

Communities for Children

TRANSFORMING RELATIONSHIPS

A YWCA Communities for Children sector capacity building initiative supporting better outcomes for children and families.

**Phase 1
Process Review**



December 2025

YWCA Australia wishes to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we work, live and play and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise First Nations people as the custodians of the lands, seas and skies, with more than 60,000 years of wisdom, connection and relationship in caring for Country.

Our Communities for Children program operates across Bundjalung Country, and we pay respect to the Widjabul Wia-bal people and their Elders past and present. With thanks to the First Nations people who have contributed to this work and supported better outcomes for children and families in our communities over many years.

This Process Review was conducted by Susan Rudland, YWCA Research and Evaluation Specialist and Emily Goldsmith, (Consultant Researcher) in 2025 on behalf of YWCA's Communities for Children Facilitating Partner team. We thank and acknowledge YWCA's CFC Team Leader, Lisa Jovaisa, who led the project and contributed to the review's scope and interpretation. Thank you also to the TR Project Team who provided valuable 'sense-checking' at key points in the process.

The Review team gratefully acknowledges and gives thanks to the Transforming Relationships (TR) Collective members who generously shared their unique insights and experiences across the project and the review. Without their collaboration, participation and the support from their organisations, the TR project would not have existed:

Goodstart Goonellabah
Jarjum Centre
Lismore Preschool
Lismore Parish Preschool
MurriMatters / Endgame Consultancy
Northern NSW Local Are Health District – Community, Child and Family Health
Mid-Richmond Neighbourhood Centre – Brighter Futures
Rekindling the Spirit
Social Futures

December 2025

YWCA Australia

W: www.ywca.org.au

E: susan.rudland@ywca.org.au

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Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
APPROACH	4
LEARNINGS	5
IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS	5
CONCLUSION	7
1. INTRODUCTION	7
1.1 APPROACH	7
1.2 LIMITATIONS	8
2. PHASE 1 OVERVIEW	9
2.1 INCEPTION	9
2.2 PARTNERSHIP APPROACH	9
2.3 PROJECT OBJECTIVES	10
2.4 THE COLLECTIVE	10
2.5 PHASE 1 PROCESS	11
2.6 KEY ELEMENTS	18
3. LEARNINGS	21
3.1 INSIGHTS	21
3.2 SUPPORTS	23
3.3 CHALLENGES	28
4. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS	31
4.1 PHASE 1: OUTCOMES	31
4.2 AN EMERGENT MODEL FOR CHANGE	31
4.3 PHASE 2: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES	32
5. CONCLUSION	36
5.1 HELPING SERVICES BECOME COMFORTABLE WITH AN UNCERTAIN, EMERGENT PROCESS	36
5.2 GAINING EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP SUPPORT ACROSS DIFFERENT SERVICES	36
5.3 OVERCOMING TRADITIONAL FUNDING AND ORGANISATIONAL INCENTIVES THAT PROMOTE WORKING IN ISOLATION	37
6. APPENDICES	39

Executive Summary

The Transforming Relationships (TR) project is a sector capacity building initiative developed as part of the Communities for Children (CFC) program in Northern NSW. Emerging in the recovery phase of the 2022 floods, TR built on the collective response of services during that crisis, aiming to embed collaborative leadership into everyday practice.

TR is grounded in a shared commitment to improving outcomes for children, families, and communities. It aims to foster deeper collaboration, sector leadership, and culturally safe approaches to practice. A key partnership with MurriMatters helped shape a strengths-based, relational foundation for this work.

Phase 1 of the project focused on laying the groundwork for long-term systems change through three strategic objectives: supporting self-determination for First Nations peoples, strengthening sector leadership and capacity, and embedding evidence-based approaches.

The process review of Phase 1 reflects on early achievements in building knowledge and practice, while setting the stage for broader systemic transformation.

Approach

The Process Review aimed to document the Phase 1 process and assess the emerging outcomes for individuals, organisations and the TR Collective. The Review intended to identify key learning and insights to inform the continuing work of the Collective.

The Review included:

- Assessment of existing data and documentation
- 15 interviews, including 10 Collective members and 7 project team members
- Preliminary analysis of emerging themes and insights
- Sense checking team workshop
- Headline insights shared with the TR Collective and team members
- Analysis and reporting.

Learnings

The TR Project emerged from a shared sector commitment to strengthen connections, build on community strengths, and enhance relational, cross sector, and community based collaboration.

Phase 1 of the Project has fostered trust, connection, and shared purpose across childhood and family services. It has been effective in establishing the foundations and conditions for new ways of working together, and a shared vision and framework to guide collective action according to four priority areas.

Phase 1 demonstrates a model that is collaborative, relational, evidence-informed and built capability. Key supports included:

- Personal and intentional early engagement
- Clear, consistent communication and regular check-ins
- Early leadership buy-in and the Engoori training
- Modelling of relational, collaborative leadership and practice
- Tools and frameworks that deepened reflection and shared understanding.

Phase 1 demonstrated the following progress towards the Project's strategic outcomes, to build knowledge, deepen practice and transform systems:

- Phase 1 built participant knowledge, creating a strong foundation for future work
- Phase 1 made progress towards deepening collaborative practice, with participants beginning to embed learnings within their organisations and explore new ways of working
- There are early signs of strengthened cross-sector collaboration. However, sustained collective effort over time is required to transform sector systems.

Implications and future directions

The TR project seeks to contribute to the evidence of what works to improve outcomes for children and families, through sector collaboration, leadership and systems change. So, what does this way of working require from individuals, organisations and the sector?

Helping services become comfortable with an uncertain, emergent process

This way of working is not linear, and outcomes are often discovered through the work, rather than predetermined in advance. Moving through complexity

together requires a shared tolerance for uncertainty, and a belief that meaningful change comes through relational, iterative processes, rather than rigid project plans. Clear structures that support shared decision making, participant engagement, and focus on tangible shared community benefit, are key. Even small, shared actions can help maintain momentum and purpose.

Gaining executive leadership support across different services

Executive endorsement is crucial to embedding and sustaining collaborative practice. Without overarching leadership commitment, these efforts may be short-lived. Transformational approaches therefore require:

- *Visible leadership support:* Leaders modelling relational values in how they partner, make decisions, and allocate resources.
- *Strategic alignment:* Embedding collaborative goals into organisational strategies and planning cycles.
- *Authorising environment for staff:* Allowing and encouraging staff to invest time in partnership-building, systems thinking, and reflective practice, rather than only direct service outputs. This includes supporting staff to attend workshops and training.

When executive leaders across services champion the work, it legitimises the process, aligns priorities across organisations, and creates the permission structure needed for innovation.

