Neighbourhood Centres Evaluation

Phase 2 Final Report – Summary

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Neighbourhood Centres funding uplift

- As part of the 2022–23 budget, centres received a funding uplift
- Accompanied with a “shared-vision” co-designed by centres and the Department of Families Seniors, Disability Services, Child Safety
- Included new initiative guidelines
- 128 centres were part of the Neighbourhood Centre initiative

Main factors that led to the uplift

- The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the limitations of the previous funding model, which left many centres understaffed and unable to meet the growing needs of their communities.
- The Queensland Government Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness, 2021 highlighted the underfunding of Neighbourhood Centres and called for a review of their funding model.

Components of the Neighbourhood Centre initiative



Neighbourhood Centre initiative funding

Funding to enable Neighbourhood Centres to operate and deliver three core initiative activities (linking to support, creating social connections, integrating community action)



Supplement

Funding as a contribution to rent, and property related costs for Neighbourhood Centres not operating from a government owned building



Community Connect

Funding for specialised workers who offer support and referrals for individuals and families experiencing significant vulnerabilities and complex needs



Peak agency funding

Funding for Neighbourhood Centres Queensland as the peak body for the Neighbourhood Centre sector in Queensland



Capital investment funding

Investing in new and replacement buildings as well as upgrades, repairs and maintenance of buildings owned by the Queensland Government

Evaluation background

To understand the impact of the increased funding, the Queensland Government Statistician's Office (QGSO) was commissioned to conduct an independent evaluation to…

- Describe the role of Neighbourhood Centres following the funding uplift
- Describe the role of the Queensland Government in supporting Neighbourhood Centre in terms of operating and facility support, while also considering the role of other levels of government and the non-government sector
- Assess the effectiveness of the Queensland Government investment in the terms of maximising outcomes and impacts.

Evaluation approach



Phase 1: Evaluation Framework
Outlining the evaluation's approach, including principles, program logic, and design options (completed in October 2024)

Phase 2: Implementation review (November 2025)
Describing the role of Neighbourhood Centres, the Neighbourhood Centre initiative, and the operating and capital support the Queensland Government and other agencies provided

Phase 3: Outcomes Evaluation
Assessing the Neighbourhood Centre initiative's outcomes and the impact for centres, communities and the broader services system (November 2026)

Purpose of Phase 2

Phase 2 addressed the first two questions for the evaluation concerning the role and support Neighbourhood Centres received

1 **Describe the role of Neighbourhood Centres in Queensland following the funding uplift?**

- What are the services delivered by Neighbourhood Centres ?
- How do Neighbourhood Centres link people with support, create social connections and integrate local action?
- What is the role of Neighbourhood Centres in the broader community services system?
- How do Neighbourhood Centres differ to other, similar community service centres?

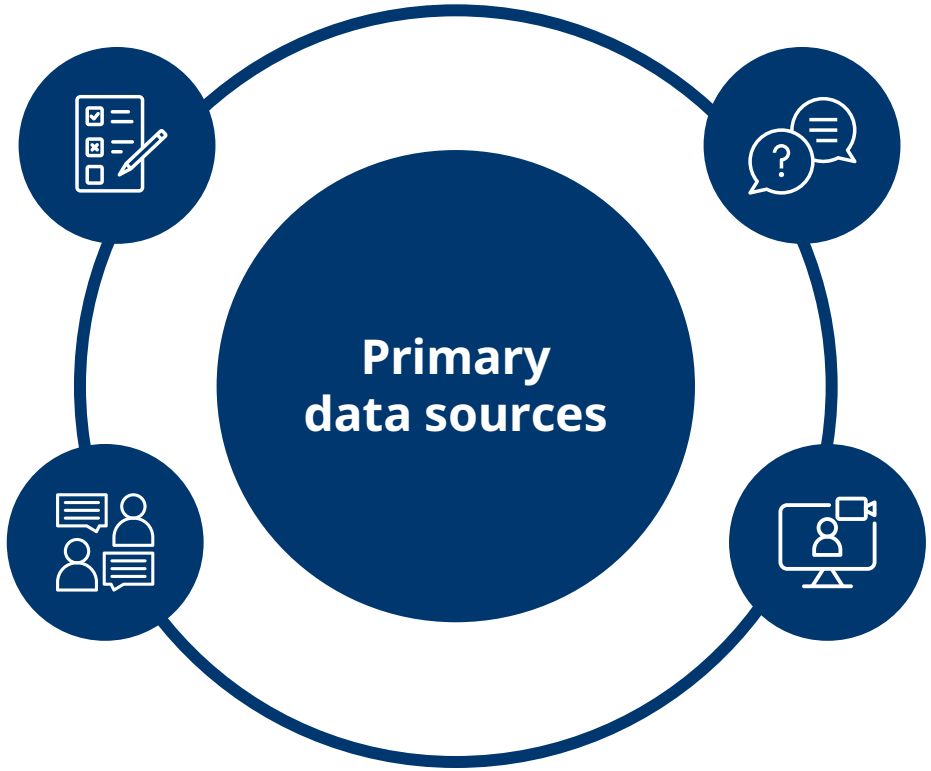
2 **Describe the role of the Queensland Government in supporting NCs following the funding uplift, with consideration given to the role of other levels of government and the non-government sector?**

