

Evaluation of the Community Development Network of the ACT & Region (CDNet)

Prepared by: Rhiân Williams, Independent Evaluator
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Executive Summary

It's such a valuable service to know what is happening in the community sector. It's helped me find collaboration opportunities, relevant training and great connections. It's also been a really valuable place to advertise our own program and events, and we get a really good response from posting to the network.

- CDNet Subscriber Comment 2022 Survey

Findings

This evaluation has identified that CDNet is valued by subscribers, as being **relevant**, **effective** and **efficient**, with a statistically reliable, 2022 survey of CDNet subscribers finding that:

- **99%** of respondents agree CDNet is a **relevant** service
- **93%** of respondents agree CDNet is **effective** in meeting its Terms of Reference
- **95%** of respondents agree CDNet provides **efficient value for money** to the ACT community sector and **93%** agree that CDNet provides **efficient value for money** to the ACT Government
- **95%** of respondents agree that if CDNet did not exist, it would cost them more time and money to share information currently shared through CDNet
- **90%** of respondents agree that if CDNet did not exist, it would cost them more time and money to access the kinds of workshops and **92%** agree that it would cost more time and money to access similar network opportunities as currently gained by accessing CDNet.

Independent economic modelling, using very conservative assumptions, has identified that CDNet delivers:

- **Cost efficiencies** for CDNet subscribers with an estimated value of \$50,500 per year
- **Cost savings** to CDNet subscribers with an estimated value of \$95,000 per year.

The **total** of estimated **cost efficiencies and savings** to CDNet subscribers is **\$145,500** per year which represents **9.7 times** CDNet's current level of funding.

Applying a sensitivity analysis and reducing these estimates by 50% still results in a total estimate of cost savings and efficiencies of \$72,750, which is 4.8 times CDNet's current level of funding.

The Independent Evaluator (IE) is confident in stating that CDNet is a relevant, effective and efficient service that is providing the ACT Government with a very significant positive return on investment (ROI) and remains well worth supporting on economic grounds. The economic modelling also strongly indicates that any increases in CDNet funding, which is one of the recommendations of this report, would also deliver an excellent, positive ROI.

The experience of CDNet matches closely to the issues noted in *Counting the Costs: Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector*¹ (*Counting the Costs*), a report prepared for the ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) on behalf of the ACT Community Services Industry Strategy Steering Group (ISSG) and the ACT Government, including that:

- it has faced significant long-term underfunding
- essential employment costs are unfunded, leaving the service dependant on a significant volunteer commitment by paid staff, well in excess of the number of hours of paid employment, which holds significant risks for sustainability and succession planning
- increases in wages and wage on-costs are not adequately covered by funding, resulting in rising cost pressures for CDNet and cross-subsidisation of the program by ACTCOSS
- it has been ‘starved’ of essential funds, which, in turn, has fuelled a ‘starvation cycle’ that has reduced its capacity for innovation, efficiency and growth.

Although CDNet is itself, chronically and significantly underfunded, it is still delivering a highly valuable and valued service. It also provides efficiencies and cost savings to the ACT Government through the services it provides to its subscribers and through them to the broader ACT Community.

Recommendations

This evaluation report makes five recommendations, which are as follows:

- ◆ **Recommendation 1:** *That CDNet continue to receive Community Services Directorate (CSD) funding as it provides a valued and valuable service, and that this be on a recurrent basis.*
- ◆ **Recommendation 2:** *That CSD meet with representatives of ACTCOSS, CDNet staff and Steering Committee to discuss the current level of funding, with a view to determining an appropriate increase. This discussion should consider the unpaid 2019/20 grant, assessment of the number of staff hours provided on a voluntary basis, estimated costs to action suggestions for improvement, as noted in Recommendation 4, as well as the amount for administrative and other costs currently cross-subsided by ACTCOSS and any existing CDNet accruals.*
- ◆ **Recommendation 3:** *That following this discussion, and any concomitant increase of CDNet’s funding, all subsequent funding should be indexed in line with Recommendation 1 of the Counting the Costs Report.*
- ◆ **Recommendation 4:** *That CDNet consider Survey Respondents’ suggestions for improvement and identify the estimated costs to action those seen as most relevant, needed and/or cost effective.*
- ◆ **Recommendation 5:** *That CSD should develop ongoing, sustainable community education and training processes to develop the capacity of both CSD and the community sector to develop and undertake simple, strategic and effective monitoring and evaluation approaches.*

In conclusion, these recommendations are based on a range of evidence sources, including a current, statistically accurate and reliable survey of CDNet subscribers, independent economic modelling, the 2019 CDNet subscriber survey and the *Counting the Cost Report*.

Background

CDNet has remained an easy and efficient way to know what other services are doing.

- CDNet Subscriber Comment 2022 Survey

CDNet is a support network of community development workers and those interested in community development principles and practices. CDNet currently receives annual funding of \$15,000 from the ACT Government's Community Services Directorate (CSD). The grant is auspiced through the ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS).

