



Western Sydney: local issues – doing democracy

policy proposals for the NSW election



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About Western Sydney Community Forum

Western Sydney Community Forum (WSCF) is a peak regional community-based organisation committed to social justice principles, meeting the needs of community groups and other relevant local and regional organisations for resourcing and representation to enable them to improve and maintain the quality of life for the residents of Western Sydney

WSCF has a cross-regional membership of over 200 community-based organisations providing services and resources to the residents of Western Sydney. WSCF represents organisations working in the Local Government Areas of Auburn, Bankstown, Baulkham Hills, Blacktown, Blue Mountains, Camden, Campbelltown, Fairfield, Hawkesbury, Holroyd, Liverpool, Parramatta, Penrith and Wollondilly.

WSCF works to build strong, organised communities by bridging the divide between communities and policy-makers at local, regional, state and national levels. As a capacity building and advocacy organisation, WSCF ensures a voice for people working daily with the challenges facing the region, connecting those too often left out.

WSCF enjoys widespread support and extensive networks amongst the community sector in Western Sydney. We work to strengthen partnerships with community-based practitioners, non-government organisations and others committed to finding solutions by bringing together resources, partners and information. We utilise a range of strategies to promote local successes and local leaders.

Elections 2007

The NSW state election will be held on 27th March 2007. A federal election is expected to be held sometime later in 2007.

In the lead-up to the NSW state election the Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS) has released a range of policy proposals under the banner *A Fairer NSW: bold solutions and real results* (see www.fairernsw.net).

Western Sydney Community Forum (WSCF) has worked with NCOSS in the development of many of these policy proposals and will continue to work in partnership with peaks in the lead-up to the state election.

This document builds on the work done by NCOSS. Five issues have been selected from the range of NCOSS proposals as being of particular interest to Western Sydney and being the subject of existing community sector campaigns. The document can support local partnerships with Western Sydney workers around these issues.

The five issues of particular concern to Western Sydney Community Forum are:

- **No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS)**
- **Health-related transport**
- **Provision of Aids and Appliances for People with Disabilities (PADP)**
- **Transport**
- **Workforce issues**

WSCF will continue our work on these issues in the lead up to the state election 2007 and, following on from that, the lead-up to the federal election. The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) has recently released a document *A Fair Go For All Australians* (see www.australiafair.org.au). This document may well provide a basis for consideration of Western Sydney-specific issues during the development of a similar set of policy proposal in the lead-up to the federal election next year.

No Interest Loans Scheme

The No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS) is a community-based program to help low-income people who cannot access affordable credit to buy essential household items such as a washing machine, fridge or medical appliances.

The NILS project was initiated by The Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services in Victoria in 1981 and it maintains the ownership of the NILS trademark.

NCOSS tell us that, of NILS clients in NSW during 2004:

- 54% have dependent children.
- 51% live in public housing, 34% live in private rental.
- 71% of loans were for an amount between \$500 and \$1000.
- Repayment periods average between 47 and 61 weeks.
- Loans are mainly for electrical goods, bills, repairs, heating, second-hand furniture, fridges, freezers, washing machines, car costs, bigger furniture and medical expenses.
- Some larger loans are granted for cars, house repairs, debt consolidation and housing costs such as bonds.
- Since 2001, when Centrepay was introduced, the default rate on loans is less than 1%.
- 35% of repeat loan recipients receive Parent Payment Single and another 35% receive Disability Support Pension.

The NILS Network of NSW is an unfunded project currently coordinated by staff at the Winmalee Neighbourhood Centre.

There are currently 8 registered NILS schemes in Western Sydney servicing 11 local government areas and a population greater than 1,484,000 (ABS, 2001 Census). These 8 NILS schemes are part of the NILS Network of NSW.

The NILS Network of NSW tells us that “in 2005 the NSW NILS Network compiled an overview of statistics from 16 active schemes across NSW. The 16 schemes had a combined capital base of \$360,000 and this base has been recycled to lend loans to the amount of \$949,499. A total of 1,593 clients received these loans, with 688 still current.” (NILS Network of NSW, 2006, p 4)

Currently NILS projects rely on unfunded resources from auspicing organisations for the administration of each loan and support for each client. “The loans rely on and build social capital (trust, reciprocity, skills, knowledge and social connectedness) created by the cooperation of local groups, often auspiced by a locally-based agency and capitalised by grants from the philanthropic sector ... business ... and government.” (NILS Network of NSW, 2006, p5).

