

MOVING THE CONVERSATION FORWARD

*A decade of reform recommendations
for the community services sector*



Community
Services
Industry Alliance



CENTRE
for **SOCIAL**
IMPACT



REPORT DETAILS

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Centre for Social Impact

The Centre for Social Impact (CSI) is a national research and education centre dedicated to catalysing social change for a better world. CSI is built on the foundation of three of Australia's leading universities: UNSW Sydney, The University of Western Australia, and Swinburne University of Technology. Our research develops and brings together knowledge to understand current social challenges and opportunities; our postgraduate and undergraduate education develops social impact leaders; and we aim to catalyse change by drawing on these foundations and translating knowledge, creating leaders, developing usable resources, and reaching across traditional divides to facilitate collaborations.

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FOREWORD

The Community Services Industry Alliance (CSIA) exists to support community organisations to be innovative, high performing and sustainable in the pursuit of social and economic inclusion. CSIA was formed with the investment of national, state, and local organisations, each striving to reach their potential and deliver their purpose. This work is important because of the critical role every one of these organisations plays in a thriving civil society that is just and equitable.

As part of the effort of this work CSIA has come to understand the importance of the intersection between policymaking and reform and the influence this change agenda has on the business environment of community organisations. It is not a new thing to remark on significant scale and scope of policy reform in human services. There are a plethora of national and jurisdictional reforms which each in their own way shape the business environment of community organisations.

Here at CSIA we became interested to understand more about the themes of these reports emerging over time and to be more proactive in our critical analysis of the effectiveness of them. This is of particular interest in an atmosphere of increasing frustration that we are stuck in a cycle: calling for change, inquiring into the problem, charting a course for that change and then finding ourselves all too soon back in review of the problem.

We believe it is time to move on from this pattern of activity. To make a start towards this we commissioned the Centre for Social Impact to undertake this ground-breaking review. The report contained in these pages provides an historical and contemporary context for the role of community organisations in social change and specifically identifies the winds of policy change that have shaped this role over time. Further, the report looks at over 92 Commonwealth-level reviews into the role of community organisations and provides a summary of the themes that emerge.

I will not unveil those themes here but suffice it to say they are simultaneously obvious and confronting. Obvious because they are matters of concern that we have been working away at for many years but confronting because the seemingly repetitious focus on them suggests failure. We see this as an opportunity to change our approach to policy reform, specifically:

- To recommit to the things that matter in achieving better outcomes for people who rely on services and support from community organisations
- To find more efficient and effective ways to work together to do this across the boundaries of community, government, and business; and

- Direct investment not only to the effort of changing services and supports but to changing the system necessary to deliver them.

We hope you are challenged and excited by the report and open to join with us as we focus our effort for change at the action end of our policy opportunities in Australia.

Belinda Drew

Chief Executive Officer

Community Services industry Alliance

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this report we provide a review of how the community services sector has been positioned by major governing bodies, including the Productivity Commission, Royal Commissions and Senate Inquiries. The aim of the review is to provide insight into how the sector is being understood and approached by government(s) and to identify key themes that have emerged in successive inquiries.

Our review takes in the time period of 2008-to present, in order to track developments since the last concentrated effort at sector reinvigoration by the commonwealth government. Over forty reports and inquiries were searched thematically for discussion of social service provision. Discussion and recommendations regarding the community services sector were concentrated around four themes:

- Joined-up and integrated working
- Competition and contestability
- Government as steward
- Workforce reform

In each of these areas, debates concerning the sector are long-running, with changes to language – but not substantive issues – changing over time.

Despite the number of inquiries, recommendations remain remarkably consistent over a ten-year period within each of these four themes. Broadly, they emphasise:

The need for system integration and joined-up working across the services system

That competition and contestability is a source of efficiency and innovation, though which models are fit-for-purpose is a source of much debate.

That to ensure system integration and effective service delivery, governments need to act as ‘system stewards’

As part of their role as system steward, the government needs to undertake workforce reform including attracting, training and retaining workers to the sector and ensuring good wage growth.

The fact that recommendations remained consistent over a ten year period suggests that many are not actioned, or not actioned in full. As a result, they continue to be raised by subsequent inquiries – either as the answer to why system failure has occurred (e.g. in Royal Commissions) or as an area for

government reform to ensure more effective and efficient services (e.g. in Productivity Commission inquiries and government task forces).

Across all the reports examined, responsibility for enacting change is placed on government. The community sector is framed as a passive-recipient of change, which should be initiated and guided *by* government.

We suggest this raises questions for the sector in terms of its own agency. For example, given that many of these issues have persisted for over a decade, to what extent should the sector wait for government to enact these changes on its behalf, find ways to reform itself, or effectively partner with government?

INTRODUCTION

The community services and not-for-profit, or ‘third’, sector has been the subject of over two decades of concentrated reform by successive Australian Governments. Reforms have sought to shape the relationship between the sector and government, the sector and the community and the composition of the sector itself (e.g. workforce). Through the 1990s and early 2000s, the not-for-profit sector was subjected to a range of New Public Management reforms, which saw it competing for government tenders to provide services on behalf of the state (Osborne, 2010). During this time, strict gag clauses were placed on the sector to curb its ability to critique government policy (Productivity Commission, 2010a). During the Rudd-Gillard government, the third sector was the subject of a revitalisation program which saw a renewed commitment to their links with civil society and community groups, and the importance of allowing the sector to critique government and advocate for citizen needs. During this time, significant policy and governance structures were put in place to support the sector, including a National Compact, an Office for the Not-for-Profit Sector and the Australian and Charities Not-for-profit Commission.

Since the change to a Liberal-National Coalition government since 2013, many of these structures have fallen away. The notable exception is the Australian Charities and Not-For-Profit Commission (ACNC), which was established as a national regulator in 2012 in order to ensure public trust and confidence in the not-for-profit sector and support its development. Arguably, there is no clear paradigm which underpins the approach of the LNP towards the sector – creating a mixture of old, new and emerging approaches to the role and position of the third sector in policy.

In this report we provide a review of how the community services sector has been positioned by major governing bodies – such as the Productivity Commission, Royal Commissions and Senate Inquiries – to provide insight how the sector is being understood and approached by government(s). In particular, we examine whether reforms over the past decade have been cohesive or represent a fully formed vision for change. Our review takes in the time period of 2008-to present, in order to track developments since the last concentrated effort at sector reinvigoration by the commonwealth government.

We find that many of the debates concerning the sector are long-running, even if the language that describes them has evolved over time. Moreover, recommendations across all inquiries were found to be remarkably similar, suggesting that little – or patchy - inroads over time have been made. Fundamentally, the review revealed that there has been no blueprint for full sector reform since 2010, leading to reactive reviews, recommendations and reform initiatives often stemming from system failure. For example, this could be in response to the findings of a Royal Commission, or limitations in a broader reform which ultimately did not address underlying issues (e.g. the introduction of the

National Disability Insurance Scheme). Across all reviews, the primary responsibility for sector and system change was placed on government through all or some combination of data collection, analysis, population planning and measurement, system design and rule setting, and resource allocation. In this report, we suggest this raises questions for the sector in terms of its own agency. In short, given that many of these issues have persisted for over a decade, to what extent should the sector wait for government to enact these changes on its behalf, or find ways to reform itself?

METHODS

An initial scan of Productivity Commission, Royal Commission, Senate Inquiries, and Ombudsman Reports pulled together any reports that were related to the community services sector. This included matters such as inquiries into the NDIS, institutional child sexual abuse, and the Banking and Superannuation sector. This initial search resulted in 93 reports and inquiries. A large number of reports referred to social services in their capacity as a government department (i.e. Department of Social Services), but did not necessarily include any discussion about the role of community social services and how they interact with the investigated issues. Reports and inquiries that discussed community and social services as a business model were prioritised in the review. A total of 43 reports were included in this review (21 Senate Inquiries, 11 Productivity Commission, 1 Commonwealth Ombudsman, 5 National Audit Office, 3 Royal Commissions (including documents available from the on-going Disability Royal Commission into Violence, Aged Care Royal Commission), 2 parliamentary documents identified through Google search). Extraction involved a search of each of the included reports for the following search terms:

- Community sector
- Community services
- Social services
- Third sector
- Not-for-profit sector
- Competition

Surrounding sentences or paragraphs were extracted to maintain context when extracting each instance of extracting the identified terms. Excerpts were compiled in separate documents for analysis.