The Terms of Reference for CDNet outline the network's purpose is to:

1. Facilitate the sharing of information on current trends, good practice and activities relevant to community development through an email distribution list.
2. Provide information on the role of community development to ensure a sound foundation for healthy and sustainable communities.
3. Provide opportunities for discussion and learning through seminars, workshops and conferences.

CDNet has a volunteer Steering Committee of 12 to 16 members, drawn from various ACT community sector organisations, who oversee and coordinate the activities of the CDNet. The work of the Steering Committee is supported by the employment of a secretariat position, who is paid for 90 hours a year. CDNet also employs an email and website moderator/administrator who is paid for 109 hours a year, with the responsibility for maintenance of the CDNet website and moderation of emails to the CDNet subscribers.

CDNet serves the wider community sector through three main activities:

- the CDNet email list of over 2100 subscribers
- two forums or workshops a year organised by the CDNet Steering Committee
- bi-monthly Community Development Peer Network/Community of Practice meetings co-hosted with ACTCOSS.

These last two activities have been substantially circumscribed during the last two years, due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. CDNet had to cancel a fully planned *CoDesign Meets Placemaking Training Workshop* in April 2020 but was able to move committee, community of practice, and planning meetings online. In March 2021, CDNet hosted an in-person forum entitled *One year on: Stories Community Connection and Resilience in a time of COVID*. CDNet has also undertaken extensive work on a follow-up project titled *Stories of Community Connection and Resilience in a time of COVID - looking back and looking forward*. This was enabled through a small COVID-19 grant, secured in 2021, at a point when no CSD funding had been received.

The current CSD funding arrangements for 2021-22 require that CDNet undertake a formal and independent evaluation.

In February 2022 CDNet commenced an independent evaluation with the final report delivered in May 2022.

The Context for the 2022 Evaluation of CDNet

Information from services that is timely, accurate, appropriate to very changeable times.

- CDNet Subscriber Comment 2022 Survey

In February 2022 CDNet sought Expressions of Interest for an Independent Evaluator (IE) to undertake an evaluation of CDNet. The Terms of Reference required that the formal evaluation of the CDNet Program consider the operation of CDNet, from July 2017 to the present, to determine:

- a. whether CDNet is a contemporary service and provides **value for money**
- b. options to integrate with other similar services (such as Volunteering ACT information and Resource Line).

The evaluation was intended to be a desk-based review drawing on CDNet's 2019 email subscriber survey, its annual summary reports and other documentation contained on CDNet's website.

Upon selection, the IE reviewed the available material, including previous surveys and noted the following issues and concerns:

- The survey data, as provided, did not cover the last two years which, due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, has been unprecedented in its impact on the community sector.
- The 2019 survey had limited quantitative data on the subscribers' assessments of CDNet's relevance, effectiveness and efficiency. A more quantitatively focused survey would hopefully elicit more statistically useful responses.
- As the time period specified for the evaluation was July 2017 to current, the absence of data from 2019 through to 2022 as to subscribers' assessments of CDNet's relevance, effectiveness and efficiency was a critical gap.
- It was particularly important to capture the experience of subscribers over the last two years as, due to the unprecedented pandemic circumstances, there may have been significant changes in the way people have used or engaged with CDNet.

The IE recommended that CDNet seek a meeting with CSD to clarify if CSD was open to a further survey of CDNet subscribers being undertaken as part of the evaluation. This survey would seek specific feedback from CDNet subscribers, including how they had engaged with CDNet since the beginning of the pandemic, as well as responses to questions regarding subscriber assessment of the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of CDNet.

A meeting - attended by the Senior Director, Industry Development, Strategic Policy at CSD, the Head of Sector Capability at ACTCOSS, the Secretariat Manager at CDNet and the IE - was held, where CSD agreed that CDNet could undertake a further survey of subscribers. It was also agreed, that it would be very useful if the evaluation could include economic analysis that considered any potential cost savings and benefits delivered by the work of CDNet. It was further agreed that the evaluation did not need to consider options to integrate CDNet with other similar services.

With these agreements in place the IE worked with the representatives from CDNet and ACTCOSS, including the Deputy CEO and the Head of Sector Capability, to design a survey, (see *Attachment A for the survey questions*) that was then finalised in discussion with CSD. The survey results are summarised in the body of this evaluation report.

Evaluation Approach

I am new to ACT government but I am loving the CDNet emails so much - usually programs that I can relay onto my team.

- CDNet Subscriber Comment 2022 Survey

Evaluation is an essential tool for ensuring accountability, program management and learning. For an evaluation to be of most use, its purpose must be clear. The purpose of this evaluation is to examine the following questions:

- How **relevant** is CDNet for the ACT community sector and ACT community development workers (particularly people new to the sector)? Are the TORs still relevant?
- How **effective** is CDNet in meeting its Terms of Reference? What are the strengths of the Network?
- How **efficient** is CDNet? How does CDNet provide **value for money** to both the community sector and the ACT Government?

