



**Positions &
Provocations:**

**Regional Mental
Health and
Wellbeing**



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.



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An introduction to our three positioning pieces

This series of three positioning pieces are for anyone who's ever felt the friction of trying to do the right thing inside a system that just won't budge. It's for funders who want to do more than fund. For policy thinkers trying to loosen the grip of old ways. For community members already leading change but looking for partners who'll walk beside, not ahead. And for all of us who've asked — quietly or loudly — "Surely there's a better way?". These first three pieces are a way of positioning Our Town in terms of:



**Community-led
Systems
Change**



**Re-thinking
Power and
Partnerships**



**The Core
Components
of Our Town**

These aren't toolkits or polished case studies. They're provocations. Field notes. A work in motion. It's a story of power — who holds it, shares it, grows it... and sometimes, who lets it go. If you're curious about what happens when we move from 'projects' to relationships, from control to collaboration, and from certainty to collective discovery — then read on. This might just be the invitation you've been waiting for.



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Regional mental health is not a single story – and our systems need to catch up

Across regional South Australia, mental health and wellbeing is often spoken about in broad strokes. Words we have heard in rooms for decades, but we often fall short of addressing. These are real pressures. They matter. But they only tell part of the story.

Yes – Access to services is scarce, workforces are difficult to attract and the economy of scale is a constant battle

Yes – The tyranny of distance is always present and transport infrastructure may not exist

Yes – People might know more about their neighbours lives than in metropolitan areas - and that's a double edged sword

BUT, if you are a member of a regional community, or have spent time alongside regional community – really spent time – something else comes into view. Mental health and wellbeing is not just shaped by what is missing or what strengths we can map, but by what these things present: relationships, identity, place, history, and the ways communities respond to change together.

And that's where the nuance lives.



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The South Australian context – what we've known for some time

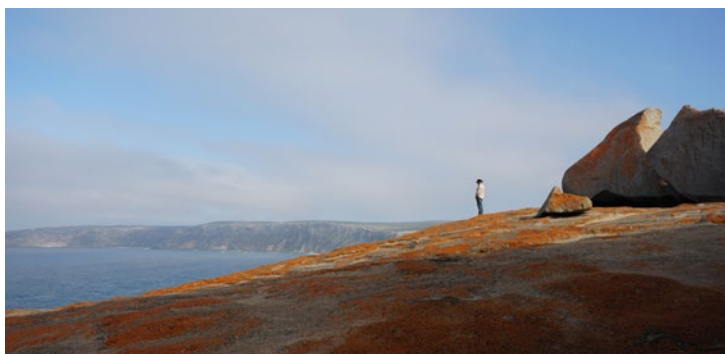
This isn't new. The Fay Fuller Foundation's 2017 "[Health Needs and priorities report](#)" was the catalyst to Our Town. It made clear that people living in regional South Australia experience poorer health outcomes across a range of indicators – including mental health and wellbeing. It pointed to:

- higher levels of chronic stress and disadvantage
- reduced access to services and supports
- workforce shortages and system gaps
- and the compounding effects of geography, income, and opportunity

But importantly, it also highlighted something that often gets less airtime – that health and wellbeing in regional communities is shaped by social determinants, local context, and lived experience – not just service availability. Nearly a decade on, much of this still holds true.

We know the data – but do we truly understand the nuance?

And yet, too often, our responses continue to default to service expansion alone, rather than engaging with the deeper, more complex conditions that shape wellbeing in place.





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Getting past 'the silver bullet'

Before Our Town existed, regional communities were not waiting for solutions. They were already navigating complexity every day – often in ways that systems struggle to see, recognise, or resource.

This doesn't mean challenges aren't real. It means that the starting point matters.

If we begin with a deficit, we design for dependency. If we begin with strength, we create the conditions for agency.

This is not theoretical.

This is visible in communities like Kangaroo Island, shaped by strong inter-generational values and now enriched by a changing population that continues to adapt and evolve. People seek to live authentically while remaining connected to home, even as separation from the mainland presents social and economic challenges. Strengthening mental health and wellbeing calls for approaches that bridge diverse perspectives, foster belonging, and create pathways – honouring both the island's history and its evolving identity. Through its deep connections, shared care for place, and enduring spirit, Kangaroo Island holds strong foundations for community-led resilience, healing, and a collective hope.

