Our Town : Catalysing communities to lead local change

Written by the
Our Town Support Team
(TACSI, Fay Fuller Foundation
& Clear Horizon)

We'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of all of the Lands on which Our Town worked in 2020, and pay respect to Elders past, present and future.

The lands of the Far West Coast Aboriginal Peoples, the Gugada/ Kokatha, the Mirning and the Wirangu people spanning from Smokey Bay and Ceduna and out to Koonibba, Yalata and Oak Valley in the far western reaches of South Australia.

The lands of the Barngarla and Nawu people, including Cummins on the Lower Eyre Peninsula.

The lands of the Barngarla people on the Northern Eyre Peninsula in Kimba, marking halfway between the east and west coasts of the continent.

The lands of the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Plains and the Peramangk people of the Adelaide Hills, where TACSI and Fay Fuller are based.

The lands of the Ngawait, Peramangk, Ngarrindjeri, Nganguruku people, Erawirung people, Ngaralte people, Ngarkat people, Ngaiawang people and Ngintait people of the River Murray and Mallee Region, spanning the Riverland through the Murraylands to the eastern slopes of the Mount Lofty Ranges, including the Mid Murray Region and Berri.

The lands of the Aboriginal Peoples of the spiritually significant Kangaroo Island (Karta) off the coast from Cape Jervis.

The lands of the Kulin nation, where Clear Horizon are based, in Melbourne.

We acknowledge their ongoing custodianship of the lands and waters and respect their living cultures.

Our Town is committed to walking together, with compassion, to learn from and build on 70,000 years of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience and wisdom.

We are committed to collaboration that furthers self-determination and better futures for all.

Ceduna/Far West
*Gugada/Kokatha,
the Mirning and the
Wirangu*

Kimba
Barngarla

Melbourne
Kulin nation

Cummins
*Nawu and
Barngarla*

**Adelaide
Support Team**
Kaurna

Berri
*Ngaiawang,
Ngawait,
Nganguruku,
Erawirung,
Ngintait,
Ngaralte, and
Ngarka*

Mid Murray
*Peramangk,
Nganguruku,
Ngarrindjeri,
Ngarkat,
Ngaiawang*

Kangaroo Island
Karta

WELCOME TO OUR TOWN

This paper was developed by the partners in the Our Town Support Team:

The Fay Fuller Foundation established the Our Town concept. They're funding this initiative because their mission is to see South Australian communities work together to build inclusive and equitable healthy futures.

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) is building the capabilities of towns to lead local social innovation processes. Their mission is to demonstrate the potential of community-led mental health responses, and the ability of communities to lead their own regeneration.

Clear Horizon is the initiative's evaluation partner. Their role is to enhance the learning of the initiative at every step and ultimately measure the impact of the initiative. Their mission is to support change makers to evaluate and learn their way to creating positive impact for people, place and planet.

The Town Teams currently participating in Our Town are **Berri, Ceduna/Far West, Cummins, Kangaroo Island, Kimba** and **Mid Murray.**

While we refer to them as Town Teams throughout this report, one 'Town' is Australia's third largest island (Kangaroo Island) and another is a region that includes 17 townships (Mid Murray).

What is Our Town?

Our Town is an 11-year, $15 million mental health initiative funded by the Fay Fuller Foundation implemented in partnership with The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) and Clear Horizon.

Shaped with regional communities for regional communities, Our Town aims to build the capabilities of regional towns in South Australia to develop community-based responses to mental health and wellbeing with an eye to scaling what works, and influencing regional policy.

The initiative gives towns and regions the power and opportunity to define what's best for their community, so that they can reclaim their mental wellbeing.

Why this report?

This report is an honest reflection of the Support Teams' (Fay Fuller, TACSI, and Clear Horizon) experience of Our Town in 2020: What the Town Teams achieved, what worked and what didn't and, most importantly, what we learned and what we would do differently next time.

We wrote this reflection from the perspective of the Support Team, gathering and expanding on our biggest learnings when it comes to starting community-led work well, and then asking the community to provide their own reflections and honest feedback.

This process itself was a learning opportunity, as we discovered that what seemed profound to us was just business as usual in some Towns, while in other instances the Towns' own learnings from 2020 were vastly different from our own.

We've included this feedback and Town reflections throughout this report to provide additional context.

While this report focuses on Support Team learnings, future pieces will centre the voice and experience of the community as they take the reins on leading change in their own towns.

This reflection is intended to inform our own future practice, and to help anyone planning or leading place-based change, especially in the early years of an initiative.

To support what is shared in this piece, we've created a number of tools and resources so that you can build on from the principles, practices and learnings, which we now believe are critical to starting community-led change well.

Download these toolkits here

"The time has come for us to move beyond professional services alone. While they're critical, we need to stretch our imaginations and unlock new strategies that can meet the scale of the challenges we face."

Carolyn Curtis, TACSI

"It's not like adding salt and pepper from the top, it's going to be a seed that grows from our island."

Kate Brooksby, Our Town Kangaroo Island

"We learned that the initiative did its best work when we put community at the heart."

Niall Fay, Fay Fuller Foundation

WHY

STORY

LEARNING SUPPORT

Our Town Plan

Why Our Town?

Our Town arose from the findings of the Health Needs and Priorities in South Australia report, commissioned by the Fay Fuller Foundation.[1][2]

This research showed:

- A disconnect between the intentions of health policy in South Australia and the experiences of those navigating the health system
- That mental health challenges were more prevalent in rural and remote areas
- That people within those communities were less likely than their metropolitan counterparts to seek help.

The evidence continues to reinforce that mental health and wellbeing is declining in Australia, and is acutely felt in our regional areas.

The systemic roles of Our Town

Demonstrating community's role in responding to mental health and wellbeing
Our Town is demonstrating the role that community plays in shaping mental health and wellbeing, and the roles that communities can play outside of formal service delivery to increase mental wellbeing. Our Town communities are demonstrating the shifts that are possible when you work at the level of local cultures, mindsets and economies.

Demonstrating rural and regional communities potential to lead local change
Policy, funding and investment decisions that impact regional communities are predominantly determined from the urban centres of Australia. Regional communities regularly experience the unintended consequences of decisions made about them or for them. Our Town demonstrates the potential for rural and regional communities to plan for the long term, lead local change, and manage resources based on a holistic view of their local challenges and aspirations.

Demonstrating an alternative approach to community-led change
Our Town demonstrates an alternative way of starting community-led initiatives; one that is anchored in principles, intentionally distributes and grows power in communities, builds social innovation capabilities, actively includes and leverages the full diversity of community and community infrastructure, and ultimately centres lived experience.

2019	NOV–DEC 2019	DEC 2019	JAN–MAR 2020

Initiation

Research commissioned by the Fay Fuller Foundation shows that mental health is a growing concern. Communities want to see a focus on wellness over illness, and rural and remote communities are poorly served by existing health services.

Twenty-nine potential Town Teams submit an expression of interest to be involved in Our Town.

Shortlist and visits

Nine towns from the initial EOIs received are shortlisted.

Support team representatives visit the Towns for one day workshops.

Six selected for capability year

The Grants Advisory Committee (GAC) selects six towns to enter the funded capability building phase.

In response to the 2020 bushfires, the Fay Fuller Foundation guarantees an additional fully-funded position to Kangaroo Island for the 10-years of the initiative, relieving the pressure for them to participate in the capability development phase on the same timeline as other towns.

Kick off

Six of the nine shortlisted towns (Kangaroo Island, Ceduna/Far West, Berri, Cummins, Kimba and Mid Murray) receive $45k unrestricted funding to support a year of work.

