

LCSA responses to Questions on Notice

Inquiry into the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales

6 March 2025

Question 2

Noting LCSA's focus on social infrastructure in your evidence, please outline how and where this intersects with government policy in NSW and federally?

There is no social infrastructure policy at the Commonwealth level. Infrastructure Australia's 2021 Australian Infrastructure Plan, which does cover social infrastructure, does not include community building components, community spaces, and in fact recommends an almost entirely government-led process that makes little mention of the community sector. In any case, the 2021 Plan seems to have stalled after the 2022 federal election.

The NSW Government also has no social infrastructure policy. However, further down in this answer is reference to an upcoming agreement between a NSW state government department and LCSA on the role of neighbourhood centres as social infrastructure.

LCSA is supportive of social infrastructure definitions as outlined in the International Comparative Review on Social Infrastructure by the UK based Institute for Community Studies and the Bennett Institute for Public Policy Cambridge (2023), who note that specific definitions most commonly revolve around three key approaches:

1. Social infrastructure as the physical places that encourage social interaction.
2. Social infrastructure as created through public services, laws, and institutions.
3. Social infrastructure as voluntary and community sector infrastructure.

Social infrastructure includes childcare centres, schools, universities, hospitals, neighbourhood centres, libraries, parks, public pools, art galleries and so on. Different social infrastructure sectors are closely tied and many people need multiple and overlapping services and facilities.

Social infrastructure was audited for the first time by Infrastructure Australia in 2019, which is startlingly recent. In that Audit, Infrastructure Australia notes that, 'social infrastructure is essential to maintaining and improving the quality of life of all Australians. **It is critical for social inclusion and cohesion.** Social infrastructure provides not only the essential services required for communities to function, but also the services that make places liveable and help improve the quality of life for people living there' (p. 393).

The Audit goes on to say that, 'schools, sporting facilities, **community centres** and libraries often play central and multiple roles in these communities. This helps to build social cohesion and identity and can help foster community resilience in times of stress, such as natural disasters'.

The Audit notes that there is a challenge for governments in overcoming the interrelationships between social infrastructure sectors as we operate within siloes. 'A lack of integration across

portfolios can create disjointed social policy and infrastructure investment, and poor outcomes for communities who may receive high-quality access to certain services but not others' (p. 393).'

Shared Commitment to Collaboration – NSW Government acknowledgement of neighbourhood and community centres as social infrastructure is a promising first step

LCSA and the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) are in the process of finalising a Shared Commitment to Collaboration between these two parties and neighbourhood and community centres to work together for strong, vibrant local communities in NSW. This commitment explicitly recognises neighbourhood and community centres (NCCs) as essential social infrastructure, and outlines ways that NCCs can assist the NSW Government to understand issues facing their communities to best drive policy investment. While there is no funding attached, LCSA views this commitment as a critical first step in recognising and resourcing the NCC social infrastructure network in NSW with core funding.

LCSA can send an update to the Committee once this work is finalised.