



What we think about when we think about systems change

Why systems change matters in Our Town

When systems simply aren't working, we can't keep doing more of the same. We need to create space – space to pause, question, reimagine. That's what Our Town is doing. It's not just tweaking at the edges. It's opening up space for communities to step in, challenge the status quo, and co-create something better. Something that works for them.

At its heart, systems change is about shifting the deep conditions that keep problems stuck. Not just fixing symptoms—but changing the game so change becomes possible, transformational, sustainable and equitable for everyone. In Our Town, we are looking to shift the conditions impacting on the mental health and wellbeing of regional South Australian communities.

Where the system is at present: 'one-size-fits-all' doesn't work!

Let's be honest, many of the systems we rely on in regional South Australia were never designed with regional communities in mind. They were built elsewhere – often in metro offices, shaped by city logic, and rolled out with the best of intentions but the wrong assumptions. The result: We've ended up with services that are too far away, too rigid, or too removed from what life actually looks and feels like in regional places.

If you live in a small town and you need support for your mental health, chances are you'll hit a wall pretty quickly. Maybe the only local clinician is at capacity. Maybe there's a service, but it's fly-in-fly-out, and you never see the same person twice. Maybe you have to travel hours just to sit in a waiting room – only to be asked to tell your story all over again. And again. And again.

That's not just a technical problem – it's a design flaw. It's what happens when we don't consider prevention as a worthwhile investment. It's what happens when we think of engagement at the point of crisis as a positive outcome. It's what happens when we design **for** communities, not **with** them.

This isn't just inefficient. It's exhausting. It's disempowering. And it's deeply inequitable.

Business-as-usual has failed regional communities. The mental health outcomes speak for themselves: higher suicide rates, less access to care, shorter life expectancy, more people falling through the cracks. It's not because communities are broken – it's because the systems that surround them are. For too long, those systems have operated from a deficit view, focusing on what communities lack rather than what they could bring. Our Town reframes this: communities aren't the problem; they're the source of the solution and the people who can drive systems change.

So what's keeping things stuck?

Our Town grew, in part, in response to [The Health Needs and Priorities report](#). The report didn't just identify problems, it helped us see the deeper 'stuck conditions' holding them in place. Like,

- **A system dominated by the medical model.** Mental health too often gets reduced to diagnoses and prescriptions. We need a more holistic lens that can see the whole person, in



their whole context, with the whole community. We're especially missing the social context – disconnection, isolation, shared trauma, and the power of prevention, community, and belonging.

- **A gap between policy and lived reality.** There's often good intent in policy, but a real disconnect from what people are actually experiencing. The report called for something we know to be true: that people are the experts in their own lives, and community needs to have a central voice in shaping solutions.
- **Urban-first solutions in a regional context.** What works in the city doesn't always translate to the regions. Regional communities experience mental health challenges differently, and often more intensely. But too often, they're asked to fit into models that weren't made for them.
- **Those outside of the community decide.** Regional mental health isn't something you fix with better messaging or more outreach. It asks us to slow down, to build trust. That's not a service you deliver – it's a relationship you build. And in small communities, that relationship matters more than ever.

Our Town is working to shift these stuck conditions – not by pushing harder on a broken system, but by showing what becomes possible when communities lead and systems listen. Our systems are often centralised, rigid, and disconnected from the daily lives and wisdom of local people. But the problem isn't just the structure – it's the underlying mindset. The belief that decisions, practices, and responses should be made for community, not by them. That knowledge often sits with 'experts', not with those who live the reality every day.

If we want different outcomes for mental health in regional South Australia, we need different systems. Not just tweaks to programs or new services on the same old scaffolding – but fundamental change in how power, partnership, and community leadership are understood and practiced. We think this is especially key and explore it in more detail in our Power and Partnership paper.

What exactly do we mean by systems change?

When conditions, such as those we've named above, are stuck, fixed, or keeping a problem in place, then we need to disrupt these - not work differently within them, but think totally differently about them. We need to look for leverage points where we can disrupt what has come before. These levers can open up new possibilities and potentially new conditions that are more enabling to work within. These more enabling conditions, in turn, create more levers and opportunities for change. And so on. Our Town is an opportunity to explore and experiment with what happens when we shift conditions - both how we do this and what it can lead to.

There are many models and theories of systems change (e.g. The Water of Systems Change¹) and we are drawing on many of them as we explore our work in Our Town. But it's safe to say our starting place involved some fundamental leverage points:

- **We are stripping away explicit structural conditions.** Trust based philanthropy enables us to work beyond some usual structural conditions. We have the opportunity to put policy

¹ Kania, Kramer, and Senge (2018) The Water of Systems Change. FSG.
https://www.fsg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Water-of-Systems-Change_rc.pdf



restrictions and predefined medical model practices to one side – not because they're unimportant, but because they can limit what's possible and can constrain our ambitions to think differently. This opens us up to more social practices, community-led and preventative.

