

1.1 What would a partnership between CSOs and the government that achieves outcomes for Australians being supported by the community sector look like?

Flexibility and adaptability in supporting CSO services across diverse metro, regional, and rural areas is crucial. Customising partnerships to align with the specific requirements of each service provider is essential for effectively addressing the distinct demographics and community needs they serve. It is imperative for the government to recognise that a uniform, one-size-fits-all approach to service and funding design is insufficient and unattainable.

1.2 How can CSOs and government streamline the sharing of information, particularly through utilising technology to effectively engage, distribute, share, influence and inform in a timely and efficient manner?

Information sharing has seen significant improvements, primarily thanks to the adoption of email, video conferencing, and digital reporting tools. Notably, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been notable instances where government funders proactively facilitated additional dialogues and information exchange. These efforts not only improved communication but also fostered a sense of connectedness and value added to decision-making processes, especially allowing regional and rural partners to be more included in broader conversations.

1.3 How can government ensure the community sector, including service users, and those not able to access services, have an opportunity to contribute to program design without imposing significant burdens?

Employing comprehensive digital surveys to gather insights, conducting thorough SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) and needs analyses to understand the intricacies of each unique community/region. Proactively engaging with CSOs to empower them as advocates for their communities. This involves addressing the specific hurdles faced by individuals and communities who are either unable or ineligible to access support services, ensuring that the voices of community members are heard and accounted for. This is especially important in regional, rural and remote communities. Every community is unique, and making assumptions on one community, based on another, is unhelpful.

2.1 What would adequate and flexible funding look like?

Facilitating CSOs to adapt grant parameters through consultation and having monetary recognition for cost-of-service delivery in regional, rural and remote communities. This adjustment aims to enhance the reach and support for individuals who would otherwise be excluded from accessing these services. Rural and regional service users frequently face disadvantages stemming from limited transport availability, unreliable or inadequate internet connectivity for telehealth appointments, limited-service options, and increased costs associated with service access, such as higher fuel prices and pricier, less reliable internet services. Fragmenting funding amongst multiple service providers also results in false economy. Australia is unique in terms of its geography and demography and always subject to market failure. Procurement and recommissioning models that recognise these challenges would actually save government money. There is no opportunity for economies of scale, and government should stop looking for them. Instead, recognise place-based, established providers, and work with them to establish parameters (including KPIs) that satisfy procurement processes, but that also support 'common sense' approaches to providing services in remote areas.

2.2 What administrative and overhead costs are not being considered in current grant funding?

Ensuring the provision of essential infrastructure to meet client needs is imperative. For example, while grant funding may support services for neurodiverse clients, there may be insufficient funding to create a comfortable, low-stimulation environment, such as dimmable lights in consultation and waiting rooms.

Additionally, the expenses related to implementing digital client information systems for file management, data capturing and monitoring can be a significant hurdle. Many organisations still rely on paper files due to the unavailability of resources for investing in digital services.

Moreover, there are substantial costs tied to assertive outreach and client engagement, particularly in smaller communities that are rural and remote, with limited referral sources, limited to no transport and a vast distance between households. This necessitates a proactive approach to integration within the community, reaching out actively to address the needs of the client population effectively. There is a distinct lack of understanding of the scale of distance and population sparsity in the rural and remote areas of Australia. Our service region encompasses close to 1million square Kms. However, this is not considered when funding is dispersed. Like all RRR providers, we use technology whenever and where ever we can. However, in some communities, it is culturally inappropriate to use technology instead of a face to face approach. funding needs to account for distance and isolation.

2.3 How are rising operational costs impacting the delivery of community services?

Ongoing CPI rises have impacted the ability to invest in the upskilling and ongoing professional development of staff. This is largely due to the inability to adequately predict and account for these rises over the term of the grant funding periods. This impacts employee satisfaction and staff retention, thus reducing capacity to provide a service within grants and to keep staff skills and knowledge contemporary. Access to upskilling and professional development is often higher for rural, regional and remote CSO's especially if there are travel and accommodation expenses required. This is exacerbated by competition for staff from other industries – particularly in RRR areas. When economic opportunities from mining and construction occur, our social services sector loses staff. For example, we are currently carrying a semi-permanent vacancy load of approximately 6.0FTE. Being able to pay staff, or at least invest in their professional development helps us to retain them.

