



Linkwest Submission to The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry on The future conduct of elections operating during emergency situations

December 2020

Introduction

Linkwest thank the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters for the opportunity to present community insights from WA's Neighbourhood and Community Resource Centre network (Centres) into the future conduct of elections operating during emergency situations.

As the Western Australian (WA) peak body for 140+ regional, remote, and metropolitan Centres, Linkwest work to ensure that WA Centres develop vibrant, inclusive and connected communities that will remain a part of the local landscape for generations to come. WA Centres, like many community-led essential services, risk being under-valued during emergency situations. This was most visibly demonstrated during the WA state COVID -19 lockdown when 96% of Centres remained open for communities.

WA Centres have a high-level of community trust and local knowledge which they use to quickly pivot to meet local needs. They are sought after by local, state and federal agencies for their skills in stretching existing government resources further into regional areas, and also hard to reach urban communities. Centres act as the only essential service in some WA regional areas with less than 3,000 residents.

The extensive local knowledge and skills of WA Centres are recognised as being 'hyper-local', meaning that they benefit individuals, families and communities through the provision of targeted services, support and opportunities within the culture of those regions. Being community-led, they have an unparalleled reach and agility into their community. In previous emergency situations, Centres have gained experience in adapting to the strengths and weakness of various one-size-fits-all policies.

Linkwest propose that federal agencies develop this resource by including direct, long-term partnerships with WA Centres wherever full, national community participation is required. Australia's electoral process is strongly supported by the same civic values driving our sector and Linkwest welcome opportunities to support future elections.

For this submission, Linkwest consulted with its members, many of whom want to play a larger role in future elections - particularly during a Covid-19 lockdown, bushfire or other climate emergency.



Summary

Linkwest has heard many stories in its member surveys to indicate that Centres often step into a sudden demand which arises when existing community services are overwhelmed. Rather than competing with other community groups and even local government, they are relied on when existing strategies fail. The majority of Centres pivoted to working within the restrictions arising from the health pandemic by providing local emergency responses and they continue to maintain emergency readiness knowing that as a volunteer-led 'back-up' plan, they are indeed essential.

The outbreak of COVID-19 saw a dramatic change in Emergency Relief (ER) demands. Due to COVID restrictions, Centres already offering ER support needed to make rapid changes to the way they delivered their services. Many Centres not previously involved in ER provisioning - especially those in regional WA - felt they needed to respond to the needs of their communities. Linkwest witnessed new relief efforts spring up almost overnight based on local knowledge, trusted relationships and a thriftiness typical of community-led enterprises accustomed to being improperly funded.

The functions performed by Centres during the COVID-19 crisis between March and May 2020 were diverse but focused on three outcome areas.

These were:

- **Strengthen communities** by encouraging, supporting, and providing avenues for social connections.
- **Support people**, including vulnerable people, by connecting them to essential services both through direct provision and through referrals to other service providers through partnerships and collaborations.
- **Keep individuals, families, and businesses informed** by sharing clear and relevant guidelines, resources, and information.

Community insights applied to elections held during emergencies

WA Centres were consulted for this Inquiry and their response was largely positive while expressing a genuine desire to make elections safer for their communities. A significant number of Centres already have substantial experience both as a polling venue and assisting with early postal voting.

Of the Inquiry's six terms of reference Linkwest members provided insights on three.

These are:

1) Access to polling places during times of natural disasters

- the importance of trusted networks
- Infrastructure upgrades
- Use of online/electronic voting

2) Introduction of safety mechanisms

- PPE stockpiles
- Early staff training
- More security vetting categories for volunteer staff



3) Alternative voting methods

- Innovation: Pop-Up Kits, Early Voting, Drive-Through Voting
- Spread out voting over several days.

1. Access to polling places during times of natural disasters

The importance of trusted networks

124 of WA's 146 hyper-local, community-led Centres are rural, regional or remote, demonstrating an extensive community reach. Across the network, over 1,000 community groups and services are hosted and supported by their local Centre. Each week around 18,500 people visit local Centre while the network itself employs approximately 750 people and works with over 2,000 volunteers. A 2019 Linkwest member survey calculated that Centre volunteers collectively contribute more than 2,500 hours to their community.

Many Centres have been embedded in their communities for up to 40 years, and – as trusted organisations - their community outreach activities and outcomes are experienced as authentic. This trust has helped Centres to map vulnerable groups and tailor communication in the more subtle languages and cultures of Place.

