

Submission to the Multicultural Framework Review by Community Hubs Australia, September 2023.

Overview

Community hubs are place-based, people-centred spaces in local communities that create connections and social cohesion. Based on a model developed more than 15 years ago and successfully replicated in communities across Australia, hubs are a prime example of an initiative that supports a cohesive and inclusive multicultural society.

This submission provides an overview of the hubs model and its outcomes, and offers some recommendations that the committee may wish to consider.

Community Hubs Australia

Community Hubs Australia (CHA) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to improving social cohesion. Our goal is to assist culturally diverse people to integrate into Australian communities. CHA works in partnership with government, businesses, philanthropy, not-for-profits, and community organisations to fund and facilitate locally generated programs that reduce social isolation and increase connection.

A community hub is a place-based people-centred space that connects people with schools, with each other and with organisations that offer services such as health, education, and settlement support. Hubs are embedded in primary schools and harness existing school infrastructure, government, and services in the local community. We partner with local agencies to support community hubs which are clustered in local government areas throughout New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, and Victoria. Locations can be found here: <https://www.communityhubs.org.au/hubs/>

First founded in 2011, the hubs' network has grown steadily from its original pilot of nine hubs in Victoria to 100 hubs across Australia today. As the program has grown, we've extended beyond metro LGAs into regional areas, with hubs valued as grassroots initiatives where all community members can connect, share, and learn.

Each hub is managed by the school in which it is based. Decisions about the way the hub operates and the programs it offers are made at the local level. This flexibility enables each hub leader, who is employed by their school, to develop the space and the program offerings to address the needs of their host school and the local community. Within each LGA the specialist local agencies, or support agencies provide coordination and connection.

Community Hubs Australia is responsible for overseeing the delivery, reporting and continual improvement of the program at the national level.

Who comes to hubs?

Most hub participants (92%) are women, and three quarters of these are aged under 45. One-fifth were born in Australia; of those born overseas, 29% arrived in Australia in the last five years, 31% between 5-10 years ago, and 41% more than 10 years ago.

Most (79%) speak a language other than English at home, although this varies widely across the network, from 8% at Lakes Creek State School hub in Rockhampton through to 100% at Cranbourne

Primary School, Fountain Gate Primary School, Hampton Park Primary School and Holy Eucharist Primary School hubs, all in Victoria.

Most (88%) have at least one dependent child at home, and 40% have pre-school aged children. And of those with preschool aged children, 60% are bringing them to the hub, and half of these don't take their children anywhere else.

In other words, the hub is critical for connection.

Just under one third of participants rate their ability to speak or read English as not very / not at all well.

The main reason people come to hubs is to spend time with other people (49%), improve their English skills (44%), for their children to join in playgroup (42%), to gain skills (32%), to learn about services (31%) or to learn about life in Australia (25%).

Nearly half of the participants who are coming to the hub to improve their English haven't been to an English class outside of the hub.

Program outcomes

The success of the model is based on four key outcomes - outcomes for children, families, the school, and the broader community.

For children, hubs increase school readiness through playgroups and early years programs, and by engaging parents in the school.

The community hubs model was recognised by the Centre for Educational Research, at Western Sydney University for implementing effective strategies to optimally support refugee family settlement, children's early learning, and transitions to school.

For families, hubs are a point of connection and a soft entry point to learning English or upskilling through informal and formal training activities. In Term 1 and Term 2, across the network, 9,426 families engaged with their local hub, with 89 hubs delivering English with at least 1,021 regular participants¹, 49% of whom had preschool aged children. Learning English builds confidence in participating more broadly in the community, including parenting and volunteering. It also builds a participant's confidence to pursue further studies or employment. In the first half of 2023, 69 hubs have delivered informal and formal training, and 542 referrals have been made to external education and training services. Notably, hubs provided valuable employment opportunities for participants, and in between January and June this year, 224 jobs were secured.

For schools, hubs play an important role in building school capacity to respond to the needs of culturally diverse families, whether through running in-school activities like breakfast club and multicultural days, parents volunteering in the canteen, or by inviting organisations into the hub to support family needs. Because of hubs, children arrive at kindergarten and school well socialised and ready to learn, and parents are more actively involved in their child's education.

For communities, hubs help connect parents and children to the services they need. Across the network in the first half of 2023, 395 local organisations partnered with hubs. These organisations

Commented [HP1]: FYI - these numbers have all been updated based on the 2023 midyear snapshot

¹ Regular participants are those that attend at least three classes in a term.

included women and community-centred health and wellbeing services, vocational training providers, paediatric outreach clinics, and playgroup facilitators.