- What funding is provided to Neighbourhood Centres by the Queensland Government?
- What non-financial support is provided to Neighbourhood Centres by the Queensland Government?
- What funding is provided to Neighbourhood Centres by other levels of Government and non-government organisations?
- What non-financial support is provided to Neighbourhood Centres by other levels of government and non-government organisations?

Evaluation sources – primary data

Community Survey
An online survey conducted by QGSO of 6,400 residents living within a location that contained at least one Neighbourhood Centre

Case Study
Semi-structured interviews with staff, site tours and direct observation of operations at four centres in and around Cairns



Local council interviews
Semi-structured interviews with two local government stakeholders familiar with the Neighbourhood Centres in their area in Cairns

Meetings with department and responses to information requests

Weekly half-hour meetings with program area and responses to two detailed information requests

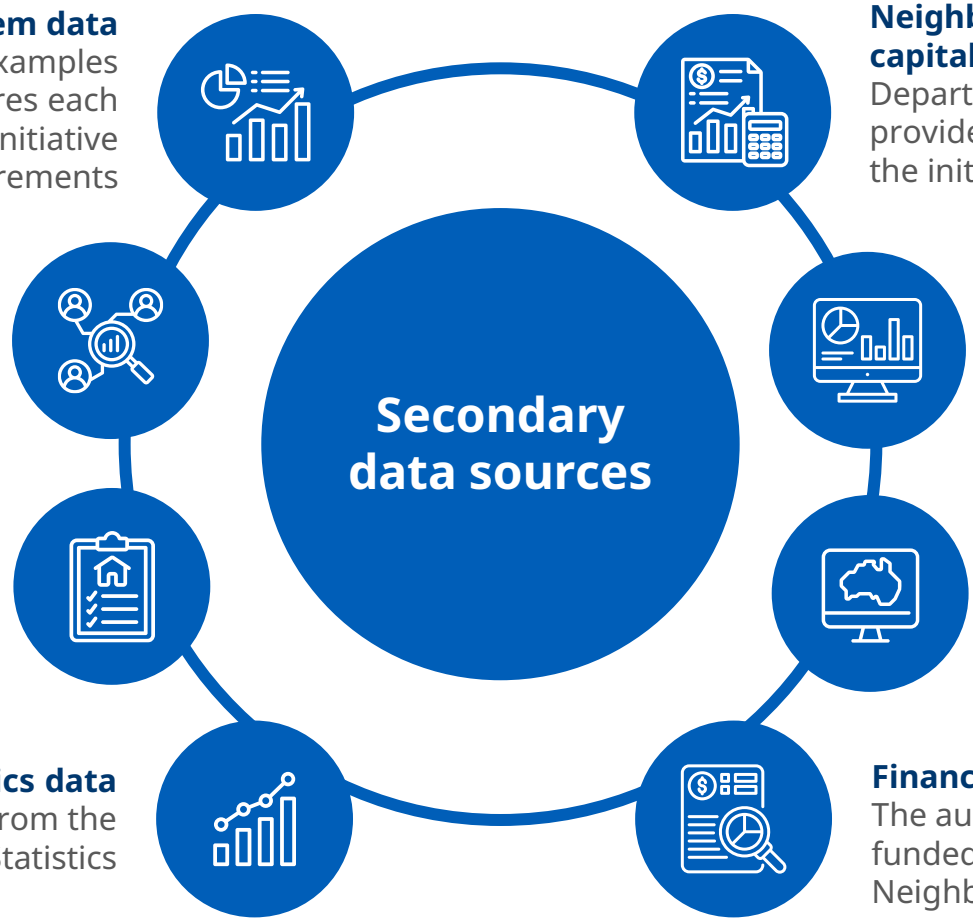
Evaluation sources – secondary data

Outcome Measurement System data
Performance data and practice examples provided by Neighbourhood Centres each quarter to department as part of the initiative requirements