Organisations in Western Sydney auspicing NILS projects reported to WSCF that these staff resources need recurrent funding to ensure that the viability of the NILS projects are not compromised.

In March 2006 the NILS Network of NSW submitted a request to the State Government for recurrent funding to pay for staff hours to administer the existing NILS projects. Currently the coordination of the NILS Network of NSW relies on the unfunded work of the Winmalee Neighbourhood Centre.

The National Australia Bank (NAB) recently announced a grant of \$3.2m as a capital base to support of the NILS project nationally.

The recent sponsorship announcement by NAB makes the request for funding for administration and client support more important. Recurrent funding will ensure that NILS projects are able to access and use this privately-provided capital base to maximum effect for disadvantaged people.

Policy proposal

WSCF supports the submission from the NILS Network of NSW requesting recurrent funding for the existing NILS schemes to provide administration and client support for each project.

WSCF supports the request for recurrent funding to support the work of the NILS Network of NSW.

Health-related transport

Health services are a major generator of demand for transport services. Lack of transport to health services has a significant impact on those who experience transport disadvantage – people who through illness, financial constraints or disability have an inability to access their usual forms of transport.

Whilst some funds are available through the Transport for Health project with the creation of Health Related Transport Networks and employment of Health Transport Co-ordinators, these funds are available in rural areas only.

Metropolitan areas, regardless of the distances and time travelled to reach health services were excluded. This has a significant effect in outer urban areas. For example, the average transport time for Blue Mountains residents to access specialist health services is 90 minutes each way, a timescale repeated across many areas of Sydney.

Ongoing discussions between State government agencies have failed to resolve the issue of who is responsible for providing transport assistance to health services for Home and Community Care (HACC) clients, leaving their need unmet. The needs of other transport disadvantaged groups remain unaddressed.

To reduce the unmet need generated by transport demand to health services, and ensure equitable access to the broad range of health-related destinations, especially for health-related transport disadvantaged people, both an increase in funding as well as support and funding to develop innovative approaches is required.

Transport must not be a barrier to good health.

Policy proposal

WSCF recommends the Ministry of Transport, Department of Health and Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care address unresolved issues of responsibility for client travel.

WSCF recommends funding is expanded for services to ensure transport disadvantaged patients are able to access all health-related services, including specialists, allied health, dental services and private hospitals.

WSCF recommends that funding to the Transport for Health program is increased to include metropolitan areas.

WSCF recommends \$500,000 funding is provided to the Passenger Choice project for Demand Responsive Transport software to improve co-ordination between existing transport resources.

WSCF recommends hospital bed management and health-related appointment scheduling is improved.

WSCF recommends the Ministry of Transport establish and support on-going Transport Forums to develop partnerships with all transport providers and stakeholders, including for health-related transport.

Provision of Aids and Appliances for People with Disabilities

The Provision of Aids and Appliances for People with Disabilities (PADP) assists people with a permanent or long-term disability to live and participate in their community by providing appropriate equipment, aids and appliances.

People on low income and children and young people under the age of 16 are eligible for the full range of equipment provided by PADP. People on higher income may qualify for equipment, aids and appliances which cost in excess of \$800.

People who receive assistance through PADP are asked to make a payment of \$100 towards the cost of items they have received. They will be required to make one payment of \$100 in any financial year. Some higher income earners are required to make a payment of 20% of the cost of the item.

Equipment provided includes wheelchairs, walking frames and sticks, pressure care mattresses and cushions, beds, communication devices, continence items and personal assistance items (shower commodes, bath seats).

The PADP budget is currently \$22million. 48% of expenditure is provided to assist a person's mobility and 20% of expenditure assists in providing items for continence management.

The Physical Disability Council of NSW says that "failure to provide aids and equipment in a timely manner means that people with disabilities experience greater difficulty or may not be able to go about their daily activities such as work, school, leisure, and shopping."

The Provision of Aids and Appliances for People with Disabilities (PADP) program requires an urgent increase in funding to adequately meet the demands of unmet and escalating needs for equipment.

Continence Foundation Australia tells us that in Western Sydney there are 70 to 80 adults on the waiting list, who will wait up to 2 years for a service. Additionally there are 7 to 10 children on the waiting list who will also wait for up to 2 years.

Continence Foundation Australia claims the waiting lists for PADP have been this long for at least 4 years. It is widely thought that these waiting lists are not actually a true indication of need, as a lot of people enquire about PADP but when they find out the waiting period they don't bother to join the queue.