They start building capability in team forming, centring lived experience, community engagement, social innovation and mental health and wellbeing.
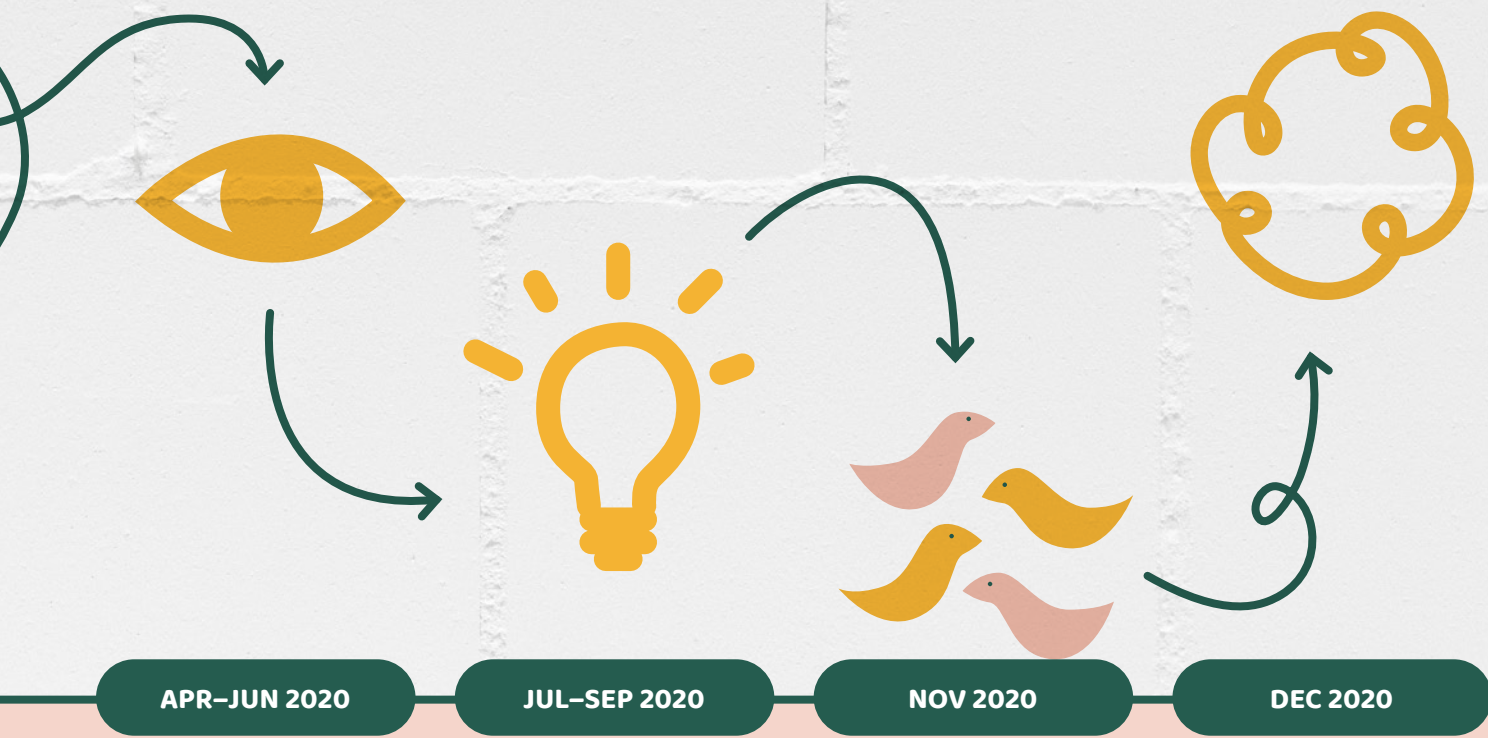
| APR–JUN 2020 | JUL–SEP 2020 | NOV 2020 | DEC 2020 |

Discovery

Town Teams start a discovery process that involves listening to lived experience in their towns, engaging with other people with insights into mental health, engaging with data (through a data pack), and engaging with evidence (through a literature review).

From this, they develop insights into what affects mental wellbeing in their town, and refine their insights by testing them with the broader community.

Options and ideas

Town Teams develop ideas and options for action based on their insights, and test these ideas locally through participatory forums, revising them based on what they learnt.

Planning

Town Teams shape a plan based on their insights and options, informed by best practice and most importantly their community, and submit to the advisory committee for funding.

All plans are significantly different from what they started the year with.

Decisions

Based on the GAC's decision, Town Teams in Kimba, Cummins and Ceduna/Far West recieve 10 years' funding (300k annually per town plus additional capability building).

Fay Fuller also commits seed funding (50k) to Mid Murray and Berri to progress their plan, while working with them to secure additional funding.
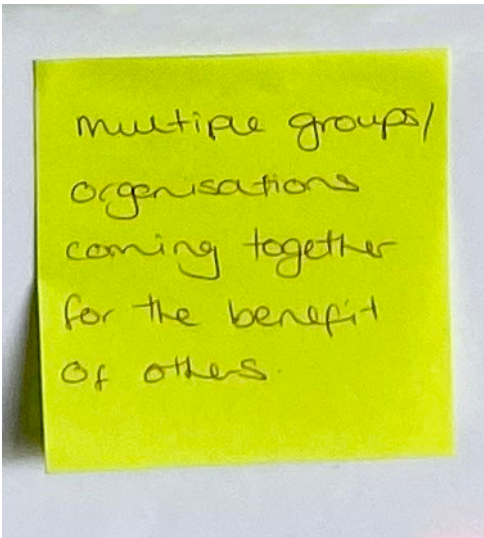
"We used strategic funds this year that were unspent last year to really get some things into action, without this we couldn't have done what we've done this year. That meant a lot to us."

— **Our Town Berri**

Berri

Nestled on the Murray River in the Riverland region on the lands of the Ngaiawang, Ngawait, Nganguruku, Erawirung, Ngintait, Ngaralte, and Ngarkat peoples, Berri is a regional hub for community services and programs. The area is home to 10,386 people.

Their Town Team was initially exploring a school as a community hub with a focus on young people. In 2020, they developed their thinking to see how the school could be part of a broader set of community informed solutions. Our Town Berri's goal is to connect their community, bring generations together, elevate the voices of young people, and support those both visible and hard to reach.

What they achieved in 2020

- Broadened the membership of their team to include people across the community
- Broadened their connections with Aborignal community members
- Developed how they work together
- Strengthened their understanding of community based approaches to wellbeing
- Influenced change in local government

Their funding

$50k seed funding for 2021 from Fay Fuller Foundation, while additional funding support from State Government and other funders is being sought.

Plans for 2021 and beyond

- Build community as a network of connected groups and organisations
- Develop a collective community history of Berri to strengthen identity and connection
- Launch a volunteer initiative to reconnect generations and mentor young people
- Create an Aboriginal-led response focused on tackling the barrier of transport for young people in gaining employment
- Reconnect generations, mentor young people and build relationships

Watch this Team in action

Ceduna/Far West

Located on the west coast of Eyre Peninsula on the lands of the Gugada/Kokatha, the Mirning and the Wirangu peoples, Ceduna/Far West is a diverse community of just over 4,000 people.

Their Town Team started as a network of 40 service providers with 75 programs, and then shifted from service-led to community-led leadership. They want to create better community-based, preventative mental health support services that are locally grown.

What they achieved in 2020

- Focused on the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people
- Engaged businesses to provide better mental health responses to employees
- Built strong connections with the local government
- Pushed themselves to create ideas not based on service and government responses

Plans for 2021 and beyond

- Activate community connections and networks
- Grow community voice and action through yarning and stories
- Encourage community members to voice thoughts on local matters
- Address the separation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members
- Run a community fund to spark community ideas and action

Their funding

10 years' funding and capability building ($300k annually) provided by the Fay Fuller Foundation

Watch this Team in action

What is Good Mental Heath?

OUR

CEDUNA/ FAR WEST

COMMUNITY

WELLBING
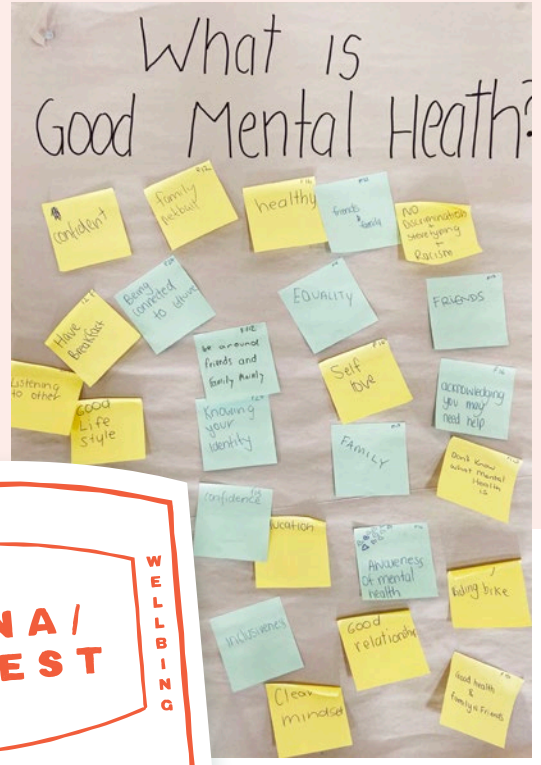
TOWN

"This funding gives us the opportunity to make change at our own pace."

