



Submission:

**Strengthening Partnerships:
Commissioning for Social Impact –
Discussion Paper**

December 2019

About ACTCOSS

ACTCOSS acknowledges Canberra has been built on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We pay respects to their Elders and recognise the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and ongoing contribution to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) advocates for social justice in the ACT and represents not-for-profit community organisations.

ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS Network, made up of each of the state and territory Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS's vision is for Canberra to be a just, safe and sustainable community in which everyone has the opportunity for self-determination and a fair share of resources and services.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community-based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS advises that this document may be publicly distributed, including by placing a copy on our website.

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Acronyms

ACTCOSS	ACT Council of Social Service Inc.
ATSIEB	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body
CSD	Community Services Directorate
JCGRG	Joint Community Government Reference Group

Introduction

The ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Community Service Directorate's (CSD's) *Strengthening Partnerships: Commissioning for Social ImpACT – Discussion Paper*.¹ As the peak body representing not-for-profit community organisations in the ACT, ACTCOSS has long been a strong advocate to government for establishing and maintaining a partnership approach to community services.

This submission provides some introductory comments, highlighting the need for the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy to link and align with established partnership frameworks in the ACT. The submission then responds to the Discussion Paper Survey questions.

Overall, ACTCOSS strongly supports the development of a Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy as a critical, whole-of-government framework – and a missing piece – that should assist in matching the intent of existing partnership arrangements between the ACT Government and community sector with practice. We particularly welcome the Discussion Paper's commitment to 'Commissioning that supports ... the ACT Community Services Industry Strategy 2016-2026'.²

Aligning the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy with existing partnership frameworks

ACTCOSS sees the development of a Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy as flowing from and aligning with established frameworks that outline and reflect a long-standing partnership relationship between ACT Government and the community sector. We see the following two partnership documents as providing the foundation and framing for the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy:

- The Social Compact (2001, 2004, 2012, forthcoming refresh)³

1 ACT Government, *Strengthening partnerships: commissioning for social impact – discussion paper*, Community Services Directorate, Canberra, September 2019, viewed 3 December 2019, <https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1423983/Strengthening-Partnerships-Commissioning-for-Social-Impage-Discussion-Paper_v2.pdf>.

2 *ibid*, p. 13.

3 ACT Government, *The social compact: a relationship framework between the ACT Government and community sector*, Community Services Directorate, Canberra, 2012, viewed 3 December 2019, <https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/521486/The-Social-Compact_web-version2.pdf>; for a brief history of the ACT Social Compact see, J Butcher, 'Australian sub-national compacts with the not-for-profit sector: pathways to cross-sector cooperation', in J Wanna, EA Lindquist & P Marshall (eds), *New accountabilities, new challenges*, ANU Press, Canberra, 2015, pp. 317-9, viewed 3 December 2019, <<http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p314521/pdf/10.-Australian-Sub-National-Compacts-with-the-Not-For-Profit-Sector.pdf>>.

- ACT Community Services Industry Strategy 2016-2026 (Industry Strategy).⁴

In addition to The Social Compact and Industry Strategy, we also note significant overlap between Commissioning for Social Impact and the Human Services Blueprint.⁵

ACTCOSS sees the development of the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy as having the potential to implement the intent of both of these documents. The Social Compact sets out the relationship framework between the ACT Government and the community sector. The Joint Community Government Reference Group (JCGRG) oversees the progress of The Social Compact. The ACT Community Services Industry Strategy 2016-2026 was developed through the JCGRG in a partnership between CSD and the ACT community services industry.

Amongst other things, The Social Compact is intended to be used to ‘improve engagement in planning and policy and service design’ and ‘continue to improve service quality, innovation and sustainability’.⁶ Its foundation principles include ‘Engagement’ (i.e. ‘community participation in planning, policy development and other decision making that is inclusive of our diverse community’) and ‘Continuous improvement’ (i.e. ‘innovation and continuous improvement in the planning, delivery of services and workforce development’).⁷ It sets out undertakings as guiding standards for ACT Government and the community sector. These undertakings are reflected to a large extent in the Discussion Paper, such as the view of commissioning as relational versus contracting as transactional (page 13) and ‘where we want to be’ versus ‘where we are now’ (page 12).

The Industry Strategy was developed to ‘help build capability within community services grow sustainably and achieve positive outcomes for everyone in the ACT’.⁸ Through it, the ACT community sector identified what needed to change and provides substantial guidance as to ‘defining a local understanding of commissioning practice and developing an evidence base in the ACT’.⁹ The priority areas and outcomes identified by the ACT community sector through the development of the Industry Strategy is reflected on pages 5-6 of the Discussion Paper.

