WESTERN SYDNEY COMMUNITY FORUM

DELIVERING IMPACT UNDER PRESSURE

FUNDING, REPORTING AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING IN WESTERN SYDNEY



western sydney community forum

UNSW SYDNEY

CENTRE for SOCIAL IMPACT

UNSW Business Insights Institute

We work on the lands of the

DHARUG GUNDUNGURRA DHARAWAL



We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

as the Custodians of the unceded lands and waters on which we work and live. We pay respect to Elders past and present.

We
recognise First Nations people, their cultures and their heritage on these lands, which spans more than 65,000 years

We
acknowledge past and present injustices and commit to walking in solidarity alongside First Nations peoples and communities

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Contributions

Dr Noone contributed to the literature review and the development of the research questions and community wellbeing framework; designed the survey; collected and analysed the data; drafted the findings; and contributed to the recommendations.

Dr Bird (Western Sydney Community Forum) conceptualised the research problem, facilitated engagement with the Western Sydney community sector, and contributed to refining the research questions, interpreting the findings, developing the community wellbeing framework and the report's recommendations.

Dr Nguyen contributed to developing the community wellbeing framework, the survey, and the literature review.



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We are especially grateful to the 41 participants who generously shared their time, knowledge and experiences through the survey. Their insights formed the foundation of this report, and we thank them for their contribution and ongoing commitment to communities across Greater Western Sydney.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (ChatGPT OpenAI) was used to assist with editing and improving the clarity, structure and consistency of the writing; locating potentially relevant references; organising and formatting references; generating variable labels and syntax for SPSS analyses; and assisting with the transfer and aggregation of summary statistics used to prepare figures and tables. All sources were reviewed and verified by the authors before inclusion. All statistical analyses, interpretations, conclusions and final editorial decisions were undertaken by the authors.

Executive Summary

Greater Western Sydney is home to 2.9 million people and is characterised by substantial cultural diversity, a large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, and spatial concentrations of socioeconomic disadvantage. These characteristics make locally responsive, place-based approaches particularly relevant to addressing community challenges across the region.

Place-based services play an important role in supporting individuals and strengthening communities across Western Sydney. However, while these organisations are often funded and evaluated based on client-level outcomes, much less is known about their collective contribution to community wellbeing. This report addresses that gap by examining the contribution of place-based services to community outcomes, the conditions under which they operate, and their readiness to participate in a shared approach to outcomes measurement.

Activities that contribute to community wellbeing emerged as a core feature of Western Sydney's place-based services. At least 85% of organisations reported activities related to social connection, access to services, responsiveness to community needs, acceptance and inclusion, community participation, access to information and support, and collaboration across the service system. The highest-priority outcome areas were community connection and belonging, and access, equity and inclusion.

At the same time, organisations are operating in an increasingly challenging environment. Most respondents expected demand for their services to increase beyond current capacity, anticipated pursuing new funding sources, and expected reporting and administrative requirements to grow. Respondents also reported substantial administrative burden associated with managing multiple funding sources and reporting requirements.

The report also identified challenges associated with outcomes measurement. While many organisations reported undertaking, or intending to undertake, monitoring, evaluation and learning activities, fewer than half (46%) believed that the benefits of measuring client outcomes outweighed the costs involved. Although most organisations reported having the skills needed to collect outcome data, substantially fewer reported having sufficient time or funding to do so effectively.

Despite these challenges, more than two-thirds of respondents indicated that they were interested, or potentially interested, in contributing to a shared approach to measuring community outcomes. Many were willing to share aggregated data and believed that a shared approach could improve understanding of both client and community outcomes.

Overall, the findings indicate that Western Sydney's place-based services are already making important contributions to community participation and wellbeing, but that these contributions remain difficult to demonstrate within existing funding, reporting and evaluation systems. Building on the preliminary community wellbeing framework developed through this research, a shared approach to outcomes measurement offers a practical opportunity to strengthen the evidence base for place-based services and inform future funding and policy decisions across Western Sydney.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction



The purpose of this report is to examine how Greater Western Sydney's[1] place-based services contribute to community wellbeing, the challenges they face in demonstrating those contributions, and their capacity and appetite to participate in a shared approach to measuring, evidencing and communicating community outcomes.