Sandra — Our Town Ceduna/Far West

WORKING OUT WHAT PEOPLE WANT

HOW TO COORDINATE THE GLIMPSES OF INNOVATION TO REALLY MEET NEEDS

IDENTIFY ACTIVITIES WHERE MH FIRST AID WOULD HELP

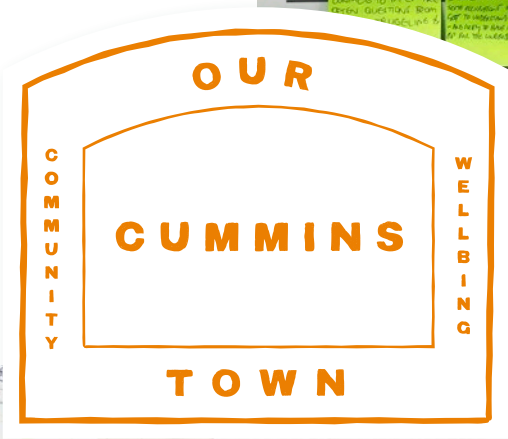LEARN HOW TO MEET OUR COMM- UNITIES TRANSPORT NEEDS
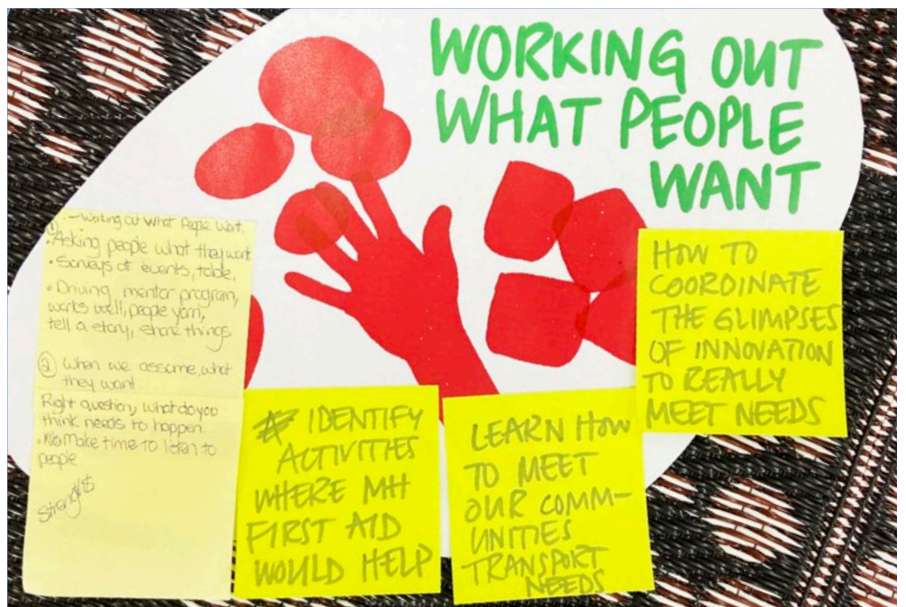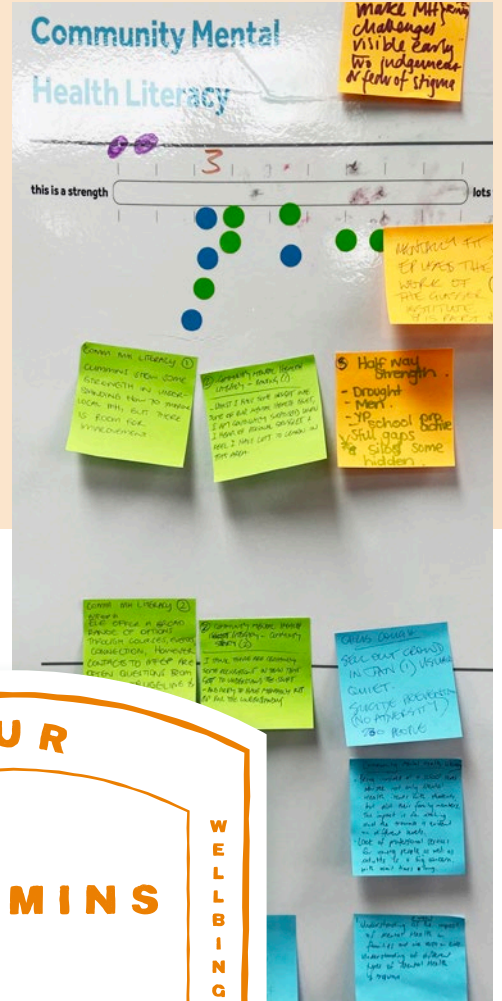
"*This funding means that everyone's voices can be heard.*"

Mick Traeger — Our Town Cummins

Cummins

Located just 45 minutes from Port Lincoln is the 'can-do' town of Cummins, on the lands of the Nawu and Nawu and Barngarla people, and home to around 959 people.

Their Town Team is made up of passionate health and wellbeing advocates, bound together to honour the legacy of a beloved passed community member and those affected by mental health challenges themselves.

Our Town Cummins' focus is preventing mental health issues, and helping people strive for mental fitness.

What they achieved in 2020

- Engaged with the diversity of their community
- Prompted the local supermarket and pub to stock alcohol-free drinks
- Organised 'unofficial mentors' with lived experience to provide peer support
- Developed their vision through a rich and creative conversation with the community
- Continually challenged themselves to take a systemic view

Plans for 2021 and beyond

- Start a peer mentoring and 'just listening' support model
- Develop an app-based register of people with lived experience trained in emotional CPR
- Develop a network of community connectors to reach people who are disengaged
- Share people's stories of living with mental health through a 'human library'

Their funding

10 years' funding and capability building ($300k annually) provided by the Fay Fuller Foundation.

Watch this Team in action

Kangaroo Island

Kangaroo Island (KI) is Australia's third-largest island, home to 5,021 people and a spiritually significant place to many Aboriginal peoples.

Their Town Team is made up of services and community members from across the island. They're hoping that Our Town can support the mental health of an island community already experiencing vulnerability, and provide much-needed support as they work to rebuild in the aftermath of the 19/20 bushfires.

What they achieved in 2020
The team's participation in the initiative was delayed until they were ready. In early 2021, they started the discovery process that the other towns started in January 2020.

Their funding
Following the 2019/20 bushfires, the Fay Fuller Foundation awarded Kangaroo Island 10 years' funding, knowing that healing community trauma from such a disaster takes time.

Plans for 2021 and beyond
Kangaroo Island is hoping to provide much-needed support as the community works to rebuild in the aftermath of the bushfire crisis.

Watch this Team in action

COMMUNITY
HAVE SHOWN
THEY ARE
INTERESTED to
LEARN MORE

MENTAL HEALTH
RAISED AS ONE
of THE MAJOR
CONCERNS OF THE
community THROUGH
EALTH SERVICE 10
EAR PLANNING
com. CONSULT
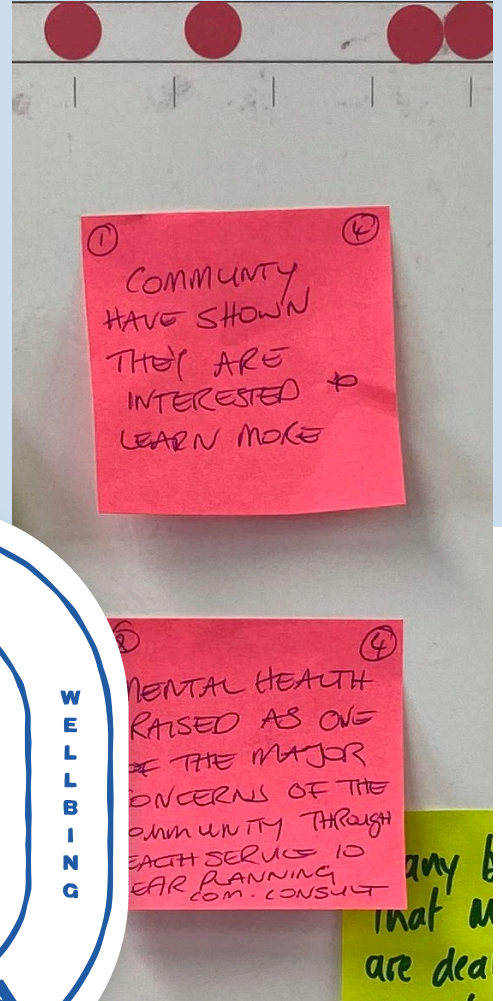
"I'm so excited that this change will be community driven."

