

Putting People First

Transforming social
services in partnership
with people and
communities



Clifford Eberly
Ryan Martin

Cpd CENTRE
FOR POLICY
DEVELOPMENT

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 strive to build a social services system that helps people and communities to thrive now and in the future, and drive shifts in policy making practice with a focus on wellbeing and sustainability rather than primarily economic growth.

CPD uses a distinctive Create-Connect-Convince method to influence government policy making.

We acknowledge and celebrate Australia's First Peoples.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Centre for Policy Development acknowledges and pays respect to Elders, both past and present, and all generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Traditional Custodians of the land.

For thousands of years, prior to and during colonial settlement, the diversity of indigenous cultures, languages, identities and country across the continent and islands demanded locally responsive solutions that adapt to context. As it was then, so it is now.

Much of the thinking and practice on people- and place-centred approaches comes from thousands of years of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wisdom and leadership. In First Nations worldviews, individual and communal identity is tied to land and Country. Also core to this worldview is the belief that we are all interconnected and that these relationships should be at the centre of everything we do.

As with many aspects of Australian life, the acknowledgement of First Nations leadership provides a meaningful starting point in putting people and place at the centre of government. The principle of self-determination and a "nothing about us, without us" mentality has fostered expectations of locally engaged leadership. This work acknowledges that leadership and seeks to learn from it in order to grow services and systems that support people and communities to thrive.

Executive summary

Every year, governments spend around 200 billion dollars helping Australians to find jobs or homes, supporting the elderly to live independently, providing disability services, helping refugees settle, assisting families to give young children a good start in life and supporting First Nations families and communities.¹ Some of these government services are primarily the Commonwealth's responsibility, others fall to the states and territories. At both levels of government, services are usually delivered through contracted agreements with not-for-profit agencies and private companies.

Despite the significant investment, this collection of services and payments fails too many people. While government services play an essential role in helping people to get back on their feet when they fall, many supports only become available when people are already in crisis. People find the system confusing, cumbersome and more focused on making them comply with complex rules than meeting their needs.

Ideally, government services would be easy to understand and simple to navigate. But progress towards that aim has stalled, and in some ways, we are going backwards.

An effective and efficient system would support people and communities to thrive, not just survive. It would focus on increasing wellbeing and building resilience. Instead, we have a system that is mired in managing risk, driven by competition and focused too much on service growth and cost.

Numerous reports and inquiries - commissioned over decades by governments of all persuasions - have called for government services to be re-imagined so that people and communities are at the centre. Yet the system is stuck in a pattern of review, recommend and adjust that fails to make meaningful progress. Instead of moving forward, we're spinning in circles.

This report presents a pathway to transforming the social services system so that it is more responsive to people and place, using the services managed by the Commonwealth as a starting point.

Transforming the system will take more than just updating the tools of public administration. It will require governments to see communities as part of the solution and commit to working in genuine partnership with them. It means changing mindsets and cultures, putting people at the centre of policy and service design.

This report identifies six crucial drivers for a transformed social services system:

- 1 A shared purpose backed by long-term investment;
- 2 Grounding relationships in trust and transparency;
- 3 Sharing and devolving power;
- 4 Coordinated and cooperative approaches;
- 5 Flexibility and adaptability; and
- 6 Learning and knowledge sharing

This report also sets out four recommendations — practical actions that the Commonwealth and others can start doing now to begin the step change to a new system:

- 1 We recommend that the Commonwealth lead a system-wide collaboration to establish a clear purpose for the social services system and each of its sub-systems that is aligned to the Measuring What Matters National Wellbeing Framework. This would help align policy and practice towards enabling people and communities to thrive.
- 2 We recommend that evaluation units within service delivery agencies and the Australian Centre for Evaluation (ACE) partner with academia and other learning partners to establish and sustain iterative learning mechanisms tailored to social services delivery, including impact and developmental evaluation tools that centre community voice and regular spaces for collective learning. This would ensure systems improve over time and will adapt to changing conditions and variation across individuals and communities.
- 3 We recommend that the Commonwealth Finance department work with state and territory governments to develop tools for the collaborative commissioning and relational contract management of social services over longer-term funding cycles. This would embed the partnership, power sharing and trust essential for effective service delivery into the way governments design and fund social services.
- 4 We recommend that governments, philanthropy and providers work together to establish sustainable demonstration sites embedded within specific local communities that are co-designed, test the service delivery approaches described in this paper and feed those learnings back to the broader system. This would allow us to learn what works while making an immediate difference for communities in need.

Cutting across these four recommendations, we recommend that all actors build their capability and capacity for people- and place-centred social services. This should be an essential part of implementing the four recommendations above and pave the way for long-term capability- and capacity-building.

This report is based on the belief that insights from existing people- and place-centred initiatives can shine light on how to effectively transform the system. To devise our six drivers and four recommendations, we synthesised what we heard from local initiatives with an extensive review of government and non-government reports and academic literature. For too long, policy and practice have been disconnected, it's time to bring them together.



**1. Too many people
and communities are
being left behind**

A rising tide does not lift all boats. Three decades of GDP growth have not delivered the widespread dividends promised. After a prolonged period of economic growth, large pockets of disadvantage still exist across urban, regional and remote Australia.² Too many people are being left behind.

Income, education, employment, health, social connection and other factors all play a role in expanding the capability of people to live a life that they have reason to value.⁵ However, a lack of these things puts that capability at risk.

Intergenerational disadvantage, a lack of access to affordable housing, unemployment and poor mental or physical health are some of the factors that leave people vulnerable and impact an individual's ability to live a good life. As a result of injustice and trauma, not everyone has access to the benefits of social networks, affordable housing and decent and secure work.⁶ Uncertain social and economic conditions make this vulnerability worse.

Social services are provided through a collection of programs and payments that address threats to human capacity.⁷ But the approaches we've used in the past have hit their limits - too many people are being left behind on key measures:

- About 13 percent of Australia's population is living below the poverty line.⁸ One in six children in Australia live in poverty.⁹
- Progress has stalled on most of the 17 Closing the Gap targets. Only four are on track. Another four are getting worse.¹⁰
- Around 22 percent of children (one in five) start school developmentally vulnerable, facing long-term impacts on their health, education and future prospects.¹¹
- Since 2006, we've made no improvement in the overall rate of homelessness, with the rate of homelessness for women increasing.¹²
- Despite recent record low unemployment and workforce shortages across many industries, more than 150,000 people have been on an employment services caseload for more than five years and 60% of the caseload has been stuck in the system for more than 12 months.¹³
- There are around three million Australians who want to work or work more hours. Of these people, 1.3 million want to work but are unable to look for employment due to issues with finances, transport, housing, childcare or other challenges.¹⁴

Our collective ability to address these issues is under pressure from a range of forces.

Uncertainty and complexity - Navigating technological advancement, the impacts of climate change, energy and industry transitions and the rising cost of living are just some of the challenges where no single actor holds the solution and flexible and adaptive approaches are needed.

Cost and capacity pressures - Government budget forecasts are strained as demand for care and support grows, with the 2024 Intergenerational Report projecting aged care spending to increase per person and as a share of GDP over the next 40 years as the population ages.¹⁵ The workforce that provides care and support through government funded services is also under strain, with capability and capacity pressures identified across early childhood education, aged care, employment services and child protection.¹⁶

HOW WE MEASURE PROGRESS MATTERS

Despite many problems with the metric, Australia still relies heavily on gross domestic product (GDP) as the primary measure of progress and economic wellbeing.³ Pure economic metrics will never capture all the complexities of social and economic development. They simply don't tell us everything we need to know.

Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) and social determinants of health provide a more nuanced view of how well or poorly individuals and communities are doing. More recently, Australia's Measuring What Matters Framework has helped policymakers to think about definitions of progress that are more holistic.⁴

Diminished trust and rising scepticism - The Australian Leadership Index notes rising perceptions of polarisation among the Australian public and low trust in government, with federal, state and territory governments among the least trusted public institutions.¹⁷ One of the biggest public grievances is that governments are not perceived to be dealing with issues that actually matter.¹⁸ Public trust has especially deteriorated among those experiencing disadvantage.¹⁹ Organisations we spoke to for this research found that the communities they work in are frustrated, disenfranchised and traumatised by repeatedly not being heard, impairing trust in relationships.^{20,21}

Evidence shows that effective social services play a role in strengthening social cohesion.²² Responsive policy and service design processes can help address these challenges and provide broader social and economic benefits.

If the services we have can't respond to the challenges of today, they won't stand up to the pressures of tomorrow.

We need to find a better way.

HOW WE GOT THE SYSTEM WE HAVE

Two events of international significance, the Great Depression and the end of World War II, framed the design of Australia's social services at the Commonwealth level.²³ Government needed to design a system of social security (welfare payments) that could be deployed universally to respond to economic setbacks and shocks.

Influenced by the work of William Beveridge and the design of social services in the UK, policymakers opted for a transactional system. Services weren't asked to manage much complexity or respond to diversity. Colonialism completely excluded First Nations perspectives in system design, reinforcing the power dynamics of the day. They overlooked women. They ignored cultural background, in part because of the White Australia policy. And services didn't account for psychological factors due to attitudes and perceptions of mental health and disability. Their development wasn't guided by social justice or grounded in human rights.