In *A Fairer NSW: bold solutions and real results*, NCOSS claims that PADP “urgently requires a significant increase in funding to cope with both unmet and escalating needs for equipment for people with disabilities. NCOSS asks for an increase of \$15.5 million in the first year and then increases until waiting lists and unmet need is addressed.” (2006, p15)

Policy proposal

WSCF recommends that the PADP budget is increased to \$37.5 million (an increase of \$15.5 million) with increases over the next 4 years to address waiting lists and unmet need.

Transport

Recent research by WSCF and the University of Western Sydney, *Transport and Social Exclusion* (2006) found that:

- Just over half of Sydney ABS districts contain transport disadvantaged populations (that is, disadvantaged populations living in an area where transport and/or other facilities and services are difficult to access or unavailable).
- Almost two thirds of these transport disadvantaged people live in Western Sydney – some 700,000 people.

The distribution of unemployed people living in transport disadvantaged areas is concentrated in Western Sydney, where 76% of unemployed people without a car live in transport disadvantaged areas.

In comparison with the rest of Sydney, Western Sydney has a significantly higher number of socio-economically disadvantaged people affected by transport disadvantage.

Western Sydney residents experience longer travel times and higher travel costs. This adversely affects their opportunities to access employment, education and health services as well as recreational and social activities. Transport disadvantage denies individuals, families and communities the opportunity to participate in society and results in social exclusion.

Increased fuel prices have a particularly strong impact in Western Sydney. Due to Western Sydney's poor public transport system the region has a high dependency on the private vehicle. For those already on the economic margins increased fuel prices increase transport disadvantage and social exclusion.

While fuel prices are not within the state government jurisdiction, the provision of a fair and equitable public transport system is.

Bus reform

To date the focus of bus reform has been on providing services for people to get to and from work. Focusing on this to the exclusion of other services is likely to increase transport disadvantage.

In an attempt to develop more efficient peak time services walking distances to bus stops is lengthening. This makes it more difficult for some people to access any service at all. Off peak services with 'insufficient' patronage are being cut to increase peak hour services.

Community Kilometres

Currently contracts for the 15 bus regions in metropolitan Sydney specify that the Director-General may request the bus operator provide up to 20,000 kilometres outside of regular routes to community organisations. This is known as 'Community Kilometres'.

Community Kilometres are not funded and are distributed equally across Sydney regardless of need.

Fares

Different fares apply to different transport services, such as bus, train or ferry.

Passengers are frequently forced to buy a new ticket each time they use a different form of transport. This can make public transport very costly if you need to use several different services to get to a destination. It also acts as a disincentive to using public transport.

Low income households, often located away from frequent public transport services, are disproportionately affected by fare inequities.

Policy proposal

WSCF recommends the introduction of integrated fares to reduce travel costs.

WSCF recommends the introduction of a concession regime based on principles that target socio-economically disadvantaged groups first.

WSCF recommends the establishment of a Bus Reform Funding Package that includes funding to:

- trial Community Kilometres delivered on a need basis
- speed up planning and implementing bus priority on strategic corridors
- install bus seats, shelters and signs at appropriate bus stops
- develop a Sydney Parking Strategy to ensure well patronised bus services.

WSCF recommends:

- the implementation of all EasyAccess stations within 5 years
- the Cumberland Rail line is brought back to full service
- the expansion of the rail network system to the northwest, southwest and cross city to relieve pressure on the network and provide for growth in new urban areas
- funding of a Major Rail and Bus Interchange Investment Program to make interchanges efficient and speed up transfers between modes

WSCF recommends a 'whole of community response' to transport exclusion by:

- funding Transport Improvement Planners within Local Councils to champion public transport, similar to the RTA Road Safety Officers Program
- fund community-based Transport Development Workers in local government areas to facilitate community input into transport planning processes

WSCF recommends the enhancement of the Local Council Bike Planning Funding Program that establishes safe routes to schools, shops, recreational facilities and transport nodes by bike, a cheap and healthy form of transport.

Workforce Issues

Community-based non-government organisations deliver services to a range of marginalised groups at a local and regional level. Their on-going survival is vital to the continued and expanded delivery of these services.

There are a number of pressures on community-based, non-government organisations in Western Sydney that may threaten their viability, including:

- the challenge of balancing grants from a number of funding bodies,
- labour market trends,
- the introduction of technology,
- changing accountability requirements,
- legislative compliance costs including Occupational Health and Safety, and
- the introduction of the Federal *WorkChoices* legislation.

