



Linkwest
Community Learning and Development

ABN: 51 172 714 842

**Linkwest Submission to
Senate Standing Committee on Economics
Regional Inequality Inquiry
November 2020**

Introduction

Linkwest values this opportunity to make a submission the Senate Standing Committee on Economics' Regional Inequality Inquiry. As the Western Australian (WA) peak body for Neighbourhood and Community Resource Centres (Centres) Linkwest is the voice for 140+ regional, remote, and metropolitan Centres. Through projects and advocacy, it works to ensure that WA Centres develop vibrant, inclusive and connected communities that will remain a part of the local landscape for generations to come.

This submission addresses two of the Inquiry's terms of reference. It focuses primarily on where WA Centres fill gaps in the co-ordination of federal, state and local government policies with Covid-19 emergency relief and recovery. WA Centres, like many community-led contributions, risk being under-valued as part of the human capital required to address regional inequality. Linkwest propose that federal agencies directly develop long-term partnerships with WA Centres as integral to strategies which address regional inequality.

WA Centres have a high-level of community trust and local knowledge which they use to pivot quickly to meet local needs. They are sought after by local, state and federal agencies for their skills in stretching existing government resources further into regional and other hard to reach communities. WA Centres act as the only essential service in some WA regional areas with less than 3,000 inhabitants and regional equality is reduced when place-based Centres are not recognised as essential services.

WA Centres are led by people who experience inequality

124 of WA's 146 hyper-local, community-led Centres are rural, regional or remote, demonstrating an extensive community reach. Across the network, over 1,000 community groups and services are hosted and supported by their local Centre. Each week around 18,500 people visit their local Centre.. The network employs approximately 750 people and works with over 2,000 volunteers. A 2019 Linkwest member survey calculated that Centre volunteers collectively contribute more than 2,500 hours to their community. Many Centres have been embedded in their communities for up to 40 years, and – as trusted organisations - their community outreach activities and outcomes are experienced as authentic.



WA Centres have gradually established high levels of community trust over three decades. Their local knowledge and skills are ‘hyper-local’, meaning that they benefit individuals, families and communities through the provision of targeted services, support and opportunities within the culture of those regions. Being community-led organisations, Centres have an unparalleled reach and agility into regional communities.

Recommendation 1:

That, through Linkwest, Federal Government agencies consult WA Centres about improving the co-ordination of federal, state and local government policies for Covid-19 emergency relief and recovery to ensure an equitable response to the health crisis in regional areas.

COVID -19 community resilience and regional inequality

The national response to the 2019/20 bushfire season and pandemic has seen regular and shifting responsibilities between state and national resources. For communities, this means sudden interventions which can affect the fabric of local community life. Strengthening the relationship will assist in building fast and trusting relationships when they are most needed, but with the consent of local communities. This would also improve the quality of government services targeting regional inequality more generally.

Centres strengthen community resilience by targeting many of the causes of inequality. When necessary, they also fill service gaps without which communities would be left unacceptably isolated. They respond to isolation, loneliness, mental health and financial hardship – all key drivers of inequality. The addition of Covid-19 community emergency relief in 2020, however, has strained their capacity to continue this work. As a response to this, Linkwest has recently begun advocating for federal government agencies to review their funded and unfunded expectations of WA Centres.

During the WA state COVID -19 lockdown and the subsequent economic crisis, 96% of Centres remained open for communities. In addition to providing essential services during the lockdown, Centre also pivoted their services to online delivery and outreach. As many Centres serve regional communities, this pivot represents a change in the way Centres address the continuity of their services in regional WA. They have been forced to accelerate and adapt their work beyond their current funding responsibilities and reach out to diverse families who may otherwise have had nowhere else to turn for help.

It is worth noting that all of WA is categorised as “Regional” for purpose-built visa programs targeting migrants; and many Centres have been working with and for migrant communities and international students delivering food relief during the recent lockdown. More work needs to be done in this area by our sector, and further and more focused investment will help Centres to target even more diverse communities.

