

Collaborating across boundaries is tougher than you might think, but it's worth it.

We talk a lot about collaboration in the human services sector. Pick up any report, recommendation on reform, strategy document or even commissioning call out, and chances are collaboration (or its peers 'coordination' or 'cooperation') are front and centre. Yet it is still not the default. The truth is, while it's easy to talk about the importance of collaboration, actually doing the thing is hard. It's often messy and feels too slow for our comfort levels. More than this, the system was just not built for it. Still, if we're serious about tackling entrenched disadvantage (and we are), collaboration isn't just a nice to have, it's actually the work.

Complexity demands collaboration.

As we set out in a [previous article](#), the human services system is fragmented, but people are not. Homelessness, intergenerational poverty and widening inequities require collective, joined up responses to get better outcomes. No organisation can solve these challenges alone. Collaboration offers the opportunity to connect diverse thought, expertise and experience in novel ways to create solutions that work, and that stick. It's why we're so passionate about [meeting in the middle](#) - we need more opportunities to build relationships and foster collaboration at every level, across communities, services and governments. Perhaps no surprises here so far, yet we find ourselves toiling within a system that makes collaboration incredibly difficult and sometimes actively discouraged.

This is the reason The Possibility Partnership exists, and why we are seeing a proliferation of other self-organising alliances emerge in recent years. We need ways to work on the system itself and that is work that can only happen when we connect and collaborate in new ways to change [relationships, power, purpose and resource flows](#).

Competition is holding us back

As we unpacked in our [last article](#), the uptake of new Public Management approaches have led to siloed and fragmented systems of government that flow into service delivery through commissioning. A strong focus on market-driven competition, highly controlled funding allocations, and accountability to metrics give an illusion of effective contract management borrowed from the private sector, which suggests efficiency and effectiveness. [A recent paper](#), however, describes at least four reasons why traditional market thinking might lead to poor outcomes in public service, including the scarcity of required skills in many areas; the complexity of outcomes sought; the disconnect between commissioner and service and the challenges of applying a cost/benefit equation in such a context. To borrow Stafford Beer's famous axiom, "the purpose of a system is what it does", and today's system is neither efficient nor effective – an intent to be otherwise doesn't change that. Long-term investments in building capability and relationships have been disincentivized, in favour of short-term contracts, leading to high turnover of contracts, uncertainty and more business opportunism. Organisations are pitted against each other, in a scrap for scarce resources, further fragmenting the sector and creating active barriers to collaboration.

At an organisational level, moving beyond what [The Strengthening Communities Alliance](#) calls the push for “self-perpetuation”, requires a shared commitment and willingness to prioritise long-term collective impact over short-term organisational gains. Sharing resources and knowledge with organisations that you are used to thinking of as competitors can feel risky and counter intuitive and needs support from the Board and Exec down. In a competitive environment it can be a hard argument to win.

At a service level, another reason we see collaboration discussed more than being done well, is the amount of time and capability that it takes. It's not just slapping a few logos on the bottom of a document, website, or proposal; it's relationship and trust-building over time, supported by actual capability in partnering, facilitation and conflict-resolution. As we've heard from colleagues across the country, while service contracts often stipulate collaboration with community and other services as a requirement, they do not recognise or pay for the time and capability required to do it appropriately. More often than not, the responsibility for facilitating collaboration lands on the shoulders of already stretched service delivery teams and superhero convenors or otherwise sits tauntingly in the 'when I have the time' box.

Stronger together than apart

In recent years, there's been an upshoot in integrated service responses and hubs like [The Hive](#) in Mount Druitt, [First Steps Count Child and Community Centre](#) in Taree, and [Youth Foyers](#) across the country. Hubs like [Village Connect](#) for young parents in SouthWest Sydney bring together the private sector and nonprofits (in this case Sonder, Karitane and Uniting NSW.ACT) to connect and coordinate services that respond to a family's needs, collaborate on solutions with parents and can adapt as families' circumstances change. The care extends beyond the usual healthcare system to other essential systems such as education, social services, financial resources, recreation, and transportation. Examples like these show us how investments into both hard and soft collaboration infrastructure can enable much more effective joined up experiences for people, and “soft entry” access points for children and families who may access a range of services from parenting programs to playgroups, advice, and opportunities to build social connections. A greater acknowledgement of the need for investment in the ‘glue’ that helps to connect and hold these systems and services together would go a long way to making such examples not the exception, but the norm.

