Overall, the study confirmed that community centres can provide a natural partner and existing infrastructure for health promotion, but may often be underutilized in this regard. Community centres also have potential to provide an entry point for strengthening social capital in neighbourhood contexts, particularly around support networks and participation, which have been shown to be positively related to health. The value of the community centre comes not only from the support provided formally with programs and activities but also informally through provision of a safe comfortable place for interaction. It is therefore critical for community centres to be attuned and responsive to community needs and desires in relation to the programs and services it provides and the manner in which they are delivered.

Critical success factors for addressing determinants of health through Community Centres were identified through the Connected Communities project. The diagram below reflects factors that are potentially applicable and transferrable to other community centres.

### Aims of the Project

The project was divided into three research stages. Each stage is summarized in the adjacent diagram.

- **Stage 1: Household Survey**
  - Aimed at exploring community attitudes towards community centres as a setting for social and family support activities.
  - 5,200 local residents were randomly selected and invited to complete a self-administered questionnaire.
  - 1,530 surveys were returned representing a 45% response rate.

- **Stage 2: Centre Attendees Survey**
  - Aimed at investigating what attitudes participants to Ottey Centre activities and effective strategies and programs to encourage community engagement.
  - Conveniently Centre attendees were approached by a trained Ottey Centre staff member and invited to complete a self-administered questionnaire.
  - 211 surveys were returned, an estimated response rate of 79%.

- **Stage 3: Stakeholder Interviews**
  - Aimed at identifying the critical success factors used in the community centre to promote health and overcome social and environmental barriers to health.
  - 12 key informants and 2 group interviews were conducted by UWA research staff.

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**Community Centres**

Community centres, or neighbourhood houses/family centres, are local organisations that provide social, educational and recreational activities for residents to participate in programs such as playgroups and classes, and provide family support services.
Findings from the Household Survey

Most respondents were female (68%) aged between 25 and 54 years. Two thirds were employed and 70% lived with a spouse or partner and 40% with children. On average, respondents had lived in the area for 10 years.

Respondents who had support from and interaction with others living in the South Lake area were more likely to have a high level of neighbourhood cohesion than those who have had little or no support.

Just over half of survey respondents had visited a community centre (52%).

Respondents most frequently stated that the purpose of community centres was to bring people together, provide support for families and activities for the community.

Regardless of whether they personally visited a community centre respondents felt that Centres are worthwhile places to have in a suburb. Community Centres were considered by most people as a good place to meet local people and a good place to get advice on health issues.

Those who have never visited a community centre tend to be less aware of the range of programs and services centres can offer.

Findings from the Ottey Centre Attendees Survey

Participation in Ottey Centre programs and activities was explored through the attendees survey.

Most of the Ottey Centre users who responded to the survey were female (88%), care for children (72%) and had been visiting the Ottey Centre for at least 2 years (74%).

Network analysis was used to record how each attendee engaged in the Ottey Centre, whether it be through participating in the education programs, using support services such as counseling, or informal contact such as dropping in for a cuppa or chat.

Almost half (47%) of participants were first encouraged to visit the Ottey Centre by a friend and most first started by attending a program such as a playgroup, art class or health education group (71%).

The survey also looked at the what attendees experience through being involved with the Centre and the relationships between staff and attendees. As well as participating in structured activities many participants also enjoyed informal contact such as having a cuppa and a chat most times they visited the Centre. Most participants reported receiving social support from Ottey Centre staff, such as being able to ask a favour, being able to talk about problem or finding out information.

The results were reflective of the Centre’s success in providing an environment which nurtures in particular, the engagement of Indigenous people through both formal and informal contact.

The strength of the Ottey Centre’s health promotion activities was apparent in the network survey as people attended multiple health related services and programs (i.e. attend the Free Street Doctor clinic and the diabetes education class).

Findings from Stakeholder Interviews

Stakeholders were asked about their perceptions of the role of community centres, including opportunities for health promotion, impact on relationships, perceived facilitators and barriers to attendance. The interviews also explored the challenges and success factors for the Ottey Centre.

Interviewees recognised community centres as well placed to address some of the underlying determinants of health. It was clear from the interviews that some centres are limited by funding or see their role more narrowly (e.g. as a community venue and place for structured activity). In contrast the Ottey Centre was described as having a very holistic and ‘upstream’ approach to supporting and encouraging well-being.

The range of programs and activities offered, and the opportunity for people to drop into the Centre for an informal chat or cuppa were among strengths noted by stakeholders. It was also noted that the Ottey Centre provides an easier and less intimidating setting for people to access services or information (e.g. relating to government welfare, financial advice, health).

"It is one of the few places you would see the Aboriginal community, they feel comfortable to go there, which you don’t see very often. This may be due to the fact that they have people from their community working there. There is a relaxedness about it. It is small, people can come and go... There is that feeling of ownership, the community owns the centre."

(Stakeholder)

"It is practical health, no one is ever turned away"

(Stakeholder)

What are the implications of the project?

The findings of the Connected Communities project demonstrate that Community Centres can be a conduit for health in a number of ways.

This project found evidence to support the value of the Ottey Centre in providing a hub for the community both physically and through provision of various programs, activities and information by;

- Facilitating social contact including the development of friendships and social support networks.
- Providing access to educational and recreational classes as well as family support services and a range of health services and health education;
- Offering a place in the community where people can drop in, visit and chat without having to have a specific purpose or activity;
- Providing a venue with an established community identity and networks that can be utilised by other groups;
- Providing a setting in which people from different ‘walks of life’ can meet and interact, this has flow on benefits for the fostering of tolerance, understanding and trust.

Community Centres as a conduit for health via:

- Building community connectedness
- Promoting health (formally and informally)
- Facilitating access to other community services and support
- Addressing social determinants of health
- Supporting and reaching those most disadvantaged
- Capacity building