We encourage the Committee to read Linkwest’s “Overview of Network Support, Services and Partnerships – Covid-19 Crisis” (**Attachment 1**) which provides an overview of WA Centres’ work during the pandemic.



Recommendation 2:

That Federal Government agencies jointly fund a block amount to provide one additional full-time staff member for each WA Centre across WA to support community-led efforts to address regional inequality.

Emergency Relief demands on Centres.

The outbreak of COVID-19 saw a dramatic change in Emergency Relief (ER) demands. Due to COVID restrictions, Centres already offering ER support needed to make rapid changes to the way they delivered their services. Many Centres not previously involved in ER provisioning - especially those in regional WA - felt they needed to respond to the needs of their communities. Linkwest witnessed new relief efforts spring up almost overnight based on local knowledge, trusted relationships and a thriftiness typical of community-led enterprises accustomed to being improperly funded.

The functions performed by Centres during the COVID-19 crisis between March and May 2020 were diverse but focused on three outcome areas.

These were:

- **Strengthen communities** by encouraging, supporting, and providing avenues for social connections.
- **Support people**, including vulnerable people, by connecting them to essential services both through direct provision and through referrals to other service providers through partnerships and collaborations.
- **Keep individuals, families, and businesses informed** by sharing clear and relevant guidelines, resources, and information.

Linkwest continues to receive anecdotal feedback that regional demand for preparedness remains high in many areas such as: COVID-19, a reduction in JobKeeper and JobSeeker and an abrupt decline in income in primary industry-led communities affected by recent international trade disputes. Consequently, WA Centres are now facing a growing demand for their services at the same time as their core-funding is being fixed or reduced.

Recommendation 3:

That Federal Government agencies provide immediate relief to WA Centres through smaller, more flexible grants to upgrade the network's communication equipment so they can digitise their trusted relationships and activities as preparedness for emergency relief. This will strengthen the sector's capacity to address regional inequality by minimising disruption to services targeting regional inequality.

WA's Neighbourhood and Community Resource Centres are at the coal face of the community dealing with the stress and fear of seismic shifts in our health and economic security. They are on-the-ground, trusted, capable and connected. As a community-led network, Centres will continue to perform any essential service needed, but Linkwest urges Government to consider the volume and



complexity of tasks and services that they expect communities to deliver for themselves and to lend a helping hand.

Linkwest welcome opportunities to present examples of the achievements of WA Centres at future public hearings and assist the Committee to recommend policy changes which reduce regional inequality in WA.

If you or your staff require any further information, please feel free to contact Linkwest's CEO Jane Chilcott on [REDACTED] or email: [REDACTED]

Yours Faithfully,

[REDACTED]

Jane Chilcott
CEO
Linkwest





Overview of Network Support, Services, and Partnerships – COVID-19 Crisis –

In May 2020, Linkwest undertook a survey of our network's response to the COVID-19 crisis. The purpose of this survey was to provide information on what support, services, and partnerships Community Resource Centres (CRCs) and Neighbourhood Centres (NCs) have been undertaking during the main period of COVID-19 disruption: approximately March – May 2020.

The main functions performed by Centres during the COVID-19 crisis, as illustrated here, have been to:

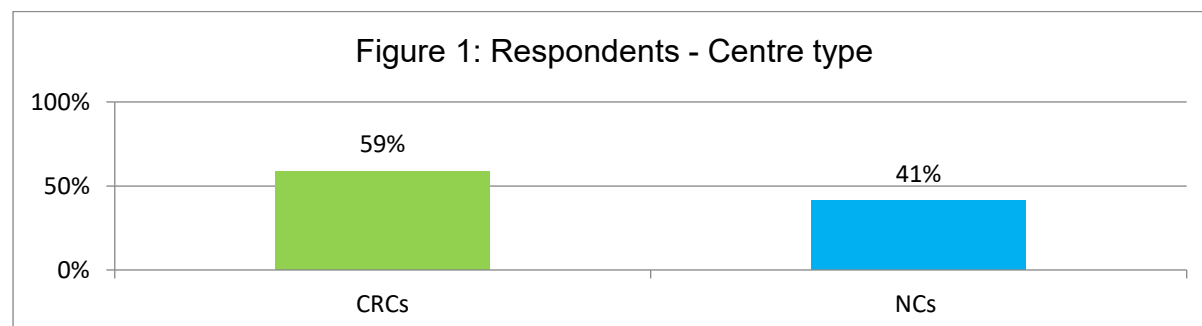
- **Strengthen communities** by encouraging, supporting, and providing avenues for social connections.
- **Support people**, including vulnerable people, by connecting them to essential services both through direct provision and through referrals to other service providers through partnerships and collaborations.
- **Keep individuals, families, and businesses informed** by sharing clear and relevant guidelines, resources, and information.