Kate — Our Town Kangaroo Island

OUR
KANGAROO
ISLAND
TOWN
COMMUNITY
WELLBEING

"*Our Town is about listening to your community.*"
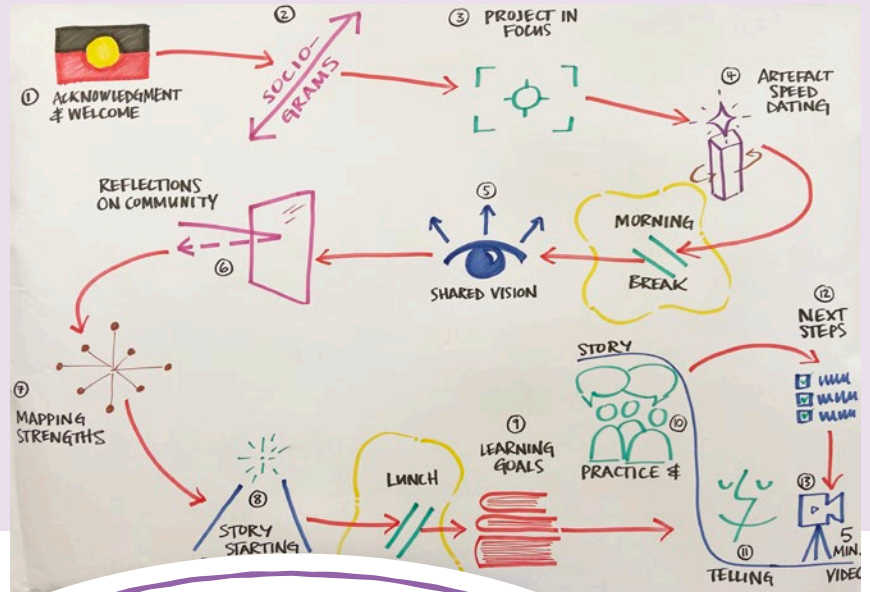
Erin Lister — Our Town Kimba

OUR

KIMBA

COMMUNITY

WELLBING

TOWN

Strength

Leadership
① I believe we have some fantastic skills & leaders within our community.
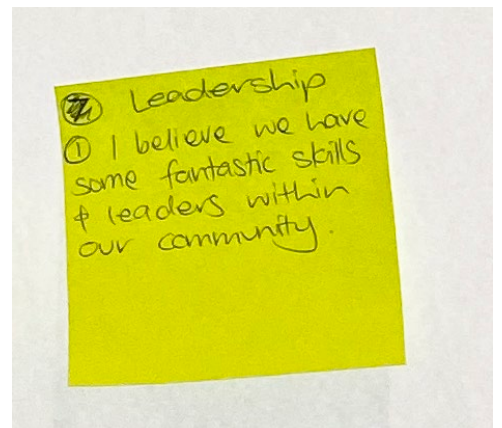
Kimba

Located at the top of the Eyre Peninsula on the lands of the Barngarla people, the Kimba area is home to 1,211 people.

Their Town Team was initially formed by a pre-existing voluntary health and wellbeing group, all with an interest in mental health and wellbeing and some with mental health lived experience. Their goal is to proactively focus on preventing mental health issues in their community.

What they achieved in 2020

- Modelled mentally healthy working practices
- Engaged with the diversity of their community
- Committed to reconciliation with the Barngarla people
- Created an open-door office on the high street
- Began to rebuild relationships between community members who were for and against the proposed nuclear waste facility, a key source of distress in the community

Plans for 2021 and beyond

- Build the collective capacity of the community to listen before making decisions
- Open conversations with the Barngarla people to pave a pathway for local reconciliation
- Establish local communications to elevate the voice of groups experiencing vulnerabilities in the community
- Launch a campaign to help community members be seen in more dimensions than the label they're given (for eg, "a farmer")

Their funding

10 years' funding and capability building ($300k annually) provided by the Fay Fuller Foundation

Watch this Team in action

Mid Murray

Located on the lands of the Peramangk, Nganguruku, Ngarrindjeri, Ngarkat, Ngaiawang peoples, the Mid Murray is home to 8,642 people across 17 individual townships.

Their Town Team was originally anchored around the local council. In 2020, they shifted from a predominantly council led team, diversifying to include members from across the community, many with experience of living with mental illness and poor mental wellbeing. Our Town Mid Murray are hoping to build the mechanisms to achieve a regional response to positive mental health and wellbeing, starting in the township of Swan Reach and expanding to surrounding communities.

What they achieved in 2020
- Built a network of 'community champions' to engage with people who are hard to reach
- Established a new way to group townships within the region
- Shifted from 'mental illness' towards the strength-based language of 'wellbeing and resilience'
- Consulted widely with people in isolated communities

Their funding
$50k seed funding for 2021 from Fay Fuller, while additional funding support from State Government and other funders is being sought.

Plans for 2021 and beyond
- Focus on demonstrating what's possible in the township of Swan Reach
- Engage community members in place making and connection building activities
- Provide capability building to improve community mental health responses
- Expand a learning partnership with Berri who are exploring similar ideas

Watch this Team in action

"*Communities are the experts in what's going on in their lives and we need to listen to that.*"

Amie — Our Town Mid Murray

OUR TOWN

COMMUNITY

MID MURRAY

WELLBEING

TOWN

What we learned about starting community-led initiatives well

2020 was a learning journey for the Our Town Support Team as much as it was for the Town Teams.

We reflected on what worked, what didn't, and what we'd do differently next time – and identified six learnings that we believe are critical to catalysing communities to lead local change:

Learning 1:
Anchor around a set of principles

Learning 2:
Distribute and grow power

Learning 3:
Innovate to learn together

Learning 4:
Take a systemic perspective

Learning 5:
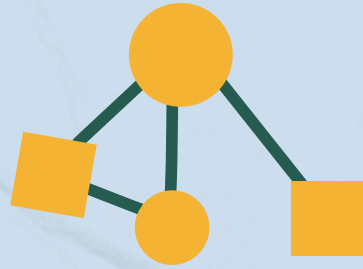Actively include people

Learning 6:
Leave good behind

LEARNING 1
Anchor around a set of principles

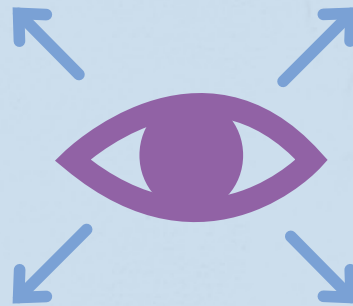**LEARNING 2**
Distribute and grow power
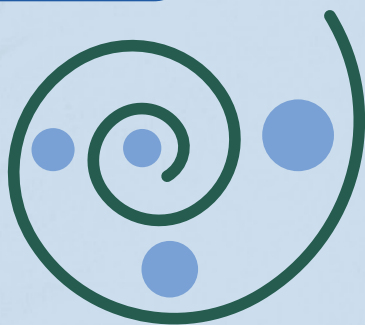
LEARNING 3
Innovate to learn together

LEARNING 4
Take a systemic perspective

LEARNING 5
Actively include people

LEARNING 6
Leave good behind

Anchor around a set of principles

What we learned about using principles as anchor points for working in complexity

Our Town worked across six different towns, with six different sets of conditions influencing mental wellbeing, with three very different Support Team partners, working together for the first time. We needed something to anchor our work, and that something turned out to be the Our Town principles[3]:

The eight Our Town principles in 2020:

1. Model mentally healthy practice
2. Community-led and owned
3. Learn our way through change
4. Strength-based and trauma aware
5. Regenerative
6. Informed by data, evidence and community voice
7. Multi-sector collaboration
8. Systemic perspective and practice

Why these principles?