The report begins by explaining why Greater Western Sydney is the focal point for this research, before examining what is known about place-based services and their contribution to community wellbeing. It then presents a community wellbeing framework and describes some of the evaluation challenges these services face. The remainder of the report presents the research questions and methods, before outlining the findings, their implications and recommendations for future action.

[1] Throughout this report, “Greater Western Sydney” is used with a lowercase “g”, consistent with the Western Sydney Community Forum’s preferred usage.

About Western Sydney

Western Sydney has been described as Australia's "fastest growing, most diverse and politically contested region[1]. Home to more than 2.9 million people, the region plays an increasingly important role in Australia's economic, social and cultural future. Yet Greater Western Sydney has historically experienced underinvestment in services, with investment continuing to lag behind the region's population growth[2]. The region also contains substantial pockets of socioeconomic disadvantage[3,4].

Greater Western Sydney also has a substantially higher concentration of overseas-born and culturally and linguistically diverse residents than Australia overall. Based on Census data, 40.9% of Greater Western Sydney's population was born overseas in 2021, compared with 29.3% in New South Wales and 27.6% nationally[5]. This proportion had increased from 38.7% in Greater Western Sydney in 2016. Residents of Greater Western Sydney also come from more than 170 countries and speak more than 100 languages[6].

Greater Western Sydney is also home to a large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. Previous Census data indicate that there were approximately 54,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Greater Western Sydney, with the largest populations living in Blacktown (11,800), Penrith (10,900) and Campbelltown (7,200)[5].

It has been argued that when socio-economic disadvantage is spatially concentrated, solutions require a localised response[7]. Similar arguments have also been made with respect to migrant, refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse communities[8,9]. The importance of locally and culturally responsive approaches is particularly well established in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across areas such as health[10] and community development[11]. Together, these characteristics make place-based service delivery particularly relevant to the Greater Western Sydney context.

Place-based services in Greater Western Sydney



Place-based services are designed and delivered around the unique needs, assets and priorities of a defined geographic community. They recognise that outcomes are shaped by local social, economic, environmental and institutional conditions and therefore emphasise local knowledge, community participation and governance arrangements that enable services to respond to local circumstances and evolving community needs[12,13]. By being embedded within the communities they serve, place-based services can contribute to community wellbeing not only through direct support, but also by strengthening connections between people and organisations, building community capacity and supporting collective responses to complex local challenges[13,14].

In Greater Western Sydney, place-based organisations are understood as more than services that happen to be delivered within a particular geographic area. Participants in the Place-Based Services and Delivery Leadership Forum, convened by the Western Sydney Community Forum (the Forum), described place-based organisations as geographically focused, community-led and collaborative, and as deeply embedded in the social infrastructure of the communities they serve. They are characterised by community-led governance and delivery, local knowledge, trusted relationships and a deep understanding of local circumstances[15].

Community wellbeing

Community wellbeing is a broad and contested concept that has been used to describe both the wellbeing of individuals within a community and the social, cultural, environmental and relational conditions that shape community life[16–18]. The literature conceptualises community wellbeing in three broad ways: as the aggregate of individual wellbeing, as a collective property of communities, and as a relational concept in which individual and community wellbeing are mutually reinforcing[14,17]. In practice, these perspectives are often combined, with community wellbeing understood to include both individual outcomes, such as health, safety and financial security, and community-level characteristics, such as social cohesion, belonging, participation, relationships and local capacity[14].

A recent survey of Greater Western Sydney residents identified access to healthcare and support services, safety, financial security and housing as key determinants of wellbeing, while also finding high levels of belonging and optimism about the future of the region[19]. Together, these findings highlight the importance of both individual and community-level dimensions of wellbeing, including many of the conditions that place-based services seek to strengthen.



Community wellbeing in Greater Western Sydney

This report does not seek to measure community wellbeing directly. Rather, it focuses primarily on the collective conditions and capacities that enable communities to thrive. This reflects the important role that place-based services can play in building trust, participation, social capital, community capacity and service system coordination. Measuring community wellbeing itself would require a much broader range of indicators and data sources than are typically available to individual organisations.

