

**Submission  
No 15**

**INQUIRY INTO SERVICE COORDINATION IN  
COMMUNITIES WITH HIGH SOCIAL NEEDS**

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**Legislative Council - Standing Committee on Social  
Issues**

**Inquiry into service coordination in communities with  
high social needs**

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## 1 Context of Fairfield Local Government Area

Fairfield Local Government Area (LGA) is located in south west Sydney between Parramatta, Liverpool and Penrith LGAs. Fairfield LGA is the third most populated local government area of Sydney with an estimated residential population of 203,109 in 2014<sup>1</sup>. It is the most disadvantaged area in the Sydney Metropolitan area with high unemployment, low educational attainment, low household incomes, high housing stress and poor health outcomes.

Fairfield has a high level of cultural and linguistic diversity. In the 2011 census, it was identified that 52% of people in Fairfield LGA were born overseas and nearly 70% speak a language other than English at home with over 20% of people stating that they speak English poorly or not at all. Almost half the residents of Fairfield are bi or multilingual.

Fairfield is the most popular place for settlement by humanitarian entrants and family visas in Australia. Between 2009 and 2014, 5,348 humanitarian entrants settled in Fairfield LGA, a higher number than in any other city in Australia. Fairfield has a very low level of skilled migration.<sup>2</sup>

There are a large number of community organisations, charities, government agencies and foundations providing services in Fairfield. A significant number of these organisations are well established within the community and are run by local residents. These groups provide a network of support, knowledge and opportunities within the community and they are trusted by local residents.

Incomes in Fairfield are lower than in other areas and the gap between Fairfield LGA and the rest of NSW and Australia has continued to grow over many years. In the 2011 census, the median individual income in Fairfield City was \$369 while it was \$619 in the Sydney Metropolitan area: \$561 in NSW and \$577 in Australia.<sup>3</sup>

The percentage of Fairfield residents attaining post school qualifications has been increasing since 1996, however, this has been at a lower rate than the rest of Greater Western Sydney<sup>4</sup>. This has resulted in an increasing gap in qualifications. The level of vocational training is predicted to decrease as fewer courses are now offered at local TAFE campuses and the increase in fees creates additional barriers.

In addition to low incomes, Fairfield LGA has a significant level of residents who are dependent on income support from the Commonwealth. In Fairfield, 7.0% of the population report needing help in their day-to-day lives due to disability. In 2006, approximately 40% of children were living in low income or welfare dependant households.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Census id Community Profile

<sup>2</sup> Australian Government 2014

<sup>3</sup> Australian census data 1996 to 2011

<sup>4</sup> Australian census data 1996 to 2011

<sup>5</sup> Public Health Social Atlas

Fairfield LGA is typical of areas experiencing a high level of disadvantage in that the residents also have poor health outcomes. The cultural background, migration history and language proficiency of many residents also results in difficulties for many people to successfully navigate the health and other government support systems.

Overall, Fairfield LGA is an area with high social needs and disadvantage.

## 2 Income Levels in Fairfield LGA

In 2011, there were 30,695 people living in low income households in the Fairfield LGA. These are households with incomes below \$600 per week. This represents 24.9% of households in Fairfield compared to 18.3% of households with incomes lower than \$600 per week in the Sydney region<sup>6</sup>.

It must be noted that the average household size is larger in Fairfield than other parts of Sydney. This means that the household income must support more people than in other parts of Sydney resulting in a lower income per person than experienced in other low income households.

In 2013, couples with children comprised 16.3% of households with low incomes compared to 5.9% of low income household across NSW. Single parent families account for 18.9% of low income households in Fairfield compared to 12.6% in NSW. Overall, 45.25% of children in Fairfield belonged to low income welfare dependent families compared to 20.5% of children in the Greater Sydney Region.<sup>7</sup>

Fairfield LGA had 83.6% of people 65 years and over receiving aged pensions in June 2013. This is compared to 65.3% of people 65 years and over in Greater Sydney and is the highest percentage of any LGA in NSW.<sup>8</sup> In addition, 7.3% of people aged between 16 and 64 years received the disability support pension while a further 7.3% of people received long term unemployment benefits.<sup>9</sup>

Not all low income households were dependent on Centrelink payments, with 4,036 people in low income households employed. Of these people, 38.5% were working full time and 52.4% part-time.<sup>10</sup> In many areas, low income households are retirees or people without children, however, many households with low incomes are those with dependent children. The expenditure required in a household with children is likely to be much higher than in a household with no children.