Many service systems were marketised in the 80s and 90s.²⁴ Government contracted out service delivery with the view that competition and profit seeking would drive efficiency and effectiveness.²⁵ Guided by New Public Management reforms, the public service shifted from direct service delivery to managing contracts. The belief was that the drive for private profits would result in savings to government and create choice and better outcomes for people.

The social services system we have today emerges from this legacy. It is a collection of services, programs and payments that help individuals and communities to meet their human needs.²⁶ This involves a range of services and payments provided by government and community service organisations, such as employment, settlement and disability services delivered through the Commonwealth or housing and family support services delivered by the states and territories.



One way of distinguishing services is how they are targeted and the outcome they aim to achieve.²⁷ In this report, we focus on subsystems that seek to respond to the needs of specific groups within the Australian population, such as aged care, employment, disability, housing, early childhood, family support and settlement services. We acknowledge that the health and education systems are also very much at work in addressing social issues, they are inextricably linked with social services and they are often governed under the same social policy constructs.





2. A future where people and communities thrive

Through a range of services, programs and payments, actors attempt to address complex social issues - but too many people are stranded in the safety net. An effective system would enable people and communities to thrive, not just survive. It would focus on increasing wellbeing and building resilience.

In order to realise this, systems and services need to centre people and communities, strengthen family and community networks, and restore personal agency. The system needs to see people who use services not as problems to be managed, but as partners in the solution.

Seeing communities as part of the solution

Big systems and standardised responses have a place in our society. Governments are responsible for responding to a wide range of threats including cyberattacks, military threats, economic crises, pandemics, and more. Having the capability for large-scale, top-down responses is a benefit.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital refers to the trusted networks between people that allow them to do things they could not do alone.²⁹ The concept acknowledges that, in addition to economic resources and bureaucratic support systems, person-to-person relationships matter.

Social capital has been linked to positive outcomes for education³⁰ and wellbeing.³¹ However, as many societies have moved away from small, communal social arrangements to large, socially complex, industrialised ones, they have also shifted from prioritising social capital to excessive individualism.³² This is part of why we need a social services system that prioritises growing social capital.

However, the responsibility for meeting human needs, growing capability and opening up opportunity extends well beyond services and payments. Society is underpinned by a network of relationships that exist in communities. In addition to providing care and connection, this network of relationships generates economic and social benefits known as social capital.^{28box}

In Australia, around 70% of people live and work in the community they grew up in.³³ Communities are a powerful determinant of a person's capacity to live a good life.

“ 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

Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia leads in encouraging, developing and supporting programs that expand and improve refugee settlement in Australia by harnessing the generosity, goodwill, and social capital of everyday Australians.

For policymakers and service providers, the design of supports shouldn't be seen as a replacement for what communities do. Instead, they should work with what communities already do well, working in partnership with the reservoir of connections that exist within communities to help strengthen local ties.

“ Modern welfare must create capability rather than manage dependence; it must be open, because all of us need help at some stage in our lives, and when we are thriving many of us have help to offer; it must create possibility rather than seek only to manage risk; and it must include everyone, thereby fostering the connections and relationships that make good lives possible.”

Hilary Cottam, Radical Help

THE WISDOM OF FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP

Holistic, people and place-centred approaches are core to First Nations cultures. They are what Indigenous peoples have advocated for since the beginning of colonisation. First Nations peoples have called for treaties for over 200 years, from early colonisation⁴⁰ to the 1988 Barunga Statement⁴¹ to the First Peoples Assembly of Victoria.⁴²

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody notes that:

*The Aboriginal experience of history has been very different in different parts of Australia. Approaches to remedying inequality need to take account of these differences. One lesson of history is that Aboriginal society is very local.*⁴³

The *Empowered Communities: Empowered People, Design Report* (2015) was a landmark publication in Indigenous decision-making, and sets out a range of reforms that aim to return agency to First Nations peoples at the individual, community, and regional level.⁴⁴ They asserted that:

The welfare state in Australia induces the most crippling sclerosis in Indigenous society because its programs so often displace responsibility from those who should be vested with relevant responsibilities—individuals, families and communities.

Empowered Communities proposed a 10-year national policy agreement that embodies the principles of empowerment, development and productivity and places decision-making power as close as possible to the people those decisions serve. The report called for partnership between Indigenous leaders and governments, with the government acting as an enabler rather than the “primary fixer”. It recommended a formal interface between regional First Nations representatives and government to discuss key concerns in the regions, come to agreements on addressing them, and share data and learnings. The report called this kind of collaboration working from the inside out.

CLOSING THE GAP REQUIRES GENUINE PARTNERSHIP

After nearly 15 years attempting to achieve equality in health and life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, all levels of government and the Coalition of Peaks came together to develop the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.³⁴ Priority Reform One was formal partnership and shared decision-making between First Nations peoples and government and adequate funding for these collaborations.

Nevertheless, the full set of structural changes needed for true Indigenous empowerment are far from implemented. In its *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (2024), the Productivity Commission notes that there has been little tangible movement from governments towards genuinely shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.³⁵

The commission outlined some key changes needed from government to facilitate a broader shift towards place-based decision-making and

service delivery. However, instead of an emphasis on growing partnership, the commission proposed improvements by enforcing more accountability with the states and territories - specifically stating that the current accountability mechanisms are not sufficient because they “lack bite” and “do not contain timely and appropriate consequences for failure.”³⁶

But partnership can’t be enforced – the national agreement will only come to life by growing trusting relationships.

Moving from compliance to alliance

The 2023 Rebuilding Employment Services report by the House Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services makes the case for a system centred on people and place.³⁷ That report argues that we need to start by busting the myth that most people on welfare payments are seeking to scam the system. Instead of a system that primarily manages compliance, the system should focus on building human capability, working through regional gateways and governance through partnerships between business, community and government to help people meet their employment and career goals and connect to opportunities in their local labour market. The shift from compliance to alliance is the central theme.³⁸

The recent non-government report, Supporting Children and Families to Flourish, published by the James Martin Institute, calls for similar reforms to the child protection and out-of-home care system in New South Wales.³⁹ The report identifies that these systems have focused on managing risk when what is needed is an approach that prioritises trust and holistic care and “creates the conditions for families to develop their capabilities and take charge of their own lives”. The report asserts that relationships are at the centre of a transformative approach.

Across Closing the Gap reforms and a wide range of government priorities within social services, the need to mend broken relationships and work in genuine partnership is the heart of the issue. This opportunity to prioritise relationships and partnership can be applied across reforms in all aspects of social policy, including early childhood, employment, disability, child protection, housing and more.

The 2024-25 Budget outlines the government’s commitment to broadening opportunity and advancing equality, particularly for women, First Nations peoples, regional communities and those experiencing disadvantage.⁴⁵ These budget commitments sit within Measuring What Matters, a broader framework that commits the Commonwealth to making progress towards a more healthy, secure, sustainable, cohesive and prosperous Australia.⁴⁶

But instead of taking steps towards these aims, the system is stuck on managing risk and compliance. As governments have grown their muscles as contract managers, their capability for fostering partnerships and promoting social capital has diminished.⁴⁷ The system operates as a machine, proposing technical solutions to address issues of the heart and mind. We need a system that is more principled and human.

Instead of moving forward, we’re going in circles.

WHAT ABOUT COST?

The social services system already costs billions of dollars. Population growth, wage increases and inflation will increase the price tag. This report does not provide a quantitative analysis of what a system based on partnership might cost, but system reform processes should begin by considering:

- Funding already available - Big systems cost billions with a broader set of bolt-on initiatives and crisis response spending announced on a semi-regular basis. We need to consider if the existing allocation is being used in the best way.
- The cost of compliance - Each program and service comes with large volumes of rules and regulations, in part to ensure quality (which should be encouraged) and in part to ensure control (which provides diminishing returns). Highly regulated services and programs should be reviewed to ensure that they are enabling, rather than stifling, their intended purpose, with costs allocated to overbearing compliance reallocated to providing direct support to people.
- The trade-offs that exist in markets - Markets don’t always create the most efficient systems. Thin markets and single-buyer situations can drive costs up, not down. The drive for profit can also compromise quality, reducing effectiveness.

Governments have tended to respond to increasing costs through funding cuts or outsourcing in the name of efficiency. In reality, these approaches have simply created administrative complexity, reduced service quality and diminished capability.⁴⁸ Rather than a system that is focused on reducing cost, we need social services that enable people to thrive by working in partnership with them and building their capability.



3. Instead of moving forward we seem to be going in circles

We aren't the first to call for social services that centre partnership. It has been a constant refrain from the community services sector and even governments themselves.^{49, 50, 51} And yet, we continue to have systems mired in short-term thinking, excessive risk-aversion and rigid power structures that, at times, do more harm than good. To make the shift we need, governments must do more than make structural and technical tweaks on the margins of the system. All actors within the social services system must come together for a comprehensive transformation that addresses everything from service design to power dynamics to mindsets and attitudes.

What holds the system back

Until we identify what keeps the system from working for people and communities, the ambitions set out by funding announcements and frameworks won't become a reality. Our analysis has identified several factors holding the system back.

