

# Conversations in the Middle

Practitioner Perspectives on People- and Place-Centred Social Services

Ryan Martin, Cliff Eberly

## About CPD

The [Centre for Policy Development](#) (CPD) is an independent, not-for-profit policy institute with staff in Sydney, Melbourne, and Jakarta.

Our vision is a fair, sustainable society and wellbeing economy that serves current and future generations in Australia and Southeast Asia.

Our mission is to help create transformative systems change through practical solutions to complex policy challenges.

We tackle the hard questions, working towards change that is systemic and long-term. Through our work, we aim to contribute to governments that are coordinated, collaborative, and effective, with an eye to both the near and longer term.

We acknowledge and celebrate Australia's First Peoples.

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## Preface

The Centre for Policy Development (CPD) is exploring how we can move towards a social services ecosystem that better centres people and place. As part of our research, we spoke to a range of people- and place-centred initiatives across Australia and New Zealand. This document is a summary of the major themes that emerged from these conversations. These themes have informed our report entitled *Putting People First: Transforming social services in partnership with people and communities*.

CPD first conceptualised the idea of a missing middle to describe the disconnect between national services and local initiatives in the context of Early Childhood Development (ECD). Many of the people- and place-centred initiatives, government agencies and community service organisations we spoke to described a mismatch between institutional and community ways of working and a disconnect between policy and practice.

As we mapped different initiatives across Australia, we found a middle space between the national and local levels. There is strong policy and political interest in place-based approaches and many local initiatives putting these approaches into practice. Despite this, these local insights are not yet influencing big national systems.

One thing is clear: we need more opportunities for conversations in the middle and more policymakers and practitioners comfortable with sitting in the middle space.

This document serves multiple purposes. Firstly, we used this document to share what

we learnt with everyone who took the time to participate in the research and confirm with them that we correctly interpreted what we heard. Secondly, by releasing this summary publicly, we hope to honour an advocate for the participating initiatives. Finally, by outlining examples of how practitioners go about this work, we aim to clarify how to achieve good outcomes for people and communities at local and regional levels and to influence systemic reform and transformation via the six drivers we explore.

The people- and place-centred initiatives and organisations that we spoke to were:

- Communities of Focus, Mission Australia
- Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia (CRSA)
- Ready Communities (as part of Mid Coast discussion)
- Family by Family
- Flemington Works
- Hands Up Mallee
- Hunter Jobs Alliance
- Mid Coast 4 Kids, Mission Australia (as part of Mid Coast discussion)
- Our Town
- The Southern Initiative (TSI) and The Auckland Co-Design Lab (The Lab)
- Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership (TQKP)

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## Introduction

In our conversations with various place-based initiatives, we heard about their experiences, their ideas for potential reforms and the key principles that guide their work. From this, we began to see the outline for a social services ecosystem that genuinely centres people and place. A system that balances a long-term vision with flexible implementation. A system that is strongly interconnected, with relationships grounded in trust and reciprocity. A capable system that seeks constant improvement and shares learnings to all relevant actors. A system that places power where it needs to be.

We have distilled what we heard from the initiatives into seven key themes. We see six of these as interconnected drivers for people- and place-centred social services (Figure 1):

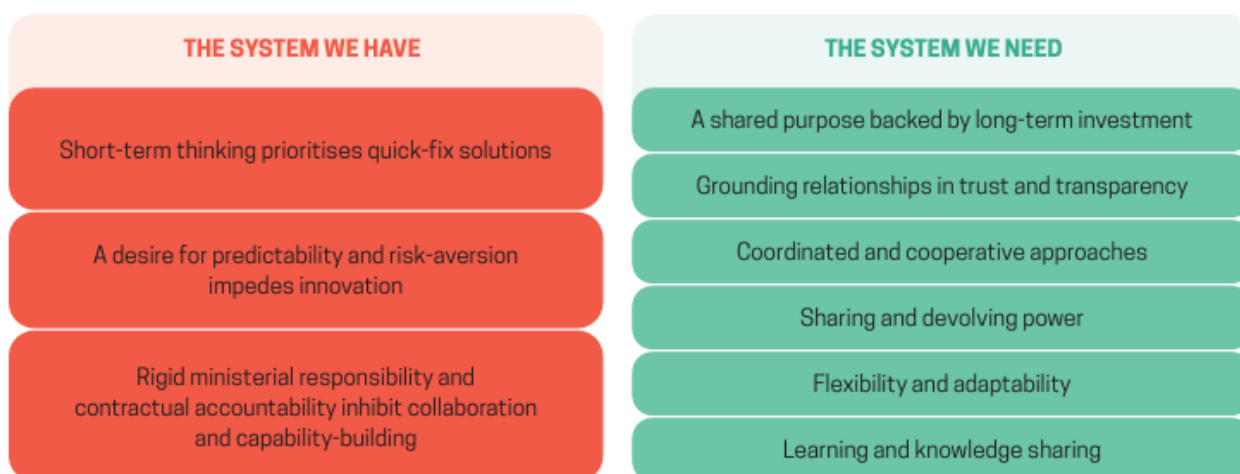
1. A shared purpose with long-term investment
2. Grounding relationships in trust and transparency