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<sup>6</sup> Public Health Social Atlas

<sup>7</sup> Public Health Social Atlas

<sup>8</sup> Public Health Social Atlas

<sup>9</sup> Public Health Social Atlas

<sup>10</sup> Public Health Social Atlas

Over 28% of people 15 years and older in Fairfield held Pensioner Concession Cards in June 2013 compared to 17.4% of people in Greater Sydney. Fairfield has 11.5% of residents between 0 and 64 years holding Health Care Cards compared to 6.3% of residents across Greater Sydney.<sup>11</sup>

The low level of incomes experienced in Fairfield, along with poor health outcomes, is more likely to result in a higher level of need to participate in the community, education and employment. Community support and services are in high demand in Fairfield, with many individuals requiring multiple types of support. High quality, accessible, appropriate and coordinated services are critical to a large proportion of children, people with disabilities and older people in Fairfield.

### 3 Housing Stress

Housing is essential to security, safety, employment, education, health and participation in the community.

In 2013, 33.8% of households in Fairfield received rent assistance compared to 16.1% of private renters in Greater Sydney. This is the highest rate in the Sydney region and only two other LGAs in NSW have higher rates. This high level of support for people in the private rental market is supplemented by 7.4% of rented premises in Fairfield being public housing compared to only 4.5% across Sydney in 2011.<sup>12</sup>

Approximately 40% of people renting in Fairfield are supported through the provision of public housing or through rent assistance. In addition, 39.8% of low income households experience housing stress compared to only 24.7% of low income renters across Sydney. Mortgage stress is experienced by 24.2% of low income households compared to only 11.2% of these households across Sydney<sup>13</sup>.

Welfare dependant, or low income households, require affordable housing as a foundation to enhance their health, employment and educational opportunities, income and family stability. The impact of housing stress and insecurity is a concern for social inclusion and the future development of children in particular.

When combined with the profile of low income households, it is clear that a high proportion of families, children, people with disabilities and older people experience housing stress as well as a reliance on social services and community support in their daily lives.

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<sup>11</sup> Public Health Social Atlas

<sup>12</sup> Public Health Social Atlas

<sup>13</sup> Public Health Social Atlas

## 4 Terms of Reference of the Inquiry

***That the Standing Committee on Social Issues inquire into and report on service coordination in communities with high social needs, including:***

- a) the extent to which government and non-government service providers are identifying the needs of clients and providing a coordinated response which ensures access to services both within and outside of their particular area of responsibility***

The extent that community needs and priorities are identified at a population level has decreased since the late 1990s when this work was undertaken in partnership between state and local governments, community organisations and specialised service providers. Identification of the needs of the community at a population level is the first, and an essential step, in identifying and coordinating services for individuals.

During this period, local government used the close relationship between the community and local organisations to identify local needs and emerging priorities. This involved consultation with organisations, government agencies such as schools and directly with residents. Local government staff then worked with state government officers to inform regional priorities.

This 'ground up' approach used the strengths of local government, local organisations and human services workers at the front line level with the strengths of state government to provide regional and state level context and inform policy direction and funding decisions.

While this level of needs assessment is not the same as the assessment of the needs of an individual client, assessment of the needs of an individual cannot take place without appropriate and accessible service providers or community organisations being available to the individual. Any assessment of the needs of an individual client is dependent on the right services being in the right place for the particular community and for those organisations to know how and where specialised services can be accessed. This is amplified in a community with high levels of cultural diversity, language barriers and humanitarian entrants.

The provision of case management services and the reduction of generalised community organisations and projects may assist coordination of services but it does not facilitate access to services for individuals seeking support. Local community organisations that are trusted by the community, offering universal programs offer soft entry points to services by individuals. Without these 'soft access' points, individuals will possibly only reach assessment stage as a result of crisis. Soft entry points through organisations providing universal access often results in services being accessed quickly and less support required by the individual in the long term.

### **Context of Fairfield community sector**

The community sector in Fairfield is possibly unique due to the sustained level and type of migration to the area. Fairfield has been the preferred settlement area of refugees and refugee like entrants to Australia for a number of decades. In many cases, these people have experienced war, conflict, trauma and torture and many have a deep distrust of authority, government and unknown organisations.