Centre Managers provided the following feedback about the use of trusted networks:

“As a trusted organisation, some of our service users may feel safer voting here rather than in a venue that they are less familiar with”.

“As a neighbourhood centre, we could make our premises available for people to be able to cast their vote, thus relieving crowding at other venues”.

“We could maintain a register of “at risk” members of our community to guarantee they can be reached in case of emergency”.

“As an essential service provider, we were open throughout the lockdown and are now experienced enough to do this in any future emergency going forward”.

“Depending on the guidelines for assistance we could offer help to people with intellectual disabilities or mobility or other health issues or the CALD demographic”.

“Education sessions could possibly be useful”.

Infrastructure upgrades

While many WA Centre premises are leased, they are often supported by long-term arrangements which provide a degree of stability. Linkwest did not find that significant investment was required in infrastructure for one-off elections, rather, they sought to increase the use of outside spaces, temporary covers and new technologies supporting election officials to relocate voting during an emergency. Those who did request upgrades did so mostly to accommodate disability access and access for seniors, but this is an ongoing issue of long-term sustainability for the WA sector which falls outside of the terms of reference for this Inquiry.

One manager in a more isolated WA region expressed concern about the reliability of the NBN and the need for electricity generators. They considered a well-functioning NBN equal in importance to their Centre's physical infrastructure indicating a wide cultural acceptance of online voting.



WA Centres recognise that they often under-charge government agencies for the use of their premises which come with a very high-level of place-based recognition and trust. This trust has been built up over decades of unpaid volunteer hours and Linkwest would like to see a new baseline hire-fee for all WA Centres in recognition of this.

Centre Managers provided the following feedback on infrastructure:

"[Our] building is maintained to a high standard".

"For COVID related voting, we have the capacity to limit numbers into the polling place, we have separate access points for entry and exit for this situation as well".

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"Have a guaranteed and high-speed internet connection. NBN did not go to all towns because they did not meet the criteria based on statistics at a given "place and time". Statistics should be revisited at regular intervals to reflect the communities changing "population" and eligibility.

"I am not sure that building upgrades would be necessary. I think it would be more appropriate to use existing infrastructure".

"We are co-located with a GP who has a power generator which is important where we are located".

"We [can see] investment in emergency back-up power supply".

"We would need to rent rooms in the facility behind us, which would cost approx. \$500 (inc GST); and would need to pay staff for the day and employ cleaners to clean surfaces between uses, approx. \$4,500 (although the staff may be employed by the electoral commission if they are acting in an official capacity, reducing this cost to \$750 for 2 x cleaners)".

"If this were to be a network wide initiative per participating CRC, then an umbrella fee for service would properly be fine. Maybe a per head payment could work also? (Some CRC's might help 500 people and others 50 so per head might be the more fair option for work involved)".

"The AEC pay for the USE of our CRC as a polling booth - \$250 for the day if I remember correctly. They also pay people to operate as election workers – (I was the Polling Booth supervisor at the last Fed Election for which the AEC paid me which saved the CRC paying me the hours I was here – 7.30am – 10pm.)".

"Could we be registered (and paid) as an early voting centre".

"As a costing is hard, but I suppose they could do a scenario by working out the average time per vote needed to assist or facilitate the process and multiply this on a per hourly basis which is both fair and accommodates the unusual circumstances say average of \$55 to \$65 per hour plus cost of centre use".



Use of online/electronic voting

By far the most feedback Linkwest received was in the use of new technologies to develop alternative voting options for Centre users. Centre managers felt very confident to adapt to new technologies after dealing with Covid-19. After rapidly moving their face-to-face services online during the lockdown, many agreed that their communities might feel safer using online voting and other electronic systems, as long as there are proper cleaning, staff training and social distancing procedures formally put in place.

Centres see a role for themselves in building community trust in online voting and identifying the most vulnerable, isolated and least capable of learning new skills. They are interested in receiving training to further train volunteers as digital mentors, and raised the issue of security vetting of volunteers and how this can help or hinder the “hands-on” nature of emergency situations where every person is needed at short notice. All Centres acknowledged that moving to online/electronic voting would require funding for training at all levels from paid staff to volunteers.

Centre Managers provided the following feedback on using online and electronic voting:

“COVID has changed how we think about many things and maybe there is a future to have online voting - if this was to eventuate centres would be well placed to provide education and assistance”.

“Better still would be if voting is fully digitalised so no one has to touch anything except wipe screens to keep [them] safe for next user”.

