Community Services Industry: Directions for the future

We are living in times of unprecedented change. Social, economic and technological developments are all having far reaching impacts on the way we live and work. These factors are resulting in significant changes to the way governments are conceiving, funding and delivering community based services. Service providers will need to be prepared for these changes in order to navigate them successfully.

This article was written by Lirata Senior Consultant Nich Rogers. This material is current at the time of publication. The contents provide general information and do not constitute professional advice.

Changing society

Over the next 25 years Australia’s population will continue to grow and age, and the prevalence of various forms of disability will increase. As a result we will need to think cleverly about how to use scarce resources to support our most vulnerable communities.

Considerations related to our growing and ageing population will be compounded by social conditions like a scarcity of affordable housing and the increasing costs of healthcare.

Technological developments will also continue to impact on our lifestyle and provide both promising solutions to emerging needs and additional problems to manage, including disruption of patterns of employment across a range of industries.

Preparing to meet future needs – the Victorian Community Services Industry Plan

Recognising these issues, work has been underway in Victoria for several years to build the capacity of the community sector to meet future needs. The Human Services and Health Partnership Implementation Committee (HSHPIC), a joint Victorian community services and government committee has identified 15 priority areas for sector change (2018).

The priority areas are grouped under four headings:

1. Making an impact in people’s lives
2. Strengthening capacity of the community services industry
3. Effective community service system architecture
4. Fostering the potential of all communities

While specifically focused on the industry in Victoria, many of these themes reflect national trends which are applicable to community service provision across Australia.

The 15 priority areas are summarised in Table 1 below. These areas will underpin the expectations of both funders and service providers about effective community service delivery over the next decade.

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is in the process of developing a ten-year Community Services Industry Plan in consultation with government and service provider representatives. This industry-wide plan strongly reflects the priority areas noted above.

Specific sectors including the Specialist Homelessness Sector, the Housing Sector, and Child and Family Services are developing four-year ‘industry transition plans’ which will best position them for these expected changes.
TABLE 1: HSHPIC THEMES AND PRIORITY AREAS FOR COMMUNITY SERVICES INDUSTRY REFORM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Priority areas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Making an impact in people’s lives</td>
<td>• Emphasising person-centred services</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Co-designing and co-producing with people using our services</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Embedding evidence-based approaches</td>
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<td>• Strengthening outcomes</td>
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<td>2. Strengthening capacity of the community services industry</td>
<td>• Ensuring we have the workforce of the future</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Strengthening good governance, and leadership</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Creating industry and organisational readiness for the future</td>
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<td>3. Effective community service system architecture</td>
<td>• Focusing on best practice regulatory frameworks</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Coordinating and integrating for seamless support</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Funding to support flexible, person-centred service delivery</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Developing information-sharing provisions, digital technologies and innovation</td>
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<td>4. Fostering the potential of all communities</td>
<td>• Recognising the role of community services in society</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Embedding Aboriginal self-determination</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Responding effectively to diverse communities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Building community resilience, social capital and place-based solutions</td>
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Implications for providers

Outlined below are four key developments we can expect over the next decade, from amongst the 15 priority areas outlined above.

More person-centred services

Person-centred approaches are already important to the work of many organisations. The next decade will see these further embedded, providing more individual choice for clients. Person-centred services recognise that the client is the expert about their life and they should be in the driver’s seat when it comes to their goals and plans. It is increasingly recognised that placing the client at the centre of decision making about them is likely to improve outcomes. Having greater control over key decisions can also assist both client engagement and motivation to change. Individual choice over NDIS providers is a clear example of this in the disability sector.

Encouraging greater client participation in the systems, processes and tools used to support vulnerable community members is also likely to increase the accessibility and acceptability of these services. As a result, client participation in developing service systems is becoming a stronger focus.

While person-centred services and consumer participation provide substantial benefits, they can require changes that go to the heart of service delivery methodologies and philosophies.

Place-based service responses

Place-based responses use data to identify needs and then coordinate services to meet these needs in an effective, efficient and collaborative manner. Place-based models emphasise greater local control of how funding is spent and how services are designed.

Governments increasingly recognise that local communities often have important local
knowledge and responses available to meet local community needs. As a result, governments are moving towards devolving funding and other decision making to more local levels. Perhaps the best example of this is the increasingly commissioning of primary and community health services through newly developed local Primary Health Networks. This contrasts with the traditional approach in which centralised bureaucracies provide block funding for the same program across widely different geographical areas with minimal consideration of specific local needs.

Place-based approaches allow key stakeholders to participate in assessing regional needs and planning responses. While potentially increasing local influence, strong capacity is required locally in order to ensure that these planning processes are effective and participatory.

Outcomes and evidence

Governments want to fund ‘what works’. No longer content to know how many people were seen by a service, they now want to know how many experienced positive outcomes. This requires sophisticated research and evaluation methodologies to unpack often complex variables to understand which ones made the difference. There are also increasing expectations that service providers will implement service models that are aligned with the best available evidence. This is clearly visible for example in the development of a menu of evidence-based practices and programs in the child and family services sector in Victoria.²

Government funding decisions over the next decade will be increasingly driven by the evidence base of program effectiveness. To remain viable, it is likely that community services providers will need to build their capacity to manage data, evaluate their work and incorporate research findings into practice. Improving capacity in outcome measurement will be an important element of this.

Future workforce needs

Governments recognise that new technology and social conditions are impacting on the workforce skills necessary across community based services. Examples above related to increasing client choice and the importance of using data to inform local decision making are two areas where the workforce will need new skills in order to effectively practice. Rapid technological changes are also impacting on future workforce needs. While demanding more of staff, new technologies also have the capacity to improve service system capacity over time.

Organisations will need to invest not only in building and supporting teams of skilled and passionate practitioners, but in accessing a broad range of expertise across governance, management, corporate systems, relationship management, communications and advocacy that will enable them to succeed in achieving their purpose in a competitive environment.

Meeting the challenge

These changes will have a far-reaching impact on how community services are funded and commissioned, and how agencies develop their workforces and support vulnerable community members into the future. Work is underway in each of the priority areas already, and agencies will be able to build on existing strengths. However, those who are most prepared and proactive will be best able to meet the challenges of the next decade.

It is important for all community service providers to consider the areas most likely to be impacted by these changes and think strategically about how to best position themselves for the future.
Resources

The following resources provide further information about directions for change in the community services industry:

→ VCOSS: Community Services Industry Planning page

→ Future Social Service Institute. 2018. Community services of the future: An evidence review

Assistance with responding to industry change

Lirata Consulting supports community service providers to strengthen service delivery and organisational capacity to meet the challenges of sector reform. We assist with strategic planning, service review and corporate systems development that provides the foundations for sustainability.

For further information or assistance, please contact Celia Clapp at Lirata Consulting.

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