Overcoming traditional funding and organisational incentives that promote working in isolation

Collaborative, place-based approaches such as TR require a significant shift in mindset and systems. Traditional funding models often reinforce siloed operations by allocating resources to individual organisations based on discrete outputs or competitive applications. These structures can unintentionally discourage collaboration, shared planning, and joint accountability.

To truly work in relational and cross-sector ways, services need flexibility in how they use resources and a mandate to prioritise collective outcomes. This includes:

- *Shifting from competition to collaboration:* Encouraging joint funding models, shared reporting frameworks, and collaborative outcome measurement.
- *Embedding collective impact in funding agreements:* Incentivising services to invest time in shared governance, reflection, and relationship-building.

- *Creating safe spaces to share power and risk:* Supporting organisations to move away from ‘proving impact alone’ toward ‘improving impact together.’

This way of working means challenging deeply embedded structures and shifting the focus from short-term service delivery metrics to long-term systemic change.

Conclusion

Phase 1 of TR has highlighted key opportunities and challenges for the future, including transitioning from knowledge and relationship building to action in Phase 2, the need for continued iteration and learning cycles, and the importance of facilitated supports and collective engagement to maintain and sustain momentum. TR demonstrates a model that builds towards transformational change, with learnings that may be applied more broadly by sector stakeholders, funders and decision makers.

1. Introduction

This report summarises the key processes, insights, and reflections from Phase 1 of the Transforming Relationships (TR) Project.

It is structured as follows:

- Introduction and Approach
- Phase 1 Overview
- Learnings
- Implications and Future Directions
- Appendices – detailed supporting information

This is a Process Review of Phase 1. Phase 2 will be evaluated in the future through social network analysis to assess outcomes in cross-sector relationships and collaboration. Headline insights from this review were shared with the TR Collective and the YWCA Project team to support ongoing reflection and continuous improvement through Phase 2.

1.1 Approach

YWCA Australia is committed to evidence informed learning, reflection, and action for continuous improvement. This has guided the TR Project since its inception.

The Process Review aimed to document Phase 1 and assess the emerging outcomes for individuals, organisations and the TR Collective. The Review sought

to identify key learnings and insights, and inform future directions for the TR Collective.

The Review involved:

- Assessment of existing data and documentation
- Fifteen interviews (face to face, online and telephone) with 10 Collective members and 7 Project Team members)
- Analysis of emerging themes and insights
- A project team workshop to sense check findings
- Sharing headline insights with the TR Collective
- Further analysis and reporting.

1.2 Limitations

The Review was conducted during a time of major change, including disaster management and recovery due to a significant flooding event in February 2025 across the Northern Rivers. A new funding and recommissioning cycle also commenced during this period.

This document reports on a process review of Phase 1. It outlines the model, insights and progress towards long term desired outcomes, at a specific point in time. The Review does not evaluate overall outcomes as a result of TR.

The Review was conducted internally with Collective members, the project team, and an evaluation team including the YWCA Research and Evaluation Specialist and an external consultant researcher. It is therefore not an independent external evaluation. The Review was, however, conducted according to specific objectives and evaluation questions. Initial themes and assumptions were tested in a project team sense-making workshop, including the YWCA Director of Service Delivery. Additional analysis and draft reporting was additionally reviewed with the CFC Team Leader.

2. Phase 1 Overview

2.1 Inception

In March 2022, the Northern Rivers community in NSW experienced the most devastating floods on record. Amid this crisis, local services came together to share resources, collaborate, and support one another to ensure children and families could continue accessing the care they needed. This experience highlighted the strength and potential of working in partnership.

During the flood recovery phase, services reflected on what made that collaboration possible - and how it might be sustained beyond moments of emergency. These conversations led to the development of the TR Project. Building on knowledge and experience gained from working collaboratively with Community Partner organisations in the YWCA's CFC program, the project aimed to create lasting connections and strengthen collaboration across the sector.

“Transforming Relationships came out of a need from services...we wanted to build on the TR Collective work off the back of the floods. How could we better use our resources to assist children and families? This Project is trying to work across the sector, to see what happens when we come together in an attempt to improve outcomes for children and families”.

2.2 Partnership Approach

In developing the project, YWCA partnered with MurriMatters, a First Nations led organisation that supports whole of organisation transformation and improvement via Engoori – a strengths based relational approach to complex intercultural challenges. This partnership set the foundations for ensuring a culturally safe, collaborative and supportive environment and overarching framework for the project.

MurriMatters provided project management support and coaching to the project team to embed an evidence-based, change management approach in the design

“Training, coaching, and mentoring around change management helped me see the big picture and what I need to do now.”

(Project Team member)

of the project. This process focused on cultural transformation, challenging deficit thinking and building on organisational and individual strengths.

2.3 Project Objectives

The TR project is focused on three strategic objectives:

- Self-determination for First Nations peoples – supporting services to embed self-determining systems, processes, and culturally safe practices, by increasing opportunities to improve cultural competency and collaborate in culturally safe practices
- Leadership and capacity building – increasing the capacity of services to lead and drive change initiatives through collaboration and professional learning opportunities.
- Evidence-based program design and delivery – adopting a continuous Improvement approach by sharing relevant quantitative and qualitative data and facilitating robust and complex discussions to implement evidence-based solutions.

Over time, the TR project seeks to achieve the following outcomes:

- Building our knowledge (short term)
- Deepening our practice (medium term), and
- Transforming our systems through collaborative sector leadership and practice (longer term).

The approach to achieving these outcomes was designed through a change management lens, understanding that change is rarely linear or immediate and requires a sustained, shared commitment over time.

This Review considers the short and -medium term TR outcomes so far, acknowledging that genuine systems change is a longer term- endeavour.

2.4 The Collective

“We wanted to bring together stakeholders in and around the Lismore community to see if we can work better together to identify gaps in service delivery and collaboratively put things into place to address and/or reduce these gaps.”

(Project team member)

The TR project team initially approached 13 services who focused on delivering early years support with children and families in Lismore and had capacity to implement long term changes across the sector. This included government, non-government, health, early childhood education and care, and child and family support services. Nine organisations participated in Phase 1 and formed the TR Collective including:

- Goodstart Early Learning - Goonellabah
- Jarjum Centre
- Lismore Parish Centre Pre-School
- Lismore Pre-School
- Mid-Richmond Neighbourhood Centre – Brighter Futures
- Northern NSW Local Health District, NSW Health – Child and Family Health
- Rekindling the Spirit
- Social Futures
- YWCA Australia

Phase 1 was additionally supported by project partners Murri Matters (project design and Engoori training) and Endgame Consulting (Leadership coaching and project team support).

Phase 1 involved:

- 16 collaboration meetings
- 88 participants engaged in MurriMatters Engoori training
- 6 Collective workshops

Stakeholders invested in:

- 4 hours of collaboration meetings
- 12 hours of Engoori training
- 18 hours Collective workshops

2.5 Phase 1 Process

The Phase 1 process commenced with the development of a project partnership between the YWCA and MurriMatters, to scope and design the project objectives, methodology, stakeholder engagement and communication processes.