Short-term thinking prioritises quick-fix solutions - Election and budget cycles encourage short-term timelines and quick-fix and crisis responses. In reality, when people aren't treated holistically and the focus is on symptoms rather than root causes, issues worsen and become more difficult to address. While early intervention can save billions of dollars in avoidable costs, the system remains fixated on short-term, downstream crisis interventions.⁵²

A desire for predictability and risk-aversion impedes innovation - Public institutions notoriously struggle with complexity.⁵³ The view that the system can be standardised and delivered at scale prevents responsiveness.⁵⁴ Top-down approaches tend to oversimplify problems and focus on technical rules and mechanical processes to fix them.⁵⁵ A focus on compliance further stifles flexibility and learning.

Rigid ministerial responsibility and contractual accountability inhibit collaboration and capability-building - Providers and government departments operate in siloed policy and funding environments that disincentivise holistic support.⁵⁶ Measures of success fixate on rigid key performance indicators set by government officials and signed off by Ministers. Methods and metrics emphasise resource efficiency and the opportunity to build human capability is diminished. Power disproportionately sits with ministers and funders rather than the people that use services.⁵⁷

These features are intended to ensure service effectiveness and cost efficiency, but the lack of interconnectedness and collaboration, and the excessive distrust and competition between actors, actually results in reduced efficiency and effectiveness.

This impacts people and communities in significant ways.

“ As in any system that fails to solve the underlying problems, they amplify work, appearing frenetically busy while accomplishing less and less. Based on identifying needs rather than strengths, they fail to help individuals and communities build self-sustaining support systems that increase agency and independence, instead increasing resource consumption and dependency and accelerating decline.”

John Seddon, *Saving Money by Doing the Right Thing*

Inflexible and pre-prescribed solutions limit agency - The nature of existing solutions reinforce reliance on services and don't adequately promote opportunities to build social capital. This results in people becoming dependent on the system rather than growing capability.⁵⁸

Competition discourages holistic solutions - When services are fragmented, too many people fall through the cracks or move from provider to provider without having their needs addressed.⁵⁹ In situations where multiple issues interact and compound, disadvantage becomes further entrenched.⁶⁰

Punitive compliance approaches harm people rather than help them - The Australian Council of Social Service has noted how welfare payment suspensions have adverse effects like increased stress and being unable to afford rent, food or medical treatment.⁶¹ The Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme found that people experienced shame, vilification, stress and financial hardship.⁶² Veterans have coined the phrase “deny, delay, until they die” to describe the treatment they receive from the Department of Veteran Affairs.⁶³ People can feel unwanted and traumatised as individual and community issues continue unabated, despite collective advocacy.⁶⁴

“ *When people don’t feel valued, it does real psychological damage and this creates more problems further down the line. The shift we need to make is to think about people and listen to people. Instead of focusing on efficiency, we need to focus on people.*”

Flemington Works

Flemington Works engages with residents of public housing, policy and funding organisations, and local service providers to increase collaboration and centre residents' voices.

Some people’s experience, particularly among First Nations communities, is of disempowerment and coercive control. This is a long way from the kind of system that enables people and communities to thrive.

And, we’ve known this for quite some time.

Breaking the cycle of review, recommend and adjust

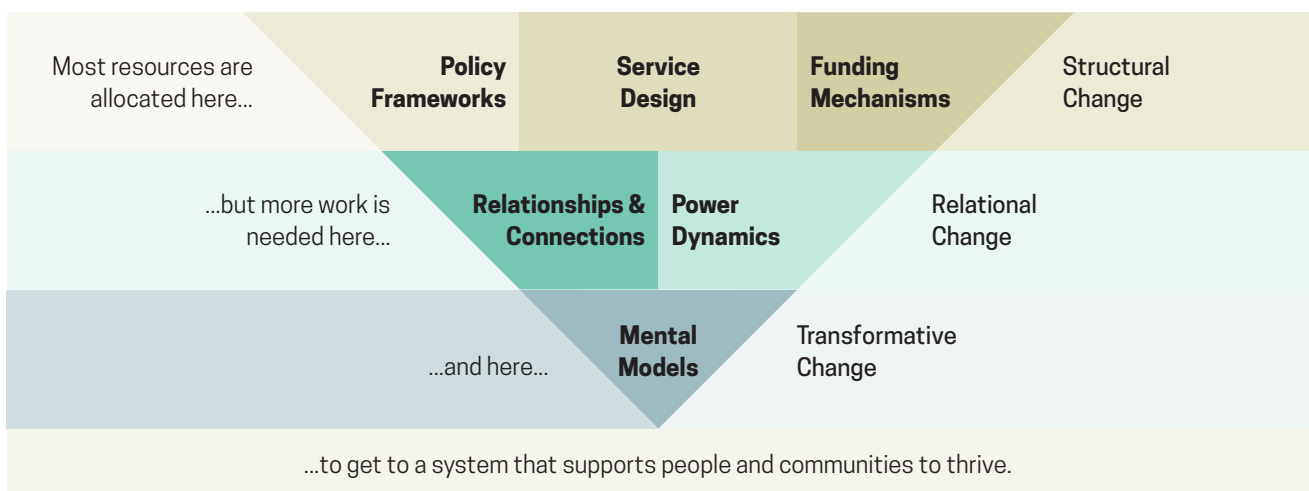
A litany of government-authored reports handed down by successive governments and across service systems detail the features and failures of the system we have. These reports describe a vision for a social services system that is accessible, easy to use and responsive to people and communities. But despite the thousands of pages of recommendations, there has been a lack of progress due to processes that focus on the same things without ever fixing them.^{65,66}

A pattern of review, recommend and adjust has become the norm. The abundance of technical recommendations fixate on what government does, not seeing communities as part of the solution. Top-down, command and control approaches stymie attempts to work together in genuine partnership, limiting opportunities for service integration and innovation.

Isolated, structural tweaks will not lead to systems change, especially for frog systems (see the Bicycle or Frog? box). This is not how systems change.⁷⁰ We can understand this better with Kania, Kramer and Senge’s Water of Systems Change model and their concepts of structural, relational and transformative change (Figure 1).⁷¹

From this perspective, a focus on policy frameworks, service design and funding mechanisms limit changes to structural components of the system. Comprehensive reform also requires relational and transformative changes that build relationships and shift power dynamics and mindsets.

FIGURE 1 | The Six Conditions of Systems Change



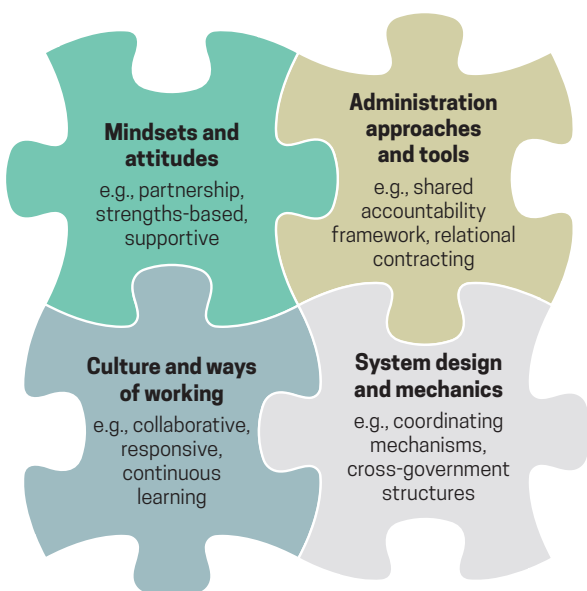
In this case, change at each level could include:

- **Structural Change** - Policy and service design that is clear on intended purpose (e.g., getting people jobs, building strong communities, giving children the best start in life). Tendering processes, governance structures and operational infrastructure can flow from this clarity.
- **Relational Change** - Collaborative governance models between government and community that challenge existing power dynamics, deepen trust and promote transparency. This is the bedrock of genuine and effective partnership.
- **Transformative Change** - A culture of shared learning between policymakers and community voices. This would better connect government policy and community practice at local and regional levels. We need mindsets that see community as part of the solution.

“ *It is not possible to fix a failing system by doing more or less the same. Dialing up and down with the same instruments will change nothing. Changing players without changing the game will not help much either. There needs to be different machinery and a different service philosophy to go with it.*”

Mark Considine, The Careless State

FIGURE 2 | Interdependent Components of System Transformation



Instead of attempts at reform that are piecemeal and disconnected, what is needed are strategic and well-coordinated change management processes that cut across the different components of each system and their interconnections. Building on Kania, Kramer and Senge’s categories, we can identify four focus areas for change (Figure 2):

- Mindsets and attitudes,
- Culture and ways of working,
- Administration approaches and tools, and
- System design and mechanics.

Effectively reforming social services will mean getting off the carousel of reforms and starting on the road to a transformed system.⁷²

BICYCLE OR FROG?

Allistair Mant described systems as being either frog or bicycle, either living or nonliving.⁶⁷ In bicycle systems, roles and functions are pre-determined with each piece designed for a particular purpose. Assuming you have a basic understanding of bicycle maintenance and access to the right tools, you can make significant improvements to a bicycle system by upgrading parts independent of the whole. Even relatively minor tweaks and adjustments (e.g., pumping up the tyres) can lead to enhanced performance.