It is present in places like Berri, where the cycles of drought and flood shifts grapes, almonds and fruit production. This isn't just about economics – it ripples through families, livelihoods, and community confidence for the future. Wellbeing here is tied to uncertainty, adaptation, and the quiet pressure of livelihoods that are always in transition.



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It shows up in Kimba, where national debates, like the proposed nuclear waste facility, are not abstract policy questions, but deeply personal, community-wide conversations about identity, future, and Indigenous voice. Mental health and wellbeing is shaped by how communities have held disagreement, navigate external scrutiny, and retain a sense of cohesion.

And it is felt in farming communities like Cummins, where drought, distance, and the realities of regional life create a constant backdrop. Here, wellbeing was not always spoken about directly – but was, and continues to be, embedded in resilience, routine, and the strength of local relationships that carry people through. It's through this deeper connection of place, people, and everyday life that both strength and vulnerability are held. In Cummins, recent experiences of loss have not followed national patterns, so it's the community who are best placed to lead the response.

It is evident in Mid Murray, where the scale and spread of the region shapes everything. Communities are dispersed across a large geographical area – small townships, river communities, and rural properties – meaning connection cannot be assumed, it has to be actively built. Here, the work has been simple, but not easy: “we just keep showing up!” across distance, across different communities, again and again. Over time, that consistency has shifted something deeper – the steady work of relationships that bridge distance and signal “we’re here”.



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If there's no silver bullet, then what? – From delivery to conditions

So in a regional setting, if tackling mental health and wellbeing depends on context and local knowledge, surely those outside of the community have a role to create, or unlock, the conditions where communities can shape responses themselves?

This means:

- investing in relationships, not just programs
- backing local leadership, not just external expertise
- allowing time for trust to build, rather than expecting immediate outcomes
- recognising that progress may look different in every place – and that's not a failure of the model, but a reflection of context

As explored [in our broader work](#), this requires a shift in how we think about power – not as something held centrally, but as something that can be shared, grown, and shaped within community; for community.

Why this matters

Regional nuances that drive wellbeing are not a “nice to understand” – it is fundamental to whether we get our preventative responses right, both in South Australia and beyond. It's fundamental to whether regional (and metropolitan communities for that matter) continue to build positive futures. It's fundamental to how we move away from fast-track wins. It is fundamental to how we see investment and the right to scale discussed. It's fundamental to how systems change for the people they are meant to serve.



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When we flatten regional mental health into a single story, we design responses that miss the mark locally, struggle to build trust and often fail to last beyond a few years of funding.

We risk investing in a perpetual cycle of short term wins- long term waste. 'Solutions' that appear technically sound from a Board room in Adelaide, risk being contextually misaligned and have, at times, caused real harm in the community.

Over time, this does more than waste resources. It erodes a collective confidence in the social fabric of the places we call home. It reinforces a sense that systems don't quite "get it" when it comes to our wellbeing journey. It means that the conversations that we once held respectfully, now seem to polarise us deeper than they once did. For our regional leaders of the future, it makes it all too real that moving to the city might be the only way to be accepted.





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Courage to back complexity

Let's be honest, nuanced, fluid, responses – the kind required to genuinely meet communities where they are – are inherently difficult for funders to grasp because they don't conform to uniform models or standardised measures. Without that uniformity, it becomes far harder for decision-makers to validate, communicate or back what's happening on the ground. It especially makes it difficult to report back to those who are further removed from the work, those who just want to know 'is it working?', 'is it fixed?', 'what do I tell my Board?', 'What's the ROI?'. While we are coming to better understand that contextual, community-led approaches are more equitable, and ultimately what we should be striving toward as a society, they often remain just out of reach of mainstream systems. They too often feel like something new, different, something that can't be scaled- 'one- offs' rather than the norm.

In Our Town, we started by asking questions - does it have to be this way? Surely there's another way? What are we afraid of losing by stepping differently? What conditions do we need to create to truly support community wellbeing?

If we want to change how we see mental health and wellbeing, we need to start with context and complexity first - taking a systems lens. If it feels easy or comfortable, shouldn't this be a red flag to check our course? In the real world, life doesn't move in neat policy cycles – it shifts with drought, floods and fires, seasons, economies, political heat, connection and loss. Rather than responding to the issue of the moment, Our Town stays with communities as these patterns unfold, backing responses that grow from within, not those announced from afar.



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:
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