In response to a greater recognition that we need to come together to work on systems themselves, we've also seen an emergence of more formal alliances, that bring together different nonprofit service providers, government, and academia to create stronger voices of advocacy and drivers of change at scale and drivers of change at scale. Collaborations like [Allies for Children](#), [Alliance 20](#), the [Strengthening Communities Alliance](#) as well as TPP learning partner [MidCoast 4 Kids](#) are breaking usual ways of working, in recognition that we are stronger together than apart. For many, participation in such alliances is a strategic investment in delivering on the purpose of the organisation outside of traditional service delivery approaches – in a way we can look at them as both symptom and cure of ailing, fragmented systems.

One of the most exciting aspects of new forms of alliance is bringing together unusual partners to drive bold, coordinated strategies and action. That's what happened when [The Foyer Foundation](#)'s FoyerInvest – a consortium of nonprofits and philanthropy working towards establishing 50 Youth Foyers in Australia by 2030 –

came together in Queensland and showed what's possible when young people, nonprofits and philanthropy collaborate around a shared goal - supporting young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. With the initial ambition of setting up six new Foyers – integrated learning and accommodations for young people aged 16-24 years – Mission Australia, Wesley Mission Queensland, Shelter Queensland, and Hand Heart Pocket pooled their influence, elevated the voices and ambitions of young people and, critically, made space so smaller organisations could step up to lead efforts. The results? A commitment from the Queensland government to support eight new Foyers, two more than the original ask, that was able to weather a change in state government in February. This kind of win doesn't happen when everyone runs their own race. It's only possible when organisations commit to alliances built on trust and shared purpose.

Sharing data to devolve power

Another area we are seeing some leading collaborations is in sharing data and resources. As Social Ventures Australia summarise in their [report](#) on [Restacking the Odds](#) – 'the right data at the right time in the right hands supports better outcomes.' Typically though, the data that would be useful for communities, services and governments alike is also fragmented and held in disparate pools behind firewalls.

There's plenty of evidence that sharing data and resources not only achieves better outcomes but actively devolves power having impacts that reach well beyond one initiative. The [Maranguka](#) initiative (with Seer Data and Analytics) pooled data from NSW Health, Education, Communities & Justice, the police, and the Department of Social Services as well as service providers and not-for-profits in Bourke so people had the information and evidence they needed to drive a new vision for children, young people and families. Ultimately the initiative reduced crime, increased safety, generated \$5 million in justice savings, and led to new economic investment for Bourke. Nonprofits are also leading innovative approaches to data sharing. TPP member organisation [The Smith Family](#) has partnerships with state governments to share real time data so people on the ground can understand the whole picture for students on scholarship programs, enabling quick intervention when needed, and also opportunities for celebration. Families can access and update their own data, with the understanding that knowledge and early intervention are the best ways for people to get what they need when they need it and change the trajectory of their lives.

Making collaboration the new normal

We believe that the case for collaboration is clear, at service, organisation and system levels. Done well, it is transformative but there are many ways that we can reduce barriers to participation.

Here's a few ways we can make collaboration easier:

- Challenging the dominant logic that competition drives efficiency and better use of public funds, and instead following the evidence behind more collaborative and connected approaches.
- Shifting to longer-term funding commitments that enable communities to invest in relationships and capability over time.

- Providing adequate funding and investing in the capabilities required to collaborate and partner well – within governments, communities and service organisations.
- Shifting from transactional contracting approaches to more [relational contracting in the commissioning of complex public services](#).
- Defaulting to open-sourcing resources and information where possible, to lift service outcomes everywhere, (through, for example resource hubs like [Mission Australia's](#)).
- Investment in data capability, and standards that allow more data informed decisions and interoperability.

Let's stop pretending meaningful and impactful collaboration is easy. Real collaboration in complexity is hard work, it's messy, and it's worth it.

Learn more: <https://www.thepossibilitypartnership.org.au/>

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