3. Coordinated and cooperative approaches
4. Sharing and devolving power
5. Flexibility and adaptability
6. Learning and knowledge sharing

In addition, a seventh theme cut across the others: *growing community, provider and government capability and capacity*. This seventh theme will be crucial for realising the six drivers.

There are many ways we could have conceptualised the ideas we heard, and there is plenty of information that did not fit neatly into these themes or that we did not include for the sake of brevity. However, we believe that the themes we have proposed and the examples of each that we provide lay out a practical path forward that is grounded in the experiences of those already working in community-centred ways.

Figure 1: Moving to a System that Centres People and Place



## A shared purpose backed by long-term investment

The initiatives repeatedly told us that it takes time for place-based initiatives to mature and community issues to be addressed. As a result, systems aiming to support people and communities need to enable this long-term duration. At the same time, this long-term effort needs guidance from a shared purpose, vision or set of principles that support partnership. Importantly, this long-term purpose needs to be jointly created by as many actors as possible as early as possible.

It was clear that funding is a core part of a long-term commitment. Several initiatives noted the instability of short-term funding cycles (often one to three years) and the administrative burden of having to repeatedly write applications and demonstrate outcomes. Conversely, Our Town and Communities of Focus spoke about how their 10 year funding provided stability and space for future-focused conversations while progressing toward a community-led, self-determined vision.

We also heard that a long-term commitment requires a change in mindset that looks beyond budget, media and election cycles towards the timescales over which people and communities develop. Essential to this is a clear, shared purpose guiding actor.

Several initiatives noted that they are guided by collective values, principles, rules or a vision created in collaboration with the community. These are important for ensuring that efforts are coordinated over the long-term.

Our Town told us how shared principles can help work through disagreements. Similarly, Flemington Works noted that mutual aspirations help bring together various organisations even where their motives might otherwise clash. Hands Up Mallee described how a shared purpose can provide sustainable motivation regardless of the amount of funding. The Southern Initiative/The Auckland Co-Design Lab discussed the importance of Indigenous navigation and journey metaphors for identifying a shared purpose and enabling multiple actors to see themselves as part of it.

*“Mid Coast 4 Kids is organised around an aspirational vision “to support children and young people to make a safe, supported and successful transition from childhood through to adulthood”. This vision anchors the work, and provides for business, community and government stakeholders with a compelling basis to work together.”*

— Mid Coast 4 Kids

## Grounding relationships in trust and transparency

An extremely common theme across our conversations was the need for greater trust and transparency. Several initiatives described a distrust of institutions among the communities they worked with, tied to factors like over-consulting, poor communication and a lack of listening. We also heard about a general lack of trust between governments, funders, providers and service recipients. This has resulted in excessive compliance and reporting mechanisms dominating these relationships and an often unidirectional relationship between service workers and clients. Based on our conversations with initiatives, what is needed is a set of formal and informal relationships between communities, providers and governments that centre reciprocity, transparency and mutual vulnerability.

We heard from many initiatives that to grow trust and cooperation, there needs to be clear communication and honest expectation-setting from the beginning of the interaction. Flemington Works noted that this includes owning one's own mistakes rather than ignoring or minimising them. Community Refugee Sponsorship Network (CRSA) told us that building trust requires organisations to be vulnerable with each other and "let one another into each other's tents". They also highlighted the importance of assuming the best intentions from other actors and avoiding blame.