Ability for the workforce to find longer term and secure accommodation reduces the ability for place-based services to recruit and retain staff and thus impacts on service delivery. In addition, access to childcare is a major contributing factor for workforce to relocate, or not return to work post maternity leave.

Upskilling staff to multitask across a range of areas (ie deliver direct services and training to either staff or community) is a cost saving for the organisation, however, also runs the risk of impacting on increasing capacity within a program, meeting accreditation requirements of training programs. The organisation then risks both areas being significantly impacted if the staff member leaves.

Increases in the cost of service delivery often results in reduced staff for meeting funding parameters, however the cost of living is increasing as well as the complexities that families and communities are facing, which equates to higher demand and less supply.

2.4 What have been your experiences with and reflections on the supplementation and change to indexation?

As above, losing staff due to decreased capacity to invest in professional development opportunities.

The productivity offset of 1.2% that is designed to incentivise creative or efficiency in delivering services will reach a point whereby the delivery of service is impacted negatively. This includes the risk that the service is undermined, and community confidence is reduced. In regional, rural and remote communities this is strongly felt when programs take time to build trust (even those CSO's who are established) due to histories of pilot programs, funding being redistributed to metro, or metro-based agencies offering outreach services.

2.5 How can CSOs and the department work together to determine where funds are needed most to ensure equitable and responsive distribution of funds?

There needs to be an analysis of the true cost of delivering services to regional, rural and remote communities. Often funding is based on per capita or per LGA with little understanding of the additional costs to deliver that service due to geographical distances or increased local costs (ie fuel, corporate costs such as rent, housing for staff, time and distance etc).

2.6 How can government streamline reporting requirements, including across multiple grants, to reduce administrative burden on CSOs?

Having one or two consistent intuitive platforms for data collection and reporting would assist in reducing the administrative burden on CSO's. CSO's needing to have access to and learn a range of platforms that are sometimes not used regularly or that do not speak to one another mean that there is time lost to either enter data (sometimes more than once) or undertake reporting as re-familiarisation with processes/platforms takes time and resources. We think however, that funding reporting requirements have improved with commonwealth funding over the past five or so years. Head contracts and simplified processes have eased the burden of grant management. However, we also think the narrative around service delivery reporting is also important. We are dismayed to see this disappearing. In RRR areas, the 'story' behind the data is especially important. Small changes can have big impacts, and we believe funders are missing important data that reflects the good that the funding is achieving.

3.1 What length grants are CSOs seeking to provide certainty and stability for ongoing service delivery?

Extending grant durations to a minimum of five years would offer CSOs the critical advantage of long-term strategic planning, staff recruitment and retention, and the seamless integration of services within the community. These challenges, which are particularly pronounced in regional and rural areas, can be more effectively addressed with the stability and flexibility that longer-term funding provides. Such an extended grant period empowers CSOs to implement sustainable, well-thought-out strategies, attract and retain qualified personnel, and firmly establish their services within the unique fabric of the community, ultimately enhancing their capacity to meet the unique needs of these communities.

3.2 What timeframes should the government aim for, at a minimum, to provide final outcomes on grant variations/extensions before the current grant ceases?

A greater period of notice (6 months minimum) prior to grant renewal would be helpful. Shorter timeframes inhibit staff retention due to inability to confirm ongoing funding and program capacity. This has a cumulative impact upon community wellbeing as it causes greater periods of position vacancy and recurring recruitment. This is especially important once the new legislation impacting 'rolling staff contracts' comes into effect in December 2023.

3.3 What funding flexibility do CSOs require to enable service delivery and innovation?

Funders often send conflicting messages regarding placed-based services. While they encourage creative solutions tailored to individual community needs under a placed-based model, they also stipulate a need for consistency in program recording, delivery, and performance measurement to compare against other agencies.

3.4 What flexibility is required by CSOs in acquittal processes to support and encourage sector innovation?

It would be good to know the flexibility parameters within the budget and grant agreement and clear statements about how innovation is viewed by the funding body and the types of innovations that would be considered favourable.

3.5 How can government improve the variation process, with consideration that CSOs must demonstrate alignment with the grant agreement and provide evidence of value for money outcomes?

