



NORTH WEST COMMUNITY SERVICES

Mr WARREN KIRBY (Riverstone) (17:20): I celebrate Neighbourhood Centre Week and recognise the vital role community hubs play across our nation. Neighbourhood centres are the beating hearts of their communities. They foster connections, social support and shared experiences. They create a welcoming atmosphere where everyone feels heard and valued through collaborative projects, inclusive programs and shared spaces. These centres empower residents to contribute their unique stories and talents, strengthening the fabric of communities. Ultimately, community centres play a critical role in fostering social connections and keeping people rooted in their local areas.

In the rapidly growing Riverstone electorate, North West Community Services is a shining example of the resilience and dedication of those vital institutions. Founded in 1977 by a group of community-focused local women, led by the formidable Dawn Cassell, the centre weathered a major flood only a month after its inception. Despite the flood, the centre provided critical assistance to hundreds of affected families, showcasing its unwavering commitment to the community. That commitment is a legacy that the neighbourhood centre continues to uphold to this day. Fuelled by dedicated volunteers, North West Community Services took root. The tireless efforts of volunteers paved the way for part-time staff, allowing the centre to offer essential services like a minibus for healthcare access and shopping trips for seniors and those feeling isolated.

As grants, donations and government funding became a steady stream, North West Community Services blossomed and its services expanded to enrich the lives of the entire community. I personally benefitted from the centre when I was a troubled and wayward teen in the 1980s. The path to securing funding was not without hurdles. Like many neighbourhood centres nationwide, North West Community Services grappled with access to limited resources, competing priorities and bureaucratic red tape. However, the unwavering commitment and perseverance of the centre's staff, volunteers and supporters proved instrumental in overcoming those challenges. Their dedication ensured the centre's operations continued and its services expanded. Their work is a testament to the resilience and determination of the centre and is reflective of the community it serves.

Since the centre's humble beginning in 1977, the population of Riverstone and the surrounding area served by North West Community Services has exploded. The population of Riverstone and Schofields has grown from approximately 10,000 residents when the neighbourhood centre was formed to approximately 200,000 people in 2023, a massive increase by any measure. The influx of diverse populations, including migrants and young families, creates a complex tapestry of needs for North West Community Services to address. In addition to the host of services provided, the centre acts as a catalyst and empowers newcomers to rebuild their lives and become integrated community members.

Building a cohesive community where new residents feel welcome and existing residents feel supported is paramount. North West Community Services is a crucial partner in achieving this. A dynamic landscape of community needs requires community centres such as North West Community Services to be adequately funded. It is the role of government at all levels to invest in community centres. Only through adequate funding can community centres become more efficient and accessible. Research suggests that providing migrant settlement services through one-stop shop neighbourhood centres, such as North West Community Services, fosters community building while promoting cost-effectiveness. Unlike models where multiple services compete for resources, these centres share facilities and staff expertise and utilise their resources to assist more people.

North West Community Services is more than just a service provider; it is a beacon of hope for many people in my electorate. The centre is a lifeline for our community. It offers a range of crucial services, including support for families and communities. It has specialised programs for people with disabilities, Indigenous Australians, youth and seniors. It offered support during the repeated disasters our area has experienced, with compassionate and expert assistance in complex cases. By intervening early with holistic support, the centre's staff and volunteers make a significant difference in the lives they touch. Their impact is profound. Their work is our community's strength and their emphasis on inclusivity and comprehensive integrated services exemplifies the spirit of Neighbourhood Centre Week.

As we acknowledge the importance of community hubs during Neighbourhood Centre Week, it is vital to recognise the need for sufficient funding to support their initiatives. The commitment shown by North West Community Services to serve the area's diverse population underscores the necessity of investment in neighbourhood centres. We must ensure it has the resources to continue its invaluable work in fostering connected and empowered communities. The dedication and expertise of North West Community Services make it a pleasure to collaborate with in serving my community.