MEDIA RELEASE

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Minister Simone McGurk Commits to Extend Neighbourhood Centre Contracts by up to Six Months

Linkwest: ‘Community Sector Wins Vital Breathing Space allowing for further consultation’

The Hon Simone McGurk, Minister for Communities, advised Linkwest that the State Government will extend the current Neighbourhood Centre contracts for three months – with an option of an additional three months – while they undertake a short consultation process.

Linkwest CEO Jane Chilcott said the organisation representing these 50 centres (Linkwest) had this week received a letter from the Minister about the short-term future of many WA family and neighbourhood centres.

She said that the devil is in the detail and Linkwest will be seeking further clarification from the Department of Communities on the terms of reference for the consultation, in particular who will have an input into the consultation and what our members will actually be able to influence.

Linkwest is pleased that the funds that had been taken from the Neighbourhood Centre funding pool will be reallocated to the sector, and the new Department for Communities will be instructed to prioritise the resolution of the accommodation issue that has plagued 33 of our centres for well over 12 months. However, again these require further clarification.

Minister McGurk remains adamant that funding will still go out to open tender.

“We thank Minister McGurk for taking our concerns seriously,” says Jane Chilcott, Linkwest CEO. “While we are concerned that a three or even six-month extension will not provide sufficient time for a robust consultation to occur, we are cautiously optimistic we can work with the Minister and the Department for Communities towards a result that works for all parties, but most especially local communities.”

“Our concerns over the proposed changes concerning tendering remain the same, and we are hopeful that the consultation will reveal that small, community managed place based services are a model that serves their communities well.

“Again, we thank The Hon. Simone McGurk for providing this breathing space for consultation to occur, and for all the Centre staff, volunteers, centre users and community members who have added their voice in support of this vital community network.”

A social media campaign to save more than 50 centres across WA at risk of closure began two weeks ago, it has resulted in thousands of signatures being collected in support, and dozens of social media posters created. Many of those attending the centre sent in photos and messages through Facebook. 

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www.facebook.com/Linkwest
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cOZ3voU-ml
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 180 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.

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!

BACKGROUND: Linkwest’s opposition to the Supporting Communities program

The proposed Supporting Communities Program combines what were three separate funding streams into one, and introduces an open tender process that is geared towards the reduction in the number of contracts the State Government is required to manage. This contract reduction is an important point. Because the state government is actively seeking to reduce the number of contracts, the open tender process is already geared to favour the larger not for profits.

The State Government has stated that one of the expected outcomes of the Supporting Communities program is improved funding security. The large NFPs which secure contracts may well benefit from the security of the program funding, but it will be at the expense of the small, community managed not for profits that do not have the staff or the resources to compete.

Under the conditions detailed in the Supporting Communities program – where the minimum contract amount is $100,000 (for some centres this is double what they currently receive) and no ceiling on the amount an organisation can tender for, there WILL be a reduction in the number of state government-funded Neighbourhood Centres in WA: we estimate at least a 15 – 20 Centres, regardless of the quality of the tender they submit.
In its current form, the Supporting Communities Program will also result in a thinner spread of funding over a greater area. It includes all the new residential developments and suburbs/towns that currently have no Neighbourhood Centre, without any increase in \$\$. We would argue that funding should actually be increased to service these areas: Centres should be available to everyone, no matter their location.

Funding is no longer linked to place, so there is no guarantee activities, events, services and programs currently provided by Neighbourhood Centres will be available. Or if an agency wins the tender to provide a specific service or range of services, they may only provide it according to their schedule – and at a cost beneficial to them. Currently, our Centres offer many of their services at low or no-cost, making them accessible to all, no matter their level of income.

In addition to all the Centre-initiated groups and activities 1,000 self help and support groups call these centres home, and will effectively become ‘homeless’ if their centre closes its doors. Then of course there is the loss of local employment and volunteering opportunities that our Centres provide.

Many existing Neighbourhood Centres have been embedded in communities for 30 years or more. If the Centre was to disappear, so would the investment in social capital - relationships and networks - that has been built over time.

Neighbourhood Centres are MUCH more than just buildings where 'things happen'. The things that happen, happen because a local community need has been identified and acted upon. That ability to gauge community need happens best when you are on the ground, speaking with, and working alongside, the community on a daily basis. This is what true program flexibility looks like – the ability to adapt and change to local needs in a timely manner. It is one reason why Centres can suddenly become evacuation centres and disaster management headquarters during a crisis: they are adaptable, dependable, responsive and able to mobilise a community into positive action.

For all of the above reasons Linkwest believes the introduction of the Supporting Communities program puts small but vital community assets at great risk, for short term cost savings.