A framing analysis was conducted on the extracted excerpts, paying attention to how the third sector was positioned in the reports: how was the sector defined, where it was given responsibility or direction from the recommendations of the report, and how these representations differed across

departments or sector inquiries. Overarching themes were identified (Blaikie, 2010; Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). Four major themes emerged:

- Joined-up and integrated working
- Competition and contestability
- Government as steward
- Workforce reform

Within each of these themes, questions of resourcing and financing the sector were raised.

The 93 documents identified were then re-searched with terms relating to these themes¹. Within each theme, analysis examined how the sector was framed as the subject of reform (or absent from reform). Recommendations from major reviews were also read in detail to assess whether they spoke to the themes identified. Documents and recommendations were looked at sequentially, to identify changes in framing and language over time.

CHALLENGES TO THE TRADITIONAL WELFARE STATE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE THIRD SECTOR

Before outlining the findings of the review, we first provide historical background on the Australian welfare state – which the third sector is part of – and how pressures on the sector have changed over time. While our review focused on a component of the third sector – the community services sector – we provide an overview of trends which have affected the sector as a whole.

The welfare state now constitutes a significant part of government spending and concern. Political scientist Esping-Andersen (1990) argues that governments are predominately occupied with the production and distribution of social wellbeing. Yet, the welfare state has been the subject of increasing ideological and political debate and scrutiny over the past three decades. Globalisation and neoliberalism have encouraged a shift away from the more institutional welfare states of the 1960s and 1970s (Mendes, 2008). Since the 1980s it has become commonplace to speak of the ‘crisis of the welfare state’ and the ‘rolling back’ of the welfare state (i.e. a reduction in the welfare state). However, the welfare state has retained substantial public support and continues to be “underpinned by a number of powerful moral and political arguments” (Mendes 2008: 68): particularly, that the

¹ Documents were re-searched with the following terms: Joined-up, integrated, whole-of-government, responsive, competition, contestability, steward, stewardship, workforce

welfare state ensures personal freedom for the unemployed, promotes equity, reduces poverty and increases the wellbeing of all citizens. Moreover, the welfare state has always been surrounded by contestation and ideological tensions. Hence, the extent to which contemporary challenges and changes to the welfare state can be called a ‘crisis’ is a point of contention. Undoubtedly, however, the ways governments ‘do business’ is changing significantly (Rodger, 2000; Mendes, 2008; Briggs, 1961).

The contemporary welfare state is understood to face a number of social and economic challenges (Rodger, 2000). The traditional models established in the 1940s made certain assumptions about the nature of families, society and the economy. For example, it assumed a stable and homogenous family unit and full employment. Today, the labour market is characterised by (comparatively) high unemployment and changes to workforce structure such as the increasing participation of women, flexible career paths, and the increasing casualisation of the workforce. Other challenges to the welfare state include changes to the traditional family structure, different patterns of immigration, increased individualism, an ageing population and as of 2020 COVID-19 and related financial pressures (Mendes, 2008; Rodger, 2000).

In the face of these substantial shifts, it is argued that the hierarchical government bureaucracy of the 20th Century is no longer an appropriate vehicle for the delivery and development of public and social policy (Eggers, 2008). Problems have become both more “global and more local” and the traditional hierarchical model of governing and the welfare state does not meet the demands of the complex, and rapidly changing, nature of the social and economic problems faced today (Eggers 2008: 23; Rhodes 2006). Internationally, trends suggest that we are moving towards a new era of unprecedented collaboration and partnership between sectors (Barraket, 2008). These trends are signified by a shift in language from ‘government’ to ‘governance’.

Governance encompasses new, collaborative, arrangements and practices related to governing. It is seen as constituting a distinct set of practices in relation to governing but not necessarily replacing government (Meehan, 2003). Governance refers to a range of practices, particularly the fragmentation or sharing of public power, a decentering or ‘hollowing out’ of the state through privatisation of utilities and services, and a greater push for partnerships and collaboration between state and non-state actors (Rhodes, 1997). As a result, functions that would have once been carried out by governments as part of ‘welfare state’ arrangements are now undertaken by other parts of society.

In the face of globalisation, governments remain responsible to their citizens but have a diminished ability to provide for their needs; as previously stated, problems have become both more global and

more local (Lewis, 2005; Eggers, 2008).² This has necessitated a more arms-length approach of governing that utilises flexible, cross-sectoral and blended methods of governing. Power is seen to be fragmented, both between different levels of government and between state and non-state actors. The hierarchical decision-making processes associated with traditional forms of government are replaced by partnership and cooperation based on mutual interests. Public, private and non-government organisations are linked into networks managed by government (Lewis, 2005). This blurring of sectors is seen to better address new complex social and economic problems through ‘joined-up’ government (Lewis, 2005). These are referred to as ‘wicked’ policy problems, as they cross traditional boundaries and institutions (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Social policy design and implementation now involves a complex interaction between government and a diverse range of non-government organisations (Hill, M. & Hupe, 2009; Barraket, 2008; Considine, 2003). While it is sometimes argued that social policy has always been delivered by a range of sectors, trends towards collaborative and network governance approaches have seen an even greater reliance on non-government actors (referred to as the ‘mixed economy of welfare’) (Powell, 2007). Increasingly, these policy networks are seen as the ‘engine room’ of modern social policy (Hudson, J. & Lowe, S, 2004, p. 245).

The rise of the ‘third sector’

The advent of network governance techniques has meant that new players, outside government, are now part of the welfare state (or the government’s efforts to improve the wellbeing of citizens). Most significantly, the ‘third sector’ has become an important new player in social policy. The term ‘third sector’ refers to non-government, or not-for-profit, organisations (in some instances, the terms ‘not-for-profit sector’ and ‘community sector’ are also used) (Lyons, 2001). One of the leading welfare state researchers, Mark Considine (2003, p. 63), argues that the role of the third sector in the welfare state “can be viewed as the most important and most radical change to state–society relations since the advent of the modern welfare state”.

The third sector has increasingly been treated as a ‘panacea’ for the challenges faced by contemporary governments and the welfare state. For example, the political Left has viewed the sector as a way to increase participation and encourage civil society to foster social change for greater social equality.

² Lewis (2005a: 43) argues that new governance has been actively sought in many sectors due to growing criticisms that government has become too “big and powerful, inefficient and unproductive, outmoded and functionally and morally bankrupt”.

Conversely, interest in the sector from the Right has been fuelled by a ‘revival of the local’, where economic growth is developed from below (Fyfe, 2005). For both sides of politics, the sector is perceived as a way to address the social costs and the political repercussions associated with the rise of neoliberalism, and to reduce the fiscal burden of the welfare state on governments (Mendes, 2008; Gonzales, 2007; Fyfe, 2005; Brown, et al., 2000). Faced with fears about declining political participation, anxieties about meeting welfare needs, and worries about the nature of citizenship, “the third sector has come to be regarded as the place where politics can be democratized, active citizenship strengthened, the public sphere reinvigorated and [the design and delivery of] welfare programmes made to suit pluralistic [needs]” (Brown, et al., 2000, p. 57).

The sector now occupies a central role in the welfare state: designing and delivering services, providing feedback and input into the policy process, and – as a result – subject to a wide range of reform efforts aimed at enhancing its capacity to engage with both government and citizens.

The Australian third (or not-for-profit) sector first emerged as charitable and faith-based organisations during colonial times (Lyons, 2001).³ Since the late nineteenth century, non-government organisations have been prominent in caring for the poor and marginalised. In the 1960s and 70s the sector expanded considerably, with the growth of secular organisations arising from social movements (Lyons, 2001; Melville, 2008). These organisations were primarily small (although ubiquitous) and established around issues concerning identity politics and social movements (Lyons, 2001; Melville, 2008).

Today, the sector is very broad and made up of a diverse range of small and large institutions and organisations. These include charities, advocacy organisations, voluntary affiliations and community service organisations. These organisations work across a broad range of social issues, including housing, employment, family services, domestic violence and disability. Lyons (2001) argued that while the sector as a whole can be said to be centrally concerned with social justice (because of their voluntary and not-for-profit nature) and the 2013 Charities Act which outlines that the sector exists for public good, the mission, values, roles and purposes of individual organisations vary considerably. Most often, non-government organisations are defined by what they are not: they are non-government, and are not driven by profit as in the private sector (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2004; Lyons 2001; Salamon & Anheier, 1997). The absence of a profit motive is understood to encourage such organisations to pursue activities and undertakings that are valuable to the community for their own sake (Productivity Commission, 2009). In this sense, their most basic function is to ‘do good’ (and

³ The colonial period in Australia is understood to stretch from 1788-1901 (Lyons 2001).

many receive tax incentives to exist for public good (Charities Act 2013).. The social and political contribution of the sector is difficult to measure, but it is believed to underpin both a strong economy and a strong democracy (Lyons, 2001).