(Phase 1 process outline)

Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholders across the region were identified and invited to participate in the Project. YWCA held initial briefings to discuss the Project's objectives and approach. Sixteen collaboration meetings were held as part of the stakeholder engagement process. Stakeholder engagement was further supported with the delivery of MurriMatters professional learning packages for all stakeholders, engaging 88 participants across stakeholder organisations.

Engagement included early outreach (via phone, online and in person) and the offer of Engoori professional learning to all local service staff, including those not directly involved. Engoori training was utilised a key engagement tool and a

foundational component to support culturally informed engagement across the TR project's 6 design workshops.

"The Y really showed up, offering that professional development and training early on... Knowing that support was there and commitment from the organisation at large...was really amazing".

(Collective member)

This proactive support helped embed strong relationships from the outset and reflected YWCA's broader commitment to children, families, and sector-wide collaboration.

A diverse mix of organisations, from government departments to grassroots services, was seen as key to the Project's success. Sensitivities regarding potential funding roles and responsibilities limited government involvement. Early and inclusive engagement, alongside a strong commitment to partnership, provided a solid foundation for trust, collaboration, and shared leadership to develop across the TR Collective.

"I've always had a love of learning and an interest in evolving our program to do things better or more creatively. After the floods and COVID, we saw real fracturing in the service sector. While we'd always had a strong workplace culture and low turnover, we suddenly faced significant staff movement. That led us to reflect on the culture we wanted to build internally to attract and retain staff. When Lisa reached out, I saw this project as a continuation of that thinking - a way to build a culture of learning and reflection. That's especially important in child protection"

Capacity Building

A key part of Phase 1 was the partnership with [MurriMatters](#), offering training in the Engoori model as a core foundation for culturally grounded, relational practice. This supported leadership and cultural capacity building across the project.

MurriMatters delivered a two-day Engoori professional learning package to 88 stakeholders across the 9 organisations,. 95% of participants agreed that the training was valuable and increased their knowledge of cultural practices to help foster a more culturally responsive work environment.

The impact of the training was reported as immediate for participants and continuing through Phase 1. 97% of participants felt that the training enhanced their skills to build more inclusive and collaborative relationships, with 93% noting the positive impact on their leadership and management capabilities. Participant feedback was overwhelmingly positive, suggesting the training was effective in strengthening relationships, encouraging reflective practice, and broadening skills and perspectives.



(Engoori training evaluation highlights)

MurriMatters guided participants through a foundational process of developing a Cultural Action Plan (CAP) for each group, to identify key values, behaviours and rituals to support how their people will be together. This was seen as a crucial part of the project.

The delivery of Engoori was customised in collaboration with each stakeholder group. At the request of some stakeholders, some Engoori sessions were adapted to a hybrid model and included an online format. Feedback suggested the face-to-face offer of Engoori was particularly impactful. The hybrid model of delivery was also described as effective, however, there were challenges in sustaining the level of engagement and interaction after the initial face-to-face workshop transitioned to an online format.

"I loved the Engoori Training with YWCA – seeing the shift in how we engage and the way we engage with each other in space after this training. Shifts include 'check ins' in meetings, taking time to stop and have genuine conversations with how people are going - cultural knowledge and understanding has moved. This work has supported that a bit quicker, [it's] a bit more prominent. There is a different culture now, it's more inclusive and, less hierarchical. Everyone's opinion is important, and everyone has something valuable to share"

MurriMatters provided coaching to the TR project team to embed an evidence-based, change management approach to the design of the project. This process focused on cultural transformation, challenging deficit thinking and building on organisational and individual strengths.

"Training, coaching, and mentoring around change management helped me see the big picture and what I need to do now."

(Project team member)

Evidence Informed

A systematic review of 110 peer-reviewed articles was undertaken by Dr Meaghan Vosz to inform the design of the TR Project. The review identified the key principles and practices that support effective sector collaboration and systems change in child and family services. These insights shaped the foundational approach of the TR Project, with a strong focus on collaboration, leadership, and relational conditions.

"The evidence review also supported the process – we possibly could have gone ahead without it, but it was important to have evidence to back up the work we are doing and help focus us on what we need to keep doing"

(Project team member)

A summary of the key elements within the evidence review is below, with the full Evidence Review at Appendix B.

Transformational and Collaborative Leadership

- Leadership is inclusive, designated, distributed, and diverse – everyone has a role to play.
- Sharing, communicating, and using knowledge strategically to challenge assumptions and drive informed change.

- Trust, information sharing, and avoiding blame are critical elements of successful collaboration. Aligning a shared agenda with members' responsibilities and localising decision making to a region helps incorporate local knowledge.
- Developing a clear strategy for achieving impact is essential for the success of multi-stakeholder collaborations, including shared values, goals, and indicators of change.

Key Collaboration Principles & Practices

- Change is most effective when driven by a coalition or network of stakeholders who work collectively to build a shared agenda, lead initiatives, and evaluate impact.
- Central to collaboration is a commitment to respect, reciprocity, and returning value to the community – reinforcing trust and responsibility in relationships.
- Effective systems change requires engaging with complexity – understanding processes, relationships, tactics, and the spaces where change happens (systems thinking).

Reinforcing Conditions and Relationality

- Power dynamics at individual, community, organisational, and institutional levels shape how we relate and collaborate.
- The narratives we share, our responses to complexity and uncertainty, and our ways of seeking understanding all influence systems change.
- Sustainable change requires shifting not just what we do, but the conditions that sustain current effective and valued practice.

Conditions that Support Collective Change

- Build relational conditions for collaboration and leadership, including trust, reciprocity, shared strengths, and collective accountability
- Centre efforts on a shared agenda, evidence-informed strategies, and coordinated action for collective impact
- Focus on capacity building, supporting the community and key stakeholders to lead and leverage their knowledge and connections. Skills critical to success include relationship building, service coordination, and cross-organisational leadership.
- Aligned vision, strategy, and change indicators are a platform for measuring and communicating progress. Common goals and shared values are crucial for systemic change. Negotiating differences is a key task for collaborative leaders.

The evidence review was shared with participants, including a presentation from Dr Meaghan Vosz, a summary of headlines, and dissemination of the full document.

A range of evidence informed tools were utilised and shared with the TR Collective throughout the workshops, reinforcing the commitment to building evidence-informed capacity through a shared learning environment.

"[The Y] commissioned that evidence review to begin with, which was shared with the group and was really useful in grounding the work. We used different tools... we did the readiness assessment around where are we individually and also as organisations. We use the seed to tree tool from Community First Development. I use all of them! I use the connection cards most days with my team and with my family as well. Seed to Tree - all of them really!"

