



Our Town
why

**Positions &
Provocations:**

**Power &
Partnerships**



Acknowledging Country

The Our Town network stretches across many places, we acknowledge the First Nations Peoples across these lands, we recognise their continuing connection to land, waters, and culture, and we pay respects to Elders across all time.

Acknowledging Knowledge

One of the core principles in Our Town is *learning our way through change*, this means knowledge is built collectively through our shared experiences of doing and reflecting on innovation work together and drawing on our diverse practices, stories, and histories of place.

Unless individually credited, the knowledge in this paper is collectively owned by the Our Town network — including the community members, organisations, and collaborators who have contributed over the years. We share it together to influence together.



Our Town
why

Positions
&
Provocations

Rethinking Power and Partnership in Our Town

Our Town's key focus is on enabling the conditions for communities to lead the change they want to see. It starts from a simple belief: people are the experts of their own lives and should be central in the ownership and leadership of change.

So often, those in positions of structural power forget the importance within leadership in creating the space, the conditions, and the relationships that help local leadership grow. That's a simple change though, right?

In Our Town, we are exploring if and how real, lasting change needs to rethink some of the dominant habits that shape how power and partnership show up in systems and in communities. Our Town is an opportunity to test how we go about this - to challenge the status quo and see what happens. In order to achieve transformational systems change we need to aim to create new conditions, not just learn to live in old conditions which are no longer fit for purpose - and likely never were to begin with.

So, what does it look like when power shifts - not just in theory, but in reality? From the beginning, Our Town was intentionally designed to challenge the traditional dynamics where institutions often hold the reins. Instead, it sets out to tilt the balance, explore what it takes for communities to hold power - creating the conditions where power could naturally emerge, grow, and be recognised.

By deliberately disrupting traditional systems, particularly through power-sharing and new forms of partnership, we are contributing to broader national conversations about place-based approaches. This includes our continued questions about where we align with, and differ from, more established models such as Collective Impact, which remains one of the most widely adopted frameworks in Australia.

We believe we CAN move beyond 'business as usual'. We want to reset the conditions for better partnerships and more transparency in how power is shared.



Our Town
why

Positions
&
Provocations

Power: How are we sharing it? How are we growing it?

In most systems, power is still held tightly. Often by institutions, governments, funders, or experts. And we can see why - these are established, dominant, and tried and tested in systems. These players can be helpful, but can they truly lead community change? Our Town is disrupting this by intentionally centering community ownership and leadership and sharing our experience and learnings of this.

Through various experiments in Our Town, we want to test what it takes to shift the dominant narrative that power is not only something to hold, but something to control. We want to test how we can have a different understanding that power includes the ability to shape decisions, to influence what matters, and to set the direction - not just respond to it.

We have a hunch that when we believe in communities; when power is shifted and shared; when we are equal partners; we are creating more enabling conditions - more authorising environments, where communities lead change. Instead of replicating harmful structures of decision making or separation from community, this creates structures and ways of working that fits community context and that enables people to be part of leading the change.

For example, to bring this to life a bit more, all Our Town communities have created community-led decision making mechanisms, ensuring locally determined funding across their communities actually reaches the community rather than being stuck in red tape, policy and bureaucracy. Each community's decision making mechanisms work for them, because it was created by them. And these aren't just 'boards' - they're grounded in trust, lived experience, cultural safety, and relationships.

More collectively, at the network level, community voices shape the strategic vision for the initiative through the network strategy group. We are learning that when we co-create the conditions for communities to collectively lead and create, it shifts power by and for the network.



Our Town
why

Positions
&
Provocations

We see this in action every time we meet, where the network embraces differences of opinions, knowing it's our biggest strength. It leads to us connecting the dots across the state, meaning the network is starting to have a voice in Royal Commissions, in drought resilience, green energy transitions, and social policy reform. Collectively, the more we make sense of the systems that influence our work in the community, the more we strengthen the network.