Recently, not-for-profits have become seen as important contributors to social policy and an integral part of the modern welfare state. In part, this is because of their close connections and networks with local communities, which enable not-for-profits to undertake work such as advocacy, community development and, more generally, addressing local level social disadvantage (Dalton & Lyons, 2005; Lyons, 2001).⁴ In particular, the third sector plays an important role in the delivery of welfare relief services, along with community development and empowerment activities (Lyons, 2001); see also Dalton, B & Lyons, 2005; Productivity Commission, 2009). It is argued that while non-government organisations fulfil important service delivery roles, they do not operate or fulfill these roles in the way for-profit organisations do. For example, they provide a greater investment in communities than for-profit organisations delivering the same services (Lyons, 2001). Non-government organisations are understood to build social capital, provide spaces for active citizenship, and promote democracy through reinvigorating civil society (Passey & Lyons, 2005; Dalton & Lyons, 2005; Lyons, 2001).⁵ They are manifest of people's ability to join together for collective action, and thus both draw on and generate social capital (Lyons, 2001). In this sense they are framed as innovative spaces where civil society may flourish (Brown et al., 2002):

Not-for-profits engender proactivity and an enterprising approach to development, in so far as they set up structures and processes for the practices of self-determination and participation and they provide space for constructing alternative practices and visions. (Kenny, 2008, p. 24)

The contributions of the sector are generally viewed in favourable terms. For example, the 2009 Productivity Commission argued that "The range of direct and indirect benefits that not-for-profits undoubtedly generate through their activities is diverse", while the Marmot Review suggested that the sector made a significant contribution to reducing health inequalities through building community infrastructure and extending community networks (Productivity Commission, 2009; Marmot, M et al., 2010). There are, however, growing calls for the sector to demonstrate its impact in these areas (Productivity Commission, 2009).

⁴ It is worth noting that although the rhetoric of policy contribution by non-government organisations is strong, evidence of this occurring in practice is more limited.

⁵ Passey & Lyons (2005) found that members of non-profit organisations of any kind are nearly three times as likely to participate in political activities.

While the sector's contributions are significant, its roots in charity and relief for the poor mean that there are common perceptions that its activities and concerns are predominately those of welfare relief. However in practice, the sector works across all areas of the welfare state for all social groups – from education, medical and health services, research, arts and religion.

Challenges facing the sector – a historical view

The rise of the third sector as a significant player in social policy has, as one might expect, been a contentious issue. In particular, the ways in which governments interact with, fund and regulate non-government organisations and their provision of welfare relief significantly impacts their internal and external functioning. It also shapes the sector as a whole and its relationship with civil society.

The Australian third sector has gone through a variety of changes with regard to funding and governance. Prior to the 1980s non-government organisations involved in community service provision and advocacy were primarily funded through grant schemes and subsidies. That is, funding was not allocated for specific services. This guaranteed a degree of autonomy for organisations. Throughout the Hawke–Keating era a shift began towards contractual funding and competitive tendering arrangements between the third sector and government (Mendes, 2008; Considine, 2003). These approaches were substantially expanded under the later Howard Government, underpinned by neoliberal philosophies of cost saving and residual approaches to the welfare state. While the sector has been attractive to government because of its close connections, or embeddedness, in communities, the position of the third sector in the delivery of welfare relief has also developed as a result of governments wanting to shift the responsibility and cost of service delivery away from the state.

Contracting processes were established in the public services that saw non-government organisations compete to fill gaps in the welfare state (Staples, 2008; Casey & Dalton, 2006). These approaches to funding have had a significant impact on the sector's internal and external functioning (Melville, 2008; Lyons, 2003). The market principles embraced within the contracting model, and the paradigm more broadly referred to as New Public Management, encourage competition and self-seeking behaviour to ensure the growth and survival of organisations. For example, the top-down accountability and government imposed targets found within the contracting model often decreased organisational autonomy, which in some instances diminished the ability of organisations to carry out work intended to address disadvantage and inequality, such as advocacy work and representing marginalised social groups (Fyfe, N & Milligan, C, 2003, 2003; Wolch, 1999; Salamon & Anheier, 1997). As Howe (2002, p. 9) suggests, there is also a risk that organisations or agencies become uncritical of government and provide 'disinterested' services, with little incentive to engage with the interests and needs of users.

Contracting is also understood to undermine organisations' capacities "to develop trust and maintain networks [with communities] as well as limiting efficacy in promoting social change" (Owen & Kearns 2006, p. 117). In a survey of approximately five hundred organisations involved in contracting, Rawsthorne (2002) found that close to 50% of these organisations felt that contracting had reduced their ability to seek and/or receive grants for innovative prevention or development activities. The stifling of innovation has been particularly evident in the case of community development. Decreased autonomy reduces the ability of many non-government organisations, particularly the small ones, to work effectively and innovatively in communities. In Australia, competitive tendering and contracting models have seen the destruction of small organisations – organisations, that Lyons (2001) argues, are the richest in social capital.

On the whole, the New Public Management policies that have grown since the 1990s have raised concerns about the autonomy of organisations and the sector, and what has been described as the 'professionalisation' and 'bureaucratisation' of the sector. Through complex funding and reporting mechanisms, combined with a shift towards business models, organisations have been forced to place significant resources into supporting core management functions and the professionalisation of their workforce, rather than their community-based work (Onyx, 2008). Melville (2008) argues that while this expanded the service delivery role of the sector, government investment has not kept pace with this expansion. Consequently, parts of the sector are critically under-funded, resulting in a lack of infrastructure and systematic workforce planning and development (Melville, 2008).

In recognition of this difficult history, the Rudd-Gillard Government stated that new partnerships and stronger working relationships with the sector were needed to support the implementation of a range of large-scale social policy reforms (Butcher, 2011; Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2008; Stephens, 2008). To support this, a number of initiatives were supported to reinvigorate the sector including significant governance reforms, such as the establishment of a National Third Sector Compact, Not-for-profit Reform Council, and Office of the Not-for-profit Sector in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (Butcher, 2011).

The Australian 'National Compact', which set out the terms of engagement between government and the sector, was launched in March of 2010. The Compact was seen as a means by which to redress the fractured relationship that developed under the previous government, through reinstating the sector's ability to advocate and contribute to social policy and debate (Australian Labor Party 2007). The then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, lauded the document as "the beginning of an era of collaboration that will fundamentally strengthen and improve the way we work together", enabling "true collaboration" and a "shared vision" (Rudd 2010). Peak not-for-profit bodies welcomed the Compact as an

“important foundation for stronger links between the not-for-profit sector and government” (ACOSS 2010).

When Labor lost office in 2013, structures such as Not-for-profit Reform Council, and Office of the Not-for-profit Sector were disbanded. Similarly, the National Third Sector Compact also fell away quickly under the Coalition government. The ACNC, established in 2012, remains current and active. While the sector continues to be engaged in the delivery of policy (either through direct contracting by government, or through engagement by individuals who have been given government budgets for services), no cohesive paradigm appears to underpin the approach of governments from 2013-2020. We explore the nature of pressures on the sector, and the findings of multiple reviews, in the next section.

FINDINGS

The review found that recommendations and references to the community service sector are predominately made by the Productivity Commission. Senate Inquiries, Ombudsman reports and Royal Commissions tended to make highly technical recommendations regarding specific service areas, without necessarily engaging with the broader context of the sector or policy debates concerning its relationship with government or role in social service provision. As a result, the findings section examines firstly the Productivity Commission reviews, while cross-referencing other sources as appropriate. As the largest and most comprehensive assessment of the sector and blueprint for reform, we commence our analysis with the 2010 Contribution of the Not-for-profit Sector Report, from the Productivity Commission.