This evaluation primarily draws on the results from the quantitative responses to the 2022 survey of CDNet subscribers (the first five questions), along with independent economic analysis to support the recommendations. However, the evaluation has also drawn on data collected in the 2019 survey of subscribers. Throughout this report the quantitative data is complemented by the inclusion of quotes from subscribers that highlight their views of particular aspects of CDNet's approach.

This evaluation has focused on the following three key aspects:

- 1. Determining relevance:** The experiences and needs of service users, funders and the organisation that is the subject of any evaluation, can and do change over time. This evaluation, drawing on direct surveys of CDNet subscribers, considers how subscribers view the relevance of CDNet.
- 2. Determining effectiveness:** Evaluations can provide useful data about how effective an organisation is, and is seen to be, in meeting its purpose, goals and objectives, including Terms of Reference (ToRs). Core to this evaluation has been seeking feedback from subscribers and others about how they rate the effectiveness of CDNet.
- 3. Determining efficiency:** Ensuring accountability in the use of funding is a key reason to conduct program evaluations. The feedback obtained is beneficial for both internal accountability (program and personnel decisions), and for external accountability to funding bodies and the broader public interest. Feedback from subscribers has been sought as to how they view the efficiencies offered by CDNet as well as their evaluation of whether, in the absence of CDNet, it would cost them more to secure the services currently provided by CDNet. Feedback has also been sought as to whether subscribers believe CDNet offers value for money to both the ACT Community Sector and the ACT Government. These assessments are complemented with independent economic modelling that identifies the range of savings and efficiencies offered to subscribers, including the costs that the absence of CDNet would impose on subscribers and through them to the ACT Government.

This report outlines for CSD the evaluation findings and recommendations.

Determining the Reliability of the 2022 Survey Results

So many useful things - from resources that are helpful for our residents to support services for individuals to workshops and conferences that I would not have known about otherwise.

- CDNet Subscriber Comment 2022 Survey

As this evaluation extensively draws on the quantitative results of the 2022 Subscriber Survey, it is therefore essential to consider if the responses can be considered an accurate and reliable reflection of the CDNet Subscriber base. In doing so the following three statistical factors have been considered:

- 1. Population Size versus Sample Size:** The total CDNet population (*population size = total number of subscribers*) of 2100 subscribers was sent the 2022 survey. The number of survey respondents (*the sample size*) was 242 or 11.5% of the total population.
- 2. Margin of error (MoE):** As with most surveys, the sample size is less than the full population; this means the survey results are only accurate to within a certain range. This range can be calculated using the margin of error (MoE), which is also known as the confidence interval. The smaller the margin of error, the closer the survey results are to having the exact match with the full population at a given confidence level. The MoE for the 2022 CDNet survey is 6%. This means, for example, that if 93% of the respondents have answered 'Yes', it can be assumed that between 87%-99% of the total CDNet subscriber population would say 'Yes'.
- 3. Confidence level:** This is a percentage that reveals how confidently it can be assumed that the full population would answer the same as the sample responders. The confidence level is not as important as the confidence interval (MoE) when analysing survey results. The confidence level selected for the CDNet survey is 95%, which is a standard value for statistical purposes. This means that if you conduct the same survey on the total population repeatedly, the sample results would match those of the total population 95% of the time.

A total of 242 surveys were returned in the 2022 survey. The MoE and Confidence Level remain constant for a sample population range between 206 and 275 respondents. The total number of respondents sits slightly above the midpoint of this range.

This also means if respondents skip any of the survey questions, particularly the questions requiring *Yes/No* responses, as long as there is a minimum of 206 responses, the MoE and the confidence level remain unchanged.

In summary:

- The 2022 survey results of 242 respondents represent a sample population of **11.5%** of the total CDNet subscriber population.
- The survey has a MoE of **6%**.
- The results have a confidence level of **95%**.

This means the 2022 **survey results** can **confidently** be **considered as an accurate and reliable** reflection of the CDNet Subscriber base.

General Overview of Responses to the 2022 Survey of CDNet Subscribers

It has been incredibly useful to provide updates on potential training and job opportunities.

- CDNet Subscriber Comment 2022 Survey

This section provides a general overview of the 2022 survey responses:

- There were **242** respondents out of **2100** subscribers - a response rate of 11.5%.
- This is more than double the number for the 2019 survey.
- Questions 1 to 5 required a *Yes/No* (quantitative) answer from respondents. These questions received a higher response rate than questions requiring qualitative responses:
 - All respondents answered Questions 1, 2 and 4
 - One respondent skipped Question 3 *Note: As noted above, as this question still has a response rate at, or above, 206 the MoE and Confidence Level remain unaffected*
 - Five respondents skipped Question 5. *Note: As this question still has a response rate at or above, 206 the MoE and Confidence Level remain unaffected.*
- Questions 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 sought either qualitative or demographic information.
- *Question 6* - This question sought information about the most useful thing offered by CDNet to subscribers over the last two years (peri-pandemic period). **223** (92%) respondents provided a comment, with the majority noting appreciation for the opportunities provided by CDNet for staying connected and informed in a rapidly changing pandemic environment.
- *Question 7* - This question offered respondents the opportunity for ‘*any other comments*’. 182 (75%) responded, with the majority of those highlighting issues regarding email formats, moderation of posts, additional information wanted on the website and the need for increased community awareness raising about the work of CDNet. Around half expressed thanks to CDNet.
- *Question 8* - This question asked respondents where they worked:
 - 76% were from the not-for-profit sector
 - 13% were from the “purpose/for profit” sector
 - 10% from the ACT government.