“They could stop doing the manual process of crossing off names on a list and have a digital database that allows a person to scan a form of identity such as a driver’s licence or another identifying card, seniors, WWC, etc. Centres again would be well placed to provide assistance in this space. They could provide tablets similar [to those] used to streamline the process and allow many multiple points for voting not just in one location”.

“Perhaps the form could be designed in conjunction with a scanner program that would see a correct completed form put through a scanner so staff only have to deal with “donkey” vote counts that are not recognised by the scanner - that would limit the handling of papers by multiple people reducing risks of contamination”.

“If an election were to be conducted online, I can see an avenue for us providing access to computers and internet to allow members of our community who don’t have these facilities at home, to cast their vote.”

“If things were electronic then staff would need to be trained and that would still be costed out at \$45 an hour and dependent on what the new technology was then a certain amount of days would be assigned to upskill staff – who would then in turn train vollies...”

“The approximate cost [of devices] would depend entirely on how many and what type the Government [or] Electoral Commission choose. We could also provide education sessions in advance, so that voters with poor or no digital literacy can participate on Election Day”.



“We could support people to lodge electronic votes, if there was an electronic voting system. There are currently no trustworthy electronic voting systems I am aware of”.

“One suggestion would be the AEC supply a number of laptops that can be rotated through CRC’s in the three months leading up to an election so each Centre can use [them] to train and then pass them onto the next Centre. This would save them supplying every Centre with training laptops, although if we kept them that would be a good way to update laptops every 4 years”.

“We would certainly need more IT equipment if electronic voting systems were utilised, and extra paid staff would be necessary as well”.

B) Introduction of safety mechanisms

PPE Stockpiles & Cleaning Services

WA Centres, like all community organisations, struggled in 2020 with sourcing appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Centres see the cost of stock-piling PPE as an area where they require some funding support. The funds requested were not large amounts but, for community-led Centres already supporting patterns of unconscious cost-shifting from an increasing number of government agencies, these small amounts are difficult to raise. Additional cleaning costs during an election at the same time as an emergency was also raised as an area of deep concern.

Early staff training

Staff training is the second highest priority for WA Centres after the use of online/electronic voting technologies and considered a safety issue in terms of Covid-19. Currently Centre managers and volunteers are stretched to their maximum capacity while continuing to accept and train new volunteers. They will not stop doing this because they have strong civic values and know that if they do not participate in emergencies, it will directly affect their themselves and their friends and families.

Paid staff do not all have equal access to professional development and training courses. WA Centre support for elections during an emergency would require an equal, network-wide investment in staff training in areas as diverse as digital mentoring, OSH, and the same training provided to temporary election staff.



Centre Managers provided the following feedback on early staff training:

“Cost is the problem - most centres are busy and to add this to their duties would mean additional staff for this one-off state event every 4 years plus training of staff would be a must”.

“So, say staff were trained over two days that would cost say \$315 per day for 7-hour day x however many staff were being trained. Then we would again charge \$45 an hour for the staff to in turn train volunteers”.

“Staff [need] to be kept informed of possible emergency situations and have the most up to date skills and training”.

“We could host training sessions if it’s deemed necessary. We could also provide resources”.

“We are lucky in that our A/V room can train up to 20 people to utilise new software if it came to electronic voting”.

More security vetting categories for volunteer staff

Linkwest found complex insights around the area of security vetting procedures and how current procedures restrict the number of experienced volunteers they could use in an emergency election situation. Centres are looking for a flexible range of paid positions with different security vetting protocols to fully participate in elections as a sudden back-up polling venue in an emergency.

Centre Managers provided the following feedback around more security vetting categories for volunteer staff

“I think they [the WA Centre network] would need more staff but this will be a problem to provide if they need all the security stuff”.

“I could only do this if they only needed driver’s licences as proof of who the staff are. The normal electoral requirement needs police clearances, birth certificates and passports etc”.

C) Alternative voting methods

Innovation: Pop-Up Kits, Early Voting, Drive-Through Voting

A long history of ‘making-do’ has forced Centre managers, staff and volunteers to become extremely creative and open to new ideas. This is their strength. WA Centres suggested some innovations to further extend their trusted networks.

Investing in Centres to blend new technologies with their relational-networks has great potential. With strong name-recognition in small communities, WA Centres believe they can effectively use pre-designed and locally manufactured “Pop-Up Kits” to create polling booths at short-notice in any part of their suburb, town or regional area. Collaborating with the Australian Government to design these products - which would also create local jobs - would be highly valued by WA Centres.