But let's be honest, power-sharing can feel uncomfortable for some. It asks those in institutions to let go of certainty, to shift from telling to listening, from doing to enabling. From creating in the short term to building intergenerationally. It means we pay attention to, but aren't beholden to political cycles or quick wins. It's a slow burn. But it's also how we start to rebuild trust and form deeper partnerships and shift systems that haven't served regional communities well for generations.

We are learning (and unlearning) collectively, as community teams, funders, and a support team, what it takes to shift and share power - to let go, or not be the ones who set the direction, or not have the direction set for us. To share responsibility and have accountability to the rest of our communities, is all part of the work.

As community teams, it's about trust, taking ownership and leadership, growing voice, and building on community assets and strengthening capabilities. For example, the Mid Murray Our Town team say they just kept showing up! Until the point where the community trusted they were different and here to listen, share power and resources and stay for the longer term.

For those who are part of the support system, including the allies and advocates who are walking alongside the initiative, it's not about stepping back, but about stepping differently - into spaces where we listen first, sit with the uncertainty, and stay in the conversation about what community wants to grow. That sense of discomfort - It's not a red flag; it's a signal that we're shifting - from leading to learning, from control to collective possibility.



Our Town
why

Positions
&
Provocations

Partnership: More than a word

Talking about shifting and sharing power helps us reposition ourselves as partners and lean into the conversation about partnership. We hear a lot about partnership in this work - but do we all mean the same thing?

At its best, partnership means walking alongside each other. Not ahead, not behind. It's about shared work, shared purpose, and shared accountability.

In Our Town, partnership is what makes the work possible. It all starts with community vision. Those who share in the vision, be this philanthropy, government, services, and communities, can come together - not around a project plan, but around a vision for community mental health and wellbeing. And crucially, it's communities who hold the pen.

We've come to feel real comfort in the shared power this way of working demands. It's this comfort that lets us hold the space, and model and share it with new learning partners — helping them experience what an equal seat at the table actually feels like.

We saw this recently when talking with a potential funding partner. Instead of imposing a traditional measurement framework onto communities, we invited everyone - funders, communities, support partners - to share what they were genuinely curious to learn. What followed was powerful: we realised there were deep shared interests, and new perspectives that none of us could have seen alone. From that place, a much richer, more useful learning agenda emerged - one that was owned by everyone.

However, it doesn't always work out this well! There have been times, where we made the call to step back from partnerships that couldn't support true power sharing. It wasn't about blame - just a grounded confidence that the way we work matters, and that sometimes walking away with integrity is part of walking the talk.



Our Town
why

Positions
&
Provocations

Our Town is demonstrating that when you build trust first, meaningful partnerships aren't built on contracts or MOUs. They are built on cups of tea, on doing the work side-by-side, and on sticking around when things get tricky. If you live on Kangaroo island, and you have an idea about improving community wellbeing you have Sunday lunch with the team and talk it through. There's no paperwork - a conversation is your grant process. It's slow. It's human. And it's powerful. It works (trust us- we're seeing it happen!)





Our Town
why

Positions
&
Provocations

But what if you are a funder? How does that change things?

In our experience, showing up as both a funding and learning partner means making deliberate choices right from the start — not just about what you do, but how you show up. It means taking time to examine your own mindsets and intentions, and to truly recognise and value the power and expertise that already exists in community. Once that shift happens, changing outdated practices, like rigid timelines, pre-set deliverables, or holding the financial reins, is often the easier part. The harder work is sticking with the discomfort. Staying long enough for trust to take root, for learning to deepen, and for something transformational to emerge. It means leaning into your values and relationships when things get messy - not reaching for control just to feel comfortable.

That's where the real possibility lives. When we focus less on what we fund and more on how we partner - power starts to rebalance. Not because it disappears, but because it stops being the quiet force that distorts the work. Instead, we see relationships that are honest, strengths-based, and rooted in shared purpose. And this isn't just about reforming funder practice - it's about modelling a different way of working; one that clears the path for distributed leadership, community ownership, and new possibilities to grow.