Note: 239 (98.8%) respondents provided details and three (3) (1.2%) skipped, thus, as the response rate is still at, or above, 206, the MoE and Confidence Level remain unaffected.

These percentages are also similar to the 2019 ratios, which found:

- 75% work or volunteer in community organisations
 - 11% in business
 - 9% in government.
- *Question 9* - This question asked only respondents from the not-for-profit and for purpose/profit sectors how many paid staff were in their organisation. Answers ranged from 1 to 700.
 - *Question 10* - This question asked all respondents how long they had been volunteering or working in the community sector. Answers ranged from 2 months to 50 years, highlighting that CDNet is of use to those new to the field along with those who are highly experienced.

Overview of Responses to the Five Quantitative Questions in the 2022 Survey

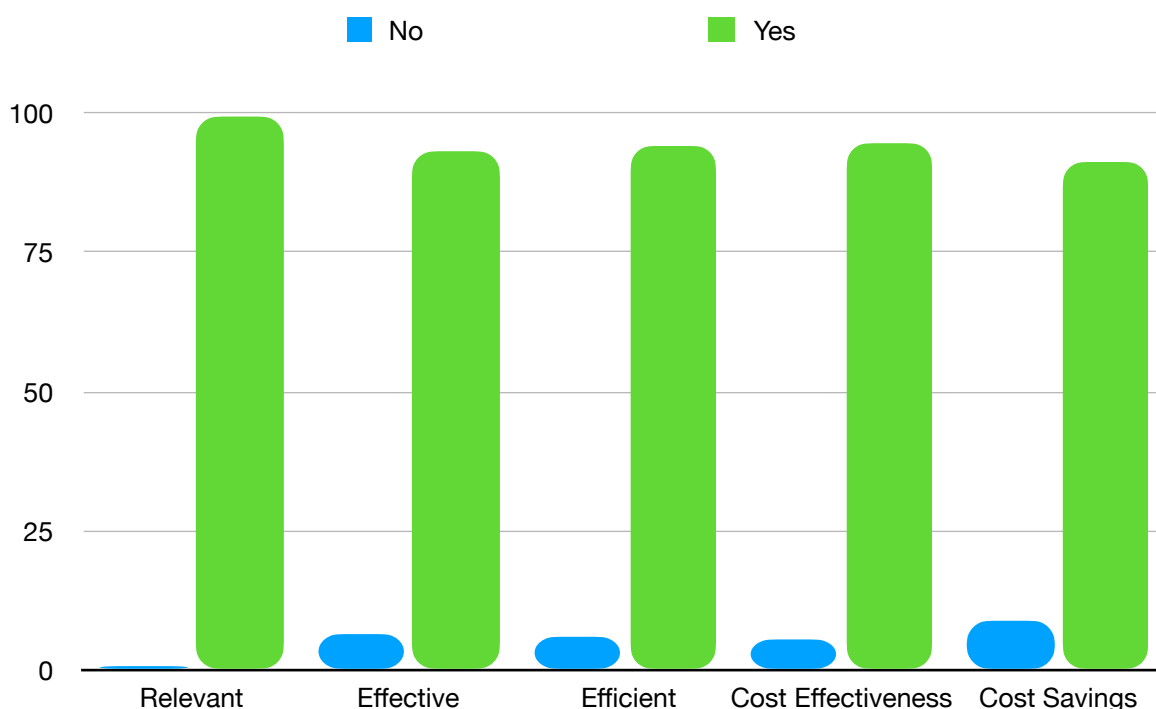
Information from services that is timely, accurate, appropriate to very changeable times.

- CDNet Subscriber Comment 2022 Survey

The first five 2022 Survey questions required a Yes/No answer from respondents. The results were:

- *Question 1* **99%** of respondents agree CDNet is a **relevant** service
- *Question 2* **93%** of respondents agree CDNet is **effective** in meeting its Terms of Reference
- *Question 3* **95%** of respondents agree CDNet provides **efficient value for money** to the ACT community sector and **93%** agree CDNet provides **efficient value for money** to the ACT Government. *Note: The average of these gives a **94% Overall Efficiency** as represented in the graph below.*
- *Question 4* **95%** of respondents agree that if CDNet did not exist, it would cost more time and money to share information. *Note: This is termed **Cost Effectiveness** in the graph below.*
- *Question 5* **90%** of respondents agree that if CDNet did not exist, it would cost more time and money to access the kinds of workshops and **92%** that it would cost more time and money to access for similar network opportunities. *Note: The average of these gives a **91%** and is termed **Cost Savings** as represented in the graph below.*

Graph 1 Summary of Subscriber Assessment of CDNet Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Cost Effectiveness and Cost Savings



These responses clearly show that CDNet is valued by subscribers as being relevant, effective and efficient. It is also seen as a service that provides value for money to both the ACT Community Sector and the ACT Government, through the cost effective provision of services as well as offering cost savings and efficiencies to subscribers and through them to the broader community sector.