The Productivity Commission made several broad recommendations in its landmark report in 2010 with regard to the third sector, with a particular emphasis on its sustainability and resourcing:

- [that] governments are not making the most of the knowledge and expertise of NFPs when formulating policies and designing programs
 - excessively short-term contracts
 - tendering, contractual and reporting requirements that are disproportionate to the level of government funding and risk involved
 - the sheer volume of contracts that community-based organisations have to manage.
- (Productivity Commission, 2010a, p. 309)

Subsequent Productivity Commission reports have argued that these fundamental issues remain unaddressed, and can be noted in findings throughout this report (Productivity Commission, 2018a). Indeed, there were strong recurring themes across the reports and inquiries, particularly around joined up systems and services, the role of competition in driving client-responsive and innovative services, and the importance of government to act as a system or market ‘steward’. Below, we investigate each of these themes in turn.

1. *Joined up responses*

In 2008, there was a concentrated policy effort on both the need for, and the creation of, joined-up policy responses and services (Carey, 2016). Joined up policies and services were seen as providing better outcomes for citizens, who would no longer ‘fall through the gaps’, while also streamlining government services and departments (Carey, 2016). As a key actor in the delivery of government services, the community services sector was centre to much of these reform efforts, either through the need for governments to understand their activities, or plan and design funding systems that would support joined-up responses. For example, back in 2008, the Productivity Commission noted that:

Governments are increasingly emphasising the need for integrated, client-centred community services. A greater understanding of the links between the use of various community services, the nature of these links, and whether interventions in one area of service provision result in reduced need for other services, will enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the sector overall. (Productivity Commission, 2008)

The landmark report ‘Contributions of the not-for-profit sector’ also highlighted the need to break down government silos, and created joined-up responses (Productivity Commission, 2010a, p.).

The logic and need for joined-up responses is compelling; if successful, it is believed to reduce costs, use resources better, more effectively meet the needs of citizens through tailored and appropriate public services, and provide a way forward for addressing complex social problems. While often presented as an emerging imperative of government, by 1970 fervor around the need for joined-up governance was already well established; Schermerhorn described interagency collaboration as a ‘panacea’ for addressing social issues (Schermerhorn, 1975). It was the packaging of these ideas as ‘joined-up government’ by the Blair Government in the late 1990s that brought such approaches to the fore in a new way within industrial countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada, manifesting in the Rudd-Gillard government’s renewed focus on the not-for-profit sector in reforms from 2007-2013 (6, 2004; Christensen & Laegreid, 2007; O’Flynn, 2009). However, even in 2017 the Productivity Commission stated “governments are *increasingly* emphasising the need for integrated, client-centred community services” (Productivity Commission, 2017, p. 14). In this review, we find that joined-up services and systems have been a focus of Australian governments, and a wide range of inquiries and reports, since at least 2007. While the rhetoric of ‘joining-up’ has fallen away, the ideas remain a constant theme in reviews and responses to service delivery and sector reform.

The Productivity Commission continues to argue for joined-up responses in a range of areas, from disability to early childhood education and care, noting in 2017 that a lack of integration in planning and delivery remains a fundamental issue for Australian social policy and welfare services:

The effects of the lack of planning are magnified by Australia's federal system. Several different agencies across different levels of government are responsible for commissioning family and community services, but there is no process for coordination between them. ... An incoherent patchwork of different funding priorities and commissioning arrangements creates barriers for providers, even those in the same service area, to develop closer working relationships, let alone integrate their service offers. (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 243)

In this same report, 'Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reforms to Human Services', the Productivity Commission notes that this extends from planning through to data collection and evaluation/compliance data:

Governments need to understand the service provider population to identify gaps and duplication in service provision, and to inform planning for service coordination.

Currently governments collect information on existing services, but in an uncoordinated, duplicative and irregular fashion. NFP organisations currently collate information about family and community services. For example, Infoxchange manages the Service Seeker directory, which is a searchable directory of social services across Australia, including maps of services in a specified area. Governments should improve their coordination of data collection and collate and publish maps of existing services. (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 250)

As in 2010, the focus on integration in recent years is driven by a desire of more effective services and better outcomes:

More effective service coordination could contribute to better outcomes for people with complex needs who can otherwise be at risk of 'falling through the cracks' of a service system that is not set up to provide comprehensive, coordinated and ongoing support.

Coordination can also reduce the waste associated with duplication. Governments need to ensure that the right mix of services are provided to meet the needs of the community and must also establish mechanisms for service coordination. (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 251)

The need for integrated services and systems also appears as a solution to address systemic issues, and respond to service system breaks downs, in several other reviews. For example, The Royal Commission into child abuse includes in its recommendations the need for a 'cohesive systems approach', and an 'integrated model' in responding to reports and providing care for victims of child abuse. It also notes the need for integration across a range of government systems to protect child into

the future, “A national approach would also facilitate the integration of child safe initiatives with other national strategies aimed at protecting children, including the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022 and the National Disability Strategy 2010–2020” (McClellan, 2017, p. 27). Similarly, the action plan put together in response to the Senate Inquiry into ‘Violence, abuse and neglect against people with disability in institutional and residential settings’, included a recommendation for integrated service recommendations (Senate Inquiry, 2015a). A lack of joined-up/cohesive service systems is positioned as a cause of service system failures, which have resulted in abuse and neglect. Despite this, the on-going recommendations of a similar nature – to create integrated systems, build coherence between policies, and create joined up services – suggests that we have not yet achieved integration.

While reports call for integrated and cohesive services and systems, specific recommendations focus almost exclusively on the change needed within governments and planning to achieve this, not the sector. For example, the Productivity Commission report on competition in human services argued that:

Firstly, governments should invest more in planning for services to meet the needs of System Outcomes Provider Outcomes Program Outcomes User Outcomes. Upfront investment in service planning could significantly improve outcomes for people with complex needs, and could also lead to medium-term savings for governments through greater efficiency in service provision.

Second, the Australian, State and Territory Governments should work together to establish mechanisms for service coordination. One option would be to allocate responsibility for service coordination to dedicated regional bodies. ... there is no single model or approach that is clearly suitable to be rolled out across all family and community services throughout the country. An alternative is for existing State and Territory Government departments to take responsibility for developing regional service plans, with the Australian Government using these plans to inform its own funding decisions. (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 252)

The responsibility to create integrated systems is seen to sit with government, through data, planning and funding approaches, rather than on the community services sector. The 2017 recommendations above indicate that the goals set out in 2010, to create more integrated services and client experiences, remain a long-standing issue and the subject of on-going scrutiny, with a particular focus on the need for government to provide the conditions upon which joined-up responses can be built. These issues

were framed as the responsibility of government to ‘steward’ (see discussion on stewardship below), particularly in a market-based service environment.

2. Competition and contestability

Choice in service provision has been a concern in social service reform since the 1990s (Considine 1999). Under new public management reforms, diversity and choice in services was positioned as the gain of marketized systems for citizens (while for government it was cost containment) (Bradley & Parker, 2006; Dickinson 2016). Here, citizens are said to get service that better meet their needs rather than a ‘one size fits all’ approach (Girth & et al, 2012). While the period of Labor reform between 2007-2013 sought to build stronger relationships with the third sector, competition remained central to funding models. Indeed, competition and contestability continues to be a feature of government engagement with the community services sector under subsequent governments.

Questions of competition and contestability have been at the heart of multiple reviews, including a major Productivity Commission review into contestability (Productivity Commission, 2018b), the ‘Harper’ Competition Policy Review (Harper et al., 2015), and reports on the NDIS (Earnst and Young Consulting, 2015; NDIA, 2019b; Productivity Commission, 2017a). Interestingly, competition has not emerged in any of the recommendations into sector/service failure – such as the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse, or senate inquiries. Competition, contestability and markets in service delivery were not positioned as either a cause or a solution for institutional/service failings in these areas, despite their continual focus as an area of reform.

In the 2010 report, Contributions of the Not-for-profit sector, the Productivity Commission emphasised the need for governments to engage in a range of funding approaches to the third sector: “Australian governments should ensure that they choose the model of engagement with not-for-profits that best suits the characteristics and circumstances of the service being delivered” (Productivity Commission, 2010b, p. 347). This recommendation came off the back of a decade long push towards marketisation and increased competition in the sector, under the Howard Government. The Commission noted that funding models needed to be fit-for-purpose, which would see government engaging in mixed models across services, from block-funded grants to client-directed funding:

Where governments are seeking the delivery of clearly defined outcomes, and markets are genuinely contestable, purchase of service contracting remains the preferred approach. However some service areas require longer-term relationship models of engagement (referred to as joint ventures). Further, while client-directed funding can provide opportunities to give clients greater informed choice, this must be conditional

on having real choice and quality assurance processes in place to ensure the services are to an appropriate standard. (Productivity Commission, 2010: XXXVIII)

Consistent with this recommendation, the sector is now characterised by a mixture of funding arrangements, from block-funding in areas such as advocacy, through to personalised or client-directed funding within the NDIS. As noted by the Productivity Commission, there remains great variability in uptake of market mechanisms and competition and its outcomes across different areas: while “governments have made progress in introducing competition, contestability and user choice to human services provision, the efficiency and effectiveness of the delivery of services within the sector varies significantly between jurisdiction” (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. iv). However, the push towards competition and contestability has remained strong.