Frog systems are living ecosystems. The interactions between parts are more complex, sometimes unseen and influenced by various conditions.⁶⁸ There is radical variability. Even small changes can have large ripple effects.⁶⁹ In order to make changes to frog systems you need in-depth knowledge of context, specialised tools and advanced skill.

Social services systems are frog systems. This is because of their reliance on people, human connection and relational ways of organising. The people they are designed to serve are inextricably embedded within their families, peer groups and communities. We need a social services ecosystem that acknowledges and works with this complexity.



4. What systems that work for people and communities look like

We know from the spread of community-led initiatives around the country that systems are already changing. This report is based on the belief that these initiatives provide invaluable insight into how social services can and should look. We refer to many of these in this report, but we also know that there are a myriad of initiatives, programs and projects that are not represented in this research. Some of these efforts are being led by government, many have sprung up through committed partnerships between philanthropy and communities and some have been established almost entirely through community effort. They have been lighting this way for more than a decade.

To better understand what people- and place-centred social services look like, we reviewed numerous government and non-government reports and academic literature and talked to various place-based initiatives about their experiences working with people and communities.

What we found is that we need policy and service design processes to respond to a different set of drivers. Our analysis has identified six system drivers that connect large-scale policy and service system design with the realities of working with people and place (Figure 3). These drivers resonate with research findings across multiple sectors, service systems and contexts.^{73,74}

To move forward, improvements to **public administration tools** (e.g., evaluation frameworks, contracts), **system design mechanisms** (e.g., commissioning, governance, learning), **mindsets, and culture and ways of working** need to be powered by these drivers. The six system drivers are:

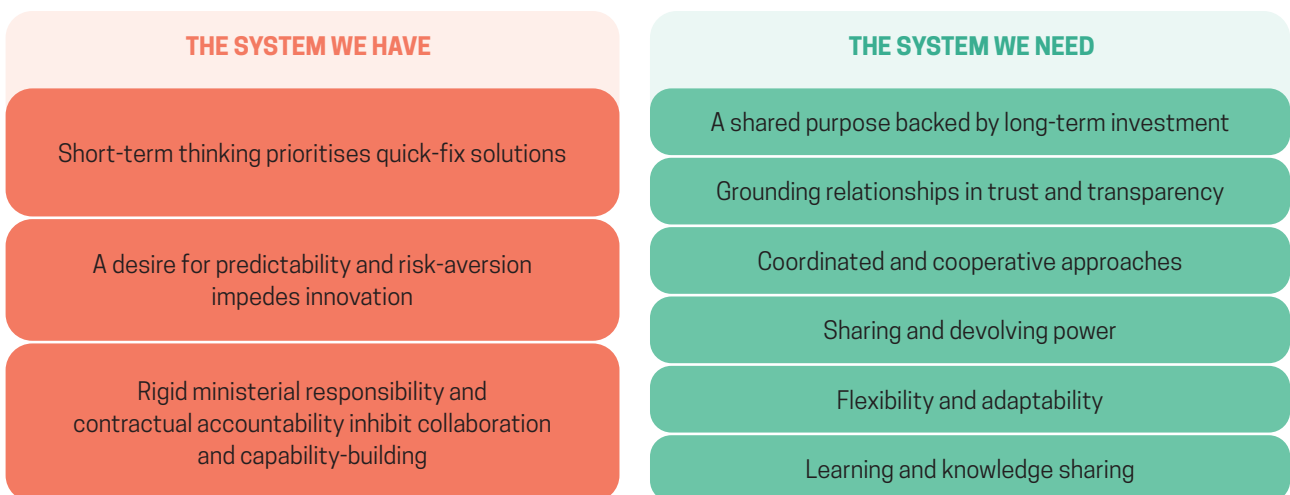
- 1 **A shared purpose backed by long-term investment**
- 2 **Grounding relationships in trust and transparency**
- 3 **Coordinated and cooperative approaches**
- 4 **Sharing and devolving power**
- 5 **Flexibility and adaptability**
- 6 **Learning and knowledge sharing**

These drivers are featured in place-based programs; have helped to strengthen multi-site initiatives; have enabled community, business and government to work together in regional and metropolitan settings; and have connected a diversity of people - children, families, refugees, women and young people - into community.

Services and systems guided by these drivers would see mutual obligations in employment services redesigned around trust and transparency. Public housing tenants would have power over decisions that impact their lives. Funding for services and programs that seek to address entrenched challenges would be long-term in nature.

The rest of this section outlines these six drivers, examples from government and community services where they currently exist and how they might work across social services systems.

FIGURE 3 | Drivers for Transformed Social Services



1 A shared purpose backed by long-term investment

Media and election cycles promote short-term, quick-fix solutions. However, supporting individual and community transformation requires multiple actors working towards the same goal over multiple years and decades - certainly beyond budget and election cycles. The system requires a shared purpose rooted in equity and sustained by long-term investment.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SAYS

- In 2011, the Australian Social Inclusion Board identified that “the most critical element of the funding mechanism for a place-based program is that the funding commitment must be long-term”.⁷⁵ The board also identified a shared vision and a mutually-agreed process as essential for sustainable local governance.
- The 2019 Select Committee on Intergenerational Welfare Dependence found that a shared vision was crucial for coordinating local services and that long-term funding was critical for improving community outcomes and building trust.⁷⁶
- The Strengthening Communities Alliance notes that a common vision and strategy are essential to place-based work.⁷⁷
- Equity Economics recently found that sustained support was a key concern for community leaders, and suggested a more coordinated approach to funding as one way of providing this.⁷⁸
- Kania and colleagues assert that a shared purpose that acknowledges power imbalances and centres equity is essential to community-based collective impact work.⁷⁹
- The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, in its discussion of the successful Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder Program, notes that flexible and ongoing funding is essential for providing the intensive support required by vulnerable families.⁸⁰

- The Rebuilding Employment Services report suggests a refreshed purpose for the employment services system that emphasises building human capability rather than rapidly moving jobseekers off income support.⁸¹ That report also recommends nine-year contracts with three-year renewal cycles for employment service providers, identifying the inefficiencies of transitioning providers in and out of communities as a reason to avoid short-term contracts.

WHAT WORKS FOR PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

Every initiative we spoke to described a set of values and/or a vision created through partnership that gave purpose to and sustained their work. Some initiatives spoke about how this helped in setting expectations and resolving tensions between collaborators. This highlighted how a shared purpose enables cooperation and limits competition.

“ *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 business, community and government stakeholders with a compelling basis to work together.*”

Mid Coast 4 Kids

Mid Coast 4 Kids connects a range of government and non-government organisations to support children across the communities of the Mid Coast of New South Wales.

Many of the initiatives we spoke to discussed the instability of one to three year funding cycles and how these limit services and programs from truly serving the community. They also described the administrative burden of constantly reapplying for funds. Meanwhile, Our Town, a community-led mental health initiative in rural South Australia, and Communities of Focus, a place-based initiative in four Australian communities, spoke about how long-term funding, for at least ten years, enabled growing trust and capability across communities and support staff.

MAKING IT WORK IN PARTNERSHIP

A shared purpose with long-term commitment can be seen in several ongoing government initiatives.

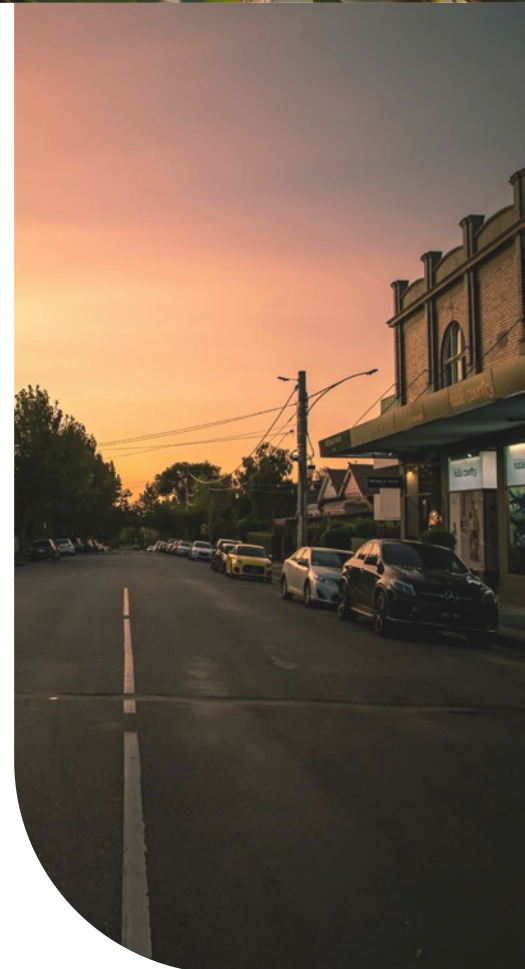
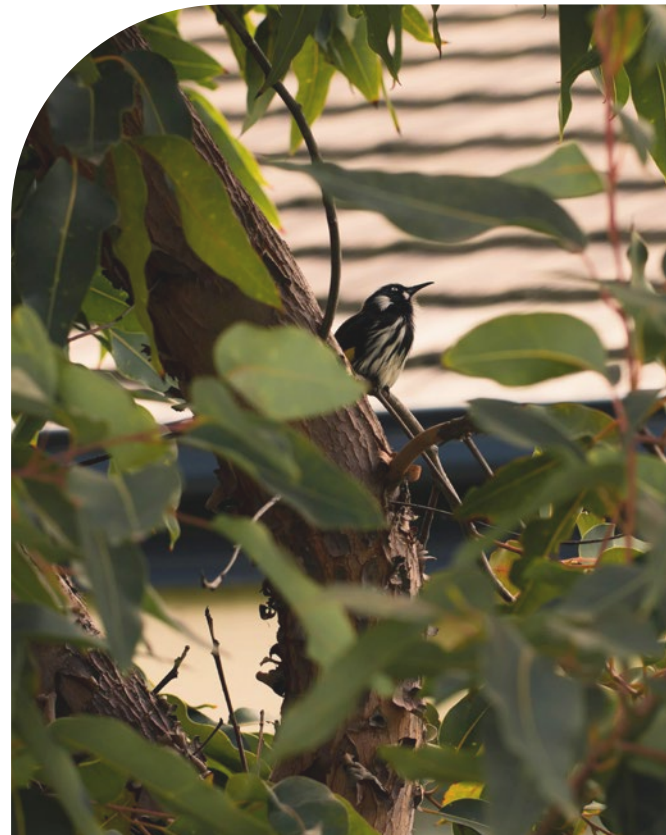
- The 2021 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy,⁸² the Early Years Strategy 2024-2034⁸³ and the national vision for early childhood education and care⁸⁴ seek to address fragmentation in the system by setting out a long-term purpose for the system where all children are born strong and nurtured by their families and communities.
- The Commonwealth's 2023 Employment White Paper laid out a national vision for full employment where people have access to decent, secure work.⁸⁵