Community Connect reporting data
Community Connect data and practice examples collected by staff and reported to department every quarter

Neighbourhood Centres Queensland (NCQ) Sector Impact Survey data
Deidentified data from the Queensland-wide survey conducted by NCQ across Neighbourhood Centres each year

Australian Bureau of Statistics data
Demographic and regional data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics



Neighbourhood Centre initiative and capital investment funding
Departmental data that detailed the funding provided to Neighbourhood Centres as part of the initiative

Queensland Government Investment Portal
An online platform that tracks the financial investments of each government department

GrantConnect
The Australian Government 's centralised grant information online portal

Financial Statements
The audited financial statements of the 128 funded organisations who received Neighbourhood Centre funding

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Findings: Characteristics of Neighbourhood Centres

Organisations that operate Neighbourhood Centres

A funded organisation was the organisation that received Neighbourhood Centre initiative funding from the Queensland Government to operate a centre.

There were three key types of funded organisations:



Local community organisation (80%)
Primarily operated within a specific area or community, focusing services on meeting the needs of the local population



State and nationwide funded organisation (10%)
Operated a range of community services across Queensland and/or Australia in addition to Neighbourhood Centres e.g. Uniting Care, Wesley Mission



Council operated (10%)
Local councils who received Neighbourhood Centre initiative funding and operated a Neighbourhood Centre

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Findings: Role of Neighbourhood Centres following the funding uplift

Neighbourhood Centre services

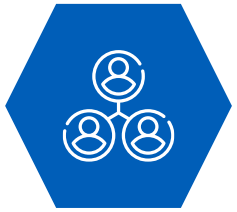
The 2022–23 funding uplift increased base funding for operations and established a consistent service approach across all centres.

Neighbourhood Centres core initiative activities were established via the initiative guidelines. Other (non-initiative) services also occurred at centres.



Core initiative activities

The NC initiative service agreements required Neighbourhood Centres to deliver three core activities



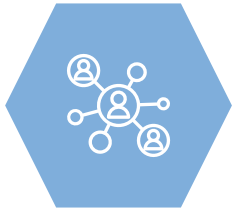
Linking to formal and informal support

Connecting community members with support by providing information, service navigation, and warm referrals to expert services



Creating social connections

Providing opportunities for social connection and inclusion, enabling community members from all backgrounds to feel welcome and connected

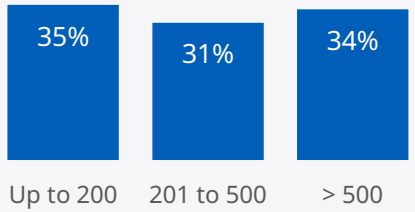


Integrating local community action

Focused on the community sharing ideas, solving problems and planning projects to address local issues and build a stronger, more connected community

Linking to formal and informal support

Average number of links made by Neighbourhood Centre in a month in 2024



Top issues linked to support in 2024

41% Financial hardship

21% Housing

Most frequent types of referrals in 2024

56% Emergency relief

45% Housing services

39% Emergency accommodation

"Significant time was provided to go through all of the issues for the client. We leveraged off local resources and ended up providing a lot of the practical supports around paperwork and follow up appointments to best support this person and her children. All levels of government agencies and local services were included to provide a wraparound support."