The 2015 ‘Harper Review’ into competition policy provided the most forthright and unequivocal push for the need for more contestability in social and human services:

Our ageing population will give rise to a wider array of needs and preferences among older Australians and their families. Extending choice and contestability in government provision of human services will help people to meet their individual health and aged care needs. (Harper et al., 2015: 7)

The review recommended that:

- user choice should be placed at the heart of service delivery;
- governments commissioning human services should do so carefully, with a clear focus on outcomes;
- a diversity of providers should be encouraged, while taking care not to crowd out community and volunteer services;
- innovation in service provision should be stimulated, while ensuring minimum standards of quality and access in human services.
- governments should retain a stewardship function, separating the interests of policy (including funding), regulation and service delivery; (Harper et al., 2015, p. 7).

In the Harper Review, competition is positioned as a means by which to improve outcomes and drive diversity in service provision. This is not dissimilar to the arguments underpinning the NDIS, put forward by the Productivity Commission in 2011, for a personalised (i.e. citizen budgets and citizen

directed care) approach to funding disability services. Both reviews, along with the Productivity Commission report into introducing competition (Productivity Commission, 2018b), argue that competition is important for driving innovation in service design. With regard to the NDIS, the Productivity Commission argues that: ‘competition is not just about achieving the lowest price, but also encouraging the entry of new suppliers, quality service and the creation of new products that match people’s preferences’ (Productivity Commission, 2011, p. 373).

While the Harper Review (2015) advocated very strongly for competition in social and human services across the board, the Productivity Commission has at times taken a more tempered approach. For example, in the 2017-2018 Introducing Choice and Competition report, the Commission states that:

Used well, competition and contestability can be a powerful mechanism for improving the effectiveness of service provision. But competition and contestability should only be pursued where they improve outcomes for service users and the community. For example, the Commission has concluded that introducing further contestability into the delivery of public hospital services is unlikely to deliver additional net benefits at this time. (Productivity Commission, 2018b: 6)

Principles of choice and service diversity can be seen most strongly in the NDIS reforms (discussed below) (Productivity Commission, 2011). The NDIS, which has seen the development of nation-wide disability service markets using consumer/citizen budgets (referred to as a ‘personalisation scheme’) (Carey et al., 2018). Within the NDIS, providers compete for funding by appealing directly to scheme participants (i.e. rather than winning a government tender), creating some of the most complex social service markets in the world (Carey et al., 2018). While the NDIS is seen as an important and defining reform for Australia, in 2017-2018 the Commission still cautioned the government against pursuing such a high degree of marketisation and ‘consumer choice’ in other areas:

Family and community services are not well-suited to the widespread introduction of greater user choice at this time. Instead, governments should focus on practical reforms to improve their stewardship of family and community services — the way they plan the system of services, select providers on behalf of users, and contract services so that users are at the centre of service provision. (Productivity Commission, 2018b: 242)

In contrast to this stance, the earlier Harper Review pushed more strongly towards a personalised/individualised model in service well beyond disability: “a ‘presumption of choice’ could have significant benefits in many human services sectors. Putting users in control of the human

services they access — either through direct payments, personal budgets, entitlements or choice — drives service providers to become more responsive to individual requirements.” (Harper et al., 2015a, p. 35). Given the proximity of these two reviews to one another, one can assume that there are currently differing views between government agencies about how far marketisation, and personalisation, should be pushed.

The other key area of debate is around how and if competition should function regard to Indigenous and remote services. For example, in 2017-2018, the Productivity Commission indicated in its report *Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services* that competition may not be well suited to the provision of services in remote Indigenous communities due to a range of hurdles, such as lack of providers, infrastructure issues, and appropriateness of the model:

Competition between service providers is not commonplace in remote Indigenous communities, even where there are multiple providers, and user choice of service or provider is limited. The provision of human services in remote Indigenous communities, like family and community services, is largely designed around a model of commissioning where providers compete periodically through tender processes for funding to deliver services.

Remoteness poses a number of challenges for service provision. It increases the costs of delivering services and prevents some services from being delivered at all. The size and remoteness of these communities means that they may not be able to support full-time services. Isolation also poses challenges, with some communities cut off from services for weeks or months each year... Access to online service alternatives can also be challenging due to a lack of IT infrastructure and, in some cases, a lack of the skills required to utilise those services. Recruiting and retaining staff with skills in service provision and the necessary cultural competencies is an enormous challenge. Few small communities have local people with the professional skills to deliver the suite of human services they need, and provider and staff turnover can be significant barriers to effective service provision. (Productivity Commission, 2018b: 270)

The 2017-2018 Productivity Commission Report ‘Introducing Competition and Contestability into Human Services’, while noting the same constraints, singled out Indigenous services as a key area of opportunity for markets use and growth. This recommendation was made in response to an assessment that remote Indigenous services are ‘not working’, and that the government ‘should improve commissioning arrangements and should be more responsive to local needs’ (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 2). The Commission recommended longer (i.e. ten year) contracts for these

services. Interestingly, these recommendations have been made against the background of community and government concern over the functioning of NDIS markets in remote areas (Fitts & Soldatic, 2020; Malbon et al., 2019; NDIA, 2019a). This suggests that while individualised/personalised service markets are unlikely to be fit-for-purpose for Indigenous communities (Malbon et al., 2019; NDIA, 2019a), contestability, competition and markets are still seen as the best way to drive client-focused services in these areas.

Overall, competition through marketisation continues to be seen as the best way to create innovation and diversity of services, despite the fact that we lack a clear evidence base for this assertion (Dickinson, 2016; 2017). In some areas, such as disability, this has been pushed to new extremes with the use of personalised budgets, and reviews such as the Harper Review continue to drive towards greater use of contestability policies in human services. However, in other reviews of government social services the Productivity Commission has been more restrained in its recommendations around markets and competition – suggesting that such approaches should be used cautiously where they might drive good outcomes, as opposed to being applied as a blanket approach to the sector. Nonetheless, recommendations from successive reports and reviews are notably similar – emphasising the need for more contestability and competition, the role of competition in driving innovation, how competition ensures services are responsive to clients, and the best way to drive diversity. While the Productivity Commission is more cautious in its recommendations regarding competition and contestability – emphasising that governments must engage in a range of funding models which are fit for purpose, it still positions competition and contestability as key to achieving service ‘choice’: “Competition (as an adjunct to user choice) delivers strong incentives for providers to be more focused on people who use services. Contestable arrangements, where providers are selected by governments through competitive processes such as tenders, are widely used in human services. Examples include the selection of providers of family and community services, and tenancy management services for social housing” (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 6). As the major reform body for economic and social policy, the Commission is likely to continue to exert a strong influence over social service reform.

A notable change that has occurred since 2010 is the growing description of government as a ‘system steward’ – this language has emerged in the last five years in a variety of service contexts, but was not an explicit feature of the 2007-2012 reforms.

3. Government as system steward

With the growth of competition and markets in the social sector, governments around the world have begun to talk about the need for market and system ‘stewardship’, to ensure that social service systems

and meet policy goals (Carey et al., 2020, 2017; Gash, 2014; Girth & et al, 2012). In Australia, this term first emerged in in the Competition Policy Review in 2015, which stated that “an ongoing market stewardship function means that governments will retain responsibility for overseeing the impact of policies on users” (Harper et al., 2015b, p. 33). In 2018, the Productivity Commission (2018b) described government stewardship as core to the reform and delivery of human services. Since then, stewardship has been used extensively with regard to NDIS markets to refers to the need to address market gaps (Carey et al., 2017; NDIA, 2019), while more broadly the role of government in social service provision is referred to ‘system steward’ in a range of areas from aged care to health and disability (Commonwealth Government, 2019; Productivity Commission, 2018b). Most recently, stewardship has emerged as a point of major discussion in the on-going Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, which noted that poor system stewardship by government has been found to be the cause of failings in aged-care for decades (Commonwealth Government, 2019).