Every reform or redesign is an opportunity for purpose-setting. Employment services, aged care, early childhood education and care, and many other social support areas are ready for the APS to bring this transformation to life now. Some systems across the states and territories, like child protection in New South Wales, are ready for this now as well.⁸⁶

In his 2023 address to the APS, the Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Glyn Davis, declared **a vision for a social services system that was “designed to build capability and resilience, focused on the whole person, grounded in community.”** A system that works for people and communities will have all actors committed to realising a long-term vision similar to the one outlined by Davis, with funding mechanisms to match.

However, a 2023 government discussion paper on strengthening the community services sector identified that 47% of organisations funded through Commonwealth grants are for 12 months or less.⁸⁷

All actors need to recognise how short-term and uncertain funding commitments undermine progress towards a shared purpose. Capability and resilience are built through consistent approaches over time.



2 Grounding relationships in trust and transparency

Relationships based on trust are essential for effective social service delivery. Currently, government relationships with providers and communities are mostly unidirectional and emphasise compliance. Relationships between providers are rife with competition. Actors often do not share information with each other and the reasoning behind decisions is guarded tightly.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SAYS

- The 2019 Independent review of the Australian Public Service asserts the need for “a trusted APS” with partnerships that are “open, respectful and of mutual benefit”.⁸⁸
- The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety considers being “open, accountable and honest” as essential to an effective service system.⁸⁹
- The 2023 Review of the Migration System argues that trust and confidence in the system are crucial goals for migration reform.⁹⁰
- The Grattan Institute found that a major barrier for policy reform is ideological boundaries.⁹¹ These boundaries often block reform even where they are well-supported by evidence.
- Equity Economics listed “building trust” and “continuous communication” as key design elements in place-based work.⁹²

WHAT WORKS FOR PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

We heard from many initiatives that to grow trust, there needs to be genuine power-sharing, clear communication and honest expectation-setting from the beginning of the relationship. Flemington Works, an initiative from Melbourne’s North-West that promotes collaboration and centres community voice, noted that this requires all actors to own mistakes and treat them as learning opportunities. Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia, which helps communities mobilise their social capital to support refugee newcomers, spoke to the importance of taking collective responsibility to resolve issues when working in partnership. Another initiative highlighted that growing trust requires a willingness to break rules and work outside your remit in the interest of community outcomes.

“ To build trust, we all need to be able to let one another into each other’s respective tents. We need to be open and vulnerable about our challenges and let go of the idea that everyone is perfect.”

Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia

Several initiatives outlined how fostering trust with the community enabled community members to seek support across a wide range of issues they otherwise would not have. This allowed for more holistic support and for the initiatives to connect community members to other relevant services.

MAKING IT WORK IN PARTNERSHIP

Governments need to acknowledge that punitive contract and service relationships in social services produce relationships based on fear, which inevitably causes harm. There are emerging shifts in government to curate relationships grounded in trust and transparency.

- Trust and transparency are key elements of the current slate of Australian Public Service reforms.⁹³ Examples of this include establishing the National Anti-Corruption Commission, publishing communiques from the Secretaries Board meetings and expanding the Survey of Trust in Australian public services.
- The Australian Government’s upcoming reformed disability employment services program aims to “build greater trust between participants and providers with more meaningful engagement”.⁹⁴

These shifts need to happen faster and go further.

A system that works for people and communities has a performance and accountability culture that centres transparency, owning mistakes, learning through failure and two-way communication. This overhaul to organisational culture combines with updated policies and frameworks. This will look different for each social service, but examples might include more tailored mutual obligations in employment services, greater data sovereignty for First Nations communities, and evaluations or performance frameworks that encourage learning rather than consequences for failure. Governments and institutions need to communicate more openly with communities, genuinely implementing their suggestions or explaining why they are not feasible. Actors need to accept responsibility when they make mistakes. Trust and transparency need to be modelled by senior leaders and politicians and filtered throughout all levels of the social services ecosystem.

3 Coordinated and cooperative approaches

Competitive, narrow and fragmented approaches to service provision are damaging for people. Individuals fall through the cracks, are shunted from service to service without resolution or receive partial solutions that do not get to the root of the problem. The provision of holistic and responsive support depends on collaborative effort. This is especially true for frontline service delivery, but extends to all aspects of the social services, including how services are designed, administered and stewarded. It is only through the cooperation of actors across systems that we can start to address the conditions underlying the many issues Australians face today.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SAYS

- The Strengthening Communities Alliance notes the importance of reducing competition in the social services sector and aligning work across different government portfolios.⁹⁵
- The Select Committee on Workforce Australia found that “human services... are fragmented, disconnected, and hard to navigate” and that “service delivery at the Commonwealth, state and territory, and local government levels is characterised by policy silos which limit coordination and collaboration”.⁹⁶
- South Australia’s recent Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care recommends “making integrated services the default for all newly established State Government early years services” by building appropriate infrastructure and providing “regular opportunities for connection” between service providers.⁹⁷
- The Australian Social Inclusion Board recommends that the Commonwealth, states and territories come together to make long-term commitments for addressing locational disadvantage.⁹⁸ Crucially, roles and responsibilities need to be clearly delineated in these coordination efforts.⁹⁹
- The 2019 Independent Review of the Australia Public Service made several recommendations on how the APS could enhance coordination and cooperation, including better partnering with Ministers, working jointly with states and territories and clustering portfolios to deliver more effective outcomes.¹⁰⁰
- The Australian Centre for Social Innovation argues that impact networks, which bring together diverse actors for systems change, are most effective when they centre togetherness, inbetweenness, emergence and wellbeing for members.¹⁰¹

WHAT WORKS FOR PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

In our conversations with initiatives, we repeatedly heard about the need for greater cooperation and coordination across all actors at all levels. We heard about the duplication of initiatives in the same community and a lack of collaboration, despite obvious shared objectives.

Coordination and cooperation were described as enablers in building capability. The Southern Initiative/The Auckland Co-Design Lab, which promotes prosperity and resilience in South and West Auckland, and Communities of Focus talked about how formal cooperation mechanisms led to informal “phone a friend” networks that could be leaned on in times of crisis. Our Town described a networked approach, creating hubs that connect various elements of the initiative across the state, accelerating the learning and sharing of ideas. They found that this drove a mindset shift towards collectively working on problems, exploring opportunities and sharing solutions that can be nuanced to meet community context.

Coordinated and cooperative approaches are also enablers for systems change. Our Town found that their town networks allowed them to demonstrate shared impact for further investment and come together for collective advocacy. We heard from Mid Coast 4 Kids, an initiative that connects various organisations across the Mid Coast of New South Wales to support local children, how important connections across communities are for ensuring that local innovation can be joined up to system transformation.

“ 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

● MAKING IT WORK IN PARTNERSHIP

Governments across Australia have begun moving to a more coordinated and cooperative approach to social support.

- The Commonwealth is developing a whole-of-government framework to address community disadvantage¹⁰² and has recently outlined its Regional Investment Framework,¹⁰³ both of which aim to align work across portfolios and allow those departments to better partner with communities.
- Partnerships for Local Action and Community Empowerment (PLACE), a not-for-profit organisation jointly funded by the Commonwealth and five philanthropic partners, offers opportunities to enhance cooperation across social services.¹⁰⁴
- The Care and Support Economy Reform Unit within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet monitor and coordinate policy design and implementation across aged care, disability support, early childhood education and care, and veteran's care.¹⁰⁵
- Jointly funded by the Commonwealth and the states, the Multi-Purpose Services program flexibly provides older people in regional and remote areas with integrated health and aged care services.¹⁰⁶

Nevertheless, current tendering, commissioning and contracting arrangements make coordination and cooperation very difficult. A system that effectively serves people is stewarded by larger institutions and networks to ensure that the combination of programs in a particular location meet the needs of those communities and that context. While governments would retain a core of regulation and quality assurance, contracts and funding arrangements with providers would move away from compliance and towards long-term collaboration with a view to continuous improvement.