Independent Economic Modelling of the Work of CDNet

Love the simplicity of organisations putting their info out there without significant cost.

- CDNet Subscriber Comment 2022 Survey

Placing economic values on the types of cost savings and efficiencies arising from the services provided by CDNet makes it easier for government to understand the economic context and consequences of the funding decisions affecting CDNet. In discussions with CSD it was identified that any economic analysis about the work of CDNet would be greatly welcomed.

The evaluation funds as provided by CSD were not sufficient to allow a full cost benefit analysis of the work of CDNet; however, the IE approached economist Greg Barrett² who agreed to provide economic modelling of a sample of costs and savings associated with the work of CDNet.

The modelling has identified the following key areas of cost efficiencies and cost savings:

- A. Cost efficiencies** for CDNet subscribers to an estimated value of \$50,500 per year
- B. Cost savings** to CDNet subscribers from saved use of external media of an estimated value of \$20,000 per year
- C. Cost savings** to CDNet subscribers from saved use of internal media, of an estimated value of \$75,000 per year.

The total estimated cost efficiencies and savings to CDNet subscribers is **\$145,500** which represents 9.7 times CDNet's current level of funding.

It is also important to note that the cost savings and efficiencies delivered to CDNet subscribers are against the backdrop of a sector that has experienced chronic and significant long-term underfunding.³ By providing cost savings and efficiencies to subscribers the benefits also flow to the ACT Government. The detailed breakdown of the economic modelling is as follows:

A. Cost Efficiencies for CDNet Subscribers:

1. Use of CDNet offers timesaving on finding information

- Value - This has been estimated at 9 minutes per search for 1000 searches per year and valued at \$20 per hour. This delivers an estimated saving to users of **\$3,000 per year**.

2. Access by subscribers to training that would otherwise have been missed without CDNet

- Value - This has been estimated at 100 training sessions missed at \$200 per session. This delivers an estimated benefit to users of **\$20,000 per year**.

3. Access to jobs that would otherwise have been missed without CDNet

- Value - Lost productivity has been estimated at \$1000 per person for 20 jobs missed. This delivers an estimated benefit of **\$20,000 per year**.

4. CDNet support for the creation of a community of practice

- Value - Lost opportunity to network with other community development professionals and develop new networks and connections has been estimated at \$750 per person for 10 people. This delivers an estimated benefit of **\$7,500 per year**.

- **Total Estimated Value of Cost Efficiencies to Subscribers: \$50,500 per year**

B. Cost Savings to CDNet Subscribers as Producers Using External Media:

1. The cost of advertising jobs in alternative media if CDNet was not available

- Value - This has been estimated at 100 job ads at \$100 per ad. This would add an estimated cost to CDNet subscribers of **\$10,000 per year**.

2. The cost of advertising training and other events in alternative media if CDNet was not available

- Value - This has been estimated at 50 event ads at \$200 per ad. This would add an estimated cost to CDNet subscribers of **\$10,000 per year**.

- **Total Estimated Value of Cost Savings to CDNet Subscribers: \$20,000 per year**

C. Cost Savings to CDNet Subscribers as Producers Using Internal Media:

1. The extra IT costs required to match services as provided by CDNet

- Value - This has been estimated at half the cost of CDNet, which is \$7500 per organisation for an estimate of 10 organisations. This would add an estimated cost to CDNet subscribers of **\$75,000 per year**.

- **Total Estimated Value of Cost Savings to CDNet Subscribers: \$75,000 per year**

Grand total of estimated cost efficiencies and savings to CDNet subscribers is **\$145,500** - representing 9.7 times CDNet's current level of funding.

This economic modelling is based on very conservative assumptions of cost savings and efficiencies delivered by CDNet to a very conservative number of users. For example, 242 people completed the 2022 survey and the above numbers are based on 10 organisations or individuals (approximately 4% of the respondents or a total of 0.5% of the total CDNet subscriber population) gaining a cost saving or efficiency. Estimates of costs are similarly conservative. For example, job listings with ethicaljobs.com cost \$150 per ad however the modelling assumed \$100.

This means the figures are likely to very significantly underestimate the true value of CDNet. However, even this very large underestimation shows CDNet is delivering significant savings and efficiencies to individuals, organisations and the community sector as a whole. This also matches with subscribers' own assessments of the value of CDNet to them, their organisations and clients.

Applying a sensitivity analysis - which is a standard economic approach to address the risk that the estimates might have been overstated - and reducing them by 50% still sees a total estimate of cost savings and efficiencies of \$72,750. This is 4.8 times CDNet's current level of funding. Based on this, it is clear that CDNet is providing the ACT Government with a very significant positive return on investment (ROI) and remains well worth supporting on economic grounds. It also strongly indicates that any increase in CDNet funding would similarly deliver an excellent, positive ROI.