Linkwest found different understandings of what “mobile” polling might look like or achieve. A majority want Federal Government investment in mobile devices, improving NBN regional access, PPE stockpiles and staff training so Centres can prepare their communities to vote safely during an emergency. Some Centres felt very strongly that early polling was the preferred process for WA’s network of Centres and they were uniquely placed to fill this role.

The idea of “drive-through voting” was inspired by Covid-19-testing clinics. In the event of a severe Covid-19 lockdown, it may prove useful to combine digital devices with secure apps “to collect both health testing and voting information. WA Centres recognise that security is an ongoing concern and encourage the Government to continue to develop safe and secure online and electronic voting options to give WA Centres a safe and flexible option when they are called on to ‘step-in’ and support overwhelmed election officials, polling booths or other election events in their local communities

Centre Managers provided the following feedback on Innovation such as Pop-Up Kits, Early Voting, Drive-Throughs:

“Perhaps they could design pop up booths that come in a kit with full Covid-19 safety screens and a voting screen for online voting”.

“We are very limited with how many people can actually be accommodated in the building, but we have a large garden with an equally large undercover area which would comfortably fit a series of portable polling booths and tables for workers to sit at, including social distancing”.

“With the Early Voting, we used our own computers and the WAEC gave us secure log ins, so we could access the whole state and people from any electorate could vote. We had to have a secure/lockable area that completed votes and unused votes could be locked every night. We had to send completed votes via a security group that the WAEC organised once a week and then after 6pm on the Friday before Election Day, so that there was no confusion between early voting and polling day.”

“Another suggestion, which I think has been used in some of the Metropolitan areas, is a ‘drive through’ option for voting [where] ... staff can go out to people in cars who need assistance (which is allowed normally during elections), but having CRC staff (people who the community trust) would be a benefit”.



Spread out voting over several days

WA Centre managers who want to participate more in elections suggest that voting be spread over several days, rather than one day, will make voting safer in an emergency. They say that less rigid time frames are needed to overcome the many unexpected barriers that occur in emergencies.

Centre Managers provided the following feedback on spreading out voting over several days:

“Perhaps voting could take part over a period of time instead of 1 day to allow for less crowds and [for] social distancing. Centre could be an early voting place”.

“For our Centre, which has limited floor space, it would be too disruptive to host a traditional election “Day”, but if they held it over days and/or early voting using digital voting on specially designed tablets for this purpose, [then] we would be able to accommodate and assist/educate our community members before and during the [election] process”.

WA’s Neighbourhood and Community Resource Centres are at the coal face of the community dealing with the stress and fear of seismic shifts in our health and economic security. They are on-the-ground, trusted, capable and connected. As a community-led network, Centres will continue to perform any essential service needed, but Linkwest urges Government to consider the volume and complexity of tasks and services that they expect communities to deliver for themselves and fund them accordingly.

In the event of an emergency during an election in WA, Centres are uniquely prepared to offer their place-based knowledge of local culture, community relationships, and experience working with a wide range of government services. In this context Linkwest provide the following recommendation based on insights from WA’s Neighbourhood and Community Resource Centre network.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Australian Government work with WA Centres to:

- 1) Explore and offer WA Centres a range of staffing options with different levels of security vetting so Centre’s and volunteers can assist election officials conduct elections during an emergency.
- 2) Educate WA Centres – and WA communities more generally – about online/electronic voting options as early as possible and partner with WA Centres to build trust in online voting systems.
- 3) Acknowledge WA Centre’s high-level of community trust and unofficial role as a connected, established and state-wide community ‘back-up’ centres by setting a baseline hire fee for the use of venues during elections held during emergencies.
- 4) Provide grants for WA Centres to upgrade their staff training in digital mentoring, mapping of vulnerable voters in their local areas, and strategies to use their Centre to ensure no Voter is left behind.
- 5) Partner with WA Centres to develop mobile “Pop-Up Voting” kits involving local unemployed people, small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) and Centre staff and volunteers.



Linkwest welcomes the opportunity to discuss the resourcefulness, innovation and community trust of WA Centres at future public hearings and assist the Committee to with the findings of its Inquiry.

If you or your staff require any further information, please feel free to contact Linkwest's CEO Jane Chilcott on [REDACTED] or Linkwest's Senior Research Officer [REDACTED]

Yours Faithfully,

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