

Supporting Communities Forum Consultation Paper Response

Introduction

This paper has been developed in response to the Supporting Communities Forum Consultation Paper. The responses have been developed following comments collected from a roundtable of industry leaders brought together to discuss the Consultation Paper and draft Terms of Reference.

Overall, it was acknowledged that the aspirations and work of the previous Partnership Forum were important for both government and the Not-for-profit Human Services Sector (the Sector) in Western Australia. It was agreed that the Partnership Forum constituted an important element of community infrastructure that was intended to be the infrastructure necessary to operationalise the Sector-endorsed “Delivering Community Services in Partnership Policy” (DCSP).

The DCSP was endorsed by the Sector precisely because it described a mature relationship between the Sector and the government, embodying genuine partnership and service user centricity. The extent to which the aspirations embodied in the DCSP were achieved has been the subject of four reviews over five years and much deliberation. While it is debatable as to whether or not the Partnership Forum was ultimately successful, government and the Sector now have an opportunity to build on the experience gained so that the prospective Supporting Communities Forum can be set up to succeed.

Before responding to specific questions general feedback is provided.

General Feedback

The Not-for-profit Human Services Sector (the Sector) is a very large and important part of the economy and community of Western Australia. Charities, a sub-set of the Not-for-profit Sector, alone employ 7% of the state’s workforce, turnover more than \$12 billion, generate 51% of their revenue from sources other than government, and provide many of the services needed by some of Western Australia’s most vulnerable people. Indeed, governments are increasingly seeing the Sector as a source of efficient, effective and flexible human services delivery.¹

As such, there has been an identified need for greater facilitation of collaboration between the Not-for-profit Human Services Sector (the Sector) and the Western Australian Government for many years, with both major political parties identifying this need over past decades. Successive governments’ policy resulted in the establishment of the Partnership Forum which is, perhaps, the most substantial policy framework to be established in Western Australia.

The delivery of human services on behalf of government by the Not-for-profit Human Services Sector is an important nexus because it allows government to fulfil its responsibilities to the Western Australian community via organisations that are best placed to provide these services more efficiently than they can be provided by the public sector. Indeed, these principles have been embodied in the DCSP.

Importantly, the DCSP was developed in collaboration between, and endorsed by, government and the Sector, and its aspirations remain relevant and important to the present time. With broad support and relevant objectives, it is the operationalisation of the DCSP—including in relation to the

¹ Western Australian Council of Social Service, (2017), Western Australia’s Not-for-profit Landscape 2017 Report, available at: <http://www.wacoss.org.au/news/action-needed-on-pay-day-loans-copy/>

identification of practical, immediate and mid-term goals and a long-term vision which would usually be incorporated into an Industry Plan—that was under-achieved in the context of the Partnership Forum.

In the opinion of the group present, the new Communities Forum has to be structured around clear objectives and priorities for the first 18 months to be able to convert what are universally held aspirations into solid, practical and highly useful outcomes. Such priorities include revisiting the draft terms of reference in order to define a set of principles that confirm the ongoing place of the DCSP, with the Supporting Communities Forum’s role confirmed as including an oversight role in the DCSP’s implementation. Such principles need to be mutually agreed between the government and the Sector. They should articulate the nature of the collaborative relationship and the development of a practical, targeted set of goals prioritising the key objectives which will be pursued by this Forum. Such goals would be monitored through to development of State Performance Indicators and subsidiary Key Performance Indicators as discussed below. Further, it was also identified that there needs to be an annual review of the DCSP’s impact on government and the sector.

Questions

1) What lessons can be learned and adapted from the Partnership Forum?

It is considered that the opportunities for improvement following the experience of the Partnership Forum fall into two distinct categories:

a) Policy & Leadership:

The previous structure was unable to achieve the aspirations held for it as a result of:

- An over-reliance on the Premier and the Premier’s Department to maintain momentum and focus;
- Insufficient involvement with respect to some key Departments of government;
- Regional representation / involvement was found to be lacking;
- The above weaknesses were exacerbated by extent to which the Forum increasingly became an advisory committee rather than a decision making body.;
- This had the effect of reducing the capacity of the Forum to facilitate true collaboration resulting in practical outputs and outcomes; and
- There were no practical goals identified as a result of the lack of an overall plan.

Some of these issues are mitigated by the fact that:

- The Cabinet Committee driving the Supporting Communities Forum initiative will mean that increased ministerial interest and responsibility may drive departments to prioritise the new structure;
- The evaluations discussed above have also shown that the DCSP policy remains supported by government agencies and the Sector notwithstanding the deficiencies that were recognised in terms of the actual outcomes achieved—that is, the DCSP is in place and supported so it should be retained; and
- The commitment of government is supportive of the establishment of a true collaboration vehicle.

