

Roundtable Summary

Transforming Australia's Social Services System

23 October 2024 | Canberra, Australia

Background and Context

The Centre for Policy Development (CPD) convened the Transforming Social Services Roundtable on 23 October 2024 with representatives from government, philanthropy, service providers, research institutions and community organisations. The roundtable presented the opportunity to acknowledge the complexity of the challenges within social services and brought together a diverse set of actors, all of whom have a role to play in changing the system. Together, we sought to create greater alignment between the conversations, initiatives and investments already in motion around place-based change, community-led ways of working and more effective social services in order to collectively work towards the ambitious reform vision of a transformed social services system that enables people and communities to thrive.

This document provides a brief summary of the conversation and is organised in two parts:

1. The first section provides a summary of the **discussion points** in line with the agenda.
2. The second section provides a summary of the **headline themes** that were heard across the whole conversation and is organised under four headings: systemic challenges and barriers; mindsets and purpose; relationships built on partnership; and policy and service design.

Discussion Points

To open the conversation, CPD proposed a definition for the social services system that was distinct from the systems of education and health - though we acknowledged their intersectionality. This definition was: *A system of services and payments provided by government and service providers that aim to give children the best start in life, support people living with a disability, support refugees to settle well, help people with housing, support families, help people to age well and get people jobs.*

Conversation on the boundaries proposed by this definition identified the substantial diversity in services e.g., some services are about particular life stages, some are about helping through difficulty, some are about redressing harm, some are about protecting from harm or emergency. While it was acknowledged that social services were distinct from health and education it was also noted that maximising connections between services (including health and education) is where the opportunity for transformation is. Yet, the orientation and operation of current social service systems does not consider or respond to how people organise their lives. Furthermore, when services are not guided by values and respect, a disempowering and confusing environment emerges. To address these shortfalls, participants suggested that we need to tap into community effort, remember the role that services have in creating social cohesion, and focus on how people and communities are empowered to grow in confidence and capability.

CPD also proposed several components of a new system purpose that included: what it is meant to do; how it operates; and what it advances. Participants discussed an example purpose of the social services system: **to support people and communities to thrive; focused on the whole person;**

grounded in community; and to advance inclusion, equity and fairness. As an example at the sub-system level, CPD suggested that, for employment services, the purpose should be ***to support people to access decent, secure work by building human capability, connections and skills that enable social and economic participation.***

Discussion around these points highlighted that we need to better balance the aspirational, future-focused aspects of social services with the need to address past injustices and harm; how saviour mentalities and service-centred approaches undermine higher-order goals like capability-building; and the importance of emphasising care and connection over compliance. Participants also highlighted the need to describe the purpose of the system by using the words of the people that use the system.

The discussion also featured comments about how discrete sets of services and payments were put in motion at particular times in history - but the paradigms that guide the system shift, change and remain up for debate. As an example, one participant shared that if overall wellbeing and flourishing is the goal, then it makes sense to orient services to a broader and more holistic wellbeing framework, but if predictability and control of cost is the goal, it brings compliance-first approaches into play. This is where we have actual conflict between system purpose and function - highlighting the need for a clear purpose alongside continued iteration, reorientation and evolution.

CPD shared 6 drivers for a transformed system that feature in [a recently released publication](#):

1. A Shared Purpose with Long-Term Investment
2. Grounding Relationships in Trust and Transparency
3. Coordinated and Cooperative Approaches
4. Sharing and Devolving Power
5. Flexibility and Adaptability
6. Learning and Knowledge Sharing

Discussion around the drivers identified the bureaucratic blockers to seeing those drivers embedded in the system, the need for spaces (such as a “negotiating tables”) that bring government and community together and a new public service capability to sustain a new approach. Some participants shared that we are a long way from having the structures and capabilities needed to even begin the conversation and that we’re not using all the assets we already have in starting to address the challenges. For example, local government is often excluded; there is a potent distrust between levels of government; and the system's dysfunctions are interconnected with how power is held, funding is allocated and risk and failure are managed.