People- and place-centred social services have mechanisms that connect different parts of the sector, whether through regular roundtables, a standing council, hubs, workshops, informal networks, cross-portfolio governance structures or other methods. These mechanisms would help to coordinate initiatives in a given area and avoid duplication and competition. Structures that enable best practice and promote collaboration would be commonplace.

4 Sharing and devolving power

To genuinely centre people and place, power needs to be shared between communities, providers and funders. How power is shared across the system will vary in each case. However, governments and other powerful actors need to ensure that formal decision-making power is distributed equitably and avoid command-and-control approaches that limit the effectiveness of services and community engagement.

● WHAT THE EVIDENCE SAYS

- Demos notes that power sharing means building up local institutions and local governance mechanisms so that communities can bring about the world they envision independently of *and* in partnership with the public and private sectors.¹⁰⁷
- The Australian Social Inclusion Board argues that local governance mechanisms should include community organisations that are trusted, understand local needs and possess social licence.¹⁰⁸
- The *Empowered Communities: Empowered People, Design Report* (2015) centres the principle of subsidiarity - the idea that the "authority to decide and act should rest at the closest level possible to the people or organisations the decision or action is designed to serve".¹⁰⁹
- The Productivity Commission notes that the government has made some progress in partnering with First Nations peoples while asserting the need for governments to relinquish more control and better promote long-term and transparent partnerships with Indigenous Australians.¹¹⁰
- A 2019 review of the Australian Public Service identified that governments need "a new disposition that enables, not directs, communities".¹¹¹
- Ethical Fields' Place-Based Capital Initiative 2024 - 2030 and community wealth building work demonstrate the importance of community-controlled assets and finance for improving collective wellbeing.^{112,113}

WHAT WORKS FOR PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

In our conversations, we heard how effective partnership occurs early in the process, is long-term and iterative, brings together diverse voices, gives the community real decision-making power and addresses inequities that might hinder community participation.

In contrast, we heard examples of roundtables where people only got to speak for two minutes, consultations limited to whoever showed up on the day and the same community being separately consulted multiple times with little to show for it.

Several initiatives noted that greater power-sharing does not mean those at the top should forfeit all responsibility. Rather, it is about everyone coming together, with those who hold formal decision-making power amplifying and enabling the agency of actors across the system. They made clear that there needs to be formal and informal opportunities for communities, providers, governments and other actors to come together on equal terms.

MAKING IT WORK IN PARTNERSHIP

The Commonwealth has acknowledged the importance of partnering with and devolving power to local communities, particularly for addressing entrenched disadvantage and in working with First Nations communities.

- The APS Reform agenda includes a commitment to work “in genuine partnership with the community to solve problems and co-design the best solutions to improve the lives of the Australian community.” As a result, the APS Reform Office has produced a *Charter of Partnerships and Engagement* that provides guidance for public servants around sharing decision-making with community partners.¹¹⁴
- The Australian Government’s 2023 Employment White Paper acknowledges the importance of “directing funding to communities in ways that help them address local issues, ensuring communities have access to data to guide local decision-making, and setting up appropriate systems and processes to achieve this”.¹¹⁵
- Stronger Places, Stronger People funds community-led change in 10 communities across Australia, with local backbone teams that facilitate joint decision-making.¹¹⁶

In a people and place-centred system, partnership and power-sharing would be standard practice. All levels of government and service providers would embody the principle of subsidiarity, reviewing and overhauling their current decision-making process to match. Large institutions would see themselves as enabling community-led solutions rather than fixing the community’s problems for them. There would be a focus on redistributing power and building capability for community action, including by identifying and investing in local leaders and organisations as well as enabling community-controlled assets and other forms of capital.

For governments, sharing and devolving power would mean deploying staff and resources in smaller communities and regions to bring together relevant services, and support clearer and faster communication between actors. Service offerings with a clear place-based component would be supported by strong local governance mechanisms. All services would be informed by the experiences of those the service affects, with “negotiating tables” similar to those proposed by Empowered Communities being a crucial enabler for sharing knowledge and learning.¹¹⁷

5 Flexibility and adaptability

Effective social supports are not static, but respond to community. Community needs vary substantially from place to place and conditions can change rapidly due to social, economic and environmental shocks and stresses. If we want stronger communities, social services need to be flexible and able to adapt to context.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SAYS

- Flexible use of funds is a frequent proposal for reforming social services stretching back at least 20 years.^{118, 119, 120, 121}
- A 2015 review of international place-based initiatives by the Australian Institute of Family Studies outlines managerial freedom, a diverse mix of service offerings, customisable support services and discretionary funding as key to effective service delivery.¹²²
- The Productivity Commission’s inquiry into the early childhood education and care sector suggest a need for greater flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of families.¹²³
- CPD has previously recommended that funding for early education and care services should account for child-based differences like disadvantage, indigeneity, disability or other factors.¹²⁴
- The University of Adelaide found that the reverse tender approach of Victoria’s Mentors Service and Jobs Victoria Employment Network allowed providers to be more responsive to local needs.¹²⁵

WHAT WORKS FOR PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

The initiatives we spoke to highlighted funding mechanisms and success measurements as core to adaptable implementation. Flemington Works outlined how their flexible funding allowed them to genuinely listen to the community early on and adapt their work accordingly. The Auckland Co-Design Lab within The Southern Initiative described how their flexible funding gave them the agency to work holistically rather than being restricted to the specific outcomes of a single funder.

The initiatives also asserted the need for flexibility in specific goals, the nature of services, the kinds of support offered and evaluation methods. Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia discussed how a balance between fixed rules and their flexible application allowed them to achieve their goals while remaining responsive. The Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership, an initiative bringing together partners across Queensland to create system change that supports children to thrive, noted that local decision-making power combined with flexibility allows initiatives to quickly respond to changes in the community.

MAKING IT WORK IN PARTNERSHIP

Increasingly, governments are centring systems around flexibility and adaptability.

- The Commonwealth’s Local Jobs Program involves developing different employment supports based on local need as enabled by flexible funding for facilitators.¹²⁶
- In its response to the Select Committee on Workforce Australia, the Australian government acknowledged that “people who use employment services deserve a quality service experience that is easy to engage with and tailored to their needs”.¹²⁷
- The new Disability Employment Services program aims to create more customised and tailored supports for jobseekers.¹²⁸
- The National Disability Insurance Scheme aims to provide flexible support that centres the choice and agency of the service recipient.¹²⁹
- The Victorian Government’s Community Revitalisation grant program bases their reporting requirements on a learning process rather than fixed, predetermined outcomes and allows grant recipients to spend their funds flexibly as expenses arise.¹³⁰ Similar approaches have been deployed in Wyndham in Melbourne’s West¹³¹ and Hume in Melbourne’s North West¹³² over the last decade and have been highlighted for their effective practice.

However, flexible and adaptable funding and service delivery should not be limited to pilots and specialist programs. In people- and place-centred systems, they are standard practice. Governments would rethink how they measure accountability and fund services. Grants and contracts would allow for discretionary funds to adapt to changes in context and community need. Measures of success would be based on how well programs meet the needs and expectations of the people they are designed to serve. Replacing fixed, predetermined success measures with process-based milestones linked to learning or co-design mechanisms is one way to achieve this.

Services would be tailored to the needs of the people and communities they support. In a transformed social services system, flexibility and adaptability are seen as core design principles and set and forget approaches are abandoned. As conditions change, as practice innovates, and the harmful impacts of short-sighted policies are uncovered, governments and service providers need to be able to quickly change course.

6 Learning and knowledge sharing

We still have a lot to learn about how individual and community transformation happens. Currently, evaluation is often a box-ticking exercise and is geared towards obtaining funding and monitoring accountability. Rigid KPIs and other risk and performance management frameworks reinforce top-down power structures and side-step accountability to the communities receiving support. Service providers operating in a competitive system keep lessons learned to themselves, have few opportunities for shared learning and are made to report on numerical outputs rather than outcomes for service users. We need learning and evaluation processes that are guided by communities, improve practice, demonstrate real impact and share knowledge widely.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SAYS

- The Select Committee on Intergenerational Welfare Dependence found that publicly sharing demographic, program evaluation and longitudinal data is crucial for effectively addressing locational disadvantage.¹³³
- A 2014 report by the Murdoch Children's Research Institute and The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health emphasised the need for routine local data collection, making regular feedback part of funding agreements, building evaluation capability and a community of practice to share learnings.¹³⁴
- The South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care recommends a more comprehensive and joined up knowledge and data ecosystem.¹³⁵
- Clear Horizon's Place-Based Evaluation Framework developed for Logan Together¹³⁶ and the Most Significant Change Technique¹³⁷ are two core resources for effective social services evaluation. They recommend evaluations that are flexible, consider community perspectives and feed learnings directly into service delivery.
- Kowa Collaboration asserts that, especially when working with First Nations peoples, an understanding phase undertaken with the community that guides measurement, evaluation and learning is essential.¹³⁸

WHAT WORKS FOR PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

We consistently heard from initiatives that learning and knowledge sharing mechanisms need to be supported by a culture that enables sustained, continuous improvement. Communities of Focus and Mid Coast 4 Kids described evaluation as an iterative process that occurs from the beginning of the initiative, with built-in moments to feed learnings back to service providers and the community. Communities of Focus also noted that impact logs and community snapshots are two effective methods for incorporating community voices into evaluation. In some cases, it is ideal to have the communities themselves directly conduct evaluations.