Recommendations

CDNet was very valuable throughout the entire last 2 years. As the environment continued to shift due to COVID (almost day to day), being able to reach CDNet members quickly and efficiently to update them about how our service was operating was crucial. It also supported our organisation to continue to be agile and to learn from the information disseminated re covid safety and alternative ways to support clients.

- CDNet Subscriber Comment 2022 Survey

This evaluation report makes five key recommendations. In developing them the IE considered:

- the issues and findings detailed above
- additional information gained from discussions with CDNet and ACTCOSS staff
- how the circumstances of CDNet align with the broader ACT Community Sector as detailed in the *Counting the Costs: Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector Report⁴*, which was prepared for the ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) on behalf of the ACT Community Services Industry Strategy Steering Group (ISSG) and the ACT Government.

The *Counting the Costs* report notes that ‘(h)istorically, the full costs of community service provision have been hidden’⁵ with the ACT community sector having faced ‘significant long-term underfunding.’⁶ The report authors detail that this has been compounded by ‘population changes and increased complexity of need in Canberra ... including rising housing and living costs and the mental health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.’⁷

The report goes on to note that the ACT Government has an expectation that community sector organisations will have ‘...diverse revenue streams that they can use to cross-subsidise any gaps in funding’⁸ and that all of these factors have effectively meant many ACT community organisations have been ‘starved’ of essential funds, which, in turn, has fuelled a ‘starvation cycle’ that has reduced their capacity for innovation, efficiency and growth.⁹

By providing the earlier noted cost savings and efficiencies to CDNet subscribers, and through them, to their organisations and clients, a significant range of benefits also flow to the ACT Government. CDNet, although itself chronically and significantly underfunded, is nonetheless playing a valued and valuable role in enabling a community sector, that is also chronically and significantly underfunded, to stitch together nimble and agile approaches and support.

The following five recommendations are intended to support CDNet to continue to play its highly valued role in supporting subscribers and the broader ACT Community Sector.

◆ ***Recommendation 1: That CDNet continue to receive Community Services Directorate (CSD) funding as it provides a valued and valuable service, and that this be on a recurrent basis.***

Rationale:

- CDNet is valued by subscribers as being **relevant**, **effective** and **efficient** and as providing **efficient value for money** to both the ACT Community Sector and the ACT Government, through the cost effective provision of services and offering cost savings to subscribers.

- Independent economic modelling, using very conservative assumptions, has identified:
 - CDNet delivers an estimated **total of cost efficiencies and savings** to CDNet subscribers of **\$145,500**, per year, representing **9.7** times CDNet's current funding.
 - Sensitivity analysis (reducing these estimates by 50%) still results in estimated cost savings and efficiencies of \$72,750 which is 4.8 times CDNet's current funding.
- All budgetary decisions need to be considered against the ACT Wellbeing Framework¹⁰, which is a key issue as also noted in the *Counting the Costs* Report.¹¹
- The work of CDNet aligns with the ACT Wellbeing Framework, by supporting subscribers and through them the broader ACT community in relation to the following six out of 12 domains:
 - *Access and connectivity* - to access the services they need
 - *Education and life-long learning* - to gain the education and skills needed at every stage of life
 - *Governance and institutions* - to have a say, be heard, and work together for better outcomes
 - *Identity and belonging* - to be able to express identity, feel a sense of belonging, and participate fully in society
 - *Social Connection* - to be connected to community
 - *Time* - to have time to live life well.

◆ ***Recommendation 2: That CSD meet with representatives of ACTCOSS, CDNet staff and Steering Committee to discuss the current level of funding, with a view to determining an appropriate increase. This discussion should consider the unpaid 2019/20 grant, assessment of the number of staff hours provided on a voluntary basis, estimated costs to action suggestions for improvement, as noted in Recommendation 4, as well as the amount for administrative and other costs currently cross-subsided by ACTCOSS and any existing CDNet accruals.***

Rationale:

- The Counting the Costs Report has identified that the ACT community sector has faced significant long-term underfunding, with Recommendation 2 of the report calling for a review of ACT funding streams to ensure full cost coverage.
- The report notes:
 - essential employment costs are often unfunded
 - employing staff is the main cost for most community service organisations
 - base wage rates increases in the community sector are matched by increasing wage on-costs, such as superannuation and the obligation to contribute to the ACT's Portable Long Service Leave scheme
 - the level of indexation is low in the ACT compared with other jurisdictions and this sits alongside the backdrop of the Fair Work Commission's Annual Wage reviews delivering wage increases that have been higher than the Community Sector Funding Rate for four of the last seven years