Stewardship has been described as a ‘catch-all’ phrase that needs better defining in different areas of application (Moon et al., 2017). For example, stewardship of the health care system, which has large contracts and a low number of providers, is very different from the type of place-based ‘market stewardship’ required in the NDIS (Carey et al., 2020). Indeed, while stewardship is used more and more frequently in reviews of government services, rarely is a clear definition provided. Overall, stewardship appears to be broadly conceived as a coordination role for government.

The most extensive discussion of stewardship is provided in the 2018 Productivity Commission Review of competition and contestability. In this report, the Commission states that governments should always act as system stewards: “Governments should always have the role of system stewards irrespective of how human services are provided, or by whom” (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 8). Moreover, when acting as stewards, governments are “responsible for the range of functions that both determine what human services should be made available and the effectiveness of those services. These functions include policy design, regulation, oversight of service delivery, monitoring of provider performance, and system improvement. Planning to understand the population of service users is a key element of governments’ stewardship” (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 8). Hence, stewardship appears to encompass government-led activities from data collection, to service planning and resource allocation, through to ensuring those delivering services in and outside of government are meeting policy goals.

Stewardship is seen as crucial for developing the joined-up responsive services which have been frequently argued for over the last decade. For example, the Productivity Commission states that the

government needs to develop its capacity for “greater coordination: government silos and poor planning have led to gaps and duplication, services with competing objectives and stewards losing sight of the users’ overall wellbeing. Better planning and coordination are needed within and across governments. Greater efforts, for example, are needed to coordinate services for people with multiple and complex needs” (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 79). Here, the term stewardship is being used to describe the long-standing issue of poor service integration, described earlier under ‘joined up responses’. In this sense, stewardship is not new, but rather gives a renewed emphasis to the need for governments to coordinate social service systems to prevent silos and gaps. Arguably, the emergence of ‘stewardship’ is part of a long-standing tradition of using new language to describe old problems in social services (Carey, 2016).

The Productivity Commission Inquiry into competition in human services argued strongly for better data collection and transparency by government, highlighting it as a key stewardship action for government for achieving better outcomes and integrated services (Productivity Commission, 2018b). Accurate, high quality and more complete data is positioned as a key responsibility of government for ensuring service gaps do not emerge and that organisations engaged in contracting and commissioning can respond to population needs. For example, the Productivity Commission noted that:

Governments need to understand the service provider population to identify gaps and duplication in service provision, and to inform planning for service coordination.... Governments should improve their coordination of data collection and collate and publish maps of existing services.

Ongoing monitoring of data and outcomes helps identify emerging trends which can lead to expansion, contraction or modification of services. In the context of outcomes frameworks, monitoring can reveal if performance is meeting, exceeding, or falling short of targets. (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 250)

Specifically, for service planning, the Commission suggest that:

The Australian, State and Territory Governments should build on existing initiatives and data to:

- *analyse the characteristics and needs of the service user population to assist with system and program design and targeting*
- *develop and publish data-driven maps of existing family and community services*

- *identify outcomes for family and community services that articulate the improvements in service users' overall wellbeing that governments are seeking to contribute to through service provision*
- *develop plans to coordinate services for people who have complex needs*
- *develop and publish regional service plans to address the needs of people experiencing hardship. These actions will require ongoing commitment from governments, working in consultation with service users and service providers. (Productivity Commission, 2018b: 250)*

At present, data gaps have been highlighted by the Productivity Commission in everything from housing, to complex service needs, to end of life care (Productivity Commission, 2018b).

While it is often the third sector that is being 'stewarded', the emphasis of reforms are once again placed on government. From the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety to Productivity Commission reports, stewardship is routinely positioned as the response to policy and implementation failures in past social service reforms. Here, the government is framed as having failed to 'steer' service systems (particularly marketized services) to meet policy objectives, including equitable, safe and diverse services. For example, the Productivity Commission states: "Problems can emerge if competition and contestability are poorly implemented and Governments need to learn from the lessons of the past.... [past problems] emphasise the importance of good government stewardship" (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 6). Stewardship is about *helping* the the community services sector deliver the best services and outcomes for citizens: "making sure that those providers that are best placed to achieve outcomes are in a position to do so", and creating the right balance of open and regulated markets for social services: "good stewardship should ensure that the only barriers to entering (and exiting) a market are those necessary to ensure positive outcomes for users and the overall effectiveness of service provision" (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 6). This, presumably, includes ensuring that organisations can operate within markets, through suitable prices, supports, regulation and compliance. Indeed, stewardship is described by the Productivity Commission as also improving accountability and facilitating performance assessment, which suggests that under current definitions it encompasses compliance (presumably ensuring the right balance between accountable and burdensome) (Productivity Commission, 2018a, 2018b).

The emergence of 'commissioning'

Alongside stewardship, discussions of commissioning appear to have also grown rapidly over the past five years. The 2010 Productivity Commission report on Contributions of the Not-for-profit sector did

not discuss stewardship or commissioning, with exception of a brief description of emerging commissioning trends in New Zealand. Like stewardship, commissioning appears to have first emerged in the Harper Review in 2015. The Harper Review described the growth of diverse contracting and commissioning practices internationally, noting that “There is much of value here from which Australian governments can profitably draw” (Harper et al., 2015b, p. 28). The Harper review argued that government “in support of their role as market stewards” need to undertake commissioning of different services so as to build their knowledge of the relative strengths of different services providers – creating an “information and feedback loop to improve the design and targeting of contracts over time” (Harper et al., 2015b, p. 37). The review also notes that traditional tendering practices can overlook the added social capital value that the the community services sector can bring, which should be accounted for in future commissioning practices.

While the Harper Review talks extensively of commissioning and ‘the commissioning cycle’, it does not offer a clear definition or explanation of how this differs from previous tendering practices in Australia. As Dickinson (2015) notes, commissioning is a difficult topic because it is used in a range of different ways and operates differently in different localities and levels of government. This means there is not a common approach, or shared professional standard across any one government, let alone between governments. As Dickinson (2015, p. 5) notes, “Commissioning is not a simple model. It is ‘definitionally’ fuzzy with unclear boundaries. There is no such thing as an ‘authoritative definition of commissioning’; commissioning is used to describe many different types of strategic service procurement and is often used interchangeably with concepts like contracting.” Broadly, commissioning refers to efforts to have more strategic engagement with the process of selecting which health and social service organisations should be funded and how.

Commissioning has also emerged in the language of the Productivity Commission. Like the Harper Review, The Productivity Commission links commissioning with system or market stewardship (“Governments use ‘commissioning’ to steward family and community services” (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 21)), while providing a more rounded description of commissioning as “a cycle that involves planning the service system, designing services, selecting, overseeing and engaging with providers, managing contracts and undertaking ongoing monitoring, evaluation and improvement” (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 235). Like stewardship, the Productivity Commission note gaps in government capability: “governments have not always successfully translated the principles of commissioning into effective practice” (Productivity Commission, 2018b: 236).

It’s worth noting, that while commissioning approaches are widespread, evidence does not support a clear case for its use in achieving better social/health outcomes compared other approaches

(Dickinson, 2015). At present, international literature suggests that there is little evidence that commissioning delivers better outcomes or efficiencies (Smith & Woodin, 2011). In some cases, not only are outcomes not improved but managerial costs are increased (Dickinson, 2015; Light, 1997). With the exception of specific approaches such as social impact investment (Muir et al., 2017), it is also unclear to what extent commissioning differs from other ‘externalisation’ or contestability practices used by governments. Commissioning emerged as a response to the technical and allocative inefficiencies found within ‘contracting out’, quasi-markets and block funding arrangements, causing calls for strategic engagement with externalisation (Bovaird et al., 2012; Dickinson, 2015). But, as Dickinson (2015: 5) notes, “It is a term used across many policy areas and decried for its lack of a consistent evidence base”. Hence, much like stewardship it remains unclear whether we are witnessing a fundamental shift in government practices with regard to their engagement of the community services sector in service delivery, or a ‘re-hashing’ of old problems under new names.