Key Points:

- 96% of Centres continued to provide services throughout the crisis.
- 78% of Centres successfully pivoted their services to online delivery.
- 49% of Centres stated that (during the abovementioned period) the Centre was *“open to the public for essential services and we are providing online/virtual services and/or activities.”* This included a majority of CRCs (60%).
- A majority of NCs (52%) stated that the Centre was *“closed to the public and we are providing online/virtual services and/or activities.”*
- Overall, the **greatest need** to be addressed, identified by around 60% of Centres (48% of CRCs and 76% of NCs), was **social isolation, loneliness, and community disconnection**.
- Overall, the **most common service** provided (78% of Centres) during the COVID-19 crisis was *“community calls to check in on vulnerable people.”*
- Overall, the **most vulnerable group** identified by around 71% of Centres (83% of CRCs and 52% of NCs) were **seniors and the elderly**.
- The **biggest pressure facing Centres** – both CRCs and NCs – was identified as **financial, including loss of income and concerns over government funding**.

Respondents

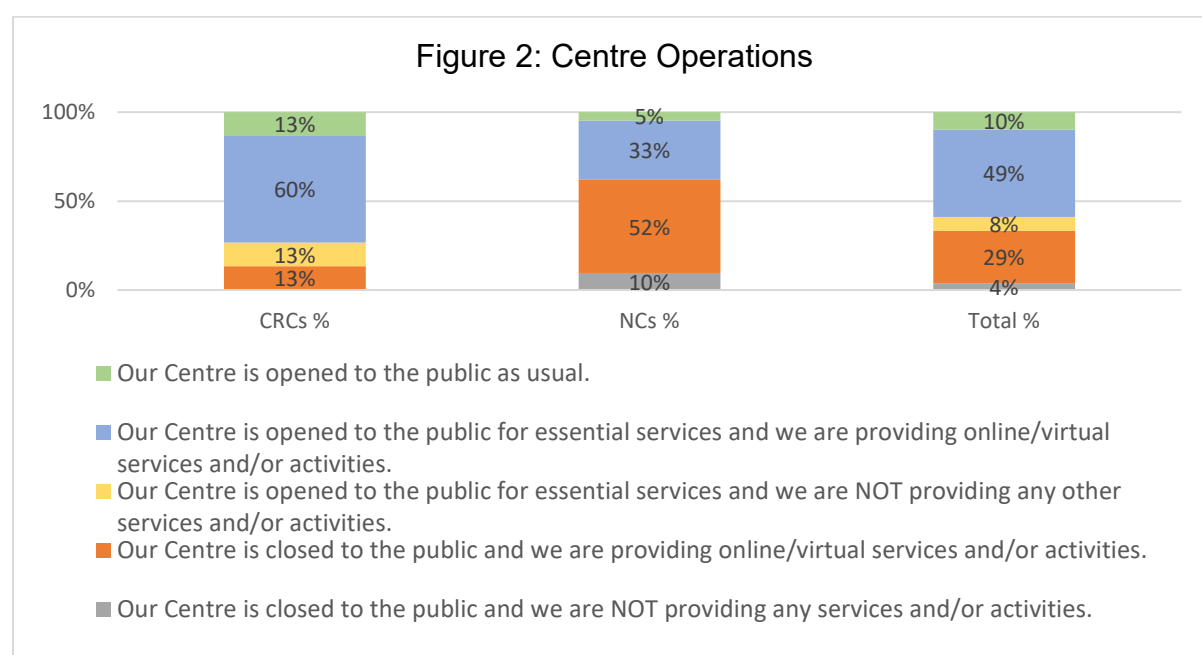
51 Centres completed the survey. Of the respondents, 59% were CRCs and 41% were NCs, including Family Centres, Learning Centres, and Neighbourhood Centres. All CRCs are based in regional/rural communities, and NCs are based in both metro (around 66%) and regional/rural areas (around 34%). The majority of respondents were therefore based in regional/rural WA.