Neighbourhood Centre practice example

Community Connect

- While all Neighbourhood Centres linked people to support, 30 (at the time reporting) of the 128 centres received additional funding to deliver the Community Connect initiative
- Community Connect initiative operated alongside the broader Neighbourhood Centre initiative
- It allowed selected Neighbourhood Centres to employ specialist staff to assist individuals and families presenting with more complex needs
- These workers provided personalised support and facilitated referrals to appropriate services

Creating social connections and inclusion

All Neighbourhood Centres were creating opportunities for social connection, learning and skill-sharing by providing community events, groups and classes and other activities

Examples included



Education and skill building
Cooking classes, computer clubs, English classes, parenting classes



Creative and recreation
Arts and craft groups, sewing groups, gardening clubs



Health and wellbeing
Tai Chi classes, yoga workshops, chair exercises, walking groups



Social connection
Men's and women's sheds, trivia nights, morning teas and lunches



Children and youth
School holiday activities, after school programs, playgroups



Cultural connection
Migrant programs, harmony day activities, NAIDOC week activities



Community events and festivals
Christmas events, street festivals, community fun days

Integrating local community action

- Focused on the community sharing ideas, solving problems and planning projects to address local issues and build a stronger, more connected community
- Some of the practice examples in performance reporting suggested that many centres **may not have been undertaking community development activities** that integrated local community action

This might have been due to:

- A historical focus on providing service-oriented activities
- A lack of understanding about what was involved or required
- Constraints with capacity and capability



Other Neighbourhood Centre services: Non-initiative services

Neighbourhood Centres often provided other services beyond the three core initiative activities. Instead of linking people to outside organisations, some centres could connect individuals to specialist services delivered on-site



Examples include emergency relief, financial resilience and disaster recovery, homeless services, family and youth services

Other Neighbourhood Centre services: Visiting services

Some Neighbourhood Centre also served as hubs for various services, making the support more accessible and affordable to the community. Many Neighbourhood Centres hosted visiting services on their premises on a weekly, fortnightly, or monthly basis.



Examples include Justices of the Peace, Tax Help, Centrelink outreach services, financial counselling, legal advice and support and employment services

Other Neighbourhood Centre services: Co-located services

Co-located services were professional or specialist services that were available at the same location as the Neighbourhood Centre but delivered by external organisations other than a Neighbourhood Centre funded organisation



These services leveraged the Neighbourhood Centre premises to offer services to the local community

Role of Neighbourhood Centres in the broader services system

- Positioned as a first point of contact as they provided low or no-barrier access to all sorts of services and support
- An independence building and developmental approach – interconnecting needs in one place to relevant support



"Navigating complex online platforms to apply for assistance with a disability is overwhelming and sometimes difficult to understand and coordinate. Walking alongside people through this process provides much needed support so they can get through this process and thrive on their own once they have the right type of support for their disability."

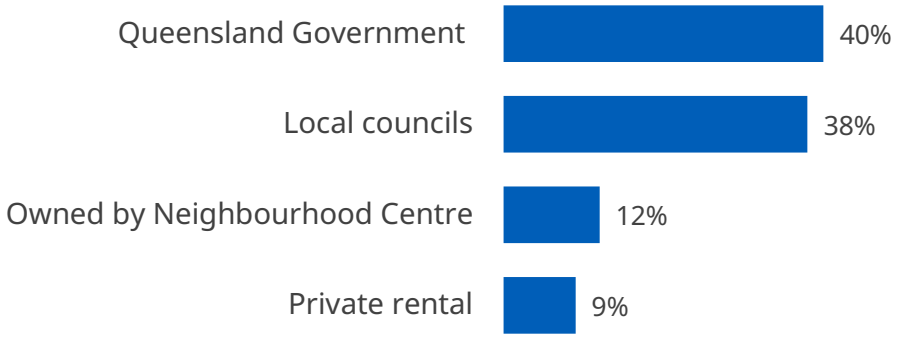
Neighbourhood Centre practice example

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Findings: Neighbourhood Centre initiative financial investment

Neighbourhood Centres: building ownership

The owner of the buildings that Neighbourhood Centre operated from varied



- There were differences in the costs that centres may have incurred for government and council owned buildings compared to private rentals and those owned by the funded organisation.
- Differences in premises ownership arrangements could have influenced the centres' capacity to deliver services

Ownership of Neighbourhood Centre premises as of June 2025

Ownership of premises	Per cent of NCs	Numbers of NCs
Queensland Government: DFSDSCS[(a)]	38%	49
Queensland Government: Housing and Public Works	2%	3
Local government	38%	49
Owned by service	12%	15
Private rental	9%	11
No premises[(b)]	1%	1

