



Submission to the Social Services Investment Framework

About Us

The Coalition of Community Boards is comprised of elected board (or management committee) members of community organisations across Queensland. We have come together as a Coalition to ensure the continuation of a strong, resilient, inclusive and well governed community sector.

We are pleased to have opportunity to respond to the draft social investment framework and to share with government the priorities and concerns that arise from the local level.

Wherever possible, local boards work with their organisations and communities to link local aspirations and plans to government policy and plans. The aim is a joint mobilisation of effort towards shared goals. It is local community organisations which respond to unmet needs that arise as an unintended effect of policy, or inadequate delivery of services, or poor fit between service design and people's needs. Growing from community desire to act to improve their local situation, community organisations do not start life as sophisticated and professionalised corporations. Some eventually take this trajectory, some choose to stay closer to the motivations and passions that inspired them. There are hundreds of such organisations across Queensland and they illustrate a continuum of degrees of community- to-professional orientation. They are all equally valid and valuable even as their contributions vary.

We would like to see acknowledgement of this in the social investment framework. We know that government is interested in how communities can contribute to government agendas. We are sure that treasury also appreciates that for this to happen, there must be ongoing investment in communities and a reciprocity in terms of government recognition that communities too have agendas which reflect the common good.

The implication of the draft framework as it currently stands is that government seeks to purchase prescribed services at low cost, through a more open market, whilst distancing itself from the detail of delivery. In the absence of detail about how government plans to regulate and monitor this process on behalf of its citizens, we cannot endorse such a model. We also

have concerns that government's responsibility to its citizens will not be well met through such a model alone.

However, we do identify within the draft framework the potential for a quite different approach which emphasises partnership and collaboration towards achieving system wide outcomes. This approach is grounded in the specifics of local communities, has community engagement at its core, is much better supported by the evidence and seems to us to offer the potential to build on the existing strengths of the community service system, whilst also facilitating the entry of new partners, collaboration across a broader sphere and increased innovation and creativity.

This approach resonates more favourably with the Carmody Inquiry recommendations and with the direction of the Queensland Plan.

Overview of the Draft Framework

We have ordered our response to firstly consider the overview of the framework (Draft p4-6), followed by the Principles, (p8-9). We emphasise the collaborative regional approach rather than the market entity approach.

Government Priorities

Government clearly wants to arrest the growth of expenditure on services and get better value for money whilst also building a strong, cohesive and clever Queensland.

We propose that in trying to achieve this, the first line of policy should be to invest in communities through their local, long standing community organisations. People live in communities, and conduct their lives between a few significant people, groups and agencies in their locality. The more the capacity to drive local and regional social and economic impact is located in the localities and regions, the less people will depend on government to drive and fund all change.

We have had decades of poor support for communities, even as investment in services has increased. If the growing investment in services has not produced the desired outcomes, it may well be because the changing emphases of the system have produced an uncoordinated and inefficient service system, which has a focus on individually-oriented solutions rather than well- coordinated, holistic, locally sustainable social and economic solutions.

Whole of Government Renewal Programs

The Coalition of Community Boards fully endorses the notion of whole of government approaches to social and economic renewal.

This needs to be reflected in a devolution of responsibility and resources to local and regional levels. An engaged community working with well- coordinated agencies across silos to achieve agreed upon outcomes, is a vision we fully support. We believe that some regions in Queensland are well able to begin working towards a regionally-held approach to such an outcome.

It is at the regional level that overlaps, gaps, and inadequate service delivery become most evident. It is at the regional level that planning and integration can take place to ensure that the service system stays responsive and is really achieving outcomes against agreed goals. The authority to act on this local/regional knowledge must be devolved if such a framework is to be effective.

Government will need to dedicate resources to such a shift, however, it could then position itself as one of several investors, and achieve the arms length oversight that it desires.

Social Services Reform Program Vision

Like government, community organisations too want sustainable, outcomes-focused services that address identified community needs; we too, want efficient administration of funding arrangements, and we too want transparent and accountable use of public monies.

Well coordinated regional approaches are undoubtedly the best way to achieve these outcomes. It is essential that regional partnerships are grounded in the specificities of communities and are locally as well as centrally accountable. This may well be combined with an opening of the market to contestability, and the development of new markets in some areas.

Social Services Reform Program Overarching Aim

We welcome a transformation of the ways in which government invests in and engages with the sector. This will of course be accompanied by changes in how the sector engages with government. We welcome the opportunity for the sector to become more independent of government, reporting only on the return on investment. In other words, monies invested in an agency become agency property so long as outcomes are met. We believe that within a collaborative regional approach agencies will be held to evidence based, ethical practice and will be more transparent in their business processes. This will mean government can operate more at arms length. We would have great concerns if market driven agencies operated outside of a regional collaboration and accountability. Of course, should a region neglect its communities and contractual obligations, then government will need to intervene.