- Helped shape a positive error and learning culture
- Recognised the value of partnership and bringing people along on the journey
- Provided guidance on the perspective of the work
- Steered us away from dominant cultural norms of how things are "done"
- They don't prioritise timelines and targets, ask us to name outcomes in advance or ask us to follow the orders of the funder or highest ranking professional
- Put community expertise and lived experience in the drivers seat
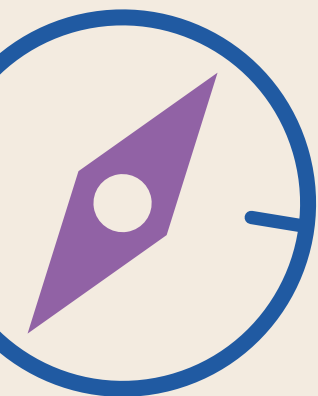
What the principles gave us

- A process for informal reflection between team members
- A method to resolve conflicts. We all have different perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds, and these principles gave us a common reference point from which we could make objections to actions that weren't aligned
- A structure for ongoing developmental evaluation; a form of evaluation that supported our learning in the moment, while helping the Support Team to 'practice what we preached' by comparing our practice to the Our Town principles[4].

Reframing the principles

At the start of 2021, after a year of practicing the principles, we reflected on and refined them with the Town Teams. Town Teams were clear that we needed to lose the jargon, so 'See the system', became 'See the big picture', and some of the principles were merged to make them easier to use. The eight principles were reduced to four:

- Community led and owned
- Model mentally healthy practice
- Learning our way through change
- Seeing and acting on the big picture

"Whenever there was a conflict we returned to the principles."

Kerry Jones — Support Team, TACSI

"We used the principles as an anchor and a reflection tool, they gave us confidence to be a bit braver in our thinking."

Julie — Our Town Berri

Distribute and grow power

What we learnt about making transitions intentional

At the outset, Our Town was catalysed by the Support Team before transitioning to being community-led. This change took a series of intentional transitions that collectively created the conditions for communities to lead their own change.

Key transitions in 2020 included:

- The shift from the funder solely shaping the initiative to the Support Team collectively shaping the initiative
- The strengthening of Town Teams in their organisation and capability
- The distribution of long term funds with few requirements
- And, ultimately, from the Support Team setting the agenda of the initiative to the towns setting the agenda[5].

Power is the ability to influence an outcome

Our cultural and organisational norms mean it's almost natural to set up place-based initiatives in a way that gives significant power to the funder, which can leave communities delivering on what funders want rather than what communities need.[6]

What's more, this kind of structure is poor at responding to complexity; it takes decision making away from where the action happens: on the ground in communities.

For Our Town, the Support Team were determined to set up a dynamic that put towns on a track to self-determination, and positioned Town Teams and the Support Team as allies in creating changes across systems of mental wellbeing; aligned to a common aim, but each playing a different role.

Building relationships, closing the gap

Ask anyone on the Support Team what's different about Our Town and they'll tell you about the partnership between the Fay Fuller Foundation, TACSI and Clear Horizon, and the relationship between the coaches on the Support Team and the Town Teams they coach.

Building trust between the Support Team and Town Teams was and continues to be critical. It took the Team spending time in the towns, meeting people face-to-face (lockdowns permitting), listening to towns and adjusting the initiative to meet Towns' needs and priorities.

And it all took building personal relationships between Support Team members and people in the Town Teams – showing up as whole people, sharing stories from our whole lives, not just our work lives.

"When we really thought about what it would take to have an authentic relationship with people, handing the decision-making over seemed like the best way." [7]

Stacey Thomas, Fay Fuller Foundation

"Community deserves and needs funders to step up, to put into place what it knows is best practice by putting community at the heart of everything it does."

Niall Fay, Fay Fuller Foundation

"It definitely goes to the heart of what it is all about - giving the communities the power because we know best about our community."

Our Town Kimba

"Funding partners in the past told us what we need to fit into to be successful. This bottom up approach means that we can actually listen to what the community is telling us they need and what they want."

Emma Gale, Our Town Cummins

"Something we learned from working with the communities is how important it is to spend time forming a team and building deep, trust-based relationships. In hindsight I actually wish that we had invested even more time forming as a support team, it's just that valuable."

Niall Fay, Fay Fuller Foundation

Moving between front and backstage

Supporting effective transitions in leadership often meant the Support Team cycled between frontstage and backstage in a three part movement:

Working frontstage to introduce new capabilities and model new practices

Working shoulder to shoulder to build towns' confidence to use new practices

Working backstage to let towns lead their own work, resisting temptation and resisting requests for direct help when communities already had the capability themselves

It wasn't always easy for the Support Team to stay backstage. We learnt to say less in network meetings to give towns more time to talk, and the importance of keeping pace with towns and working at the pace of community.

Understanding and capability built in towns in 2020

The initiative	Social innovation	Organising community-led work	Mental health and wellbeing
• The aims of the initiative • The principles of the initiative • The process for the initiative	• Mindsets for innovation • Planning research activities • Reflective practice and revisiting assumptions • Learning from lived experience • Conversations around mental health • Learning from diverse communities • Drawing on diverse data sources (and developing your own data) • Crafting compelling insights • Developing and prioritising ideas	• Putting your own mental health first • Making decisions together • Building and nurturing teams • Increasing membership diversity • Sustainable models for operations and governance	• Emotional CPR (eCPR) • Community-led mental health responses • Frameworks for mental health and mental wellbeing • Local data on mental health and wellbeing

Community-led at an initiative level

The ambition for Our Town was to put community intelligence in the driving seat at both the local level, and at the level of the initiative itself. At the initiative level we started with a Grants Advisory Committee (GAC) of four members representing the funder, TACSI, and two government departments.

Through our reflective practice, we recognised the need to shift the power balance and responded by growing the GAC through the recruitment of community members and lived-experience representation.[8][9]

Innovate to learn together

What we learnt about social innovation as an approach for community learning and alignment

DISCOVERY

The Our Town social innovation process

Learning about community wellbeing

- Learning from the data pack
- Learning from the literature review
- Learning from initial conversations

Listening to really interesting people to fill the gaps

- Interviews with people who have been directly impacted
- Interviews with stakeholders e.g. mental health practitioners, academics, innovators and other sources of wisdom
- Capturing what is significant

Identifying big opportunities for action

Developing ideas

Forming a plan from everything you've learnt

- What did we learn from whom?
- What was important?
- What patterns emerged?
- What insights emerged?
- What opportunities can we see now because of what we've learnt?
- What opportunities can we test with the community?
- How can we improve them based on what we learnt?
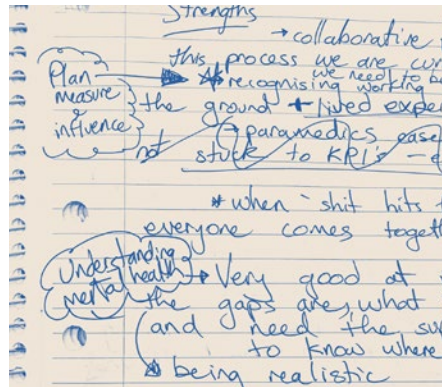
- Brainstorm lots of ideas in response to opportunities
- Prioritise ideas with the greatest potential
- Work to build more detail into the prioritised ideas
- Test ideas with the community
- Improve them based on what was learnt

- Build a plan around insights, opportunities and ideas
- Improve them based on what was learnt

This learning happened collectively

We know this early stage social innovation process worked well for the Town Teams because it meant:

- Towns could quickly articulate, test and revise assumptions
- Towns could bring together different sources of knowledge (data, research evidence, leading edge practice, and lived experience) to inform opportunities and ideas
- Towns could build ownership around local problems and opportunities, and discover them together
- Towns could rapidly move through very different mindsets – setting intent, discovery and invention
- Towns had permission to not know the answer.

Learning to learn

An additional benefit of this learning is that these social innovation competencies could support the Towns to address a range of local issues, not just mental health. They have 'learnt to learn'; to unpack local issues and collectively develop plans to address them, working with the full diversity of the community.

Supercharging innovation

The Support Team has also been on an innovation journey. We've tested our own assumptions about the nature and pace of support that Towns need, and continually revised our plans.