While the content and intent of The Social Compact and the Industry Strategy are reflected in the Discussion Paper, ACTCOSS recommends that the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy explicitly acknowledges – and

4 Joint Community Government Reference Group, *ACT Community Services Industry Strategy 2016-2026*, Community Services Directorate, Canberra, July 2016, viewed 3 December 2019, <https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/982343/ACT-JCGRG_IS-FINAL_PDF.pdf>.

5 ACT Government, *Human services blueprint*, Community Services Directorate, Canberra, 2014, viewed 5 December 2019, <https://www.betterservices.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/599860/Human-Services-Blueprint-Final.pdf>.

6 ACT Government, 2012, op. cit., p. 11.

7 *ibid.* p. 7.

8 *ibid.* p. 6.

9 ACT Government, 2019, op. cit., p. 5.

positions itself within – these existing partnership frameworks and takes the opportunity to translate key elements of these into action.

We note that in 2004, the ACT Government produced the Community Sector Funding Policy which outlined a move from a purchaser/provider (transactional) relationship to a partnerships (relational) relationship between the ACT Government and the community sector.¹⁰ The development of a Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy provides an opportunity to review policies that have been developed within the context of The Social Compact that are relevant to procurement and other elements of commissioning.

We recommend that CSD review the policy foundations and governance structures informing and underpinning the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy. JCGRG oversight would help ensure alignment with The Social Compact and better facilitate co-production towards a whole-of-government framework.

We understand the need to commence implementation of a commissioning framework at a small scale, test it, and refine it before extending a new way of working across government. However, ACTCOSS recommends the commissioning framework and roadmap identify the intent, and outline the development, of a whole-of-government Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy for community-based services across different programs and portfolios. The lack of a roadmap toward a whole-of-government Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy has potential to be a major barrier to engagement.

ACTCOSS responses to Discussion Paper questions

The vision

Discussion Paper Question 1: Does ‘Our Vision’ align with your expectations for the Directorate’s investment in government and non-government community services in the ACT?

Investment that is driven by co-production, delivers value for money, and creates shared accountability for meaningful outcomes that lead to positive social impact in the ACT – ‘Our Vision’, *Strengthening partnerships: commissioning for social impact – discussion paper*, p. 1.

ACTCOSS sees the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy as being guided by and aligning with The Social Compact, the ACT Community Services Industry Strategy 2016-2026, and the Human Services Blueprint. As such, we see it as sharing their visions for the relationship between ACT Government and

¹⁰ ACT Government, *Community sector funding policy: working together*, ACT Government, Canberra, February 2004.

the community sector, for the ACT community services industry, and the human services system in the ACT.

The Social Compact vision is:

... of a Canberra as a place where all people reach their potential, make a contribution and share the benefits of an inclusive and vibrant community.¹¹

The Industry Strategy vision is:

An inclusive, equitable and sustainable Community Services Industry will:

- deliver quality services to create more connected communities which will support vulnerable individuals and families to be empowered and to fully participate in their communities and to take charge of their own future;
- undertake community development to create social value, build social capital and improve living conditions;
- put the needs of our clients and communities at the centre of everything we do;
- be a trusted voice on the needs of our communities with a strong evidence base that will shape policies and engage in social planning for the Territory and its regions'.¹²

We also note the vision of the Human Services Blueprint:

All Canberrans have the capability to fully participate in strong, healthy and inclusive communities and are enabled by a cohesive human services system that is:

- Person-centred, strengths-based and focused on achieving positive, outcomes and services
- Simple to understand, navigate and access
- Adaptive to evolving changes, needs and knowledge
- Viable and sustainable, leveraging resources across the system to respond to current, emerging and future demand
- Working in collaboration and partnership across the system.¹³

ACTCOSS recommends that a vision for the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy should incorporate, and potentially consolidate, these existing shared visions.

ACTCOSS recommends that the Discussion Paper's vision be reframed as a mission or purpose that contributes to the above visions (or a consolidated vision). The statement needs to lead with the outcomes or 'positive social impact' to be achieved through productive partnership and processes rather than placing the primary focus on 'investment'. Focusing on investment risks reducing commissioning back down to a transactional relationship. Financial

11 ACT Government, 2012, op. cit., p. 4.

12 ACT Government, 2016, op. cit., p. 8.

13 ACT Government, 2014, op. cit., p. 3.

investment in community services by CSD is one of the means to improved social outcomes, not an end in itself. What will be critical is that the levels of funding and other resourcing are adequate to support productive processes and achieve positive outcomes.

Supporting engagement

Discussion Paper Question 2: Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy development will occur over the next 9 months, during this time how can the Directorate best support you to engage in this process?