Centre Operations

49% of Centres stated that (during the abovementioned period) *“our Centre is open to the public for essential services and we are providing online/virtual services and/or activities,”* and this included a majority of CRCs (60%). A majority of NCs (52%) stated that *“our Centre is closed to the public and we are providing online/virtual services and/or activities.”*

The higher proportion of CRCs that remained opened for essential services is, in part, due to many CRCs receiving Federal funding to provide essential government services e.g. as a Centrelink agency or access point.



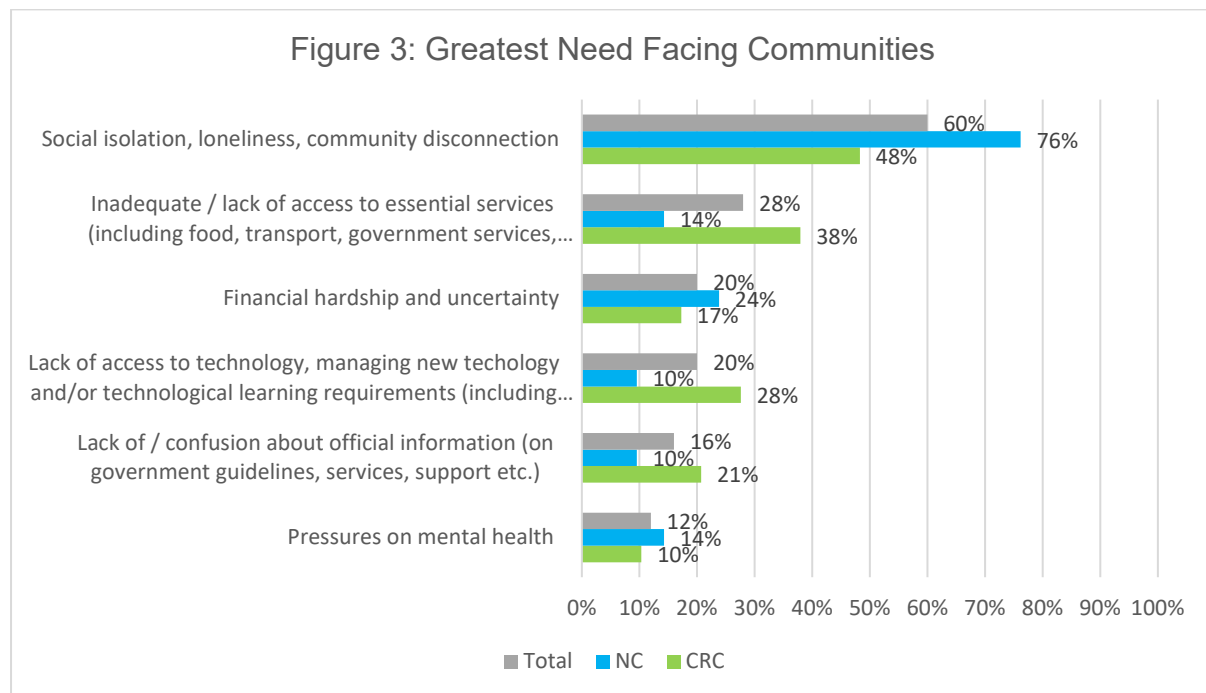
Greatest Need, or Change in Need, Facing Community

Centres employed a range of strategies to ascertain their communities' needs. The main strategies included:

- Community feedback and direct engagement: in person and via telephone and social media
- Government data and modelling, including data collection collaborations with Local Government Authorities (LGAs) / Shires
- Surveys
- Feedback from other local agencies, including businesses and other NFPs

Overall, the greatest need identified by around 60% of Centres (48% of CRCs and 76% of NCs) was *social isolation, loneliness, and community disconnection*. The second greatest need facing CRC communities was identified (by around 38% of CRCs) as *inadequate / lack of access to essential services (including food, transport, Centrelink services, health services, accommodation etc.) and / or reduction in services*. A specific problem, affecting regional and rural communities, is that of food security.