Clear Horizon (Our Town evaluation partners) facilitated regular debriefs so all partners could reflect on how we were adhering to the initiative principles, and what we were learning.

Clear Horizon were one step removed from the work with Towns, which meant they could play a real time 'critical friend' role by sitting in on the monthly meetings, raising curious questions, and speaking up if they saw problematic patterns[10].

The future of Our Town

Our Town funding requires that Towns engage in reflective learning, share practice with other towns, and that the funds are allocated flexibly, and are focused on visions, outcomes and learning.

"We do continue to see suicide attempts and suicide rates in our community, and nothing seemed to be touching the sides. Our Town allowed us to actually dig a little bit deeper and find the real source of what the problems were in the community."

Emma, Our Town Cummins

"The community wanted barriers to come down. It was heartwarming how people spoke about it. Their articulation of the real condition of Ceduna was beautiful."

Sandy, Our Town Ceduna/Far West

"The towns have learned to learn, and with that they can tackle anything."

**Dr Jess Dart,** Clear Horizon

Have a systemic perspective

What we learnt about the value of seeing the big picture, and taking a long view

Seeing and acting on the big picture

The social innovation discovery processes meant Town Teams could deeply engage with and understand the unique dynamics that shaped mental health in their town.

This new systemic insight led the Town Teams to re-frame focus away from programs and services that intervene at the point of crisis or distress, to focus instead on culture, identity, connection and relationships: the deep underpinnings of systems of mental wellbeing, and spaces where communities are uniquely placed to contribute to better outcomes.

The Town Teams' approach is aligned with research into the social determinants of mental health; it recognises that poor mental health is in many cases a symptom of deeper issues in contemporary societies, rather than a discrete issue. Instead of focusing their efforts on intervention at the point of crisis or distress, communities are looking at strengths based prevention. Their approach also recognises the pragmatic challenge of providing sufficient services in regional settings.
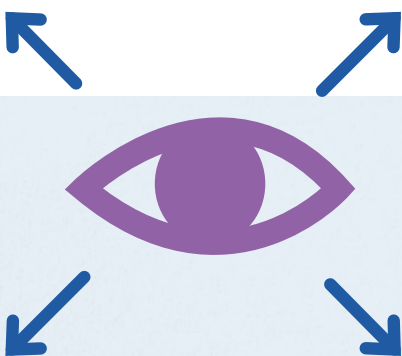
"I think the insights that came out really did reach the heart and soul of where mental health is coming from, and has changed the way that we look at the changes we can make in the future."

Meagan Lienert, Our Town Kimba

Long-term funding is more than money

The 10-year funding is a defining feature of Our Town, and we've learnt through this process that long term funding equates to so much more than long term financing. Long term funding demonstrates a commitment that leads to an enhanced level of engagement – it gives towns the breathing space to try different things, and it gives the initiative time to build relationships with key players and influence broader change.

Building relationships across the system

A focus for the Our Town initiative is shifting the broader conditions in the system: the mental models, policy settings and resource flows to enable community led change. One way we did this was by fostering close relationships with South Australian government departments and inviting them to see firsthand what can be achieved by providing flexible funding and working in partnership with the community.

This led to the creation of the Our Town Targeted Grants Program, which supported three communities from the initial shortlist who did not progress to the capability phase.

These grants fostered community-based responses through a flexible process that built on existing strengths and prioritised the needs of the community.

We also built connections and fostered learning exchanges between community members and formal systems actors and came alongside the community as allies in their interactions with services, councils, and government.

*"10 years of funding is more than just ten years of money."*

Kerry Jones, TACSI

Actively include people

What we learned about including the full diversity of community in change processes

Government and philanthropic funding rounds, most community gatherings, and community organisations often fail to invite in many of the people most affected by social issues; the very people who have the greatest interest in changing the status quo.

Common forms of exclusion in funding and community work:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders may not choose to participate because they don't see themselves represented in the group or leadership of an organisation, or don't see the process as culturally safe
- LGBTIQA+ identifying people may not feel safe to be themselves (this was a particular issue the Town Teams uncovered)
- The accessibility needs of people living with disabilities may not be catered for

- Children and young people have the greatest interest in long-term change, but funding rounds and community groups are mostly adult-only spaces
- CALD groups may struggle with language or stay away to avoid experiencing racism
- People with opposing views from the leadership of funding rounds and community groups may be purposefully excluded
- People with lower levels of literacy and education may struggle to complete lengthy application processes or engage with reading materials
- Geographical distance can exclude many
- Many people will experience multiple forms of exclusion at once.
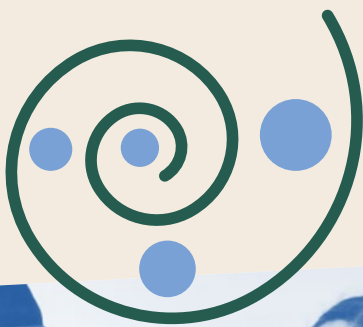
If we want community members to lead change in a way that's truly representative of the diversity of the community, then initiatives like Our Town need to take active steps to develop a more inclusive process at an initiative and community level.

Not doing so risks creating 'part-of-the-community-led' initiatives, which suffer by missing out on the insights, experiences, perspectives and energy of the very people who have the most to contribute to change that delivers for the whole of the community.

"I feel that in the next five years, [one of] the things that we could do as a team is start to bring different people together that normally aren't sharing the same spaces."

Sandy Tayor, Our Town Ceduna/Far West

"This is the first place-based initiative I've evaluated that hasn't given dominance to the written word. That has meant that people with lower levels of literacy have been able to fully participate. We don't talk a lot about inclusion across class boundaries in Australia, and we should talk about it more"

Dr Jess Dart, Clear Horizon

Modelling inclusion

When Town Team members turned up for their town visit workshop and first face-to-face engagement with the Support Team, they were each given a name badge and asked what pronouns they used (for example, he/him, she/her, they/them).

Later, we opened the session with an acknowledgment of the custodians of the land on which we were meeting, the local Aboriginal people. These simple, symbolic and practical acts, led by the Support Team, set a tone for a more inclusive kind of engagement. We didn't want to tell towns to be inclusive, we wanted to show them how they could be, and acknowledge that we were learning too.

Creating inclusive community teams

Organisations doing place-based work are often under the impression that community groups are, by nature, representative of the diversity of community perspective and experience. What we know is that this is often not the case.

This causes problems by:

1. Having groups that represent only certain interests within a community acting without understanding the realities of those who are most marginalised.

2. The 'usual suspects' sitting in leadership positions across community groups across multiple community groups, becoming overburdened in the process

Our Town worked to intentionally expand the diversity of the Town Teams, actively engaging community members with lived experience and from underrepresented groups. This also allowed Town Teams to develop more resilient governance models, because they had a greater pool of community members to draw on. Towns are at different points of this journey and this is recognised as an ongoing process for all of the communities as they seek to avoid the pitfall of defaulting to the work falling to a few key volunteer leaders.

"Our Town brought two sides of the town together, and they recognised they had more in common than they thought. In fact, they discovered they wanted the same things for their community."

Kerry Jones , TACSI

Learning from Aboriginal community practices

During our time in Ceduna/Far West – on the traditional lands of the Far West Coast Aboriginal Peoples, the Gugada/Kokatha, the Mirning and the Wirangu people – the Support Team learned in more detail about practices of yarning.

We learned how yarning circles can consist of an inner and outer ring. When someone from the inner circle steps out, a specific person from the outer circle will step in. When they return, they're updated on what they've missed and can step back into the inner circle.

Inspired by this practice, a number of towns are now trialing a 'step-in, step-out' model of community governance. People will step-out of the inner circle of governance at times, because of personal or family circumstances, and when this happens, the people in the outer circle will step in and take their place. We think it will prove to be a more resilient way to organise community teams than alternatives.

"Sometimes people took time to warm up but had good exchanges and learned valuable things in every conversation."

Our Town Cummins

"I think we have a lot to learn from Aboriginal practices about creating inclusive, sustainable and systemic community-led ways of working. We've just touched the surface."

Dr Jess Dart, Clear Horizon

Leave good behind

What we learned about running a mentally healthy process that added value at every stage

Leaving good behind in a selection process

Our Town in 2020 was a selection process, designed to select the Town Teams that best demonstrated alignment to the Our Town principles and capacity to contribute to the long term outcomes[12].