Many initiatives outlined how building trust with communities involves genuinely listening to their needs and offering them agency in the process. Communities of Focus told us how one of their communities was making good progress with the local government but the state government commenced an infrastructure project in their area despite community opposition and without consultation. This was not conducive to a cooperative relationship.

Several initiatives outlined the importance of having independent and neutral actors within the network to conduct a coordinating function in a trusted way. Flemington Works operates as a backbone organisation for many stakeholders. They noted the importance of balancing their position within the local government and maintaining enough neutrality to effectively join up each stakeholder's efforts. The Southern Initiative/The Auckland Co-Design Lab, embedded within Auckland Council, also experienced advantages to being simultaneously "inside and outside", affording neutrality and adaptability. Our Town told us about the importance of network weavers, unbiased individuals who are resourced specifically to connect up community members. Hands Up Mallee described "community connectors", trusted individuals that community members feel safe opening up to.

Our Town noted that safe spaces and places are also essential to trust and transparency. In one of their towns, there was a local issue that had created division within the community. Rather than making use of the existing buildings that might be associated with a specific faction within the community, they purchased their own building and provided a neutral space in which community members could receive support regardless of who they were.

Strengthening trust and transparency has a range of benefits. Flemington Works, Our Town and Community Refugee Sponsorship noted that, because of the trust they had built with community members, people would seek support for a wide range of issues beyond the specific remit of the initiative. When this happened, staff would refer or coordinate these other supports. This meant better outcomes for community members and more efficiency for the system as one community engagement point can refer those in need to many services at once.

## Coordinated and cooperative approaches

There was a clear sentiment across the conversations that governments tend to work in silos and initiatives are frequently disconnected from each other, even in the same locality. Several participants acknowledged that service providers are frequently competing with each other, causing them to focus on the easy solutions, prioritise volume of clients over quality of care, avoid communicating their learnings and hold back critique of larger institutions in fear of losing funding.

We heard clearly a need for more coordination and cooperation across the system. Various initiatives described ways of doing this. The Southern Initiative/The Auckland Co-Design Lab told us about their quarterly learning space bringing together actors relevant to early child development policy and commissioning. They found that these more formal mechanisms built informal networks that encouraged stakeholders to collaborate more proactively and provided contacts in times of need. Communities of Focus similarly found that formal collaboration mechanisms lead to persistent informal networks. One initiative noted that an undervaluing of the lived experience of locals can lead to those locals not being invited to participate in certain partnerships. They asserted the need for a mindset shift that acknowledges the importance of local and community knowledge. Hunter Jobs Alliance discussed grassroots efforts like market stalls, door knocking and conversations with local organisations as core to cooperating with the community.

*“There have been lots of really beautiful moments in terms of community connection, in terms of friendship, in terms of networking...It’s like there’s this reservoir of goodness in community and [community sponsorship] enables this reservoir to spring up.”*

— Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia

A range of ideas on better connecting the system emerged from our discussion with Mid Coast 4 Kids and other initiatives on the Mid Coast of NSW. One was a regular national roundtable to share learnings, set standards and coordinate efforts. It was clear that this roundtable should have representation from across communities, service providers and governments. Another suggestion was a dialogue mechanism between the givers and receivers of funds without a fear of losing support, allowing funding outcomes and processes to become more effective over time. A third idea involved making joint pre-budget submissions to the government.

Coordination and cooperation are also crucial across communities. Our Town uses a networked approach, creating hubs that connect various elements of the initiative across the state, accelerating learning and the sharing of ideas. They noted that building social capital is an emerging theme across various communities within Our Town and other place-based work. Our Town described how the network of Our Town communities learn from each other, discovering common issues, sharing opportunities and resources, and coming together to influence policy changes. We also heard how the connections between communities resulted in a mindset shift towards collectively working through problems. They noted that the Our Town Network extends to include the Support Team and Our Town Allies and Advocates who along with bringing their own experiences benefit from learning alongside towns.

## Sharing and devolving power

A constant theme in our discussions was that the power to make and implement decisions is currently far too unidirectional and top-down. It was clear that what is needed is a system that genuinely shares power across actors, with far more power resting with communities at the local level. This power sharing is also crucial to ensuring that services are genuinely tailored to diverse individual and community needs.