The second greatest need facing NC communities was identified (by around 24% of NCs) as *financial hardship and uncertainty*. Financial hardship was noted by NCs and CRCs as affecting families, individuals, and businesses.



Centres have been highly proactive in adopting strategies to help meet their communities' needs. Many have:

- Engaged in extensive outreach initiatives, including managing teams of volunteers, and initiating coordinated initiatives with LGAs / Shires.
- Undertaken community check-ins via phone and email.

- Provided access to, and support with, technology (including in accessing government services).
- Been providing and sharing relevant information to support local individuals, families, and businesses.
- Been providing virtual activities, which have helped maintain community connectedness. Many important services, like playgroups, have been moved online, with the addition of new, creative activities (like Zoom Bingo, Zoom Story Time, etc.). Provided emergency relief and referrals to other service providers.

Collaborations and partnerships with other agencies have been essential to the Centres' strategies, and these have included a broad range of organisations. Partners have included other Centres, healthcare providers, and local businesses.

The main partnership for Centres – both CRCs and NCs – has been with LGAs / Shires, and collaborative initiatives have included data/information gathering, information sharing, and service delivery.

On average, most Centres – both CRCs and NCs – rated their relationship with LGAs / Shires as good – 7 out of 10 – with 0 representing “*no partnership / support / communication*” and 10 representing “*strong partnership*”. On average, CRCs rated this relationship slightly higher than NCs (7.4 for CRCs vs 6.4 for NCs).

Services, Activities, and Support Provided

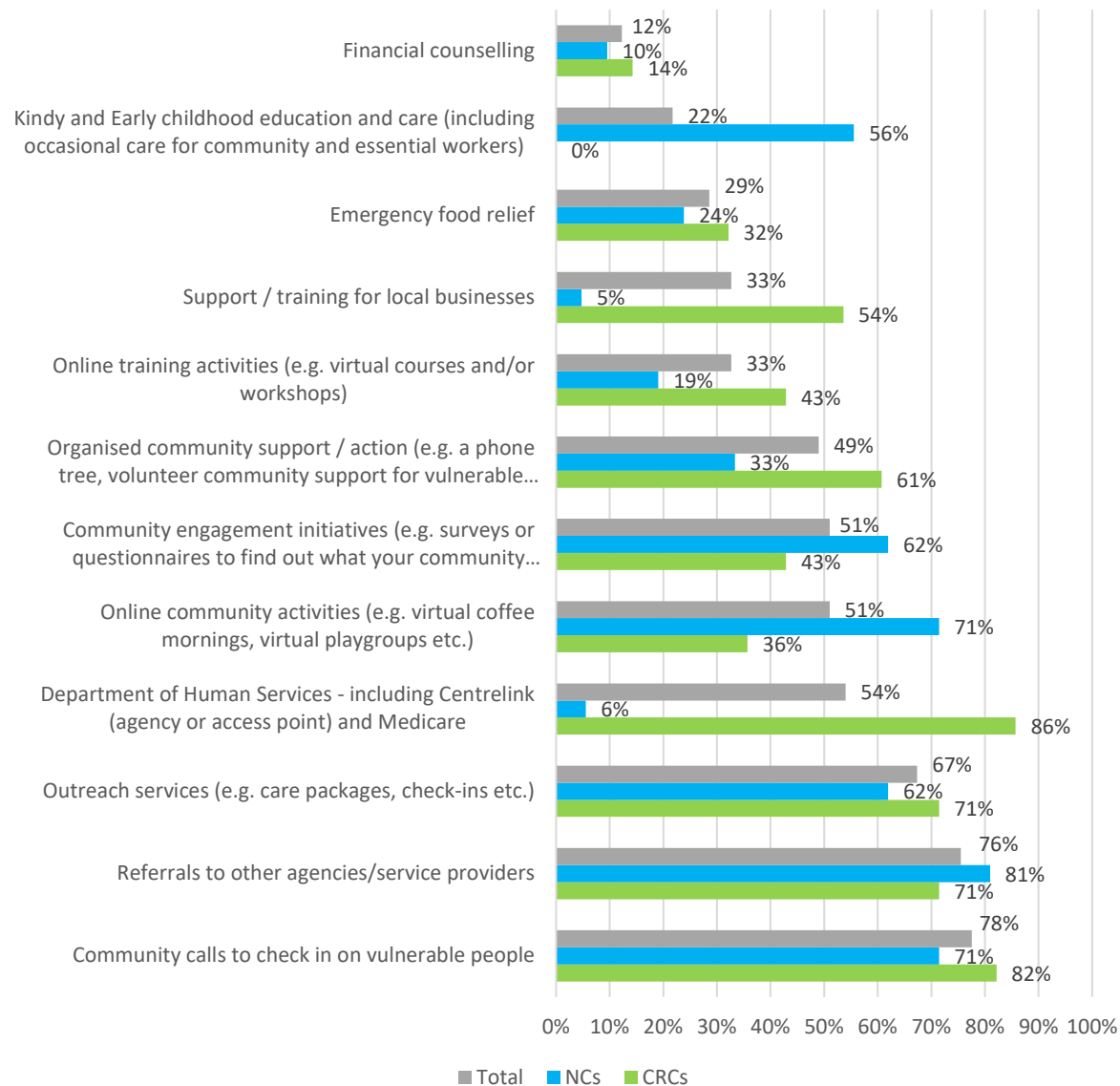
Overall, the most common service provided by 78% of Centres during the COVID-19 crisis was “*community calls to check in on vulnerable people*”. The second most common service provided by 76% of Centres was “*referrals to other agencies/service providers*”. The third most common service delivered by 67% of Centres was “*outreach services e.g. care packages, check-ins etc.*”

