communities will be greatly reduced as a result of the:

- **Loss of local part time jobs** of which 95% are held by women many with young children. On average a Centre has five paid staff. This goes against Labor’s election platform of jobs. If only 10 centres close this represents the loss of up to 50 local jobs.

- **Reduction in local volunteering** - people are more likely to volunteer for locally run organisations. Over 2000 volunteers contribute well over 4700 hours per week. This includes time of volunteer management committees or boards.

- Local organisations use **other income** through fundraising, membership fees, user pays activities, donations, room hire and grants. Self-generated funds contributed an average 28% to Centres annual incomes.

- Neighbourhood Centre workers **award pay rates are considerably less than comparable local government rates.**

**Loss of social capital**

- These Neighbourhood **Centres have been embedded in their communities for up to 30 years.** This represents significant social capital in relationships, networks and partnerships.

- There is a wide range of literature that provides **empirical evidence on the contribution of social capital** to positive results for children, families and communities.

**Loss of community resilience.**

- Neighbourhood Centres have played **crucial roles during natural disasters**, becoming safe havens, communications and support centres for local communities. This led the Victorian Commissioner for Emergency Management to say

  “What Neighbourhood Houses do every day is build community resilience and that is why they are a trusted network with the Emergency Management Sector...We need to value and promote local knowledge building and strengthen what already exists in communities...While we need to support and link communities with agencies and government, we also need to ensure that communities are the drivers of resilience.”

**To Centres**

- Centre staff will spend significant resources of time, energy and money addressing trying to forge partnerships and addressing tenders they cannot win.

- The uncertainty and turmoil will have a **negative impact on the local communities.** Centre users are already considering if they should be looking for alternative venues and childcare services have reported that their numbers have dropped as parents are worried the service will need to close.
To government

- The direct connection to local community who are well-placed to provide advice to local and state government and inform policy, strategy and services. **Local community services are the first to pick up on emerging issues.**
- The small amount of funding that is currently making a significant difference in local communities will be dispersed so thinly over the State it will have very little impact.
- Merging three programs together, the specifications become so vague that the program will attract multiple tenders for very different types of programs and for significantly more than the total amount of money available. Carving these tenders up to fit the amount of money available is an incredibly inefficient use of government staff time.