Collective Workshops

From May to November 2024, six Collective workshops were held. Each session built on the last, shaped by ongoing stakeholder feedback. By the end of 2024, the group had co-designed a Cultural Action Plan, a shared strategy, and identified four Collective Action areas. (see appendices)

"The workshops of bringing people together were the most valuable I think. Seeing those relationships forge, being together face to face and the kind of incidental conversations that might happen, like 'oh yes we do that too!' or learning from each other and sharing ways we could do something better - that was so valuable and also the most fun!"

(Collective Member)

Each workshop followed a clear structure to ensure meaningful engagement and shared learning:

- *Before the workshop:* Service check-ins to assess current context, clarify purpose and expectations, and sharing of relevant resources.
- *During the workshop:* A facilitated and highly interactive space, shaped by connection check-ins, knowledge sharing, shared assessment, collective reflection, and check-outs.
- *After the workshop:* Key insights, feedback and next steps were synthesised and shared.
- *Between the workshops:* The project team checked in with Collective members, shared updates and invited feedback, to support continuing engagement and connection.

Participants were invited to provide post-workshop feedback via a brief survey. Feedback summaries were shared and informed next steps. Feedback to assess cultural safety and protocols was separately invited from First Nations participants. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive after each workshop.

"I loved the workshops - holding the space to learn from each other and feel valued, being able to lead but also participate in sessions."

(Collective Member)

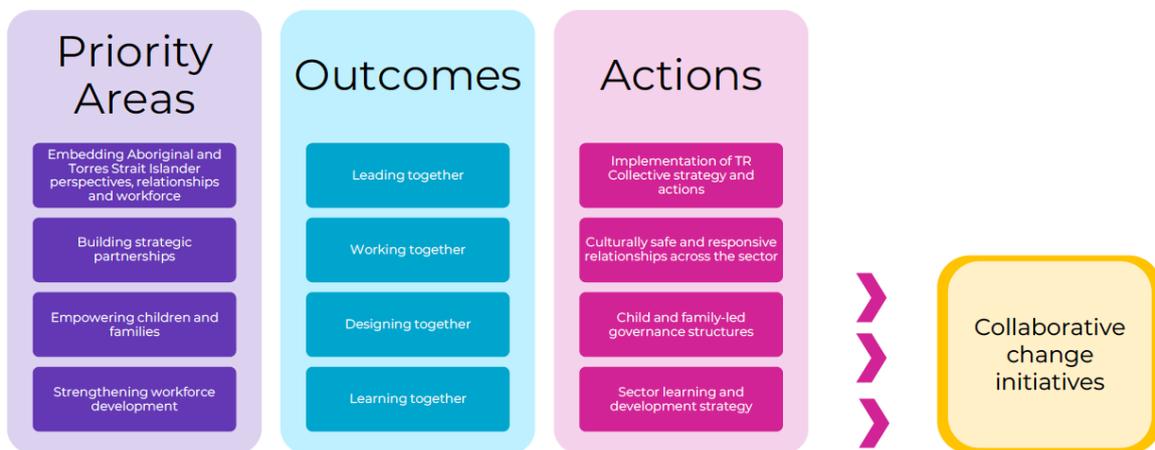
100% of participants agreed:

- The workshops were valuable and strengthened collaborations and partnerships

- The priorities identified by the Collective would support positive change for children and families
- That strengthening our collaborations and partnerships would support the sector changes we wanted to see
- That committing to leadership and collaboration practices would contribute to positive change in the sector

Over 6 design workshops, the TR Collective developed the following vision, agreed priorities, outcomes and actions, to guide future collaboration across Phase 2.

VISION: A quality, culturally safe and inclusive early years sector that grows and develops together to be more responsive to the holistic needs of children, families and community



(TR Collective Strategy)

“The workshops was a key factor in supporting the process...having that space to come together really. Having a number of the Y in the room, who were obviously really well briefed, facilitated the tables when we broke out into groups, was really supportive and helped us when we might be stuck on what we're trying to navigate or not out in those groups. It was really interactive and lots of group activities that didn't involve just sitting at a table and writing notes, they made it fun and engaging. It was delivered in a really well thought out way.”

(Collective Member)

2.6 Key Elements

The following elements underpinned Phase 1 activities. They reflect the key principles and conditions for collective collaboration and systems change, identified in the evidence review, and highlighted across stakeholder interviews.

Collaborative

- The partnership with MurriMatters, with the agreement to offer Engoori training up-front, set the tone for the collaborative approach of TR
- The initial project scoping and design was built on foundations established through CFC
- MurriMatters supported the team building of the TR Team through capacity building, mentoring and coaching.

Relational

- Focused on building strong relationships – engaging stakeholders face-to-face enabled a better understanding of drivers, interests and priorities
- Invested in proactive engagement early, to foster trust and collaboration
- Maintained consistent and connected communication before, during and after key activities
- Remained flexible and responsive, incorporating and sharing feedback throughout.

Evidence-informed

- Drew on evidence review findings to help shape the key principles and processes guiding the workshops
- Prioritised the sharing of knowledge and information to build collective understanding
- Emphasised understanding and applying evidence to inform decision making and practice.

Capacity building

- Engoori, team coaching and mentoring to strengthen skills and capabilities
- Integrated sharing of knowledge with take-away tools and resources
- Adopted a self-determining and iterative approach to enable learning and adaptation over time.

Elements in Practice

The above elements were embedded across Phase 1, framed around the following practices:

Generosity	Pre-committment offer of Engoori training New and tailored resources and tools Take-away knowledge and tools for use in organisations
Relational	Collective workshops: check-ins, check-outs, holding space, highly interactive, creativity and fun
Cultural Action Plan	Engoori Model Cultural Action Plan: how will we be together - values, behaviours, rituals
A Collective vision and goals	Development of a shared vision, goals and desired outcomes
Readiness and capability assessment	Assessing readiness and capability at individual, organisational and Collective levels
Self determining framework	Supporting curiosity, openness, diversity and navigating uncertainty
Intentional connection and sharing	For shared community benefit, beyond the transactional and individual
Leadership, learning and development	Focus on collaborative and transformational leadership

(TR phase 1 practices)

3. Learnings

3.1 Insights

A reference point for change

The 2022 floods in Northern NSW were a critical driver, exposing service gaps and sector fragmentation, and highlighting the need for more relational, cross-sector, and community collaboration, not just in times of crisis.

There was clear agreement that this required a different focus on collaborating and leading together. The Project encouraged co-design, adaptability and working *with* community, not just *for* it. The Project was seen as a transformative, values-driven initiative aligned with broader policy reform.

“It wasn’t just about one service or program - it was about the bigger picture, the whole community around children and families.”