- where increases in employment costs are not adequately covered by funding this has resulted in rising cost pressures for organisations.¹²
- This matches the experience of CDNet, who have not received a funding increase since the 2018/19 financial year, with the year following that funding increase seeing them receive no funding at all from CSD. Whilst funding was restored in the 2020/21 financial year, the amount received decreased by 2.7% despite an 11% increase in wages, superannuation and long service leave liabilities in the corresponding time period.
- In the 2021/22 financial year funding remained at the same level as the 2020/21 financial year; meanwhile there had been 24% increase in wages, superannuation and long service leave liabilities since the 2018/19 financial year.
- The current 2021/22 financial year funding covers the staffing costs with only \$615 left over after wages, superannuation and long service leave obligations are met. Where any CDNet accrual is not able to cover the shortfall for administrative and other costs, this then leaves ACTCOSS responsible for any resulting funding shortfalls.
- The two CDNet staff are paid for a total of 199 hours each year; however they are also jointly contributing approximately 100 additional hours per year, on an unpaid basis, to ensure that CDNet can deliver its services. This represents approximately \$6,500 of unpaid work at the relevant Award rate.
- This has significant ramifications for sustainability and succession planning for CDNet. It is unreasonable to expect any new staff would provide such a significant level of unpaid contribution to enable CDNet to continue to operate. It is also unreasonable to expect ACTCOSS to continue to cross-subsidise CDNet costs. It reinforces the need for a very significant increase in funding for CDNet, in order for it to be operating on a sustainable basis. This is also in line with Recommendation 2 of the Counting the Cost report, which calls for: *a review of ACT funding streams to ensure full cost coverage.*¹³

◆ ***Recommendation 3: Following this discussion and any concomitant increase of CDNet's funding all subsequent funding should be indexed in line with Recommendation 1 of the Counting the Costs Report.***

Rationale:

Recommendation 1 of the Counting the Costs report, recommends the current Community Sector Funding Rate be replaced with regular, six-monthly increases in line with the higher of the consumer price index (CPI) or wage price index (WPI) for the ACT, or the percentage increase in wage rates applying to the Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Industry (SCHADS) Award.¹⁴

This approach to indexation should be implemented with CDNet.

◆ ***Recommendation 4: That CDNet consider Survey Respondents' suggestions for improvement and identify the estimated costs to action those seen as most relevant, needed and/or cost effective.***

Rationale:

As noted earlier, the purpose of this evaluation was to determine subscriber assessment of the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of CDNet, and this has been comprehensively established.

A number of survey respondents also noted a number of changes they would like to see, with CDNet email formats, moderation of posts, additional information wanted on the website and the need for increased community awareness.

Due to time constraints with survey results being provided on Monday 2 May and the draft report submitted to CDNet on Monday 9 May, the IE has not been able to consider in detail these responses, and nor are they germane to the purpose of this evaluation.

However, it would be beneficial for ACTCOSS, CDNet staff and the CDNet Steering Committee to review this information and determine what suggestions they see as most relevant, needed and/or cost effective to action. This consideration should also detail any associated costs.

◆ ***Recommendation 5: CSD should develop ongoing, sustainable education and training processes to develop the capacity of CSD and the community sector to undertake simple, strategic and effective monitoring and evaluation approaches.***

Rationale:

The Counting the Costs report notes that a particular concern of community organisations is the lack of funding to monitor and evaluate programs.¹⁵ This aspect of the 'starvation cycle' has hollowed out the sector's capacity to engage in monitoring and evaluation.

Prior to the commencement of this evaluation the IE identified the 2019 survey was not a statistically robust survey. There was a great reliance on qualitative data without inclusion of relevant quantitative data and three years of the period to be evaluated had no relevant data collected. This meant the IE needed to work with ACTCOSS, CDNet and CSD to support the clarification and renegotiation of the purpose of the evaluation and prioritise the collection of quantitative data sets including economic modelling.

By considering ways to better support the development of ongoing, sustainable education and training processes on monitoring and evaluation, CSD would build the sector's capacity in this space. This could include ways of refining evaluation purpose, which data sets are best aligned with that purpose, how to determine the 'right' balance between quantitative and qualitative data sets and how to develop simple economic modelling of programs.

This approach would also enable CSD to better consider how it can best support and engage with the sector around what are realistic expectations for evaluation and monitoring, including the necessary levels of funding for this work.

Conclusion

Genuine, relevant, timely, LOCAL information

- CDNet Subscriber Comment 2022 Survey

It has been said that one of the marvellous things about community is that it enables us to welcome and help people in a way we couldn't as individuals. This evaluation has clearly established that CDNet is a relevant, effective and efficient service that plays a vital and valued role in the ACT Community sector and through this, in the broader ACT community.

It is seen as **relevant**, as the following comment from a CDNet subscriber who completed the 2022 survey highlights:

I am a sole practitioner in my counselling service so I have been doubly isolated during the pandemic. The amount of knowledge, connection to trainings, workshops, etc that CDNet has given me is invaluable.