What it will mean for the sector

The sector has already experienced several experiments in contestability. We will point to the Job Networks (JSAs) as an example. Here, federal government tried to drive consistency across a range of public, private and NGO providers. Some of the private providers got very rich on this program, but the only job seekers who were well served were those who would have found employment anyway. The criteria were so tight that providers had little room for innovation and creativity. Rather they felt compelled to survive by “creaming” the success cases and “shelving” harder to work with clients. It is a myth to say customers had choice. Their participation was compliance driven. JSAs could not get outcomes with the most disadvantaged clients, and eventually government recognised that this band of people were better served by small community organisations in their own localities, which had significant success in assisting them into employment.

We are arguing then for a regional approach within which contestability is one dimension. Once established this approach will combine a range of community, early intervention, prevention, targeted support and system wide engagement to achieve community-agreed outcomes.

However, what it means for the sector, is that we have an uphill road to reform ahead of us. Some regions are better situated than others to take this journey. All sectors will need a range of resources and supports to successfully make the transition.

The Principles

Customers First

Who can argue with this as a principle? Yet, when we put it into the market discourse and draw on our current experience of contestable markets we argue that this is an unsound principle for a social services investment framework. Our points are: i) one must first be a customer to be prioritised. Yet customer status is not secured simply by wanting to participate in the market. It is secured by being eligible for a service. The most disadvantaged people are those who do not “fit” eligibility criteria; ii) customer implies a market transaction to secure a commodity, whereas in human services all change relies on the provider and consumer working together to get an outcome. The appropriate title for this is client. Client however, does have limitations in terms of implying that all change needs to be at the individual level. We argue that most improvements require both individual and structural or systemic change and that therefore there is a significant component of people working together to secure

change. In this a more equal nomenclature is required. We therefore prefer community members, citizens or constituents.

Partnership

Partnership will be key to regional collaborative processes. Will government be an arms length investor, alongside other investors, or does it become involved in a significant partnership around transition and delivery? In terms of contestability in a service market, government is in a command-control relationship with agencies that it funds. This is not a partnership approach. Do terms such as co-defining, co-designing and collaboration signify that in some circumstances government will partner in a more substantial way. If so, this would require that government agencies, as partners, take a relational approach to contract management rather than a purely legal approach. We would like further clarity around government's intention in this regard.

Transparency

Once government takes an arms length approach to funding for outcomes, then much of what agencies do will be their own business. CoCB welcomes greater transparency however, this has to be applied both ways, with government also increasing its transparency. Transparency between collaborating partners in a region will be of great significance, and achieving that between sovereign agencies will no doubt require quite some transitional effort and may incur quite some conflict. Nevertheless it is at the regional level that this should be managed.

Contestability

We have already said that we embrace holistic approaches which include a range of agencies. We have concerns about unregulated access to the market, and we would like more openness from government about how this will be managed.

Value for Money

Community organisations contribute a vast number of volunteer hours, both from community, from unpaid staff time, and from Board Members. We are hampered in this by a badly coordinated sector and an almost complete absence of social planning. We would be very relieved to have opportunity to be part of redressing this.

Balanced Investment

This is important and is best addressed regionally. The current system provides an excess of some kinds of services and a lack of others. Each region is best situated to engage with communities and agencies and articulate to investors what is needed in its region.

Proportionality

Having a regional approach to securing the investments needed to achieve the agreed outcomes is the best way to ensure that more time is spent in frontline work. A strong coordinating backbone organisation has been shown to be most effective way of coordinating agency data and assuring investors. Equity and social inclusion will be enabled through regional coordinating processes. Government will, of course, need to take a role in ensuring equity across regions.

Accountability

Accountability has certainly been hampered by the complex arrangements within the sector. It is not clear to us what the actual proposal for remedying this is. A market driven system may ease government's task of managing accountability for Government's responsibility for ensuring that services are delivered ethically, contribute to social justice, and enable citizens to have a voice, will remain. Significant parts of the compliance and accountability requirements will be handled as part of local and regional collaborations, but it will of course remain government's responsibility to monitor this on behalf of its citizens.

Conclusion

Thankyou for this opportunity to comment. The Coalition of Community Boards looks forward to working alongside government in regional planning, implementation and evaluation to achieve a stronger community service system.

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