Outcomes-based commissioning and funding

Outcomes based funding/commissioning or ‘contracting for outcomes’ also emerged with the Harper Review in 2015 (hence forth referred to as outcomes-based funding). The Harper Review described ‘contracting for outcomes’ as a method to allow government to engage providers to directly meet user needs. Outcomes based funding requires a renewed emphasis on first identifying and then monitoring the outcomes of service users. It is potentially the most radical change to emerge from the stewardship/commissioning turn. The Harper Review (Harper et al., 2015b, p. 362) noted that contracting for outcomes can require “significant investment by government agencies in specifying what the desired outcomes are. This may involve a cultural shift for both government agencies and service providers”. It argued that an “outcomes focus allows service providers to suggest different approaches for achieving the desired result rather than having to demonstrate specific activities, tasks or assets. It allows potential providers to offer new and innovative service delivery methods and helps to encourage a diverse range of potential providers” (Harper et al., 2015b, p. 362). Hence, outcomes-based funding is a way to further the agenda of diverse, client centre services which offer diversity and innovation which, as noted throughout this review, has been at heart of social service and third sector reform since at least 2008.

Since the Harper Review, outcomes-based funding and commissioning has been central to a range of reviews and reforms. Outcomes-based funding and commissioning has been core to the approach the NSW Family and Community Services and, in turn, influenced of both the Commonwealth Government Department of Human Services (NSW Government, 2017). The NSW Government’s Human Services Framework sought to:

- *build a common understanding of the outcomes which are priorities across NSW Government agencies and NGOs*
- *support human services agencies and NGOs to adopt an outcomes-focused approach*
- *promote consistency of measurement and evaluation of human services outcomes and activities*
- *foster innovation, learning and improvement*
- *encourage Government agencies and other organisations which deliver human services to work together more effectively*
- *assist operational staff to understand how their roles contribute to broader human services outcomes.*

This agenda has put a greater emphasis on the need for evaluation and defining participant/client outcomes than the community services sector has previously seen.

Outcomes based funding has also been highlighted by the Productivity Commission. In their 2018(b) report, they position outcomes-based commissioning as requiring a far greater understanding by government of the needs of the population – emphasising both data and cultural change within government. The report also suggested a respectful engagement with the community services sector in order to determine these needs: “Population analysis, coupled with on-the-ground evidence drawn from service providers and others with local experience or an understanding of particular cohorts, could be used to build a more detailed picture of the needs of people experiencing hardship” (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 22). Moreover, the Commission argued that this would require a significant shift in government away from what is “designed for the convenience of governments rather than the benefit of service users” (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 22). It also emphasised a new focus for government to understand, and potentially monitor, the community services sector in order to select providers that would more likely deliver good outcomes: “Governments should develop a better understanding of how the attributes of service providers relate to achieving outcomes for service users and make these a core part of the selection process. These attributes could include a provider’s experience delivering a particular service, its local presence and established connections in communities, and its workforce capability and capacity” (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 22).

Discussion of outcomes-based funding saw the issue of contract length raised for the first time since the 2010 report on Contributions of the Not-for-profit sector. In 2018, the Commission noted that short term contracts were detrimental to service user outcomes and that the government should look towards longer contracting periods, consistent with arguments from the community services sector for more stable funding arrangements. The Commission suggested that longer contracts would allow the government to establish a more ‘relational’ approach to contract management: “relational contracting involves the parties to the contract seeking to maximise the effect of their joint efforts on improving user outcomes over time. This recognises that governments and service providers both have contributions to make to the effective delivery of services” (Productivity Commission, 2018b, p. 22). It remains unclear the extent to which these recommendations have been taken up by different governments.

Workforce challenges

Workforce issues in the third sector, and particularly in care services, have been consistently raised since the Rudd-Gillard government. In the 2010 Productivity Commission report into the Contribution of the Not-for-profit Sector, the Commission found that:

NFPs and others delivering community services face increasing workforce pressures and long-term planning is required to address future workforce needs.

For NFPs, less than full cost funding of many services has resulted in substantial wage gaps for NFP staff. The challenges in retaining staff threaten the sustainability and quality of services. (Productivity Commission, 2010: XXIV)

The Commission also noted back in 2010 that wages in the sector are low (Productivity Commission, 2010), despite the rise in qualifications and training required in service roles as part of the professionalisation of the third sector (Barraket, 2008). This has made attracting and retaining high quality staff difficult within the sector (Productivity Commission, 2010b).

Since the 2010 Productivity Commission report on the Contributions of the Not-for-profit sector, rolling reviews into aged-care and disability continually make similar recommendations to those first established by the Productivity Commission in 2010. These include:

- *The need for more training and clearer career pathways*
- *The importance of wage growth*
- *Development of leadership capabilities in the sector*
- *Consistent and respected accreditation*

- *Strategies for workforce growth*
- *Additional training for people working with people with complex needs*
- *The need for a 'joined-up' less fragmented system.*

The similarities in recommendations regarding the workforce and sector development across Senate reports (Senate Inquiry, 2015a; Senate Report, 2017), Royal Commissions (Commonwealth Government, 2019; McClellan, 2017), and other taskforces and inquiries (Aged Care Workforce Strategy Taskforce, 2018; Department of Social Service, 2019; Department of Social Service, 2019; Productivity Commission, 2018b, 2017a) is striking. Moreover, the fact that these recommendations do not differ significantly from the issues raised for reform by the Productivity Commission in 2010, suggests that over a ten-year period of sustained inquiry and examination fundamental issues remain unresolved.

Despite extensive discussion of workforce issues in the 2007-2013 reforms of the sector, many issues around workforce remain unaddressed and are discussed consistently across Productivity Commission reports, Senate Inquiries and Royal Commission documentation. For example, workforce was a point of discussion in the final report from the Royal Commission on Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (McClellan, 2017). Within the recommendations stemming from the Commission, workforce development and training was highlighted as key to addressing both systemic issues and also responding appropriately to client needs after traumatic events (McClellan, 2017). The workforce was also a major point of discussion in the 2015 Senate Inquiry into 'Violence, abuse and neglect against people with disability', which made recommendations that the Government establish a scheme to ensure national consistency in worker training – attributing systemic issues to, in part, workforce training and retention (Senate Inquiry, 2015b). Similar recommendations have been echoed in subsequent reviews in the intervening years, particularly in aged-care and disability which have areas which have received repeated and sustained inquiry.

In disability, the growth and churn in the sector as a response to the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme has highlighted issues around wages and training. In reviewing the NDIS in 2017, the Productivity Commission noted that the sector is characterised by rapid growth but significant price (and in turn wage) caps (Productivity Commission, 2017). They argued that an estimated 1 in 5 new jobs created in Australia in the coming years would need to be in the disability sector, creating challenges for attraction, retention and training of staff (Productivity Commission, 2017a). The report notes that building an effective workforce is a long-term issue. In 2019, the Commonwealth Department of Social Services launched the 'Growing the NDIS Market and Workforce' framework. The framework draws attention to the need to support the growth of a skilled and experienced disability workforce, introducing a code of conduct for NDIS practice standards. The

Code and Practice standards require NDIS providers and support workers to have the skills necessary to deliver the supports that they are providing (Department of Social Service, 2019). Through a new NDIS Capability Framework (to be developed between 2019 and 2022), the government will establish core capabilities to be demonstrated by providers and workers when delivering services. Research on the sustainability of the disability sector has found that prices are currently too low to be able to provide training or professional development to staff (Carey et al., 2019; Carey et al., 2020). It currently remains unclear whether prices will be shifted as part of the effort to build an appropriate disability workforce. Nonetheless, the Commonwealth says that the Capability Framework will include strategies to improve existing training programs, resources and modes of delivery, including refined processes for qualifications to work in the sector (Department of Social Service, 2019).

In aged-care, the 2017 senate report made recommendations for the establishment of an aged-care workforce strategy taskforce (Senate Report, 2017), with an emphasis on training and capacity building. The Taskforce was established in 2018 by the Department of Health, releasing a report in June 2018 (Aged Care Workforce Strategy Taskforce, 2018). The report made a strong argument for government and systemic reform, stating that the aged care system and workforce was fragmented, while the sector is facing “rising consumer expectations and other significant changes, much outside its direct control. This includes issues such as system funding design and regulation which impact on how care is delivered” (Aged Care Workforce Strategy Taskforce, 2018, p. v). Similar to the 2010 Productivity Commission, it made arguments for the need for better workforce planning, improved job pathways, the need for leadership skills and efforts at training and retraining the right staff.