Several initiatives noted the current lack of community voice in decision making and the low quality of much community engagement. One initiative described attending a roundtable where each party only got two minutes to talk and a call for submissions where the agenda is based on government assumptions rather than community need. Another initiative told us stories of communities being over consulted with little actionable change and consultations involving external consultants that talk to whoever shows up on the day. There was the sentiment across the initiatives that concepts like “co-design” and “place-based approaches” are being watered down. This lack of genuine partnership can have serious impacts. One initiative told us how the community they work with often feels unwanted and like governments are not listening to them on purpose to make them leave the area. Another described endemic frustration with the government from the communities in their remit.

The initiatives told us that effective power sharing processes occur early in the relationship, are long-term and iterative, bring together diverse voices, give the community real decision-making power and compensate community contributors for their time. Each initiative had different ways of implementing this power sharing. Communities of Focus, Our Town, The Southern Initiative/The Auckland Co-Design Lab and others placed certain responsibilities directly with the community, hiring locals and placing them in

direct control over parts of the program. This not only provided them a sense of agency but reportedly developed the skills and social capital needed for communities to operate on their own. Communities of Focus told us they walk alongside communities with the view to transition out of the community in the long-term once they had helped build community capability. Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia noted that effective partnership can help ensure risk is appropriately managed and shared between the government and communities. Hands Up Mallee makes its co-design workshops as “community-like” as possible.

Funding was a key mechanism through which power sharing could occur. Some Mid Coast initiatives suggested that there needs to be a codesign process at the beginning of funding cycles. This is to ensure that the outcomes set for those funds genuinely reflect what is needed by the community. As noted in the next section, initiatives with flexible funding described how important this was for enabling them to develop outcomes in step with the community and to adapt as context and community needs change.

Importantly, power sharing is not about devolving all responsibility to a local level. Institutions at the top still have an important role to play, and placing too much responsibility at a local level becomes burdensome. Communities of Focus noted that local communities generally have a ceiling to how much influence they can have. They outlined how this is made worse by the tendency for institutions to only support communities that have already “proven themselves” and set up the mechanisms and processes officially recognised by these institutions. What is needed is earlier investment to support communities in building up their capability to have an equal seat at the table. The government needs to shift from a mindset of “fixing problems” to “enabling” community empowerment.



## Flexibility and adaptability

A long-term commitment and shared purpose are crucial to effectively working with people and place. However, this purpose needs to be implemented in a flexible and adaptive way. We repeatedly heard from initiatives how flexibility and adaptability enable them to respond to the ever-shifting local context and what they are hearing from the community. As the initiatives we spoke to made clear, people- and place-centred work will always look different in each community.

Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia described a tight and loose framework. They outlined how the tight component, the mutually-agreed vision and rules, guides the practice and allows all actors to work towards a common goal in a coordinated way. At the same time, the loose aspect allows people to adapt the vision in ways that suit the needs of each community and that responds to changes over time. Exactly what was held “loose” varied for each initiative, but examples included things like specific outcomes, services offered, the nature of the services and items to be funded. Mid Coast 4 Kids talked about starting with a focus on early childhood education and care providers before realising they need to expand to a wider and more holistic scope.

Many initiatives spoke about avoiding “cookie-cutter” approaches and the need to develop bespoke ways of working with each community group they engage. This requires a deep understanding of the local context. However, Communities of Focus noted that there can be challenges associated with this level of agility as it means the people involved need to understand a wide range of methods

and techniques. This emphasises the need for capability-building and a long-term commitment when working with people and place.

The nature of funding is key to enabling flexible and adaptive approaches. Many initiatives discussed how pre-determined funding outcomes limit the initiative’s capacity to be responsive. One way to deal with this rigidity was to combine funding from diverse sources. The Auckland Co-Design Lab within the Southern Initiative discussed how they use a “club funding model” where they seek relatively small amounts of money from a range of government departments. While acknowledging the administrative difficulty of this approach, they noted that it provides much greater agency and flexibility as the outcomes were not determined by a single funder. Some initiatives were able to receive flexible grants and discussed how beneficial these grants were to their work. For example, Flemington Works told us they received funding from Victoria’s Community Revitalisation program. They noted that the openness of the funding, especially in its initial stages, allowed them to conduct genuine co-design with communities at the start of the process and use that engagement to set direction for the initiative and build trust.