The last part of the discussion shifted to the current reform context and arising opportunities for change - noting that there are new structures emerging and different ways of working being adopted. The following examples and opportunities were discussed, among others:

- In South Australia, a number of large organisations have agreed not to compete for Aboriginal funding in child protection;
- An increasing number of communities are working directly with State and Federal government through Justice Reinvestment and early childhood programs;
- The Australian Public Service Commission is driving cultural and capability changes, including in the capacity of the public service to build partnerships;
- The Investment Dialogue for Australian’s Children and the Early Years Partnership in WA are bringing philanthropy and government in closer partnership;
- Mature community-led initiatives, such as *Stronger Places, Stronger People*, are showing a new way of working, and the lens of ‘place’ continues to be a massive enabler in thinking about and trialling how to do things differently.

Participants also shared the need to grow the evidence base for different ways of commissioning and the opportunity that exists in working across the public service commissions to grow a different type of capability.

Headline themes

Systemic challenges and barriers

Throughout the conversations, participants outlined several intersecting barriers to change that were embedded in the current system: system fragmentation; a risk averse culture; media pressure; ministerial responsibility; and excessive compliance. They noted that social services systems often classify people's issues according to specific government departments rather than the reality of people's needs and that these bureaucratic divisions have come to dominate how we conceptualise and talk about the system. This contributes to and reinforces fragmentation. Participants discussed how risk aversion is often driven by the potential for mistakes, especially government mistakes, to be publicised, deconstructed and misconstrued in the media. They noted that this was particularly relevant to ministerial responsibility, with ministers often making decisions and announcements in response to the media environment, making shared decision-making with other actors impossible.

Mindsets and purpose

Participants discussed many mindset shifts that will be needed in order to bring about a people- and place-centred system, often around changing the perceived purpose of the system. There was broad agreement that, rather than a system focused on compliance and regulation, we need a system that emphasises empowerment and growing capability. Too many people, particularly First Nations people, have experienced the system as being about coercion and control and this needs to change. This involves a shift away from an adversarial mindset to one of mutual respect, away from seeing service recipients as welfare dependent, to individual people with needs *and* capabilities. This mindset shift reflects the thinking of many communities across Australia. Participants noted that poor experiences with social services can cause a deterioration of trust and confidence in government support and public institutions and that this has flow-on negative effect on social cohesion.

Another mindset change involves the nature of power. Participants noted that, while there are real power differentials, all actors hold different forms of power. They asserted that we should not think of power sharing as simply actors at the top unidirectionally giving power to those at the bottom. Instead, they suggest thinking in terms of all actors sharing the different kinds of power they possess in reciprocal ways. Participants also reflected on the need for mindsets that emphasise interconnection across service systems, including into health and education.

Relationships built on partnership

Participants noted that to realise a system that has empowerment and power-sharing at the centre will require relationships built on partnership. These relational changes are essential prerequisites to services that centre people and place. During the conversations, we heard about three types of relationships where this is most clearly demonstrated:

1. The relationships between government and providers through procurement and contracting;
2. The relationship between government and philanthropy in joint funding arrangements; and
3. The relationship between government and community in governance and shared decision-making structures.

Procurement and contracting between governments and service providers were noted as crucial areas for relational change in order to promote a partnership approach. Specifically, participants suggested that these funding relationships are not fit-for-purpose in a people- and place-centred

system because of how tightly the resource flows are held and managed. Political decision-making, sensitivity to media and public scrutiny, and the desire to announce investments to fix problems are key issues here. It was suggested that different kinds of resource flows are needed, especially away from larger organisations that tend to dominate funding rounds towards those that are more local and community-led. Participants also suggested that the process for how funding decisions get made - especially those that respond to highly publicised crises - needs to be revamped in order to avoid investment in services that fail to respond to the underlying issues and end up doing more harm than good.

A type of relationship with great potential for partnership is between government and philanthropy, facilitated through joint and/or aligned funding. As noted earlier, risk aversion is a common barrier for governments, and often impacts funding decisions. Participants expressed the potential for philanthropy to work with governments to de-risk investments that they may otherwise be unwilling to contribute to. Place-based initiatives were noted as ideal testing grounds for these kinds of funding partnerships. [The Early Years Partnership](#) involving the Western Australian state government, Minderoo Foundation, The Kids Research Institute Australia and four partner communities was noted as an example of this.