The community services sector workforce has also come under scrutiny in the interim reporting on the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (Commonwealth Government, 2019), and the Senate Report on the Future of Australia’s Aged-Care workforce (Parliament of Australia, 2017). Within the reports released by the Royal Commission to date, the workforce is described as under pressure with “Intense, task-driven regimes govern the lives of both those receiving care and those delivering it” (Commonwealth Government, 2019, p. 8). Much like the 2010 Productivity Commission Review, the interim report from the Royal Commission notes that the sector “suffers from severe difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff”, and is characterised by high workloads and poor pay and conditions (Commonwealth Government, 2019, p. 8). Education and training are once again described as ‘patchy’ (Commonwealth Government, 2019, p. 8). While the Royal Commission is on-going, reporting thus far indicates that workforce will be a major area of recommended reform: With respect to aged care, the Committee concluded that the workforce needed to be more attuned to, and skilled for, the needs of older people; there needed to be more research into the care of older people and better

integration of services at all levels to achieve person-centred care” (Commonwealth Government, 2019, p. 8).

The reports and inquiries examined in this review position these problems as either the responsibility of government as a system and market steward to address (Harper et al., 2015b; Productivity Commission, 2018b), or a shared responsibility across government and the sector. For example, the senate report in 2017 into the aged-care workforce argued that government needed to work “greater coordination across the social services sectors and should focus on recruitment, retention, education, development and remuneration to ensure the workforce needs of each of the sectors are met” (Senate Report, 2017, p. 72). Similarly, in disability the Productivity Commission recently argued that there should be a new agreement “that affirms governments’ commitment to a shared responsibility for, and an agreed approach to, workforce development (noting that this requires coordination across the health, community services and aged-care sectors)” (Productivity Commission, 2019, p. 11). The positioning of government as ‘whole of system steward’ since 2015, places a strong and renewed emphasis on government-led reform of the sector. To date, we can see this emerging in the form of various programs and taskforces, such as the Aged-Care Taskforce in the Department of Health and Disability Market and Workforce team in the Department of Social Service. What is not clear is how these different initiatives will address the oft repeated recommendation regarding joined-up and cohesive responses to systemic issues or how the funding of these services will be addressed to ensure adequate wages and investment in the workforce.

DISCUSSION

The review demonstrated that the community services sector has been the subject of longstanding inquiry by a host of government bodies concerned with government service provision. The review revealed that while language and terminology is evolving, the fundamental issues remain the same. This is part of a previously noted trend in social service reform, where new language emerges to describe existing challenges or goals but does not offer a fundamentally different way of thinking about or solving the problem (Keast, 2016). This pattern may go some way to answering the question raised in the title of this report: how do we move the conversation forward?

Critically, despite the number of inquiries, recommendations remain remarkably consistent over a ten-year period. This suggests that most recommendations are not actioned, or not actioned in full, and continue to be raised by subsequent inquiries. In some cases, this is not unexpected. Creating service and system integration, or ‘joined-up working’, is a perennial challenge of government and likely to be a staple of reform agendas into the future. In short, joined-up working is so difficult to achieve it is likely to remain an on-going project of government, not a one-off reform (Carey, 2016). This agenda

is also complicated by the pursuit of contestability reforms which are known to undermine collaboration, and thus integration (Green et al., 2018). Other areas, however, are alarming in the similarities of recommendations which appear to remain barriers to effective service provision and development within the sector. Most notably, these revolve around workforce recruitment, training and retention issues and the need for government to create the conditions for well-planned and effective services (e.g. through data collection, consistent funding, stable funding arrangements, population level needs planning). These issues have been raised as areas of risk for the government and sector alike since at least 2010.

In reviewing over a decade of government reforms regarding the third sector, it's important to ask whether they form a cohesive vision of reform. The 2010 Productivity Commission review into the Contributions of the Not-for-profit sector is widely regarded as being the most comprehensive and data driven analysis and sector-plan in Australia's recent history. The report put forward a range of interlocking recommendations to address issues from workforce development, through to funding systems and sustainability. As the Commission itself has noted in subsequent reviews, these remain largely unaddressed. As a result, they emerge frequently in inquiries into system failings (e.g. Royal Commissions, and reviews of systems such as the NDIS). While the 2010 recommendations still stand, there is no blueprint to reform of or in the sector. As a result, we see sporadic efforts at change occurring in different parts of the sector. For example, NSW moved towards a strong outcomes-based funding model ahead of other States and Territories, which has not gained traction nationally. While specific areas have been subject to enormous reform, such as disability and aged care, where there has been full system change. Interestingly, despite introductions such as the NDIS, which fundamentally reorientates the funding and operating conditions of the sector, the same issues around workforce and government planning continue to emerge – leading to specialised reform agendas targeting, for example, the disability workforce or 'markets' that sit separate from any broader sector strategy. This points to a broader issue, in that it is unclear *who owns and is accountable* for efforts to address issues or reform parts of the sector. The recurrent nature of recommendations, reviews, and system failings (demonstrated by the growth in Royal Commissions) suggests that a clear lack of ownership and accountability is a core driver of reform failures.

Across all reports and inquiries, the responsibility for enacting change was continually placed on government. **The community sector is framed as a passive-recipient of change, which should be initiated and guided by government.** This framing is also consistent with the emergence of the language of stewardship. Stewardship, as framed by the Harper Review and Productivity Commission, views government as the primary actor in system change – whether that be through planning, changes to system rules, or resource allocation. This is consistent with the international literature on

stewardship, which focuses almost exclusively on the role of government as a system steward (Gash, 2014; Reeders et al., 2019). Here stewardship is something government does, through action or inaction, for a system.

Emerging research on the NDIS has argued that stewardship is in fact the responsibility of all system actors, and there is a need for governments to invest in the agency of local actors to solve system problems at the local level based on their unique vantage point (Reeders et al., 2019). While this debate is currently framed around the language of stewardship, it is also not new to the sector. As pointed out by the Productivity Commission 2010 landmark review of the sector, there is a long history of discussion and tension regarding whether community services should be left to respond to issues based on their values, practices and understanding of communities, or whether government ‘knows best’ through population planning and some form of assessment of program contributions (e.g. evaluation or impact measurement) (Productivity Commission, 2010a, 2018b). Ultimately, the community sector has come to occupy such a central position in social services because of its unique vantage point (Carey et al., 2009). Despite this debates over whether ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’ solutions are best are long running, with most authors concluding some mixture of the two is required (Carey & Crammond, 2015; Keast, 2016).

While some principles around market stewardship appear to be consistent and clear across inquires (e.g. that it is the responsibility of government, that it includes data collection, analysis, planning, setting of system rules and resource allocation), what is less clear is whether governments are willing or able to enact this stewardship role as envisaged. As previously noted, the recurrent themes concerning recommendations regarding the responsibilities and actions required by government – across many areas of social services – indicates that it is not. This raises questions for the sector regarding their own agency; to wait for government reform, or to find alternative ways of addressing longstanding issues without clear government guidance?

CONCLUSIONS

The report highlights four consistent areas of inquiry and reform, which have not significantly advanced in over a decade. In response, we outline four key areas for moving the agenda forward, to take it beyond an inquiry-recommendation cycle where recommendations are not implemented, or are implemented partially or in siloed ways:

- What are the core challenges we need to solve in contestable/ marketised systems? Research to date indicates that equity (creating or advancing) is at risk, and may result in market failure where citizens have no services that meet their needs. We need to develop methodologies that

can systematically identify market gaps, as well as stewardship actions to address these. These actions cannot be solely the responsibility of government.

- What are the risks of expanding contestability and markets to social service areas without resolving these issues? Current research suggests that markets are risk to citizens, in terms of equity, but also providers regarding financial sustainability.
- How do we implement integration, stewardship and workforce recommendations, so we do not continue to undertake costly enquires or on-going risks in social service systems? At present, separate workforce strategies are being designed and implemented (to limited success) in different parts of the sector (e.g. there is currently a strong focus on the NDIS workforce). This points to a broader issue, which is *who owns and is accountable* for efforts to address issues within, or reform parts of the sector, including workforce issues. Arguably, a cohesive whole of sector workforce approach would be more effective than rolling targeted initiatives which emerge in response to crisis.
- What role can the community sector take up, whereby they are active leaders in implementing change (as opposed to passive recipients of government reform)? The recurrent nature of recommendations, reviews, and system failings (demonstrated by the growth in Royal Commissions
- What will it take to move the conversation forward?

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