“ 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

A 10-year initiative, Our Town aims to build the capability of regional towns to develop community-based approaches to support mental health and wellbeing.

A need to share best practice across the system was also a common theme in our conversations with practitioners. The initiatives noted that many of the mechanisms discussed as part of the *Coordinated and cooperative approaches* driver above, are ideal for sharing knowledge. Any opportunity where diverse actors in the system come together is an opportunity for shared learning.

MAKING IT WORK IN PARTNERSHIP

While there is still some way to go, government approaches to learning and knowledge sharing are moving in the right direction.

- In its response to the Select Committee on Workforce Australia, the Commonwealth Government promises “to strengthen the approach to sharing data and conducting more robust evaluations that are capable of informing changes to the design and delivery of the system”.¹³⁹
- The Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission requires providers to have a plan for continuous improvement and to actively monitor and evaluate their services.¹⁴⁰
- The Government’s Early Years Strategy commits to “transparent and robust cross-agency accountability arrangements, including through data sharing, regular reporting and strong evaluation processes”.¹⁴¹
- The Australian Centre for Evaluation assists government departments in conducting trials and evaluations and helps build evaluation capability within the public sector. Their purpose is to deliver better outcomes for Australians, promote continuous improvement and ensure accountability.¹⁴²

We need to continue building on this foundation. In people- and place-centred social services, learning is continuous and comes from a place of curiosity, with mistakes seen as opportunities for improvement. Measurement and evaluation is commonplace, is planned from the beginning of a project, centres community voices and regularly shapes service design and delivery. These learning mechanisms would demonstrate performance outcomes and ensure accountability to communities with a view to improve rather than punish actors who fall short of their expectations.

These evaluation efforts would be complemented with mechanisms that ensure learnings are shared across the system. This might be through data sharing arrangements, research centres or some of the coordination mechanisms discussed earlier. For these knowledge sharing mechanisms to work, it is crucial that governments, service providers and communities move away from competition- and compliance-driven relationships towards learning in partnership.

BRINGING THE DRIVERS TOGETHER

Each of these drivers are deeply interlinked.

- We need a shared purpose to drive sustained effort alongside flexible implementation that adapts to the local context and community needs.
- Genuine power-sharing will keep the vision alive and help to coordinate effort around people and communities.
- More flexible and adaptable funding and service delivery will give space for relationships to be built on trust, cooperation, learning and knowledge sharing.
- Relationships built on transparency and trust underpin collaborative and coordinated approaches where power is shared among actors.
- A culture of innovation and curiosity, and processes for shared learning, will allow the system to constantly realign itself towards its shared purpose while developing the capacity and the capability to sustain effort over the long-term.

Each driver reinforces one another. With each step, the journey gets easier.





5. Taking steps towards a better system

Systems transformations will always need to balance changes that maintain the stability of the current approach, innovations that move systems forward and long-term shifts that take us somewhere different.¹⁴³ As the previous section noted, there are many changes already underway in different systems, moving us in the right direction. To transform the social services ecosystem, we need to amplify, learn from, align and build upon these efforts from all levels of government, service providers, philanthropy and communities.

The previous section outlined what the new systems can and should look like. This section focuses on what the Commonwealth could start to do now. Based on the six system drivers, we propose four next steps. These are:

- 1 **Clarifying purpose**
- 2 **Integrating better learning mechanisms**
- 3 **Developing new agreements for working together**
- 4 **Demonstrating how services should work**

For these four steps to work, the Commonwealth will need to **strengthen the capability and capacity** of the Australian Public Service (APS) and enable similar capability- and capacity-building among states, territory and local governments, providers and communities.

1 Clarifying purpose

Big systems are always managing trade-offs to deliver the greatest impact within the boundary of the resources they have. But managing risk has taken precedence over growing capability. Profit, contract certainty and service growth has been prioritised over addressing threats to human capacity and connecting people into community. A focus on retaining political power or maintaining margins isn't helping people and communities.

We recommend that the Commonwealth lead a collaboration with service providers, community leaders, philanthropy, intermediaries and all levels of government to establish a clear purpose for the social services system and each of its sub-systems that is aligned to the Measuring What Matters Framework.¹⁴⁴

This means crafting system goals that promote a healthy, secure, sustainable, cohesive and prosperous society as defined by the framework's 50 key indicators.

For example, a realigned employment service system would shift away from getting people off income support and towards enabling "opportunities for employment and well-paid, secure jobs".¹⁴⁵ Every service reform process provides an opportunity to realign as needed. This process will require transparency and communication with stakeholders, service providers, communities and most importantly, the people that use these services.

With purpose carefully considered, clarified and aligned with policy objectives, tendering processes, governance structures and operational infrastructure can flow from this clarity.

2 Integrating better learning mechanisms

Effective learning mechanisms provide important feedback on the impact of new policies and practices, help identify unintended consequences and grow capability. This requires system actors to share learnings, learn from mistakes and adapt to what works.

We need methods and mechanisms for learning and evaluation that are tailored to social services delivery - particularly in environments that have hard-to-measure qualitative components.

We recommend that evaluation units within service delivery agencies and the Australian Centre for Evaluation (ACE) partner with academia and other learning partners to establish and sustain iterative learning mechanisms, including impact and developmental evaluation tools tailored to social services delivery. These tools should make use of expanded and shared data and integrate community outcomes.

Where appropriate, community members should be involved in the design, data collection and analysis phases of evaluations. Funders, across all levels of government and philanthropy, will need to provide sufficient funding for these mechanisms and the capability-building required for them.

Contract performance should be measured in part by how well service design and delivery have responded to learnings from these mechanisms. These feedback loops should be incentivised by additional funding and greater contract security. They will need to be fast enough that programs and services can improve at a reasonable rate and ensure ongoing interaction between policy and practice for the purpose of system improvement.

3 Developing new agreements for working together

To enable cooperation, collaboration and trust between actors, we need to redesign the tools we use to commission services and manage contracts. As system stewards, the Commonwealth needs to work with providers to maximise the quality and effectiveness of social services, rather than primarily focusing on regulation and contract payments.

The Commonwealth needs to make collaborative commissioning models more commonplace in social services.

We recommend that the Commonwealth Finance department work together with state and territory governments to develop tools for collaborative commissioning and relational contract management over longer-term funding cycles.

In developing these tools, Finance might be informed by NSW Health's patient-centred co-commissioning groups¹⁴⁶ or AbSec's approach to Aboriginal-led commissioning.¹⁴⁷ This approach would be particularly useful in regional and remote communities when responding to crisis or long-term challenges - contexts where impact is hard to measure.

The collaborative grants and contracts that Finance designs should be long-term, at least ten years in length, with the intention of ongoing renewal contingent on the demonstration of community outcomes. This process should avoid excessive administrative burden for all involved by embedding evaluation processes into everyday practice. Open book accounting could add to trust and transparency and improve accountability.

This would also set in motion a need to review quality assurance, data-sharing, privacy and regulation functions, with the opportunity for regulators to be on the frontline of service improvement and innovation. In addition to identifying what needs to be improved in service delivery, contract managers and regulators should examine what is going well and feed that insight back into the system.

This recommendation pairs with evaluation and shared learning mechanisms to ensure actors are demonstrating impact, incorporating the views of service users, and improving over time, all of which are essential to public accountability.

4 Demonstrating how services should work

Rather than introducing changes across the social services system all at once we need to carefully consider the volume and speed of big-system reforms. This allows for better understanding of the parts of the system that we want to keep, the innovations we can introduce now and the consideration of the longer-term changes we want to bring about.

We need to ensure reforms are aligned to the vision for the system, and bring together more diverse voices and design solutions with communities at the local level.

We recommend that governments, philanthropy and providers work together to establish sustainable demonstration sites that are co-designed with, and embedded within, specific local communities. These collaborators should build in learning and knowledge sharing mechanisms and plan for how learnings from these sites will be shared across the system more broadly.

These sites might target a range of issues, but should test the collaborative, long-term and flexible approaches to service delivery outlined in this paper, along with the shared power and decision-making governance aspects. The sites might be new or involve the broadening of existing initiatives and will require a process that enables communities to nominate their interest in being involved. Decisions around where to place these sites should consider existing capability, demographic and socio-economic factors, density of services, level of service utilisation and labour market conditions. Remote, regional and urban areas across Australia should be represented, ideally one site in each state and territory, with bespoke approaches required in each setting.

Rather than a single entity designating sites, all three levels of government should work together with communities and providers to identify where people- and place-centred social services can be demonstrated. These sites should emphasise accountability to the community and be run with a spirit of innovation, learning and continuous improvement rather than punishment for failing to meet predefined metrics. There also needs to be a long-term funding commitment for these sites, ideally for at least 10 years. Some key points to examine at these sites are whether:

- Community outcomes are being met.
- The governance arrangements support horizontal and vertical alignment.
- The funding models incentivise effective behaviours from governments, service providers and community.
- The evaluation measures used genuinely improve practice.
- Service delivery is responding to opportunities and challenges that are present in the local community and/or common features of the local demographic.
- The site is building government, community and provider capability.