We're experimenting with entirely different ways of flowing resources – ways that are more responsive, more relational, and more rooted in trust. It's less about control, more about enabling. Less about directing, more about discovering – together with community – what truly matters.

- **This is enabling work at a deeper level on relational conditions.** We're working at a deeper level – not just on what gets done, but on *how* we work together.

By focusing on the relational conditions, we're seeing shifts in power, in trust, and in the kinds of partnerships that are possible. And those relationships don't just sit alongside the system – they start to reshape it. Because when *how* we work changes, the system changes too.

- **And in turn, at an even deeper level, on transformative conditions.** We're peeling back the onion and getting to the core of systems change: mental models - deeply held beliefs, assumptions, and taken for granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we talk (The Water of Systems Change).

Our Town believes and trusts that community are experts and change makers. It's a move away from trying to 'find a solution', and towards walking alongside, listening, and creating the conditions for community-led solutions to thrive. This is the work that opens the door to transformational and sustainable change – and it's where we're choosing to focus our time and energy now.

In many ways, Our Town is almost flipping the system on its head. It starts with a different truth: communities understand their own context best – and they should be the ones leading the change. This belief and trust forms the foundation of a range of assumptions we can explore, test and experiment with in Our Town.

What are the systems levers we are experimenting with in Our Town?

Our hunches were that place matters. Context matters. Identity matters (personal and collective). Relationships matter. In regional communities, mental health and wellbeing are deeply relational – built on trust, belonging, safety, and local culture. By shifting some of the stuck conditions, more enabling conditions emerged where communities were able to build deep local insights and see their strengths and assets as a starting place - not their "problems". This is a strengthening and building of the capabilities needed, in community and throughout the system, to enable community-led change.

This was a significant departure from the dominant mental health systems – largely transactional and operating at the point of either early intervention or crisis; built on referrals, waitlists, KPIs, and standardised interventions that don't flex to community rhythm or reality.

First and foremost, in Our Town, we start with principles.

By leading with principles, we're able to hold complexity without losing focus. We can adapt, learn, and respond in real time – making sure that decisions and actions reflect what communities truly need, not what systems assume they need. Our co-created principles that guide us are:



- Community owned and led
- Modelling mentally healthy practices
- Learning our way through change
- Seeing and acting on the bigger picture

These principles aren't a list of rules we set once and then forget! In fact, our experience is quite the opposite – they're not answers, but invitations. Invitations to ask deeper questions, to challenge ourselves, and to explore what's really going on beneath the surface. They open doors – not close them. They push us into new territory, into complexity and nuance, and help us stay curious and humble in the face of big challenges. So rather than a fixed checklist, they're a living guide – a compass that keeps evolving as we learn alongside each other. They have unlocked the deeper questions that Our Town has embarked upon:

- what happens when we are truly trust based, truly flexible, and really ensure funds are determined locally?
- what happens when community controls funds?
- what happens if we foster a network of learning, support, exchange and ultimately influence?
- what happens if we underpin that by really thinking about what are the capabilities that are important here? Around community-led innovation, around truly understanding and measuring our impact and what we're learning, to see what best practice and innovation is happening in mental health globally, what it takes and the capabilities needed for leading change and for collaboration in community?
- what principles, mindsets, and insights - what's really going on that could create change around mental health and wellbeing in regional SA?

So what? Where does this leave us?

We need to stop expecting regional communities to retrofit themselves to systems that weren't built for them. That's not adaptation – that's harmful! Instead, we need systems that are capable of listening. Of noticing what's already working locally and backing that. Of adapting not just the service menu, but the mental models – moving from delivery to co-creation, from doing to community to community-led truth.

So maybe the work of stakeholders in the system (services, institutions, funders, researchers...) isn't to lead the work; maybe it's to ask better questions. To hold the space. To fund the flexibility. To back the people who are already reimagining how things could be – and to do it in a way that honours place, people, and possibility. This in turn, unearths a broader need for capability strengthening and building throughout the system – what are the supporting and enabling capabilities needed in community-led systems change?

One-size-fits-all thinking has been holding us back for too long. And the good news is – Our Town is an example of 'we don't have to keep doing it this way!'. We CAN realise community-led systems change. So far, we're seeing that it works in Our Town— not because it follows the blueprint, but because it lets go of the blueprint.



And this isn't about throwing out everything and starting from scratch. It's about letting go of the idea that "scaling" means replicating the same thing to all people. What if, instead, we scaled principles, or practices, like flexibility in funding, trust, relationship, cultural safety, and shared leadership – and let the shape of these flex to each place?

Because when we do that, we're not just nudging those within the system to act differently, we're changing the system story – from one of control, to one where we all have a voice in our context.

If you're stuck in a system that's not working- or you're trying to build something different in community – you don't have to do it alone. Get in touch and let's 'build on cups of tea and working side-by-side': oliver.carlton@taksi.org.au