(Collective Member)

Diversity and common ground

Participants came to TR with different drivers, interests and requirements, but all shared an interest in collaborating differently, and learning and development.

Some members and member organisations sought greater initial certainty about the purpose, intended outcomes and organisational benefit. Others were curious and attracted by the open-ended and relational nature of the process.

Underpinning all was an awareness of the need for relational change, offset by limited resources and the transactional and competitive nature of the funding environment.

“Transforming Relationships is a connective workshop - the common theme is to support community as well as staff. Being connected and tied in as a community. People servicing people and supporting wellbeing with self-care so we can support families and clients and colleagues”.

(Project team member)

Relational cross-sector and community collaboration

Participants described the Project as a unique opportunity to strengthen relationships across the child and family sector by working together across

organisational boundaries. They valued the project's community led and place-based design, particularly the inclusion of First Nations voices and early childhood expertise.

The following themes emerged in stakeholder descriptions of TR.



(Sense-making TR Team workshop)

The Project brought together like-minded professionals to support better outcomes for families and children in the region and created a rare space for open, honest collaboration between government, community, and early childhood sectors.

The Project fostered connection and trust through this shared purpose and engagement and allowed participants to better understand other services and build practical referral pathways.

"[We] Know who people are now, that I wouldn't have known before. We'd [heard] about each other via a mutual client and realised when we went to the workshop we put a face to a name. As a result, we have managed to get bub's immunisation on track."

(Collective Member)

A safe space for learning, reflection and capacity building

Participants were drawn to the Project's emphasis on professional growth, cultural learning, and developing more effective ways of working together. The combination of strong practical foundations and a thoughtfully designed, supportive environment supported this.

The project team provided tailored support and follow up to stakeholders before and after workshops. This played a significant role in encouraging participation and helped communicate that the work, and the people involved, were genuinely valued, respected, and supported.

Participants consistently noted that having access to well-prepared venues, coordinated sessions, and the right materials made it easier to fully engage in the work. Sessions were intentionally structured with careful attention to space, timing, and flow, which helped to create a welcoming, respectful atmosphere. Participants noted that there was a culturally inclusive framework embedded from the outset, which fostered a culturally safe learning environment.

"Having First Nations voices involved right from the beginning made it feel authentic. It wasn't just a 'tick the box' exercise - it shaped the direction of the work."

(Collective Member)

There was an emphasis on openness and learning through fun, which was valued by participants. The structure of the workshops enabled people to learn from one another in real-time and build confidence through shared experience. Each session creating momentum for new ideas and improved internal organisational culture.

3.2 Supports

Participants identified a number of key enablers that supported initial engagement, built trust, created a sense of shared purpose, and fostered strong foundations for sector collaboration.

High-quality, flexible communication and engagement

Relational groundwork was personal, intentional and laid early through face-to-face engagement, site visits and invitations to the Engoori training, which helped build trust.

Clear and timely communication helped maintain momentum throughout Phase 1 and ensured all participants felt informed and included. The project's regular

touchpoints - including updates, workshop recaps, and check-ins - supported understanding, reinforced key messages, and maintained momentum.

The workshops were described as essential in enabling informal conversations where people recognised similarities in practice and shared challenges. Workshop updates were clear, thorough, and reinforced through multiple channels. The deliberate effort to synthesise workshop feedback and check back with participants was consistently noted as a strength.

The combination of relational and technical elements across the Phase 1 process was highly valued. When asked what the most valuable part of the process was:

- 93% said the check ins and face to face workshops
- 79% said the reflections on learning and changes
- 86% said the shared documentation and resources

Leadership engagement and pre-commitment benefits

Early buy-in from leadership across organisations legitimised the work and created space for teams to participate. The pre-commitment phase was described as vital in building momentum and establishing trust. It enabled services to prepare, reflect and bring their teams along with them before the project work officially began.

"I felt like they actually listened. Not just to what we said, but what we needed."

(Collective Member)

The decision to offer Engoori training to individuals and organisations before formal project activities began was praised. It was seen as a generous and strategic gesture that signalled a serious commitment to shared cultural values.

Participants noted that the Project Team demonstrated clear thinking, responsiveness and integrity throughout, which encouraged others to show up honestly, share their reflections, and stretch their thinking.

The Project Team worked to facilitate a process of collaborative exploration rather than prescribing fixed outcomes. Participants valued their adaptability, and ability to respond to the pace and readiness of the group.

Participants consistently pointed out the value of the Project Team in modelling relational and collaborative practice.

Coming together to learn, be curious and share knowledge

A shared commitment to learning - both personal and collective - emerged as a key enabler of engagement. Many participants joined the TR Project without a clear idea of what to expect, but with a strong sense of curiosity to learn and build their knowledge.

“The shift is when you start to see the genuine trust and transparency coming into play. Capacity building is key...[people] aren’t just sharing because “I’ll get something out of this” but sharing because this is best for the sector and we want to support the community.”

(Participant)

There was a dynamic and inclusive learning environment, facilitated by the TR project team. This supported participants to enact individual values and strengths, which they identified as strategic, enthusiasm, appreciation, authenticity, curiosity, openness, peaceful, and collaboration.

Participants appreciated the space to learn from one another through structured and incidental interactions. The use of tools to deepen understanding and reflection was highlighted. This included specific reference to learning tools such as the evidence review, Engoori training, Seed to Tree, and connection cards which helped anchor learning and prompt deeper reflection.

Participants said the Project gave them time and space to reflect on what was happening in their own work, and how it could change. They liked being able to ask questions, listen to different views, and test ideas. Some participants particularly highlighted the focus on evidence, as valuable in deepening understanding and embedded the importance of coming together.

“Even when things changed, we were told why — and it always made sense.”

(Collective Member)

Participants were invited to reflect on how the process illustrated the behaviours identified in the Collective’s Cultural Action Plan. They identified the following behaviours in action.