Provide some guidance in the grant agreement around how variances might be negotiated and in what situations they may be considered.

4.1 How can the government ensure opportunities are available for new and emerging organisations to access funding?

There are instances whereby government departments or agencies are funded to deliver the same programs as CSO's. This puts the CSO at risk of being squeezed out of the market or attempting to function with greater limitations to funding, information sharing and risk management. There needs to be a needs analysis and capturing what communities need and who delivers prior to 'new' funding and services being offered – to prevent double ups and missing gaps/needs.

4.3 How could larger CSOs support smaller CSOs? What are the barriers to providing this support?

Through a memorandum of understanding service agreement to enable structured service collaboration across CSOs. For example, a collaborative service agreement between a domestic violence service and an emergency relief or homelessness service. Such service agreements embed a stronger sense of community and enable services to adapt an attitude and relationship of collaboration rather than competition. This also enables individual services to embed a solid 'No wrong door' approach to service delivery with a heightened awareness of closely aligned services.

5.1 What is your experience with and reflections on place-based funding approaches?

Adopting place-based funding strategies aligns seamlessly with our organisation's overarching approach, permitting services to be customised to suit the unique dynamics of each local community and its environment. Our organisation operates within a place-based framework, tailoring program management to cater to the specific requirements of the local communities we serve. Our extensive experience in this approach strongly indicates that it fosters trust and establishes meaningful connections within the local community, as well as among other service providers and funding bodies. This approach enables us to provide accurate reports and stay well-informed about the intricate, context-specific issues that prevail in each community.

5.2 What innovative approaches could be implemented to ensure the grant funding reaches trusted community organisations with strong local links?

What is considered as "trusted" can be highly subjective, and it raises the pertinent question of how trustworthiness is assessed and who holds the authority to make such determinations.

It is worth acknowledging that local community organisations typically harbor genuine intentions for their communities. However, these organisations often find themselves in competition with each other for the limited pool of funding allocated for community services within a specific area/location/region.

The concept of "shared" funding or embracing a diverse market approach, while often encouraged, may not prove as beneficial in regional or remote communities. In these areas, the full-time equivalent (FTE) workforce can become disproportionately small, making it less attractive to prospective employees, and

consequently, less feasible as a staffing option. This creates an additional layer of complexity in resource allocation and funding decisions within these unique settings.

5.3 Which areas do you consider have duplicative funding or gaps you think need to be addressed, and what is the evidence?

Working with men who are perpetrators of intimate partner violence is a gap across most rural, regional and remote communities. Funding for tertiary level services rather than primary level services is the current preferred funding model meaning that money in the preventative space is reduced and therefore by the time services are available the issues are more deeply ingrained, more complex and often carry a greater level of risk when working with and engaging clients.

5.4 Where there is a community-led change initiative, could shared accountability to community and funders (government) strengthen service delivery?

There is potential for this, however the current competitive funding models do not always make this realistic or easy to achieve. There would need to be work completed with both the communities and funders to work on a model of working together that makes this an attractive option that truly supports place-based funding approaches.

6.1 If any, what are the problems or challenges you think have been overlooked?

There needs to be further consideration for the implementation of grants across regional and remote communities. These communities face significant and unique place-based issues which require tailored interventions. These interventions require flexibility and innovation, and a unique approach to adequately service each community. A 'one model fits all' for service delivery is not adequate when faced with the intricacies of complex and generational issues which are often deeply embedded within the identity of the community. Perhaps this could be implemented through reviewing the needs of each community in correlation with the services currently provided.

6.2 What other solutions or changes could also be considered?

A change in attitude/perception of reporting to be solution-focussed. There can often be scrutiny as a result of partially achieved outcomes. A review of these outcomes aimed at identifying barriers to service engagement within unique regional and rural communities which is purposeful and solution-focussed, rather than disciplinary, would benefit service development and engagement.

6.3 What does success look like?

Success is where as a CSO we can make a positive difference in the lives of the individuals and communities we serve. This should be able to be measured in the tangible improvements of the well-being, quality of life, or circumstances of our clients or the broader community. Success is also where we have the capacity to sustain our operations over the long term. This includes securing adequate funding, maintaining a committed and skilled workforce, and effectively managing resources.