However, additional improvements should be made here by:

- Establishing an industry plan jointly between government and the Sector, which would include a long-term vision regarding the delivery of human services (and therefore regarding the government’s and the Sector’s role) together with intermediary short- and medium-term way points;
- Incorporating practical, measurable State Performance Indicators supported by subsidiary Key Performance Indicators within such a plan;
- Incorporating clear lines of accountability for the achievement of those;

- Empowering the Supporting Community Forum such that it is a genuine partnership with the ability to create policy and make decisions within a decision making framework which can be based on the needs of the industry plan identified above and which will help to ensure responsibility for outcomes associated with this initiative are shared between the Sector and government;
 - Establishing and supporting the operation of regionally-focused Fora designed to respond to regional issues and problems and to oversee the implementation of the industry plan as it might relate to non-metropolitan environments; and
 - Ensuring ongoing annual independent evaluations of the impact of the DCSP and any other initiatives implemented/championed by the Supporting Communities Forum are undertaken in order to gauge progress and mitigate less optimal outcomes.
- b) Structural & Operational:
- Repeated reviews of the DCSP over five or so years of operation (by independent researchers and the Treasury) highlighted the following problems which have not been addressed up to this point:
 - Government agencies involved in procuring services from the Sector had insufficient resources with which to undertake training and change management so that the goals established by the DCSP could be achieved or to administer the new arrangements;
 - Government's contract management infrastructure was lacking so that close management of the process intended to achieve the DCSP was unable to be undertaken;
 - The Sector's capacity for change has been identified as wanting as a result of limited resources and the administrative burden associated with the initiative; and
 - The lack of practical Key Performance Indicators and the necessary linked accountability processes served to exacerbate the above problems.
 - Maintaining the Secretariat solely within the Department of Premier and Cabinet served to reduce the opportunity for true collaboration at a practical level;
 - A lack of resources and an appropriate decision making structure, including in relation to having a chair that was not part of either the Sector or the Western Australian government (nor indeed were they Western Australian) meant that the Partnership Forum could not act to ensure practical outputs and outcomes were achieved; and
 - The sub-committees developed constitute important infrastructure. However, due to the lack of an industry plan and, concomitantly, the lack of State Performance Indicators and subsidiary Key Performance Indicators together with a lack of resources and appropriate, clear lines of accountability, their effectiveness became questionable. Experience does tell us that these structures were successful in the instances where individual Directors General committed their departments' resources to a particular initiative.

However, additional improvements could be made by:

- In the context of the industry plan discussed above, the Forum Secretariat should be established jointly between the Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS) so that a genuine partnership can be supported by joint administration and the prioritisation and other mechanisms are shared jointly between government and the Sector;
- Appointing a Western Australian chair for the Forum who has a deep understanding of the Sector/Government nexus and subscribes to the ethos and purpose of the Forum;

- Maintaining and enhancing the operations of the various sub-committees in the context of the Forum and the industry plan; and
- Also in the context of the industry plan, the Forum should have a small but appropriate budget in order to resource any work it needs to carry out in relation to its responsibilities. This capacity is critical to establishing a genuine partnership with capacity to create practical outputs and outcomes. Such a budget should also include financial support to WACOSS in order to allow that organisation to participate as joint secretariat.

2) What feedback do you have regarding the Draft Terms of Reference, in particular in relation to:

a) Membership:

Once the aims of the Forum are established, the membership ought to be developed such that it constitutes the appropriate mix of skills and diversity so that the capacity required to achieve those aims is included.

In structuring according to the needs of the Forum, the membership of the various sub-committees should also be considered as part of the process.

b) Chairperson:

As indicated above, the chairperson should be a Western Australian with a deep understanding of the sector and who subscribes to the ethos of the Forum.

c) Frequency of Meetings:

AS determined necessary in order to fulfil the Forum's obligations.

d) Operations:

The draft Terms of Reference appear to position the Forum as an advisory body to government rather than as a genuine partnership. Given the above discussion, it is clear that a genuine partnership structure requires commensurate Terms of Reference, which reinforce the nature of the partnership, resourcing provisions required, and lines of accountability together with an evaluation structure in order to assess progress and mitigate any problems.

Further, the draft Terms of Reference also include reference to what appear to be a number of government's priorities relating to the Sector. We consider that these priorities should not be included in the Terms of Reference. Rather, in a genuine partnership model, these priorities would be considered by the Forum and implemented in accordance with the intention of the whole Forum.

Finally, there is a recognised need for the establishment of priorities by the Forum and the development of an industry plan would be germane to this process. However, there is also a need for the identification of a set of key practical priorities that could be actioned in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Forum. Such priorities include responding to the recognised problems in the implementation of the DCSP as identified by the annual evaluations. Such problems include the need for training, better contract management systems, and jointly developing smarter procurement processes.

Concluding Remarks

The prospects for success in relation to the Supporting Communities Forum are strong if structures are created that promote and support genuine partnership. The identification of shared objectives, the sharing of risk and the allocation of sufficient resources will go along way to realising these prospects.

Importantly, the McGowan Government's Supporting Communities Policy includes a commitment to build on the current relationships in place. Indeed, government has also confirmed that the essential purpose of the Supporting Communities Forum is to "...bring government and non-government leaders together to progress the agenda of collaboration, co-ordination, and information sharing...".

Therefore, with appropriate, prioritised and focused practical objectives which could be developed with strategic time horizons of 2, 4, 6 and 8 years, with appropriate resourcing and genuine partnership, the Supporting Communities Forum could contribute significantly to the Western Australian community.

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