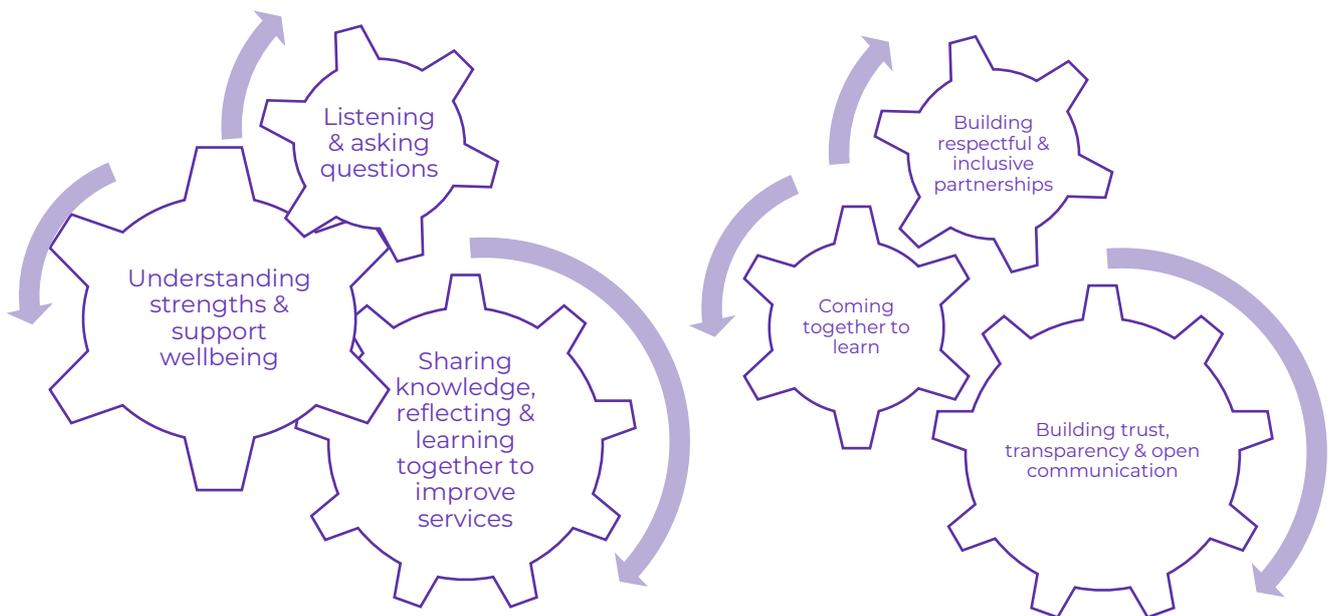


Diagram: Behaviours from the TR Cultural Action Plan

Relational processes and structure created a safe space

"[The Project Lead] would come to us with a detailed plan for each workshop, the space - it felt warm, welcoming, and special."

(Collective Member)

Participants valued the structure and adaptability of the Phase 1 process. The structure provided a safe space whilst enabling flexibility and creativity to explore complexity, uncertainty and differences of opinion. Participant reflections included:

- The Project followed a predictable rhythm, with regular workshops, updates, and reflective practices that supported participants to stay engaged.
- The facilitation and tools used by the Project Leadership Team created and held a space for all involved
- The project's regular touchpoints - including updates, workshop recaps, and check-ins - supported understanding, reinforced key messages, and maintained momentum.
- The approach was responsive, adjusting based on feedback while maintaining an overarching direction.
- Thoughtful touches, from the food, sensory toys, plants, and creative materials, helped participants feel relaxed and valued.

- Activities were well-facilitated and interactive, creating opportunities for all voices to be heard.

Models, tools and resources for connection and collaboration

“It wasn’t just the activities — it was how everything was pulled together. It showed how our feedback was heard and used.”

(Collective Member)

During Phase 1, a range of different approaches were applied across the process, to foster and model connection and collaboration. This began with the Engoori training with individual organisations, as previously described. The TR Collective subsequently drew on the training to develop a Collective Cultural Action Plan defining shared values, behaviours, and rituals.

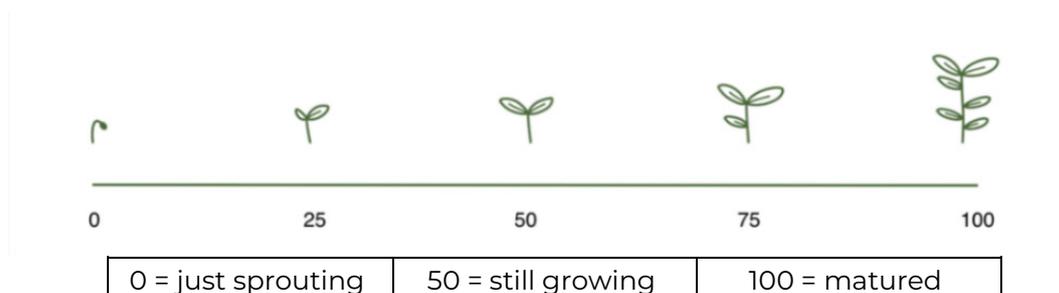
The Seed to Tree tool was also used across workshop sessions as an individual and collective assessment and reflection tool. Seed to Tree was developed by Community First Development, through action research and community development with First Nations knowledge holders and custodians.¹ Seed to Tree is a participatory monitoring and evaluation tool that may be adapted for different purposes and contexts. With agreement from Community First Development, the TR project team adapted the tool and invited participants to assess their organisational capability and readiness for change according to four priority areas:

1. Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, relationships and workforce
2. Building strategic partnerships
3. Empowering children and families
4. Strengthening workforce development.

Ratings were de-identified and collated for Collective review, to identify areas the TR Collective wished to grow and nurture together.

The tool was adapted as follows:

¹ We recognise Community First Development as the creators and copyright holders of the Seed to Tree tool, developed through action research and community development with First Nations’ knowledge-holders and custodians. We thank Community First Development for generously sharing the Seed to Tree tool for broader learning and use. Please see communityfirstdevelopment.org.au/seed-to-tree for more information.



Connection activities

A range of engagement and connection activities were used across Phase 1 workshops, including:

- Recognising strengths, with handout gifts (workshop 1)
- Building the highest tower (workshop 1)
- Music breaks and ‘waterfall’ check-out (online workshop 2)
- Share a ‘Boring Fact’ about yourself (workshop 4)
- Gift of a seedling to each Collective member, and the Seed to Tree activity (workshop 4)
- 3 Question Mingle (developing Collective connection cards, in workshop 5)
- Photo-booth, Walking the Workshop Wall (reflecting on achievements) and Feedback Frames (workshop 6)

The Engoori model, Seed to Tree tool, and check-in Connection Cards, were all identified by Collective members as significant during Phase 1. The range of approaches helped participants to engage more deeply with complex or sensitive topics. Tools and resources were taken back to individual organisations and shared and used with teams. They helped to build a shared way of working and encouraged reflection, relationality, and strengths-based thinking.

“It was delivered in a really well thought out way... It was really interactive and lots of group activities that didn’t involve just sitting at a table and writing notes.”

(Collective Member)

3.3 Challenges

Participants were asked to reflect on any key challenges that hindered the process and reflect on what was not particularly valuable. Responses have been summarised into key themes:

Working Differently

The Project asked people to engage, relate and collaborate in ways that were different from standard sector-level processes.

Phase 1 was a process of discovery, shaped by the voices, priorities and experiences of those involved. It invited people to engage in collaborative exploration together, rather than action planning towards predetermined fixed outcomes.

This approach can be challenging initially, for those who seek greater certainty and more prescribed pathways. Some people felt there was a lack of clarity around the Project purpose and desired outcomes, which led to initial uncertainty.