It is seen as **effective**, as the following comment reinforces:

CDNet had always offered networking and courses. This sharing of resources across organisations created economies of scale. During the first Covid Lockdown this practice switched seamlessly online. That period of rapid change and stress highlighted CDNet's worth. I never actually utilised the members' skills, but knowing that I had their backup as I madly scrambled to adapt services was a lifesaver. We workers were traumatised enough, let alone coping with the onslaught of double the desperate clients. Thankfully, the CDNet'ers were invisible superhero wingmen. Their presence gave me the courage to sally forth. In the past two years, this community of workers has prevented countless client suicides. We couldn't have done that without the support of each other in CDNet. Job well done! Thanks Team CDNet.

Independent economic modelling, drawing on very conservative assumptions, has highlighted its **efficiency** and this is clearly aligned with how subscribers see CDNet, as the following subscriber comment illustrates:

CDNet has been a fantastic tool over 30 years to provide the Canberra community with a hub for network and communication and creating a vibrant society that is caring, compassionate and supportive to those who are vulnerable and connecting support to those needing it. Fantastic effort!

In conclusion, this evaluation has very clearly substantiated that CDNet is valued by subscribers as being relevant, effective and efficient. It is also seen as providing efficient value for money to both the ACT Community Sector and the ACT Government, through the cost effective provision of services and offering cost savings to subscribers. These conclusions have been substantiated by a statistically accurate and reliable survey of CDNet subscribers, the evidence from which has been reinforced by independent economic modelling.

Footnotes

CDNet is a tremendous resource that facilitates open communication across the community sector (training, workshops, employment, etc.) that is of direct benefit to vulnerable people and facilitates greater collaboration and awareness of services across the sector. Very valuable resource.

- CDNet Subscriber Comment 2022 Survey

¹ Cortis, N., Blaxland, M. and Adamson, E. (2021). Counting the Costs: Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector. Sydney: UNSW Social Policy Research Centre https://www.actcoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/publications/2021-report-Counting-the-Costs_1.pdf

² **Greg Barrett** is an economist who has taught Cost Benefit Analysis at the University of Canberra for many years. He has worked for in the Commonwealth Public Service including with the Commonwealth Treasury. He has produced cost benefit analyses on diverse programs such as a health project in Fiji, Indigenous mediation projects in the Northern Territory, Victoria and Queensland, Independent Disability Advocacy in Australia, the Victorian Workers Compensation Conciliation Scheme, the ACT Galambany Circle Sentencing Court and community playgroups.

³ Cortis, N., Blaxland, M. and Adamson, E. (2021). *Op cit* Page 4

⁴ Ibid Page 1

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid Page 4

⁷ Ibid Page 1

⁸ Ibid Page 10

⁹ Ibid Page 10

¹⁰ https://www.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1498198/ACT-wellbeing-framework.pdf

¹¹ Ibid Page 44

¹² Ibid Page 18

¹³ Ibid Page 3

¹⁴ Ibid Page 3

¹⁵ Ibid Page 28

Attachment A Survey Questions

1. *CDNet is a support network for community development workers and those interested in community development principles and practices. CDNet also serves the wider community sector through its email list of 2100 subscribers and by offering forums, workshops and other networking opportunities.*

Question: Do you believe that CDNet is a relevant service to you? Yes / No

2. *The Terms of Reference for CDNet outline the network's purpose is to:*

1. *Facilitate the sharing of information on current trends, good practice and activities relevant to community development through an email distribution list;*
2. *Provide information on the role of community development to ensure a sound foundation for healthy and sustainable communities; and*
3. *Provide opportunities for discussion and learning through seminars, workshops and conferences.*

Question: Overall, do you believe that CDNet is effective in meeting its Terms of Reference? Yes / No

3. *CDNet has a budget of \$15,000 per annum and an email membership of 2100. This means the 'cost' of CDNet membership is approximately \$7.50 per individual member.*

Question: Do you believe this provides efficient value for money to:

- a. **the ACT Community Sector Yes / No**
- b. **the ACT Government? Yes / No**

4. *Membership of CDNet is free to members and enables members to quickly share, at no cost, information about upcoming events such as workshops, forums and training courses as well as advertise job vacancies to a membership base that includes individuals, community organisations, government and others. As an example this compares with a fee of \$150 to place a job ad with Ethicaljobs.com.*

Question: If CDNet did not exist do you think it would cost your organisation or yourself more time and money to share information with a similar sized network? Yes / No

5. *CDNet also directly delivers workshops and networking opportunities that members and others can attend.*

Question: If CDNet did not exist do you think it would cost your organisation or yourself more time and money to access elsewhere, the kinds of workshops and networking opportunities as offered directly by CDNet?

Workshops Yes / No

Networking opportunities Yes / No

6. *The Covid-19 pandemic has seen levels of unprecedented demand placed on the community sector.*

Question: What has CDNet offered that has been most useful to you over the last two years?

Free Text Box

7. *Any other comments?*

Free Text Box

8. *In which part of the sector do you work/volunteer?*

Free Text Box

9. *If you work/volunteer in the not for profit or for purpose/for profit sectors, how many paid staff are in your organisation? (approximate number)*

Free Text Box

10. *How long have you been working/volunteering in the sector? (approximate months/years)*

Free Text Box