Based on the next steps outlined on page 18 of the Discussion Paper, there are now between four and five months remaining in the development of the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy which is due for release in May 2020. The next steps outlined in the Discussion Paper include a 'What We Heard Discussion Paper No. 2' (January 2020), and 'co-production workshops with stakeholders and service users, exploring key themes from Discussion Paper No. 2' (February-March 2020).

CSD can best support our engagement in the remaining process by providing an adequate opportunity for ACTCOSS to engage independently with community sector peaks and our members to develop a response to Discussion Paper No. 2. Ideally, this would allow 4-6 weeks to respond to the second discussion paper, both through the co-production workshops and through the option of providing a written response.

Our engagement in the co-production workshops can best be supported by providing us with workshop materials – including a workshop outline – at least one week in advance. This would assist with our preparation in terms of the workshop's purpose, content, and process. Our engagement in the workshops would also be supported by providing the opportunity to explore how commissioning for social impact would work in practice and what difference it will make. Greater and more meaningful engagement in co-production is likely to be achieved through applied engagement with the framework rather than a theoretical discussion. This should also assist in the identification of gaps and risks.

Our engagement would further be supported by adding an extra step of releasing a Draft Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy for final comment in April-May 2020, allowing a final stage of feedback over 4-6 weeks, with a view to release of the final strategy in June-July 2020.

Communication methods

Discussion Paper Question 3: During the development of the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy, what communication methods will work best for you?

Over the time that remains to develop the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy, we recommend that priority be given to communication that provides a

more applied, practical engagement with the commissioning concept (and related concepts, e.g. co-production). This communication would ideally be diagrammatic or illustrative – clearly showing key elements such as inputs, processes, participants, and outcomes. It should also include examples – either actual or hypothetical – providing a picture of how commissioning works (or fails) in practice.

The YourSay website should be used to encourage broader community engagement in the co-production of the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy.

Engaging service users

Discussion Paper Question 4: How best, and at what stage, do we engage service users in the development of the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy?

Service users have knowledge and experience to offer in service visibility, capacity, accessibility, and design. Service users also need to be engaged in needs and assets assessment and analysis, and in-service evaluation. Service users are therefore a key part of implementing a commissioning framework. Given this responsibility in the implementation, service users need to be given opportunity to engage in the design of the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy as it relates to implementation.

We suggest that CSD engages with service users to further develop the operational framework, particularly in relation to the parts of the framework where service users are anticipated to contribute. This consultation would be to determine if the approach and expectations of service users is transparent and reasonable from their perspective. However, it is important to frame the conversation so that service users know how their feedback will be used and how it will be integrated into the development of the strategy and the operational framework.

Co-production

What does it look like?

Discussion Paper Question 5: What does co-production look like for you?

The theory and values that underpin co-production align closely with those that underpin community development. We understand that co-production involves a recognition of the strengths of various stakeholders in developing and delivering responses to complex issues. The Scottish Co-production Network states that co-production ‘essentially describes a relationship between service provider and service user that draws on the knowledge, ability and resources of both to develop solutions to issues that are claimed to be successful, sustainable and

cost-effective, changing the balance of power from the professional towards the service user.’¹⁴

ACTCOSS welcomes adoption of approaches that preference the voices of people most affected by decisions and builds shared understandings of challenges and priorities for action.

ACTCOSS’s expectations for co-production

Discussion Paper Question 6: What are your expectations for co-production in developing the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy, and in the implementation and delivery of the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy?

In the development of the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy, ACTCOSS expects CSD to seek oversight from JCGRG, and to frame the strategy as building on the relationship articulated in The Social Compact. We also expect that the respectful relationship and engagement in good faith that is articulated in The Social Compact be extended to service users and community members. As previously stated, we suggest that CSD engages with service users to further develop the operational framework, particularly in relation to the parts of the framework where service users are anticipated to contribute.

We also expect that co-production will be resourced appropriately in order to ensure participation and engagement.

Barriers to engagement

Discussion Paper Question 7: Are there any other perceived, or actual barriers, that would inhibit you from engaging on the development of the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy?

A key barrier for our engagement in the development of the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy will be competing priorities and limited resources. This will be more challenging with 2020 being an ACT election year.

An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioning Framework

Discussion Paper Question 8: Should we develop an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioning Framework, or a separately defined commissioning process to support Self Determination? If yes, do you have any recommendations for this?

ACTCOSS understands that CSD is consulting with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body (ATSIEB), Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, and the broader Aboriginal and/or Torres

¹⁴ Scottish Co-production Network, *What is co-production?*, Scottish Co-Production Network, Glasgow, viewed 5 December 2019, <<http://www.coproductionscotland.org.uk/about/what-is-co-production>>.

Strait Islander community on this question. ACTCOSS views this as a matter for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander self-determination.

Other commissioning priorities

Discussion Paper Question 9: Are there any other Commissioning Priorities that need to be considered for inclusion in a Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy?