The opportunity to devolve and share leadership leading into Phase 2, created some concerns and hesitation in the TR Collective. Coming out of Phase 1, the project team had assumed leadership roles and responsibilities would be shared across the TR Collective. However, this was not supported by the TR Collective.

It was clear that the facilitation framework and support from YWCA Australia was highly valued. This continues to be required into Phase 2 to support momentum and capability.

Capacity, Competing Priorities and Time

Engaging broader teams and stakeholders was not always straightforward, particularly at the beginning when people sought greater clarity about the outcomes, organisational investment and benefit.

In some larger organisations, it was challenging to bring others along on the journey, due to organisational size, multi-layered structures, and differing drivers and interest.

Participants acknowledged there can be tension between time away from service delivery and learning and development opportunities, particularly given limited staffing and resources. Communications between sessions and recaps at the beginning of the next one helped to support engagement if people were unable to attend every session.

Some services covered a large region and were located significant distances away from where the sessions were held. This added travel time to time away from services which has to be factored into future planning.

4. Implications and Future Directions

4.1 Phase 1: Outcomes

The TR Project was guided by a program logic with three key outcomes – building our knowledge, deepening our practice, and transforming our systems for collaborative leadership and change.

Reflections from participants found that *Building knowledge* has been successfully achieved, providing a strong foundation for ongoing work. *Deepening practice* is underway, with participants embedding learnings from TR within their own organisations. However, further support and focus will help consolidate these changes. *Transforming systems* is beginning to emerge, signalling early shifts in cross-sector collaboration, but will require sustained collective effort to fully realise its potential.

4.2 An emergent model for change

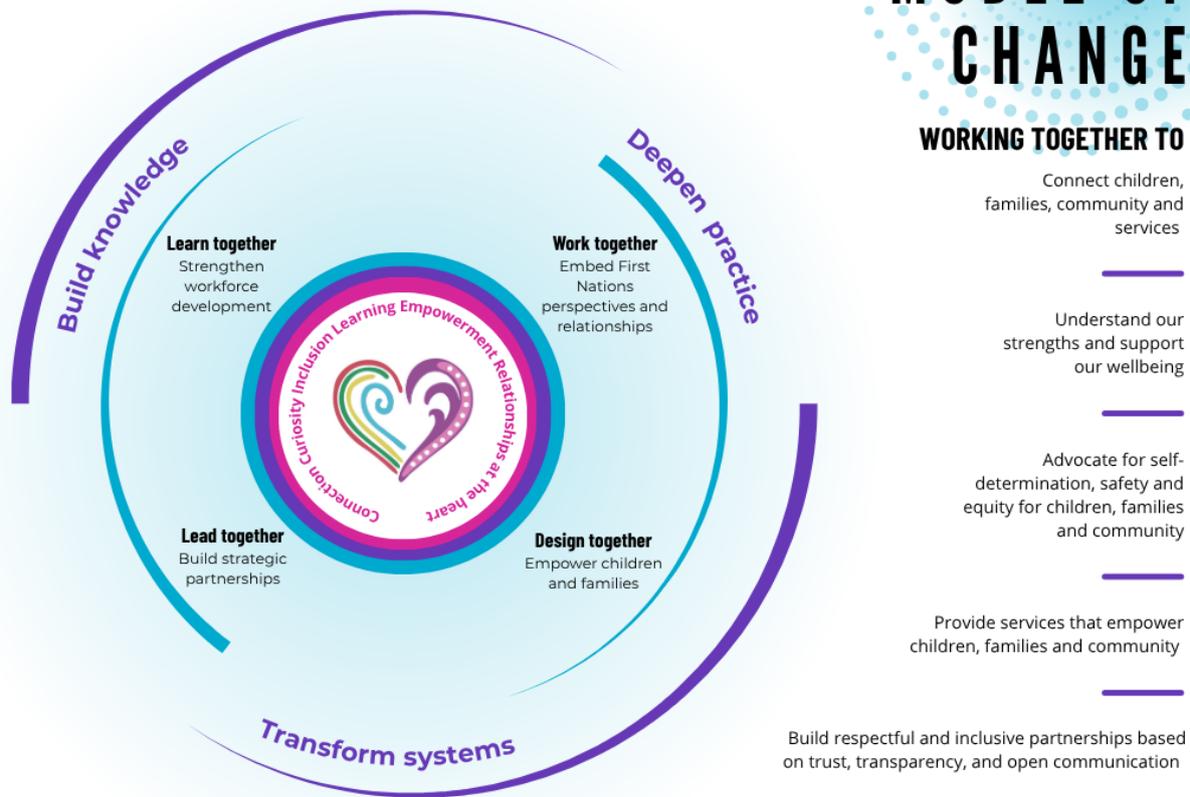
Phase 1 of TR has informed the development of an emergent model for change. This will be further refined by the Collective, as the work continues to evolve.

OUR VISION

A quality, culturally safe and inclusive early years sector that grows and develops together to be more responsive to the holistic needs of children, families and community

TRANSFORMING RELATIONSHIPS

MODEL OF CHANGE



4.3 Phase 2: Opportunities and Challenges

Review headlines were shared with the TR Collective and the project team in June. A sense-making workshop with the project team explored the findings further, to identify key themes and implications for Phase 2.

In Phase 2, the focus has shifted to how the TR Collective is taking action together and maintaining momentum. This has been a key transition point, which brings opportunities and challenges.

Phase 2 opportunities include to:

- Plan, design and deliver together on agreed priority actions
- Share leadership roles and responsibilities across the TR Collective
- Deepen collaborative learning and practice capabilities
- Extend the TR Collective to include other key stakeholders
- Identify proactive and reactive opportunities for collaboration between Collective members

- Embed systems to support shared decision-making, distributed commitments, and visible ownership of actions to track progress.
- Continue to lead responsively and flexibly, with clear communication to help services become more comfortable with an emergent, co-designed approach.

Phase 2 challenges include to:

- Ensure there is clarity around Collective roles, responsibilities, and key actions
- Support the TR Collective to explore devolved and collaborative leadership approaches
- Embed collaborative leadership learning and practice within member organisations
- Deliver together, in the face of business as usual demands and constrained resourcing
- Consider how and when to use online delivery models to foster inclusion, and maintain engagement, especially across a geographically dispersed region.
- Collaborate together, through widespread current cycles of funding recommissioning across the sector
- Maintain momentum and focus, to become self-sustaining with collective accountability embedded across the network to build long-term impact.

Centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voices

Participants identified the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and lived experience to be embedded at the heart of decision-making, design, and delivery.