The way Our Town partners is different to what we see in other ways of working. If you partner with a community, can you do it when it challenges contract timelines, KPIs, and a need to stay in control? If your version of partnership still starts with a contract instead of a conversation, is it really partnership - or just compliance with nicer language? What does it say about our 'business as usual' ways of working if trust and cups of tea get more done than our policies and procurement processes? You'll see this in Cummins, where the team are on their fourth iteration of bringing an idea to life. It's taken time, they've tested and learnt, and the end point is when the community says it's ready - not someone in Adelaide.



Our Town
why

Positions
&
Provocations

In other systems, this way of working isn't supported. But it is here! And that's what makes partnering in Our Town special.

In Our Town, we believe that true partnership allows you to go further, reach deeper, achieve more and affect real change — especially when it's grounded in the wisdom, relationships, and pace of community. That's the power of this way of working.: it doesn't just shift what we do, it shifts how we see, how we listen, and ultimately, how we share power in ways that conventional systems can't right now.





Our Town
why

Positions
&
Provocations

What it looks like on the ground

So what happens on the ground when we consider both power and partnership? What practically happens in Our Town that is different to other ways of working? Here's what we're seeing emerge in practice:

- Local leadership flourishes: People with lived/living experience lead decisions about what gets funded and what gets done
- Trust-first relationships form: Multiple people coming together to listen before acting, before talking about programs, outcomes and expected end points
- Mutual accountability: Community leaders are asking institutions to be honest about what they can and can't do — and being honest themselves
- Embracing learning: By taking a shared learning approach all parties are in it together, and we are able to be open to new possibilities and embracing the grey, challenges, and messy parts that naturally come from trying something new
- Flexible structures: We see a move away from fixed governance and towards ways of working that reflect the culture and pace of each community
- Using existing knowledge, tools, and stories - from global frameworks to grassroots storytelling - Our Town has continually tested and adapted its approach to better understand where its work sits on the spectrum of power-sharing and community leadership.



Our Town
why

Positions
&
Provocations

Why This Matters

If you work in government, a service org, as a practitioner, or as a community member - this matters to you. Power and partnership aren't side conversations. They are the work.

Because if we want systems to change, they need to behave and turn up differently, work differently. That means sharing power. That means partnering in ways that are genuine, not just performative. That means seeing the community as part of the system — not outside of it. We are all the system! We see it so clearly in Berri, where the Our Town team is influencing local groups, individuals, and how the council makes decisions. If you find yourself in Berri and you want to partner anywhere, start with a conversation - not an invitation to tender!

And it's not just about acting differently. It's about shifting the underlying mental models and belief systems that sit beneath our actions. We need to believe - not just say - that communities know themselves best. We need to value the wisdom, the lived/living experience, and the local knowledge that communities bring to the table. Relinquishing control isn't about stepping back; it's about stepping forward differently - believing that our professional expertise and the community's experience are equal but different contributions. We'll need it all if we want to create the kind of transformational systems change we're aiming for. In our context, we've explored what systems change looks like to us within this positioning paper.

And here's the good news: we don't need a perfect model to start. In Our Town, we are lucky! We've had the time and trust to build slowly. But we know that most people don't get 5 years - let alone 10. That's why we want to share what we're learning, showing that it is possible to build and grow a model as you go. You don't need all the answers at the start — but you do need the right principles, mindsets, and practices.

We've learnt that you need to shift expectations too; from seeing transformational change within a 2-year funding cycle, to focusing on laying strong foundations from which true change can grow over longer periods. Five years into Our Town, what we have isn't 'the blueprint' - it is a growing body of lived experience; real stories; working examples; a community of people committed to learning how to do this work for the benefit of generations to come.



**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, let's build on cups of tea
and work side-by-side:
oliver.carlton@tacsi.org.au**