(a) Department of Family Services, Seniors, Disability, Child Safety

(b) One NC was operating remotely and sometimes running out of another Neighbourhood Centre while looking for a new premises

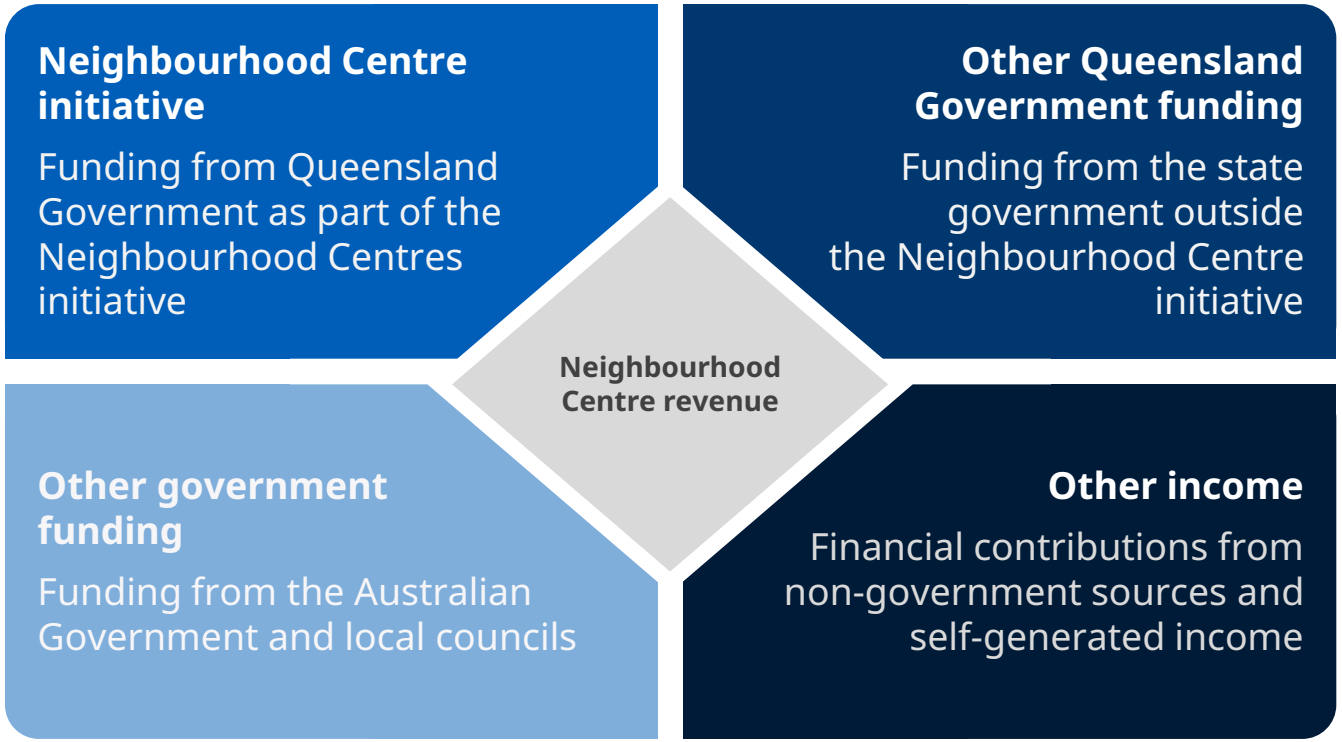
Source: Community Services Commissioning, 2025

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Findings: Other financial and non-financial support

Other financial support and income

The revenue Neighbourhood Centres generated could be separated into four broad categories



Other Queensland Government funding

In addition to the Neighbourhood Centre initiative, many centres received funding from the Queensland Government for a range of other services and programs

Among 92 local community organisations funded to deliver Neighbourhood Centres in 2023–24:

- 87% received additional Queensland Government funding
- 62% received funding exceeding $100,000
- $17 million went towards family support services in Neighbourhood Centres

Other government funding

Australian Government funding

- 69% of local community organisations obtained grants from the federal government in 2023–24
- 40% received federal funding exceeding $50,000.