These sites cannot be off to the side of big systems or priority reforms (e.g., employment, early childhood education and care, Closing the Gap). They need to be intentionally planned so that approaches can be scaled across big systems, with a clear path to them influencing change at the state, territory and national levels.

Strengthening capability and capacity¹⁴⁸

A thread that cut across the evidence we reviewed was the need to build capability and capacity across governments, philanthropy, communities, service organisations and other actors. **In addition to the four next steps, we recommend that all actors build their capability and capacity for people- and place-centred approaches.**

Growing capability works best when anchored to practical changes to ways of working. **With this in mind, we recommend that governments, philanthropy, communities and providers tie their capability- and capacity-building to the implementation of the four next steps we have proposed, learning best practice along the way.** The Australian Public Service reform agenda can be leveraged here along with the range of philanthropic-backed sector development programs that organisations and individuals have access to.

The implementation of this capability- and capacity-building will vary in each context and should consider outcomes for service users. Within the APS, The Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) and the APS Reform Office might continue to build the skills and mindsets for community and provider partnership and set out performance frameworks that encourage people- and place-centred ways of working.

The APSC could work with the corresponding bodies in each state and territory to build capability for fostering partnerships and promoting social capital. Government departments currently contracting out services could take on some direct delivery responsibilities, giving them greater knowledge and understanding of what’s involved and how best to steward the system. Government departments responsible for direct service delivery might use community immersion, reflective practices and co-location within community to build appropriate skills and attitudes among their staff. Learning and collaboration mechanisms, such as those discussed throughout this report, should be set up to ensure that this service delivery arm informs broader government mindsets and ways of working.

Government and philanthropy might provide additional funding to service providers to ensure that they have the capacity to build relationships with the communities that they work with. Providers should examine how they can appropriately value the lived experience of community members; incorporate the views of frontline service workers; dedicate sufficient time, staff and other resources to community-led processes; and establish locally representative governance structures.

Developing community capability might look like identifying and building up local leaders and organisations through a community leadership academy, invitations to professional conferences or other methods.^{149, 150, 151} A certain portion of grants or contracts might be dedicated to community-led organisations to ensure that those within a locality are gaining the experience necessary to undertake direct service delivery themselves. Similarly, directly including communities in service design, delivery and evaluation will grow their capability.

Capability- and capacity-building should not be siloed but occur in partnership via learning networks and regular learning spaces. Regardless of the exact form that it takes, governments, philanthropy, providers and communities will need to work together to grow the skills, resources and mindsets necessary for a system that centres people and place.

If we want to go far, we need to go together

For these reforms to stick, the mindsets and attitudes that underlie the system will need to change. We will have to prioritise working in partnership instead of fighting over funding, targets and outcomes.

We need a culture and ways of working that promote continuous, shared learning. We need system design and mechanics that allow the system to work in coordinated ways while better including community voices. We need public administration approaches and tools that are flexible and adaptable. These are the components of a system, as Professor Glyn Davis puts it, “designed to build capability and resilience, focused on the whole person, grounded in community.”¹⁵²

Rather than doing everything at once, we need to strategically identify opportunities for change within ongoing reform processes and intentionally build relationships between government, providers and communities grounded in trust and an unwavering commitment to working in partnership.

The next steps we have proposed are one way to progress this change by:

- Bringing together key actors to make a commitment to long-term system transformation.
- Constructing the feedback loops and information flows that are crucial for keeping this long-term transformation on track, better understanding best practice and continuously adapting to community needs.
- Starting to build a system that is better connected and can share power in more effective ways.
- Demonstrating what the system needs to look like and beginning to build the capability needed for the future.

When changes are strategically pursued across all components over the long term, they ultimately lead to an integrated system where actors continually choose to work alongside each other, collaborating and learning to enable people and communities to thrive.

By refocusing on mindsets, culture and ways of working *and* aligning policy frameworks, public administration tools and system design mechanisms with effective implementation and practice changes over time we can get complex reforms to stick and we can transform the system we have into the system we need.



APPENDIX 1 - Research methods and stakeholder outline

We engaged a range of place-based practitioners as part of our research for this publication. This typically involved a short initial conversation followed by a longer and more detailed discussion. These conversations explored the challenges these initiatives face, success stories, principles guiding their work and what an ideal social services system would look like for them.

A summary of what we heard from these initiatives can be found in the supplementary document *Conversations in the Middle: Practitioner Perspectives on People- and Place-Centred Social Services*.

After each conversation, we produced a summary that we shared back to the initiative. This was to confirm our understanding of what they told us and allow them to add new or clarifying information.

Based on these conversation summaries and our meeting notes we drew out recurring themes. We shared an initial outline of these themes back to our initiatives for feedback, before combining and refining the themes into the six drivers we present in section four. The next steps we propose in section five are also shaped by what we heard.

At the same time as these conversations were occurring, we conducted desktop research reviewing reports from government and non-government organisations and academic articles and books. These frequently echoed what we heard from the initiatives and also informed the development of the six drivers and the four next steps. We found that combining the two kinds of sources allowed for a balance between big picture policy ideas and the reality of working with communities on the ground.

We shared drafts of this publication and the supplementary document, *Conversations in the Middle*, with the place-based initiatives. This allowed them to provide feedback on how their perspectives have been portrayed. We also organised a discussion with all of the involved initiatives to offer collective feedback on both documents.

The place-based initiatives and community organisations we spoke to were:

Communities of Focus, Mission Australia - Communities of Focus is a 10-year place-based program from Mission Australia, currently embedded in four communities (Cairns South, Maddington, Meekathara and Whyalla). It aims to tackle disadvantage in each community by organising evaluation and sharing learnings, developing a shared vision in each community, promoting community voice and other methods.

Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia (CRSA) - Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia leads in encouraging, developing and supporting programs that expand and improve refugee settlement in Australia by harnessing the generosity, goodwill, and social capital of everyday Australians. The Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP) is one of those programs, designed and delivered in partnership by CRSA and the Federal Government. CRSA mobilises and empowers community members to provide 12 months of practical, hands-on support to a refugee household from their date of arrival in Australia.

Ready Communities - Ready Communities helps organisations and businesses plan for projects and engage in community consultations in regional Australia. Ready Communities is also one of the producers of the annual Social Impact in the Regions conference.

Family by Family, The Australian Centre for Social Innovation - Family by Family is a social venture developed by The Australia Centre for Social Innovation to create confidence, self-agency and resilience for all families. It involves linking up families in need of support with another family alongside ongoing coaching from the organisation.

Flemington Works - Flemington Works is an initiative within the City of Moonee Valley Council in Victoria. It aims to work with residents of the public housing estate, policy and funding organisations, and local service providers to increase collaboration and centre residents' voices.

Hands Up Mallee - Hands Up Mallee is a community-led, place-based collective impact initiative in Victoria's Mildura Local Government Area. Their social impact vision of "a connected community, where families matter and children thrive" was developed after conversations with over 1,600 community members. Hands Up Mallee's work focuses on prevention and early intervention to maximise impact across the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) NEST Framework domains. They work in partnership to combine community voice, data and research; these balanced sources of knowledge guide community-led decision-making to transform systems and change outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Hunter Jobs Alliance - Hunter Jobs Alliance brings together various communities, employers, environmental groups and unions in the Hunter region, New South Wales to advocate for sustainable local jobs in a range of industries. While not specific to social services, the alliance has ample experience working with communities to advocate for change in their local area.

Mid Coast 4 Kids, Mission Australia - Mid Coast 4 Kids connects a range of government and non-government organisations to support children across the communities of the Mid Coast of New South Wales. It aims to give communities a voice, promote collaboration and advocate for systems change in the region.

Our Town - Our Town is a collaboration between six communities across rural South Australia, the Fay Fuller Foundation, The Australian Centre for Social Innovation and Clear Horizon. A 10-year initiative, it aims to build the capability of regional towns to develop community-based approaches to support mental health and wellbeing. The six communities of Our Town are Ceduna/Far West, Cummins, Kangaroo Island, Kimba, Berri and Mid Murray.

The Southern Initiative (TSI) and The Auckland Co-Design Lab (The Lab) - The Southern Initiative (TSI) is based in Auckland, New Zealand. Embedded within Auckland Council, it is focused on social and economic transformation in South Auckland, enabling prosperous lives for Māori and Pasifika peoples. Co-located within TSI, The Auckland Co-design Lab (The Lab) is a unique local-central public sector innovation collaboration, co-funded by Auckland Council and multiple central government agencies.

Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership (TQKP) - The Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership brings together a range of local leaders, organisations and practitioners across Queensland to create the conditions where children and young people can thrive. It focuses on creating systems changes that enhance service delivery and learning with communities.

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CONTACT

Melbourne
Level 18, 1 Nicholson Street,
East Melbourne VIC 3002
+61 3 9752 2771

Sydney
Level 14, 175 Pitt Street,
Sydney NSW 2000
+61 3 9752 2771