We spent a year working with the Towns to develop capabilities in social innovation with recognition that not everyone that participated in the capability phase would be able to receive ongoing funding. Selection processes usually yield more losers than winners; they're not an automatic recipe for 'leaving only good behind' but there is an alternative way to think about them.

We asked ourselves the question: "How can we design this process so that every town that participates is left better placed to address local mental health outcomes?"

We only wanted to advantage towns through their participation[13]. Rather than a process that 'knocked out' Town Teams, we wanted a process that would 'level-up' all teams.

There are three ways we left good behind:

1. By building capabilities, knowledge, connections and starting conversations in Town Teams that would help them move towards their goals

2. By supporting Towns in developing an informed plan for community based mental wellbeing that posed a de-risked investment opportunity for other funders

3. By creating an ongoing learning network for all towns

Despite our best intentions, this was still a competitive selection process that saw two communities miss out on the full funding, a consequence of which was the Town Teams wearing that weight of responsibility with their communities.

Mentally healthy practice

Determined to live the ambition of the initiative, the Support Team set 'mentally healthy' as one of six guiding principles. We regularly checked in on each other and the towns, which led to some changes, but not enough, and some of those changes unexpectedly made things worse.

Finding the right pace for the work was an ongoing challenge. We attempted to set what we thought was a reasonable pace – but quickly learned that 'pace' is highly contextual and that the initiative had to take into account the different speeds at which communities moved or risk creating unhealthy mental pressure, and failing in our efforts to leave good behind.

One of the original plans to leave good behind was to support towns to create a "without additional resources" plan as a backup to their fully funded plan. Unrealistic pacing of capability development and community engagement activities during the year lead to the decision to drop the development of this plan.

Although this relieved pressure and mental load during the process it also led to some towns not having a plan to fall back on when they didn't receive 10 years of funding, causing a sense of grief. This was a decision the Support Team made with towns but failed to explore all of the potential consequences.

At times, we also forget to model mentally healthy practice within the Support Team, and our regular debriefing sessions for support team members fell off, in part because we put those we were supporting ahead of ourselves – a common social changemakers oversight[14]. The result for our team members was exhaustion and mental health leave.

> "You can't give what you don't have, but we didn't always take care of the Support Team's mental health - we prioritised the towns."

Euan Black, TACSI

> "It was a massive amount of work for something you didn't know the outcome of. Having said that, would we be here now if we hadn't done that? It did help us build capacity."

Julie, Our Town Berri
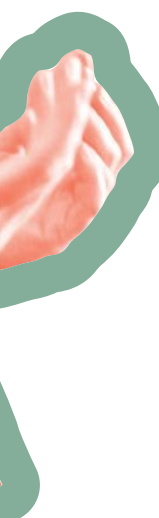
A new approach to starting community-led work well

The partners in the Support Team have been involved in over 20 place-based and/or community-led initiatives working with over 50 towns in Australia over the last five years – as evaluators, as capability builders, as leaders and as contributors.

What we often see in place-based initiatives is how important the early years can be, and how the routines, ways of working, cultures, and power dynamics established in that period – intentionally and unintentionally – can set communities up for success, failure or mediocrity.

We've seen how:

- There are principles (sometimes the same principles as we had in Our Town) but they are not embraced by every part of the initiative, nor used as a way to hold various moving parts of an initiative to account
- Funders can distribute funds without distributing decision making and capability, so communities are not able to self-determine their responses
- Community-led processes fail to draw on best practice for inspiration, get lost in data, or fail to develop deep insights that lead to imaginative responses
- Short-term funding can put communities on a hamster wheel of meeting targets and fundraising
- Early stage 'systems' can focus on understanding the formal service system, rather than the systems that more fundamentally hold poor outcomes in place
- Community teams are made up of the 'usual suspects' and exclude many most affected by social issues
- The process is stressful and mentally unhealthy

In contrast, we think that what Our Town models – and what could be adopted by other community-led initiatives in their early years – are ways of working that:

- Are principle based
- Designed around deliberate transitions in power
- Build innovation capability
- Take a systemic perspective
- Are actively inclusive
- Leave good behind.

At the time of writing, Our Town is two years into its 11-year journey, and the initiative could go in many directions. It's important to note that by no means is Our Town perfect; we're all very much on a learning journey!

To inform our future work, and hopefully yours, we've created a set of resources and tools (see next page) that can be used to shape community-led initiatives. While Our Town is focused on mental wellbeing in rural communities, we believe that with a degree of adaptation, they could be applied to any context where funders and communities are genuinely seeking to build self-determination.

Toolpack:
Reflective questions

**Our
Town**

Toolpack:
Guiding strateg
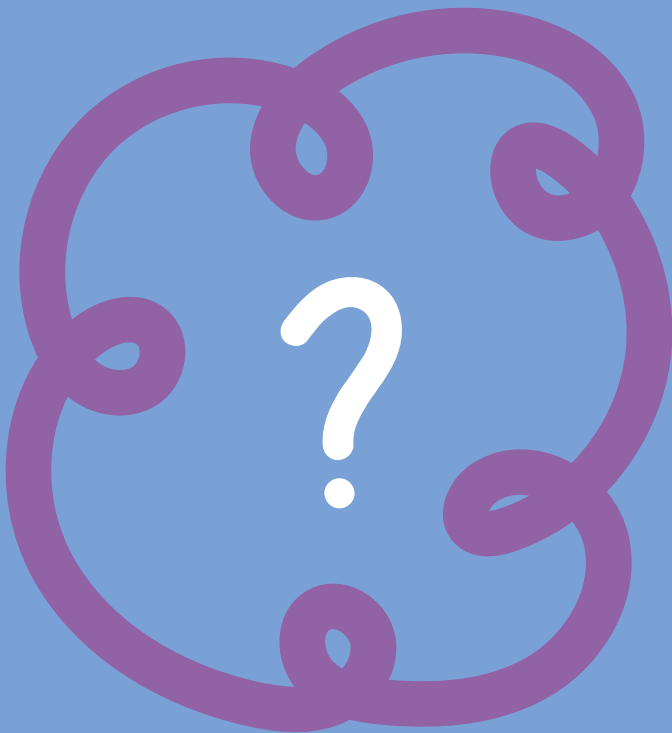
**Our
Town**

A set of **reflective questions** that can be used with teams to plan and shape a community-led initiative.

View questions

A set of **guiding strategies** to steer practical work and decision making in the early years of a community-led initiative.

View guide

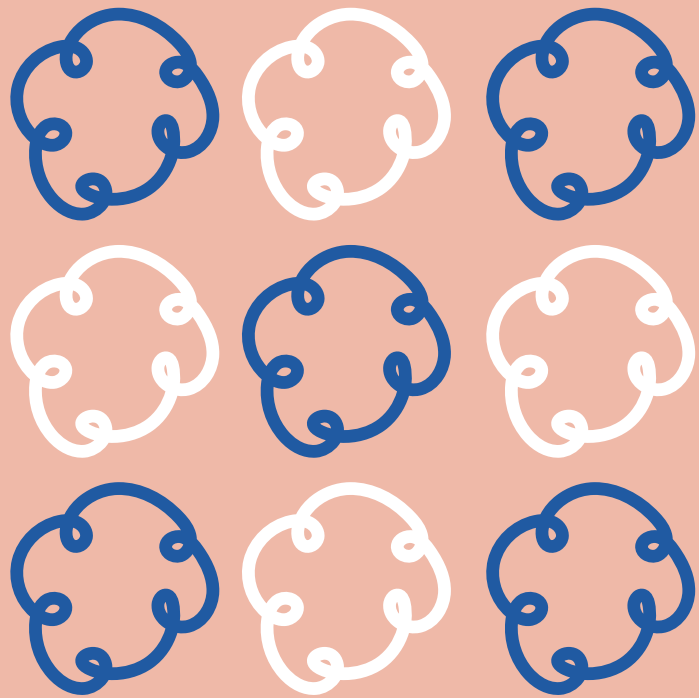**ies**

Toolpack:
Reusable patterns

**Our
Town**

A set of **reusable
patterns** for practical
things you can do that
brings to life the
Our Town way of
working – for Support
Teams and Town Teams.