Considerations for Phase 2 include:

- Continue to embed cultural inclusion in Collective and member practice, ensuring cultural safety and inclusion are not only stated commitments but demonstrated through everyday actions and decision-making
- Check-ins with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, to reflect on cultural safety and inclusion
- Collective engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members more broadly, to build understanding, relationships, and trust
- Consider how the TR Collective will hold itself accountable and responsible for learning, acting on feedback, and adapting as needed.

One of the four Collaborative Actions developed by the TR Collective is:

“Working Together: *to build a culturally safe, informed and responsive sector to better meet the needs of First Nations families”.*

The Collaborative Action objective is defined as:

To develop the capacity of services to understand and develop culturally safe and mutually respectful relationships, by:

- Building organisational cultural competence and learning
- Providing opportunities to consult, listen and learn from First Nations services, staff and families
- Developing and supporting partnerships with First Nations services.

As a result:

- Services increase knowledge and understanding of respectful and reciprocal relationships
- Services demonstrate culturally responsive engagement with First Nations people
- The needs of First Nations families are better supported in services
- Services form respectful, ongoing relationships with First Nations people.

Working Together is a priority Collaborative Action the TR Collective could focus on and progress together now.

“This connects to the impact we want for the future by having a well-resourced (informed) workforce that drives and leads change in culturally informed, connected and accountable ways.”

(Collective member)

Maintaining Momentum

There is a strong appetite for continued action in the region. This requires active maintenance through structured opportunities for collaboration and shared leadership.

Phase 2 opportunities include:

- Testing Collective appetite to build on and deliver according to the four defined Collective Actions. The TR Collective Actions set an ambitious agenda, which requires prioritisation, capability and time to deliver.

- Focus on re-engaging Collective members, given drop-off between Phase 1 and 2. This is not unexpected, as the TR Collective moves out of engagement and into action. There is a risk, however, in maintaining momentum and collective commitment, should active participation continue to fall.
- Extending Collective opportunities to other organisations across the sector. This may also include others working more broadly beyond the early years sector, acknowledging that cross-sector collaboration benefits children and families, who do not experience issues in service delivery silos.
- Continuing to foster collaboration over competition. Participants described the Project as a “beautiful example” of working together despite competitive funding environments. *“It’s okay to connect and work alongside competitors.”*
- Continuing to invest in leadership capability and training, particularly in relation to centring the voices of lived experience, which was not addressed during Phase 1.

There is a key challenge to maintaining momentum and building sustainability for the future, within the current model of resourcing and leadership. While the TR Collective values the current leadership of YWCA Australia in facilitating and supporting the TR Collective, there is significant work and commitment in project management, stakeholder engagement, process design, resource development, knowledge sharing, analysis and communications. Much of this sits outside the facilitated sessions, but is pivotal in supporting shared value, contribution and sustainability.

TR is currently funded as an initiative of the YWCA Communities for Children (CFC) Facilitating Partner program. As the current CFC funding ends in June 2026, there is a key need to consider how the achievements of the TR Collective can be sustained in the longer term, through transformed ways of working, designing, leading and learning together.

5. Conclusion

This Process Review aimed to document the Phase 1 of TR and identify key learnings and insights to inform the evolving work of the Collective. The Review has found that Phase 1 of the TR Collective was effective in establishing the foundations and relationships for collective ways of working across diverse child and family services. Phase 1 created the conditions for future, transformational change, using a highly intentional model structured around collaboration, evidence, relationality and capacity building.

Phase 1 has also highlighted key opportunities and challenges for the future, including transitioning from knowledge and relationship building to action in Phase 2, the need for continued iteration and learning cycles, and the importance of facilitated supports and collective engagement to maintain and sustain momentum.

The TR project set out to contribute to the evidence of what works to improve outcomes for children and families explored through sector collaboration, leadership and systems change. So, what does this way of working require from individuals, organisations and the sector?

5.1 Helping services become comfortable with an uncertain, emergent process

This way of working is not linear, and outcomes are often discovered through the work, rather than predetermined in advance. For many services used to operating within clear frameworks and measurable targets, embracing ambiguity can be challenging. It may be additionally challenging for participants when briefing back to stakeholders and senior leadership in individual organisations.

Moving through complexity together requires a shared tolerance for uncertainty, and a belief that meaningful change comes through relational, iterative processes, rather than rigid project plans.

Building in clear structures that support shared decision making, reconnect participants, and offer people tangible opportunities to commit is key to success. Even small, shared actions can help maintain momentum and purpose.

5.2 Gaining executive leadership support across different services

Executive endorsement is crucial to embedding and sustaining collaborative practice. Without overarching leadership commitment, these efforts may be short-lived.

Transformational approaches require:

- *Visible leadership support*: Leaders modelling relational values in how they partner, make decisions, and allocate resources.
- *Strategic alignment*: Embedding collaborative goals into organisational strategies and planning cycles.
- *Authorising environment for staff*: Allowing and encouraging staff to invest time in partnership-building, systems thinking, and reflective practice, rather than only direct service outputs. This includes supporting staff to attend workshops and training.

When executive leaders across services champion the work, it legitimises the process, aligns priorities across organisations, and creates the permission structure needed for innovation.

5.3 Overcoming traditional funding and organisational incentives that promote working in isolation

Collaborative, place-based approaches such as TR require a significant shift in mindset and systems. Traditional funding models often reinforce siloed operations by allocating resources to individual organisations based on discrete outputs or competitive applications. These structures can unintentionally discourage collaboration, shared planning, and joint accountability.

To truly work in relational and cross-sector ways, services need flexibility in how they use resources and a mandate to prioritise collective outcomes. This includes:

- *Shifting from competition to collaboration*: Encouraging joint funding models, shared reporting frameworks, and collaborative outcome measurement.
- *Embedding collective impact in funding agreements*: Incentivising services to invest time in shared governance, reflection, and relationship-building.
- *Creating safe spaces to share power and risk*: Supporting organisations to move away from 'proving impact alone' toward 'improving impact together.'

This way of working means challenging deeply embedded structures and shifting the focus from short-term service delivery metrics, towards long-term systemic change.

TR demonstrates a model that builds towards transformational change, with learnings that may be applied more broadly by sector stakeholders, funders and decision makers.

6. Appendices

Provided as a separate document upon request, or [available on our website](#), including:

Appendix A: TR Evidence Review

Appendix B: TR Cultural Action Plan

Appendix C: TR Shared Strategy

Appendix D: TR Collaborative Actions

Appendix E: Workshop tools and resources

- TR Collective Readiness Assessment and Tools
- TR Collective Connection Cards

Contact us

 (02) 6625 5800

 info@ywca.org.au

 Bunjalung Country
101A Rous Road
Goonellabah NSW 2480

 [ywca-australia](https://www.linkedin.com/company/ywca-australia)

 [ywcaaustralia](https://www.instagram.com/ywcaaustralia)

 [YWCAAustralia](https://www.facebook.com/YWCAAustralia)

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