This more flexible approach to funding does raise questions around accountability of public funds and assessing the suitability of applicants. Those initiatives that did receive flexible funding noted the importance of their organisational reputation and the trust they had built with the funder to allow them to receive the funding in the first place.

## Learning and knowledge sharing

The initiatives we spoke to repeatedly discussed the need for a culture and system design that allows actors to try new things, learn what works and share those learnings throughout the system. Several initiatives felt that public institutions are risk averse and generally avoid admitting their mistakes. One initiative noted that communities can be similarly unwilling to discuss setbacks unless there is enough trust. We heard from the Mid Coast initiatives and Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia how excessive competition means organisations tend to avoid sharing their mistakes and what they learnt from them. Even when there are learning mechanisms via evaluation, the evaluation metrics are not always based on the needs of the community nor are community voices always heard.

Part of the change we need is a shift in mindsets and culture. Flemington Works explained that failures should be reframed as learning opportunities and genuinely communicated to the community so that they can come along on the learning journey. Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia called this a culture of continuous improvement and added that, when issues arise, it is essential that all actors work collaboratively to address and learn from the issue. Mid Coast 4 Kids made clear that this learning process is inevitably non-linear and iterative. We also heard from various initiatives the need to combine learnings from each individual place to better understand the system as a whole.

This cultural shift needs to be supported with changes to evaluation practices. We heard across initiatives how evaluation needs to better integrate community outcomes and address community needs rather than those of the funder. Communities of focus outlined community snapshots and impact logs as two techniques for this.

Our Town described how the communities play an active role in evaluation, defining what success looks like and capturing their own data while supported by an embedded evaluation team at the initiative level. Communities of Focus also noted that evaluations should examine the enabling conditions that sit behind what makes the initiative the way it is.

Several initiatives asserted that evaluations need to be more longitudinal in nature and to feed back learnings into practice rather than be limited to funding applications or performance management. Communities of Focus explained how they have built in evaluation points over the 10 year plan for their program. The Southern Initiative/The Auckland Co-Design Lab highlighted the need for funding for evaluation and learning practices to be embedded, particularly to achieve practice-based evidence that can inform policy decision-making.

Gaining quality learnings is a key part of the process, but so is sharing those learnings throughout the system. Many of the processes for building interconnection noted in earlier sections double as potential mechanisms for sharing learnings, such as roundtables, collective learning spaces and funding processes. A suggestion from the Mid Coast initiatives was a research body that can distribute findings across the system and create accountability without descending into blame. Making evaluation data public was another option proposed by various initiatives.

*“Communities play an active role in evaluation, defining what success looks like and capturing their own data, supported by an embedded evaluation team at the initiative level. This builds capability within the community to both celebrate, and critically evaluate their work across the duration of the 10-year initiative.”*

— Our Town

## Growing community, provider and government capability and capacity

The previous sections have outlined the characteristics of a people- and place-centred social services based on practitioner perspectives. However, it was clear from our conversations that widely implementing the six drivers will require capability-building across communities, providers and governments.

In a social services system that centres people and place, communities will have a much more active role to play than is currently the case. This will need to be supported by capability- and capacity-building. Our Town and Communities of Focus told us how community members play an active role in their work and how this builds skills and knowledge within those people. Communities of Focus also mentioned the importance of training sessions and opening professional conferences to community members. Many initiatives noted that co-design processes inevitably result in all parties involved, including the community, learning effective processes over time.

Another key issue was sufficient community capacity in the form of time and resources. Flemington Works emphasised the importance of paying community members for their engagement with the initiative, especially given that everyone else is being paid to be there. Communities of Focus and Our Town acknowledged the administrative challenges faced by community-led initiatives such as setting up human resources (HR) policies and obtaining deductible gift recipient (DGR) status. Communities can often be left on their own in these areas and both organisations asserted the need for more support. Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia noted that community capacity-building needs to be continuous and sustainable, rather than the stop and start approach that is often taken today.

Equally important to develop is the capacity of the organisations funded to work with the community. Several initiatives we spoke to described “working off the side of [their] desks”, with one even comparing this extra time to volunteering. Many participants noted that staff in this field are often left feeling burnt out. A key theme from our conversation with the Mid Coast initiatives was that funders often do not understand the time and resources required for effective partnership and so do not provide adequate funds for it.