Workforce Demographics

The Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (2006) estimates that in the next 25 years:

- The number of people in Australia over the age of 65 will increase from 539,000 to almost 1.4 million.
- The proportion of people in Australia with a severe or profound disability aged 85 or over will increase from 14% to 25%.
- In 2001 there were 57 carers for every 100 people. This is projected to fall to 35 carers for every 100.

The Western Sydney ageing population is the most rapidly increasing in the Sydney Metropolitan Area with a projected:

- 34.6% increase in the number of people aged over 70 years from 2001 to 2016.
- 56.4% increase the number of people aged 85 years plus from 2001 to 2016.

There are already extremely long waiting lists for Home and Community Care (HACC) services which care for older people and people with disability in their own homes. NSW needs to plan for this growth in the

ageing population. There is an urgent need to recruit younger skilled workers to address this projected increased need.

Recruitment and retention

The recruitment and retention of skilled workers is critical to the success of small community-based organisations in Western Sydney.

The Community Services industry is generally finding it difficult to attract and retain skilled workers:

- There are shortages of workers in child care, residential aged care and mental health.
- The annual rate of staff turnover in disability employment nationally is 27%; almost double that of the general workforce.

Poorer wages and conditions and lack of career pathways discourage skilled workers from staying in small non-government organisations. Services are using 'unskilled' workers to fill these gaps.

The provision of accessible, affordable, appropriate training opportunities and support mechanisms is vital to maintain the skill levels of workers and the viability of services.

The retention of skilled workers to support community-based Management Committees is critical to good governance and quality service provision.

Technological Advancement

There has been rapid change in organisational and client information technology to manage information within and across organisations. The need to respond to changing technology may reduce the shelf life of skills, necessitating accelerated skills development, particularly in computer skills.

Regulatory Compliance

The increasing need for regulatory compliance requires time, skill and resources. Provision of accessible, affordable, appropriate training opportunities and support mechanisms to meet accountabilities is vital in maintaining the viability of services.

The report of SNOW Project of August 2004 identified key challenges for small community organisations in the Mt Druitt/Blacktown area. The

Report examined the sustainability of small organisations under threat due to increasing costs in staffing, administration, compliance, accountability, and insufficient government funding. The Report found that most of the small organisations do not have a dedicated manager and that only half those interviewed had paid administrative staff.

Effect of *WorkChoices* legislation

The introduction of the federal government's *WorkChoices* legislation in March 2006 needs to be seen in the context of the already complex, challenging task of running a community service.

NCOSS in *Submission to Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into the Impact of Commonwealth WorkChoices Legislation* considers that the majority of community organisations in NSW continue to be bound by the SACS Award. It acknowledges, however, that for some organisations the definitional issue of a "constitutional corporation" and in particular what constitutes "significant trading" is creating uncertainty and anxiety.

Due to the diversity of services in Western Sydney there is no easy answer on the question of *WorkChoices* eligibility. This uncertainty creates significant risk for community services.

Those who are eligible will need to allocate significant time, resources and expertise to ensure compliance with the Act. For small organisations without specialist HR expertise, additional costs will be incurred to import this support. Those who are not eligible will need a commitment to continued support from the State Government.

Policy proposal

WSCF supports the call by NCOSS for a common human services agency funding policy in NSW that includes a negotiated approach to full indexation and fully funds Award wages at the appropriate professional levels. This policy must also provide longer term funding security to enable realistic strategic and business planning for non-government organisations (see www.fairernsw.net).

WSCF believes that the NSW funding policy must align with the principles contained in the *Working Together for NSW agreement* between the NSW Government and the non-government sector.

WSCF recommends the development of a comprehensive workforce development strategy which includes both current and projected skills shortages in the sector. This strategy must address methods of recruitment and retention of staff and provide better opportunities for professional development and career advancement.

WSCF recommends that the NSW response to the *WorkChoices* legislation includes:

- methods of assisting small community organisations to define their constitutional status; and
- methods of retaining the efficacy of organisations not eligible for *WorkChoices*.

References

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Australian Services Union *WorkChoices and the Social and Community Services Industry*, October 2006

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Frazer Howard and Partners *The Impact of the NSW Department of Community Services Funding Policy on Small Non-Government Organisations*, Western Sydney Community Forum June 2006

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Tirrania Suhood, Chris Marks, Mary Waterford and Voice for SONG *The Way Forward: Tackling the issues confronting small community organisations*, Western Sydney Community Forum March 2006

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For further information

www.wscf.org.au

www.fairernsw.net

www.australiafair.org.au

www.nilsnsw.org.au

www.pdcnsw.org.au

www.ncoss.org.au