At CRCs, the most common service (provided by around 86% of CRCs) was Services Australia access i.e. to Centrelink, as agency or access point, and to Medicare. At NCs, the most common service (provided by 81% of NCs) was “*referrals to other agencies / service providers.*”

Other services provided by Centres, and deemed by Centres as essential to their communities, include:

- Business support and admin/secretarial services / support e.g. printing, (provided by around 25% of CRCs)
- Child health services (provided by around 4% of CRCs and 22% of NCs)
- Community access to computers and technology (provided by around 18% of CRCs)

Figure 4: Service, Activities, and Support Provided by Centres



Most Vulnerable People / Groups

Overall, the most vulnerable group identified by both CRCs (around 83%) and NCs (around 52%) were *seniors and the elderly*.

The second most vulnerable group identified by CRCs (around 23%) was *people experiencing financial hardship*.

The second most vulnerable group identified by NCs (around 38%) was *parents with young children and families*.

Figure 5: Most Vulnerable People / Groups (Overall)

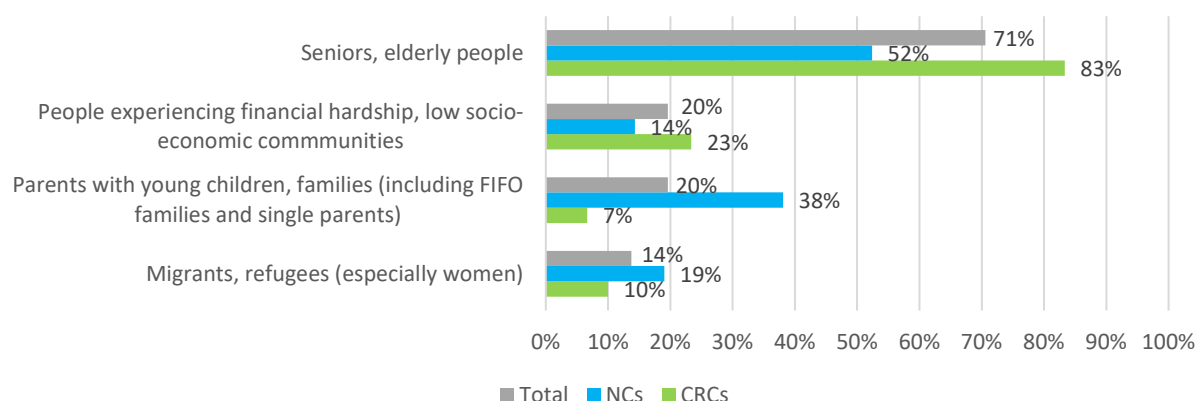


Figure 6: Most Vulnerable People / Groups (CRCs)

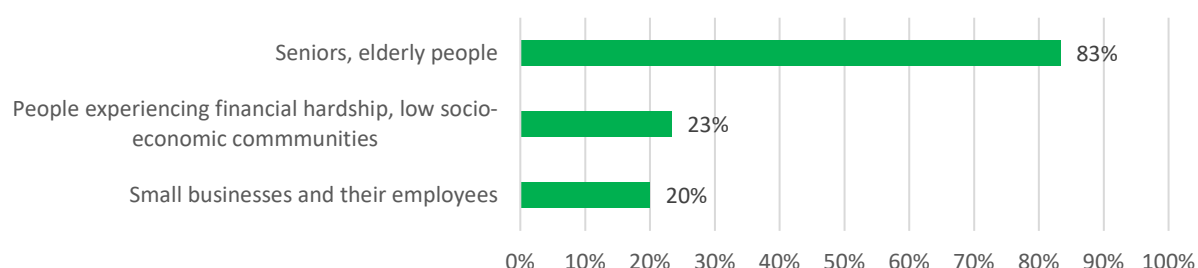
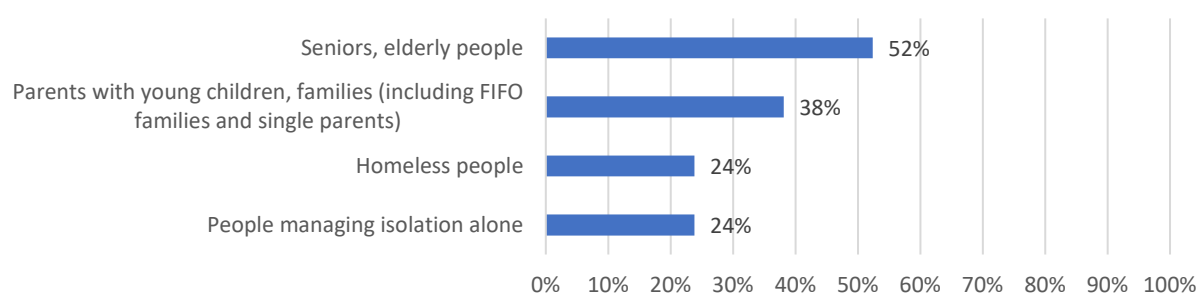


Figure 7: Most Vulnerable People / Groups (NCs)



It is important to note that “vulnerability” can be exacerbated by multiple factors. For example, an elderly person may be more or less vulnerable depending on their financial situation and confidence with technology. This means that the above categories can be read as factors influencing vulnerability, the most significant – overall – being age, financial condition, family circumstances, and immigration status.

Immigration status is significant because many migrants / refugees speak English as a second language and therefore have increased difficulties accessing information and resources. New migrants may also lack broader social connections. It was also noted that people on temporary visas experienced increased uncertainty.

Centres have employed a range of strategies to support vulnerable people in their communities, including:

- Ongoing email communication, providing support, resources, and information
- Emergency relief support, including food relief
- Phone check-ins
- Coordinated outreach programs, including delivery of care packages
- Creating and maintaining community connectedness via digital media
- Referrals to other service providers

Biggest Pressure Facing Centres

The biggest pressure facing Centres – both CRCs and NCs – was identified as *financial, including loss of income and concerns over government funding*.

Other pressures include re-engaging their communities, managing increased workloads, and meeting the needs of their communities.