

## Meeting in the Middle: Building better systems needs all of us

We see “Meeting in the Middle” as an antidote to the fragmentation and disconnection that people can experience across all parts of Australia’s human services system. Despite reform after reform and the best intentions of dedicated policymakers, community leaders and nonprofit service providers, too many people feel they get defined by problems, stymied by complexity and ultimately, left behind. The challenge is well documented, including in the recent CPD paper, [Putting People First](#).

We see an opportunity for change in every part of the human services sector from early years through aged care, in education, employment, disability and housing so that we can better meet the needs of people and communities and enable more people to flourish. This work requires us to reimagine both *what* the system does, and *how* the rules that shape it are set. Through many conversations over the last few years with people leading change in different parts of the system, we have seen high levels of ambition and great alignment of intent sitting uncomfortably in relationship with a system that feels steadfastly resistant to meaningful change. That’s where Meeting in the Middle comes in. It’s about creating new ways and new spaces where people from different parts of a system can connect, listen, think, act and learn together.

### The system feels ‘stuck’

In settings across the entire services ecosystem, we have encountered people who recognise a similar problem and see the need for change. This is especially true for people and communities who don’t fit neatly into one of the specific boxes (justice, housing, education, health, employment, social services, etc.) that shape the human services system today.

- **Within communities**, people are self-organising and working differently to connect services and plug gaps where they exist – creating better experiences and outcomes for people and families. No-one is better placed to understand what is needed on the ground than communities themselves. Yet, we’ve heard how often people feel like their efforts to do what works are challenged at every step by a system that struggles to loosen its grip on the steering wheel.
- **Service organisations** across the country are supporting thousands of people in thousands of ways, and are investing their own energy and resources into doing things differently in support of better outcomes. These same organisations can, at the same time, feel trapped in a cycle of constant competition for scarce funds, linked to over-prescriptive service contracts, knowing there could be better ways to make a difference in people’s lives.
- **Frontline staff**, often people who are part of the communities they serve, are finding different ways to engage in more relational work with people and families, to find solutions that work for them. Many express frustration that they typically must spend more time managing paperwork, reporting and justifying the work they do, than they can spend with the people and families they are dedicated to working alongside.
- **Governments** feel the growing costs of crises accumulating, recognise the challenges involved in coordinating efforts across disparate departments and agencies and work hard to create policies that translate to better outcomes on

the ground. Often, however, they discover the unintended consequences that emerge during real-world implementation just too late.

Consistently we have found that people in all parts of the system see the same challenges, if only from different vantage points. Equally consistently we have found a sense of powerlessness to change a system that feels too big, complex, and stuck in its ways.

### **Coming together in new ways can create new possibilities**

For us, Meeting in the Middle is a huge opportunity to recognise the strengths that exist in all parts of the system and bring them together to do what they do best. New possibility emerges when we think about how to more consistently connect different parts of the system to share in the challenge, cocreate, act and learn together.

This is not a new idea. The [Empowered Communities Design Report](#) in 2015 challenged the present dichotomy between top-down and bottom-up approaches, calling instead for an 'inside-out' approach that connects communities with policy makers. [Local Decision Making](#) has been implemented in places across Australia as a way to give communities more of a say in policies that impact them. Participatory budgeting, [first seen in Porto Alegre in 1989](#), has now been used in places around the world (including [Australia](#)) as a way to bring local expertise and experience into setting public policy and investment priorities.

This work necessarily goes beyond the current paradigm of 'consultation' on policy, whereby public views may be shared, before they enter the black box of policy design and emerge the other side fully formed and 'ready' for implementation. Meeting in the Middle requires us to think differently about creating spaces and processes that enable codesign and cocreation together, over time. It requires us to think differently about how we implement policy, creating space for us to sense and respond to unforeseen consequences, and moving beyond a 'set and forget' approach. It also requires an investment into the kinds of relationships and capabilities that we need to do this well, and enable continuous action, reflection and learning across multiple levels of the system as part of Business as Usual (BAU).

### **Change will take all of us**

We are under no preconception that the work is easy – it requires changing practices, systems, power dynamics and mindsets. But it's necessary work that we believe will warrant the investment, through better, more sustainable outcomes; increased levels of trust and participation; and more consistently being able to take complex policy into real world implementation and deliver for communities, governments, and services across the country.

There is a lot of work to do, to explore how and where Meeting in the Middle can support the kinds of shift we want to see in our systems, and this will play a part in each one of TPP's 'learning projects' over the coming months and years.

We're excited to know that we're not alone in this exploration and look forward to working alongside others as we act, learn together and share as we go. Together, we can reimagine what our systems could be to help create more possibilities for and with people, families and communities.

Where do you see the biggest opportunities for Meeting in the Middle?

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