Due to the language proficiency and cultural diversity of the residents, coupled with the role of Fairfield as a settlement area, many community organisations have been established in the area by the community. These organisations are embedded in the community and trusted by individuals. The stability and continuity of support provided by these organisations is invaluable as they can access, and are trusted by, people with complex and multiple needs. These organisations also enable a web of social support and facilitate social engagement and inclusion through their community connections. Engagement through participation in management committees, volunteering and commitment of local residents to assisting their own communities also occurs. These benefits are often not the intended outcome of funding for service delivery but are the result of the 'value add' the funding provided to organisations embedded in the local community.

There are a number of organisations, funded by the Community Builders Program that provide 'neighbourhood centre' style of services. These centres often provide a link between smaller, local organisations and a broader suite of services and more formal assessment of individual needs. These neighbourhood style organisations are run locally and embedded into the community and offer a range of services with universal access within a geographic catchment. These organisations are often funded to provide a range of services and provide coordination to a range of more specialised and larger service providers, often focused on a particular demographic or issue such as employment support.

Philanthropic organisations and private foundations have been increasingly providing services and/or funding services and projects. This philanthropic funding is dependent on existing community organisations to be functional in the community and able to provide the necessary organisational infrastructure, relationship with the community and understanding of needs for these services to be developed and delivered. Without community organisations within the area, the level of philanthropic support is likely to decrease.

### **Current context**

The change in the funding strategy from providing grants to local community organisations offering programs to communities to a competitive tendering process to delivering services to individuals favours larger organisations. These larger organisations have a greater capacity to deliver similar services to individuals across much larger regions, however, they do not offer the soft entry points or broader community support. The measure of success and type of evidence required to develop responses to formal tenders is often outside of the experience and scope of smaller organisations embedded within a local community. This effect is most obvious in ethno specific organisations.



Many organisations in Fairfield are at a clear disadvantage in the competitive tendering process due to less exposure of technical language required for these tenders and knowledge of bureaucratic processes and systems. This systemic disadvantage is a result of the high level of migrants who have less familiarity with the language and culture of government and business systems in Australia. In addition, these organisations most often focus on delivering services, programs and soft entry points for a specific and defined community, not services for individuals over large geographic areas.

Historically, there has been a high level of cooperation and communication between community organisations in Fairfield to ensure individuals receive the services required. Fairfield City Council runs five inter-agencies that have facilitated and assisted the dissemination of information relating to services and programs and offers a point of contact for new organisations and workers in the area. These inter-agencies also provide a forum to identify emerging needs and support newly arrived communities.

The highly competitive environment has resulted in a decreased level of cooperation and communication between organisations as they seek to retain a competitive advantage necessary for success in tender proposals. This lowered level of cooperation between services is most visible at needs identification, planning and program levels. A number of more recently funded services do not appear to have sufficient time or priority to engage in inter-agencies or contribute to networks aiming to ensure coordination across the LGA.

It is possible that some smaller, local and specialised community organisations may cease operations as a result of the new funding environment. These organisations are very important in having connection to individuals requiring assistance as well as providing important information regarding needs and issues within the community. Government and larger non-government organisations often approach these organisations for their intimate and specialised information on the community to inform planning or to address social issues. They are important to the connectedness and resilience of the broader community.

The partnership between state government, local government and the community sector that assessed and identified community need, articulated goals and prioritised strategies and funding no longer exists. This process was funded by the state government and local consultation led by local government. As state government funding and engagement in the process was withdrawn, the process ceased.

Neighbourhood centre type organisations and some projects focussed on specific demographic groups such as children and youth assess community needs. Local government is legislated to undertake a community engagement process and develop the Community Strategic Plan that articulates the broad based and long range plan for the entire community. In addition to this work, Council provides data and information on the community. The work by community organisations, service providers and local government is very valuable but does not provide the

same fine highly focussed identification of social issues or ability to influence policy and funding as the earlier partnership approach.

The cessation of a centralised, collaborative and transparent process to assess needs and set priorities means that some organisations cannot access information relating to community needs at a population level. There is no requirement for non-government organisations who undertake needs assessment of a particular area or demographic to make that information available to other organisations or local government, or to articulate their methodology and processes. This has led to an environment where there is inequitable access to information that leads to some organisations being less competitive in a competitive funding environment and government less aware of emerging issues and needs.