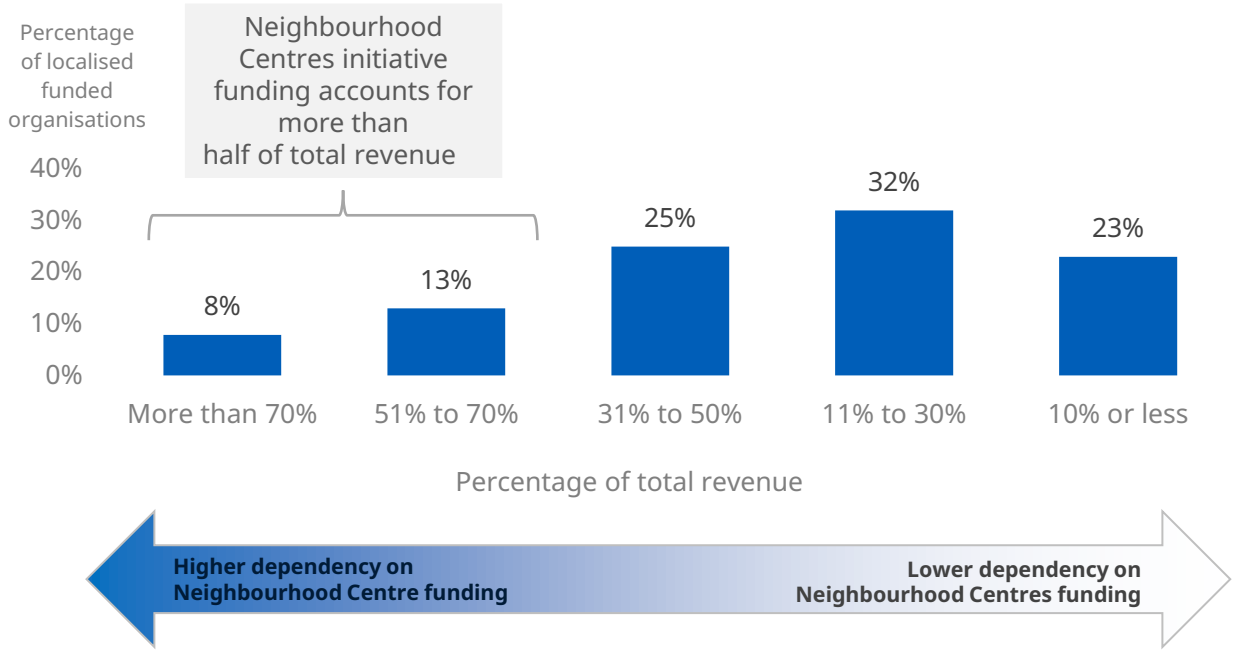
Self-generated income

Some of the more common ways funded organisations generated income included:

- Fee-for-services such as childcare, aged care facilities and legal services
- Hiring out meeting rooms
- Operating small businesses like op shops, cafes and fix-it shops at the Neighbourhood Centre

Neighbourhood Centre funding as a proportion of total revenue

21% of local community organisations reported that more than half of their total annual revenue in 2023–24 came from the Neighbourhood Centres initiative



Non-financial support

Queensland Government

- The program area and regional staff worked together to support the implementation of the Neighbourhood Centre initiative, provide training and integrate feedback.

Other non-financial support

- Some local councils provided in-kind support
- A range of legal, financial and other professional services were offered for free

Neighbourhood Centre Queensland

Worked to enhance the recognition of Neighbourhood Centres at local, state, and national levels and strengthen their ability to effectively serve and support



Insights and next steps

Insights

- There were no “typical” Neighbourhood Centres
- The core initiative activities of linking to support and creating social connections were being delivered but integrating community action was not universally understood
- Community Connect was being delivered with many stories of impact

Insights from Case Study

- Centres have a strong understanding of local needs but there were natural limits to what they could directly address e.g. housing supply
- Providing critical crisis and emergency relief might naturally shift resources away from more diverse, non-crisis programming
- Centres sometimes had to manage how vulnerable community members used the space to ensure all visitors were safe
- Consultation with Neighbourhood Centres and community members on the design of new buildings might better represent local community needs

Next steps

- Phase 3 will address the key evaluation question:

  How effective is the Queensland government's investment in the Neighbourhood Centre initiative following the 2022-23 funding uplift in maximising outcomes for individuals and Neighbourhood Centres, communities and the community services system?

- Considering best approaches for understanding value for money
- Surveys and data collection activities
- Focus on outcomes