The following five 'Commissioning Priorities' are identified on page 13 of the Discussion Paper:

- Self-determination for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people
- Building industry capacity, ensuring sustainability and promoting innovation
- Developing better policy, systems and governance
- Delivering person-centred, integrated, outcomes-based procurement and contracting
- Accountability to communities and a commitment to co-production.

ACTCOSS welcomes the Commissioning Priorities outlined in the Discussion Paper. ACTCOSS understands that the priorities logically include regular processes for community needs and assets assessment that feeds into policy development and service design, but this could be clarified.

The Industry Strategy identified the following outcomes that could be incorporated within the Commissioning Priorities:

- The industry is able to actively plan, shape and develop the evidence base
- Government and industry data is shared with the community, to enable ownership of community issues
- Data and information is shared between government, the industry and the community for the purposes of planning and advocacy.

These outcomes are all associated with developing the research, planning and evaluation capability of the industry (both government and community sector organisations). While we recognise these outcomes may be alluded to under the priority of developing better policy, systems and governance, ACTCOSS would welcome improving the visibility of research, planning and evaluation across the commissioning priorities.

Operational Framework

Discussion Paper Question 10: Do you have comments on the Commissioning for Social Impact Operational Framework?

ACTCOSS sees the Commissioning for Social Impact Operational Framework as a primary pathway for the implementation of The Social Compact. The Social Compact sets out a partnership relationship between ACT Government and the community sector. The Commissioning for Social Impact Operational Framework needs to articulate growth in the partnership relationship between ACT Government, community service organisations, and people who access community services. We recognise that the proposed Operational Framework is being tested with stakeholders and is currently in a stage of iterative development over the next four to five months.

We would like to offer the following initial comments for incorporation and review:

- The proposed framework is framed from a government funder perspective and so key parts of a commissioning cycle are missing, for example, service delivery/program participation. There needs to be a recognition of the roles and responsibilities of other stakeholders in the framework.
- It might also be useful to think of the Operational Framework as having integrated parts but not necessarily as a cycle of stages. Each of the integrated parts feeds into and effects the other parts. Realistically, and in a truly co-produced structure, a commissioning process won't always commence from developing a strategy to deliver impact. Innovation often occurs through service development, as practitioners design solutions to meet the needs of people. Once a service recognises that the solution works for more than one person, service design starts to change. Reflective practice is at the heart of the work of the community sector and is a valid way of undertaking informal evaluation that informs service development. In the proposed framework, 'evaluation' has been identified as an ongoing process but the level, type and formality of evaluation is not clear. There need to be clear links between practitioner knowledge, service-user experience, strategic development, and how this will lead to system change. This is not clear in the proposed framework.
- From the list of activities outlined on page 15 of the Discussion Paper, there are further key activities we would like to be considered:
 - Establish shared risk
 - Establish fit-for-purpose procurement processes
 - Develop capability and capacity to deliver social outcomes (ongoing skills development for funders and service providers)
 - Implement services, programs and projects that lead to social impact.

ACTCOSS contributions to strategy development

Discussion Paper Question 11: What can you contribute to the development of a Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy?

ACTCOSS has and will continue to contribute by facilitating connection to ACT community sector peaks and organisations. ACTCOSS has long-term corporate knowledge of procurement practices, previous work undertaken around commissioning, and links to other jurisdictions that we are able to share. The Directorate can best engage with community sector peaks and ACTCOSS members through participation in existing networks and forums.

Best practice or innovation considerations

Discussion Paper Question 12: What areas of best practice or innovation do you believe we should consider in the development of a Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy?

ACTCOSS welcomes the co-production process to develop the Commissioning for Social Impact Strategy based on a local understanding of commissioning practice. From a community development perspective, this co-production would build on strengths and assets, including existing partnership frameworks. We also note the value of drawing on national and international experience, including insights from the research sector.

Challenges for Commissioning for Social Impact

Discussion Paper Question 13: What do you think may be the greatest challenges that Commissioning for Social Impact may face and are there any recommendations you would make on how these challenges may be addressed?

A key challenge that Commissioning for Social Impact is facing is the current timing. There is a tight timeframe around engagement which has already experienced delays. This timeframe is exacerbated with 2020 being an ACT election year.

There may be some challenges in relation to community sector confidence in the implementation process. There have been a number of processes over the last decade that the sector has engaged in, only for implementation to be under-resourced or discontinued due to changes in government priorities. The upcoming election is a possible point of change in government priorities. This challenge could be addressed by assurance to the sector that the commissioning framework is not politically aligned and its development has an anticipated life beyond June 2020.

Another key challenge is moving from a theoretical and policy discussion into an applied framework development. We suggest that CSD take an applied approach to the next stage of development, as previously stated.