Evidence-based model

The community hubs model has been tested and refined by successive delivery and outcome evaluations. These evaluations confirm that hubs improve settlement outcomes and social cohesion, build the cultural competence of host schools, and make local services more responsive to the needs of migrant families.

In 2016, Murdoch Childrens Research Institute undertook a qualitative study to assess the impact of hubs on school readiness. The report demonstrated that children from backgrounds where English is not spoken at home are among the most developmentally vulnerable in the Australian community, and interventions are needed to ensure they arrive at school ready to learn. The report found that community hubs provide these interventions, making the transition to school smoother for new students, their families and school staff, compared to the experience prior to hub implementation. The report also notes the impact of hubs beyond school readiness, particularly in building the confidence of parents to engage in their child's schooling and in undertaking their own vocational training.

In 2021, CHA engaged Deloitte to undertake a social return of investment evaluation (SROI) of the National Community Hubs Program.

The SROI evaluation concluded that \$33.9 million of social benefits were derived through participation in the community hub network in 2019 – generating a return of \$2.20 for every dollar invested. Deloitte found that hubs provided:

- ❖ \$20.3 million in improved quality of life. 84.5% of participants experienced a significant improvement in their confidence, social participation, engagement, and community connections.
- ❖ \$360k reduction in school costs associated with improved development of children with difficulties. Hubs' early years and school readiness programs reduced vulnerability for children.
- ❖ \$4.6 million in improved educational outcomes. Children who participate in hubs, have an increased potential for greater lifetime earnings.
- ❖ \$8.4 million in improved incomes. 280 participants found work through their hub connections.
- ❖ \$307k value of volunteer hours. 1 in 3 participants volunteered in their hub or school.

In addition, the evaluation found that 85% of participants experienced improved English language – increasing their confidence and competency to join in many aspects of society and work².

Deloitte is currently updating the SROI analysis with 2023 data. Findings will be available January 2024.

² National Community Hubs Program SROI Evaluation Report, <https://www.communityhubs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/NCHP-SROI-Deloitte-Findings-09-21-1.pdf>

Funding

The hub funding formula is consistent across Australia and has been the same since the national program began in 2014.

The Department of Home Affairs (DHA) covers all hub costs for the first two years, with an annual contribution from state government (\$10k per hub) and the participating school (\$20k per hub) after two years. A 5% increase is built in each year to the DHA funding elements. Support agency funding is variable, depending on the number of hubs in each area, and is funded by DHA. Community Hubs Australia's operating costs are covered by the Scanlon Foundation.

Community Hubs Australia manages the reporting and compliance relationships with the Commonwealth and with State Governments, freeing up hub leaders from the onerous burden of reporting to multiple funders. Most state governments have aligned the reporting requirements for hubs with the Commonwealth's, however this is not always the case, and funding timetables are also not in alignment.

Community Hubs Australia has been able to use some of the Commonwealth funding to enable hub leaders to pay for English classes and childminding to sit alongside English. This has been essential to fill the gaps in English learning across the country, and has enabled us to work with AMEP providers to build pathways to AMEP – nevertheless, this remains a critical gap in service provision which hubs fill.

Childminding funding doesn't just allow women to participate, it has also provided many women across the network with their first job in Australia.

It is worth noting that while hubs funding from the Commonwealth is ongoing, funding for childminding and English will run out in June 2024. We also don't have any funding to expand the network to new schools or new LGAs – and there is considerable demand. Finally, state government funding is not ongoing, and represents a considerable risk for the future of the network.

Recommendations

1. The community hubs model is effective, proven, and trusted, and should be rolled out to more LGAs across Australia.
2. The funding model is sensible, but relies on intergovernmental cooperation, brokered by Community Hubs Australia. An intergovernmental agreement would reduce administration and increase certainty and should be considered.
3. English language is a critical skill for life in Australia, and settings like hubs have a role to play in ensuring that everyone can access and practice English. Longer term funding should be provided, and work undertaken to build relationships with AMEP providers that revolve around the needs of participants, not providers.

For more information

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September 2023

Appendix A: Local Government Areas with Community Hubs

State	LGA
New South Wales	Blacktown
New South Wales	Canterbury Bankstown
New South Wales	Coffs Harbour
New South Wales	Cumberland
New South Wales	Fairfield
New South Wales	Liverpool
New South Wales	Parramatta
New South Wales	Wollongong
Queensland	Brisbane
Queensland	Ipswich
Queensland	Logan
Queensland	Rockhampton
Queensland	Toowoomba
Queensland	Townsville
South Australia	Playford
South Australia	Port Adelaide Enfield
South Australia	Salisbury
Victoria	Brimbank
Victoria	Casey
Victoria	Dandenong
Victoria	Geelong
Victoria	Hume
Victoria	Shepparton
Victoria	Wyndham