View patterns

2021 and beyond

As a result of this 2020 process, all Town Teams substantially changed the focus of their work.

While each town identified opportunities to create change bespoke to their town, there are some common themes that connect up their work. This presents an opportunity to both scale what works and influence regional policy.

Through the process, the towns chose to move away from responding to mental illness to focus on mental wellbeing. They see mental wellbeing as the place where community can make a real difference, and this is aligned with the literature on the social determinants of mental health, and an area underserved in Australia by local and state governments.

Broadly, the towns have chosen to focus on issues of culture, connection, identity in towns, and the roles community members can take in supporting wellbeing.

Through their plans, towns are exploring themes that include:

- How to get towns to be accepting of a broader range of identities and ways of being, including addressing discimination for LGBTIQA+ groups and Aboriginal communities.
- How to address issues of trauma, at an individual level, but also at a town level. For example, the trauma created by a bushfire or the loss of a major industry in a town.
- How to bridge intergenerational divides, between young and old, and the divides between families who have lived in towns for generations, and those who are newly arrived

- How to create a compelling vision for the future for towns, and how to build the capabilities to get there. This will take into consideration the social, environmental and economic sustainability of the towns in the long term, and the intertwined relationship between social and economic outcomes.

If you're interested in exploring more about the opportunities identified by the Town Teams, their ideas for responding to them, and the implication for mental health services and government, read our forthcoming paper available at ourtownsa.com.au

In 2021, all six towns are advancing their plans with the resources they have secured.
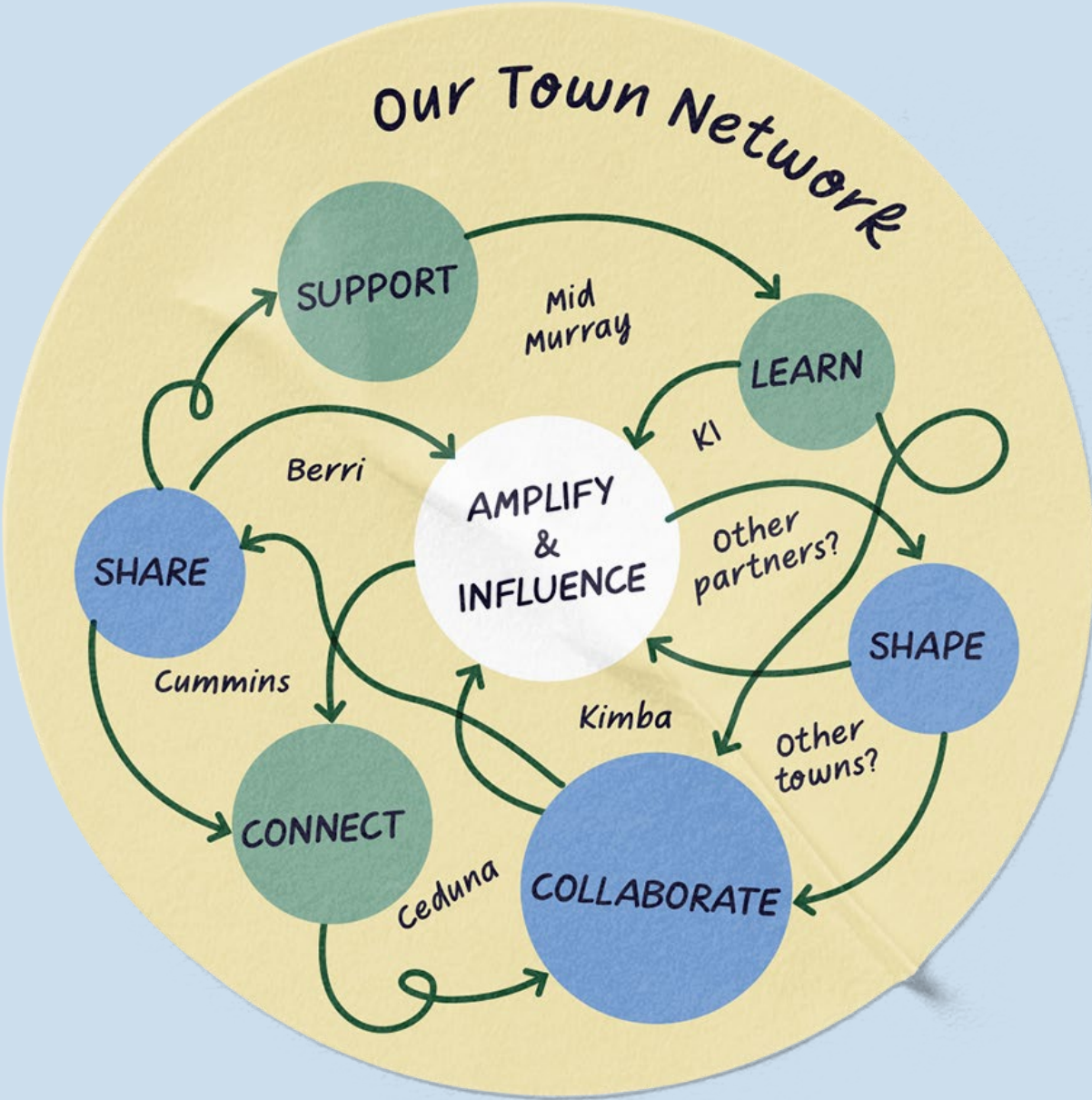
A critical opportunity exists for others to join in supporting the two towns with one year of funding to keep the momentum of change going.

To follow the progress of the initiative and towns, join our mailing list at ourtownsa.com.au

Thank you to everyone that shaped, informed, and made Our Town happen in 2020.

Our Town Network

SUPPORT

Mid Murray

LEARN

Berri

KI

AMPLIFY & INFLUENCE

Other partners?

SHARE

SHAPE

Cummins

Kimba

Other towns?

CONNECT

Ceduna

COLLABORATE

1 Health Needs and Priorities in South Australia: A comprehensive snapshot of SA's health system (2017). South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute (SAHMRI) and The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI).

2 A forthcoming paper from the Our Town Support Team will explore the set-up of Our Town (before 2020) in more detail, including why the Fay Fuller Foundation decided to create a community-led initiative, and how towns were first engaged with the idea.

3 There is an emerging body of evidence of the value of principle based rather than process or target based) working to address complex issues. See Michael Quinn Patton's book 'Principles-Focused Evaluation: The GUIDE'

4 To learn more about developmental evaluation and the role it can play in place-based initiatives, see the 'Place-based Evaluation Framework' developed by Clear Horizon in collaboration with governments, community-led initiatives and with support from TACSI.

5 For examples of more transitions that can distribute and grow power, see the reusable patterns tool in the toolkit.

6 To read more about effective funder-grantee relationships, see 'Funding Community-led Place Based Practice: Insights and actions for funders and communities' written by TACSI with Ten20, Social Ventures Australia and six communities.

7 Philanthropy systems and change.

8 In 2020, the Grants Advisory Committee grew from 4 to 7 members. Now membership represents Wellbeing SA and Department of Human Services, both South Australian Government agencies, Lived Experience Leadership and Advocacy Network, two community members (from Pinnaroo and the Barossa region), the Fay Fuller Foundation and TACSI.

9 To read more about our experience in participatory grantmaking, see The why and how of participatory philanthropy in Our Town, part of Philanthropy Australia's series on participatory philanthropy.

10 Read more about Clear Horizons' approach to evaluation on Our Town in their forthcoming case study: Evaluation in Our Town, watch Jess Dart introduce the concept in this video or watch this longer webinar.

11 The school climate strikes and the recent litigation of the Australian Minister of the Environment by a group of children with an interest in reducing carbon emissions, are two recent examples of children advocating for social change.

12 The Our Town selection criteria was co-designed with the community and broadly considered alignment to Our Town Principles, the conditions for sustainable change, and potential impact.

13 For some more in-depth thinking on creating value at every stage of competitive processes see 'And the winner is... Philanthropists and governments make prizes count' by Mckinnsey and Company (2009).

14 For research into the prevalence and impact of poor mental wellbeing amongst the helping professions and social entrepreneurs, and an exploration of the impact, see 'Wellbeing Inspires Welldoing Research Report - How changemakers' inner wellbeing influences their work' by The Wellbeing Project.