There was a strong sentiment among the initiatives that we spoke to that there are many good people working within the government dedicated to genuine place-based work. However, most initiatives also felt that these people were held back by certain engrained mindsets, ways of working and systemic factors like political cycles and rigid accountability structures. There was also the sentiment among some initiatives that certain state and territory governments work better with people and place than others, creating uneven opportunities for communities across the country.

Many of the transformations discussed so far go some way to addressing these issues in government. Enhancing government capability can take this even further. The Southern Initiative/The Auckland Co-Design Lab discussed a shift where governments take on the role of learners, particularly deconstructing ways of doing inherited from colonial society. In a discussion between various initiatives on the Mid Coast of NSW, several participants noted that organisations working within community need to help governments understand what capabilities are actually needed and the resources required for them.

The Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership told us how the place-based initiative, Logan Together, hosted an immersion event with government personnel to deepen the understanding and relationship between community and government leaders and better understand the opportunities and challenges created on the ground by systems. Our Town similarly noted that people who have a wide range of experiences in and out of community contexts are often better able to make the mindset shifts needed for people- and place-centred work.

Our Town discussed how, for all actors, acknowledging and accepting the role that we play in perpetuating the current system is a crucial first step to making change. They also discussed the importance of being a systems thinker and being able to break down problems and connect common issues at multiple levels of society. Mid Coast 4 Kids

proposed a national framework that would set out, for all actors, ways of devolving power to a more local level and creating effective community partnerships.

This framework could also set common standards for key terms and methods. As noted earlier, we heard various examples of terminology like co-design or community engagement being used where they were not appropriate. A framework that clearly outlines best practice and that bakes in a need to realign the system dynamics is one way of addressing this capability gap.

*“We need a regular roundtable that brings everyone together to set benchmarks, share learnings and coordinate as a sector. This requires genuine representation from every level.”*

— Mid Coast 4 Kids

## Bringing the themes together

While we have described these seven themes individually, the reality is that they are deeply interconnected.

A long-term commitment to a shared purpose is important for ensuring that the other themes can be actualised in sustainable and aligned ways. The shared purpose might bake in some of the other drivers, like power sharing or flexibility and adaptability. We also heard how shared values and rules can enhance cooperation and trust within and across communities and various organisations.

Relationships grounded in trust and transparency underpin many of the other principles. Devolving power to a more local level will require those in power to trust community partners and their capacity for self-determination. The kinds of coordinated and cooperative networks needed for an effective social services system requires actors to be open with each other and have faith that their partners are truly working alongside them.

A more coordinated and cooperative approach to social services will bring benefits no matter what. However, it also ensures collective ownership of the other six themes and increases the chances that these reforms will be implemented across the system. It is especially crucial for enabling power and knowledge sharing by better connecting different actors.

Power sharing is necessary to ensure that the long-term purpose is created in line with community needs. In addition, distributing

power across the system allows the capabilities associated with those responsibilities to grow rather than a dependency on a larger institution. Devolving power is especially important during evaluation as it ensures that any learnings and their impact on future program design consider community impacts from their perspectives.

Flexibility and adaptability are key to maximising trust and power sharing with communities as it opens space for community input. For example, Flemington Works' flexible funding enabled them to conduct a genuine co-design process with local residents from the beginning of the initiative. They are also essential to ensuring that the long-term, shared vision of an initiative can adapt over time and in different contexts.

A culture and mechanisms that enhance learning and knowledge sharing are crucial for making sure the system is on the right track in the other six areas. They also offer another feedback loop encouraging service design and delivery to meet the needs of the community.

Finally, none of the six drivers can be realised without the capability to do so. We heard repeatedly that genuinely sharing power, building trust and maintaining partnerships is resource intensive and requires specialised skills. Similarly, the kinds of evaluations necessary for continuous improvement will require new skills, knowledge and ways of working.

## Conclusions and the path forward

The six drivers and additional theme around capability outline a future for social services grounded in the perspectives of those already working alongside communities.

In exploring these themes, we have also discussed many examples of what initiatives are doing now that are already bringing this future to life. However, the question remains: what next steps do we take to start progressing towards a social services system that centres people and place?

To answer this question, we have also produced a report called Putting People First: Transforming social services in partnership with people and communities.

This publication combines what we have heard from place-based initiatives with various government, academic and non-profit reports to set out some concrete steps for moving towards people- and place-centred social services systems.



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