***b) barriers to the effective coordination of services, including lack of client awareness of services and any legislative provisions such as privacy law***

As a result of the outcomes of the changed funding processes and priorities, a number of community organisations in Fairfield have lost funding and/or no longer provide the same services. In some situations, services or programs are no longer provided or are provided by different organisations that may have little or no relationship with the community. As many people with complex or multiple needs also have trust issues, it is likely that these people will no longer access services as they do not know or trust the new providers. Some services now require initial contact and assessment through telephone contact, which are not free calls. This new cost and method of assessment adds additional barriers for people to access services.

The loss of continuity in service providers and stability in the community sector, impacts individuals as it is difficult to know what services are offered and which organisations are providing those services. In some cases, well established community organisations no longer know where to refer individuals for services. If individuals do not access services, they cannot be assessed, let alone have the necessary services coordinated.

The impact of the new funding approach is most evident when services for individuals are sought. Organisations now must report more closely on specific target groups and outputs rather than programs offered and accessibility. This environment does not enable service providers to assist individuals to find the correct service as this coordination work is often not measured. Individuals can be left to navigate a complex and fluid situation by themselves.

**c) consideration of initiatives such as the Dubbo Minister's Action Group and best practice models for the coordination of services**

Initiatives that seek to remove the negative impacts of competition and promote cooperation must be introduced into communities with high social needs to maximise resources and ensure appropriate services are provided and reach individuals who are in need. This approach needs to be designed to provide stability and continuity over a longer time frame.

A coordinating organisation with the main focus of bringing together community organisations, government and non-government agencies is essential to improve coordination of services. A coordinating organisation would also support the local organisations that are embedded in the community and acknowledge their importance in providing an infrastructure that supports the resilience of the Fairfield community. Organisations that support specific cultural or language groups are at times approached by government for information on these communities to assist in developing responses to specific issues or for planning purposes. For this reason, as well as the special role they play in our community, ensuring their continued existence and viability is necessary.

A coordinating organisation should be able to:

- identify community issues at a population level and within demographic groups and issue areas
- offer a single point of contact for philanthropic, funding and commercial sponsors
- maintain information regarding all funded services within the area
- advocate for the needs of the area
- provide research function relating to issues, demographics or specific areas
- provide evaluation frameworks and systems for use by all stakeholders
- offer 'back of house' functions for community organisations
- collate or develop 'evidence' on appropriate programs and services relevant to the Fairfield population
- support small community organisations and groups that are embedded in the Fairfield community
- develop and maintain partnerships to facilitate the coordination of services within the LGA

and make this information available to all stakeholders regardless of size or scope of organisation.

As a minimum approach to improving equity, service coordination and development of appropriate services, the reestablishment of the partnership between state and local government to identify and clarify local needs and priorities is required. This partnership is in keeping with the *NSW Local Government Act 1993, Integrated Planning and Reporting Amendment*, which requires local government to develop the Community Strategic Plan. While Councils are required to engage with the community to develop this long range and broad plan, additional resourcing and partnership is required to build upon this engagement and planning work to inform state and local social planning.

Local government has the closest relationship with the immediate community and has the experience and skills required to consult and engage with local organisations, businesses and residents to identify local needs and priorities in the community services sector. State government has the capacity of overview and knowledge of all local government areas and the ability to identify similarities and unique needs.

Reestablishment of the partnership between state and local government to undertake needs identification and priority setting has mutual benefit for each tier of government. This information can assist state, regional and local planning to enable the appropriate social services to be funded in areas in which they are required. The state government needs to consider reinstating the funding, resourcing and commitment previously provided for this partnership with local governments.

There is significant evidence to support the collective impact approach. The introduction of a coordinating organisation requires long term funding but can ensure efficiency. A stand-alone coordinating organisation can support a range of organisations and bring large and small organisations together for mutual benefit and to enhance the outcomes for the Fairfield residents and community.

## **5 Conclusion**

Fairfield LGA is an area with a high level of social needs requiring a large number and range of services to be available for people from diverse cultural and language backgrounds. The current competitive nature of funding, the requirements of most philanthropic organisations and the differing levels of organisational capacity of organisations offering services to this community results in the need for investment in structures, systems and processes that can effectively increase cooperation and coordination of services for individuals. This need is amplified by the number of locally run community organisations that are embedded in the community and trusted by residents. These organisations are critical to understanding need and reaching residents with complex and multiple needs but often do not have the capacity to research or evaluate programs to the same level as large cross regional organisations. A response that is based upon cooperation at government and organisational level to ensure transparency, equity and fairness of information and capacity must be developed to address the high social needs evident in Fairfield City.