

Item 3.3

Securing the Future of Community Justice Centres

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

Established and funded by the NSW Government since 1983 under *the Community Justice Centres Act 1983*, Community Justice Centres provide free and confidential mediation by trained professionals who help people solve disagreements (or resolve disputes) without going to court.

They help resolve neighbourhood and strata issues relating to noise and privacy, overhanging trees, dogs and other pets, boundary disputes and access to properties, renovations and building work, and use of common property. They also provide mediation for tenants and landlords, partners and families, and in schools, workplaces, business, and incorporated associations like sporting groups.

An essential part of the justice system

In 2022-2023, Community Justice Centres in NSW received 8,672 inquiries and arranged 749 mediations including court referrals. Some inquiries do not proceed to mediation, and others are resolved before mediation starts. For example, 79% of neighbourhood disputes are resolved by Community Justice Centres - disagreements that may otherwise consume Council and police time.

Community Justice Centres are an essential part of NSW's legal framework. Access to free mediation services allows people to proactively and voluntarily resolve disputes and avoid time-consuming and costly formal action through the over-loaded courts and NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal systems.

Community Justice Centres must continue to ensure community cohesion, particularly as the NSW Government seeks to increase housing density with more people living in close proximity. Continuing to have free and effective ways for people to reconcile their differences is essential.

The future of Community Justice Centres

On [17 November 2024](#), the Sydney Morning Herald reported that the NSW Government intends to repeal the Community Justice Centres Act 1983 and close all Community Justice Centres in NSW by 1 July 2025. There has been no public consultation about the closure with Councils, communities or other relevant stakeholders.

Reports indicate that Community Justice Centres are proposed to be replaced by a limited mediation service administered by the Department of Communities and Justice, that will only deal with court-mandated referrals involving incorporated associations such as sporting groups. The Department of Communities and Justice have since advised the City that they will consult Community Legal Centres about how the closure of Community Justice Centres will impact them.

I support calls from Local Government NSW that access to effective and affordable dispute resolution must not be taken away from our communities – especially during a cost-of-living crisis.

Defunding Community Justice Centres will add another barrier to justice, particularly for people on low incomes and vulnerable members of our community. It will force residents into costly formal legal action, clogging the courts and putting even more strain on our stretched Community Legal Centres, delaying dispute resolution for no real benefit.

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

(A) Council note:

- (i) Community Justice Centres are an essential part of NSW's legal framework that provide free access to dispute resolution and mediation services avoiding time-consuming and costly formal action through the over-loaded courts and NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal systems; and
- (ii) recent media reports that the NSW Government intends to repeal the Community Justice Centres Act 1983 and close all Community Justice Centres in NSW by 1 July 2025 to be replaced with a limited mediation service administered by the Department of Communities and Justice that will only deal with certain court-mandated referrals; and

(B) the Lord Mayor be requested to write to the NSW Attorney General and the Minister for Local Government calling on the NSW Government to:

- (i) continue funding the full suite of services currently provided by Community Justice Centres in NSW; and
- (ii) conduct a review into Community Justice Centres in consultation with relevant stakeholders including the community to assess the benefits of Community Justice Centres including potential cost savings for NSW Court and administrative systems and identify service improvements.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE AO

Lord Mayor