Participants also identified how relationships between government and community must also be based in partnership. In particular, participants discussed needing to put more responsibility and ownership into the hands of local people - structures like negotiation tables would enable this. Participants noted that local governments are an ideal mechanism through which the government can connect with communities, but also that local councils are often the lowest priority when it comes to seeking input, designing services or allocating funds for social services delivery and coordination. It was also noted that this centring of relationship and partnerships will require a new type of public service capability

Regardless of the type of relationship, participants agreed on the essential role of trust. This includes trust between the government and the community *and* trust between the different levels of government. Participants described several barriers to trust. One was that, while community members tend to stay in the same place, government employees inevitably move around. Another barrier is communities often being left out of decision-making around infrastructure, service design and other key areas. A third barrier was the bureaucracy and red tape experienced by communities when they do take the reins, which makes communities feel as though they are not trusted or empowered to take the lead.

Policy and service design processes that grow capability for people and systems

Participants discussed a range of examples of how these mindset and relational changes will look when it comes to the design of services and broader policies around them. Participants noted that service delivery needs to be culturally appropriate, take a more holistic view, and directly build people's confidence and capability. There were also suggestions around designing policies that build public servant capability. Another point was that service design needs to evolve over time and adapt when the context changes. Participants noted the importance of experiential learning and investing in coordination - not as a way to fix problems or patch holes in the system, but as a way of building capability. Specifically, one suggestion was to encourage collaboration between the Australian Public Service Commission and similar bodies in the state and territory public services to grow new and better ways of working among the public service - another contributor to system capability.

Next steps

CPD intends for this to be the first of a series of roundtables. We will be convening a second roundtable in 2025 that continues to explore these issues. In setting up that roundtable conversation we will come back to the group with some expanded thinking on system purpose that dives deeper into a handful of sub-systems. We will also expand on the thinking of procurement and contracting relationships and how these can be better anchored in trust and collaboration. Other ideas and outcomes of this roundtable will be taken forward with participants individually, and together in future roundtables.

CPD has recently released *Putting People First: Transforming social services in partnership with people and communities*, drawing from the insights of people- and place-centred initiatives, a myriad of government reviews and inquiries, and academic research. Additionally, it integrates some of the ideas discussed during this roundtable. We will be in touch in the new year and look forward to continuing working with you to transform social services in Australia.

Participant List

Name	Title and Organisation
Andrew Hudson	CEO, Centre for Policy Development
Anna Powell	CEO, Collaboration for Impact
Annabel Brown	Deputy CEO, Centre for Policy Development
Belinda Drew	Director General, Queensland Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety
Bronwen Clarke	CEO, National Growth Areas Alliance
Cliff Eberly	Policy Director, Centre for Policy Development
Esther Koh	Program Officer, Centre for Policy Development
Greta Doherty	First Assistant Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
Griffin Longley	Head of Child and Family Supports, Minderoo Foundation
Jo Kelly	Partnership Lead, Learning the Macleay
Jonathon Thorpe	Deputy CEO of Service Delivery Excellence Group, Services Australia
June McGloughlin	Founder, Our Place
Kerry Jones	Co-CEO, The Australian Centre for Social Innovation
Letitia Hope	Deputy Secretary, Department of Social Services
Liz Yeo	Chief of Alliances, Paul Ramsay Foundation
Luke Craven	Interim CEO, Partnerships for Local Action and Community Empowerment
Marg Thomas	Acting First Assistant Secretary, Australian Treasury
Matt Gardiner	CEO, 54 Reasons
Matthew Cox	Executive Director, The Bryan Foundation
Melissa Ryan	First Assistant Secretary, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
Paul Briggs	Executive Chairman, Kaiela Institute
Peter Whiteford	Professor, Australian National University
Rowena Cann	Places and Learning Lead, Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership
Sean Gordon	Managing Director, Gidgee Group
Simon Gordon	Group Manager, National Indigenous Australians Agency
Teya Dusseldorp	Executive Director, Dusseldorp Forum
Thea Snow	Regional Director ANZ, Centre for Public Impact
Tim Kane	Senior Economist, Committee for Economic Development of Australia
Travers McLeod	Executive Director, Brotherhood of St Laurence