In the absence of community outcomes frameworks developed specifically for place-based services, we reviewed the evaluation literature and frameworks associated with place-based initiatives to develop a preliminary set of domains for testing and refinement. While place-based initiatives and place-based services are not identical, both seek to improve outcomes within defined communities and often share an emphasis on local participation, collaboration and place-based action. The evaluation literature associated with place-based initiatives therefore provides a useful resource for identifying and assessing potential community-level outcomes. The findings from this review were combined with consultations with the Forum's Greater Western Sydney Sector Support & Advocacy Leadership Group and representatives from place-based services to identify a set of community wellbeing domains relevant to place-based services.

Table 1 presents the resulting framework. Community wellbeing is treated as a higher-order outcome influenced by a number of interrelated domains. The activities included in the framework do not measure community wellbeing directly. Rather, they identify the ways in which place-based services contribute to the conditions and capacities associated with community wellbeing.

Table 1. Community wellbeing framework for Greater Western Sydney's place-based services

Community wellbeing domain	Why it matters	Related service activities assessed in this research
Access, equity and inclusion	Community wellbeing frameworks recognise that overall improvements can mask significant disparities between groups and places. An equity lens helps identify who benefits, who is excluded, and where barriers to participation, services and decision-making continue to exist[14,20,21].	• Providing access to information and support • Improving access to services • Reducing barriers for marginalised groups • Ensuring services are responsive to diverse community needs • Providing culturally safe services • Acting as a first point of support for community members
Early support and safety	Early intervention can prevent problems from escalating and strengthen long-term community wellbeing, resilience and community capability[22].	• Supporting clients before issues escalate • Enhancing safety and wellbeing through early intervention and practical support • Promoting acceptance and inclusion through culturally safe and welcoming environments
Building community capacity, voice and leadership	Stronger community outcomes are more likely when residents and organisations actively participate in shaping priorities, influencing decisions and developing local leadership. Co-design and participatory approaches are increasingly recognised as central to legitimate and locally meaningful wellbeing frameworks[14,17,23,24].	• Building community participation through engagement with community members, volunteers and local leaders • Supporting community voice through gathering insights and advocacy • Developing local leadership and community champions • Governance structures that reflect local communities and cultural diversity • Employing and engaging local staff and volunteers

Table 1. Community wellbeing framework for Greater Western Sydney's place-based services

Community wellbeing domain	Why it matters	Related service activities assessed in this research
Contributing to the local economy	Community wellbeing is closely connected to employment, investment, economic participation and local capability. Increasingly, wellbeing frameworks recognise the importance of sustainable local economic activity in supporting thriving communities[2,25,26].	• Spending organisational resources locally, including staff salaries, suppliers and contractors
Community connection and belonging	Relationships, trust, participation and social cohesion are widely recognised as core dimensions of community wellbeing. Stronger social connections contribute to inclusion, resilience and a greater sense of shared identity and support[14,27].	• Building social connection through events, groups and connection spaces • Strengthening cultural belonging and inclusion • Increasing access to information and support through outreach, referrals and drop-in services
Collaboration and coordination of the local service system	Community outcomes are shaped by interconnected systems such as housing, health, education, transport and employment. Collaboration and coordination can improve access, reduce duplication and strengthen responses to complex community issues[2,23].	• Building collaboration across the local system • Strengthening referral pathways • Reducing duplication and addressing service gaps • Referring clients to other local services

Reporting, evaluation and place-based services in Greater Western Sydney

Community organisations are operating in an environment of increasing service demand alongside substantial reporting, compliance and administrative requirements[28,29]. Understanding how place-based services contribute to community wellbeing, the challenges they face in demonstrating those contributions, and their readiness to participate in shared approaches to measurement and evaluation is therefore an important step towards strengthening the region's evidence base.

Administrative Burden

Given the context in which Greater Western Sydney's place-based services operate, this research examines administrative burden, including the time, resources and organisational capacity required to meet funding, reporting and compliance requirements[28,30]. Drawing on the administrative burden framework developed by Moynihan et al.[31], the survey considers three aspects of burden: learning costs (the effort required to understand different reporting requirements), compliance costs (the time and resources needed to meet these requirements), and psychological costs (the pressures and frustrations associated with them).

Particular attention is given to the number of funders and contracts organisations manage, the time spent on reporting, the extent of duplication across reporting systems, and the effects of these requirements on organisational capacity and service delivery[28,30]. These factors may affect not only organisations' ability to deliver services, but also their capacity to measure, demonstrate and improve the outcomes they generate.

Capacity and appetite for a shared community outcomes framework

One potential response to these challenges is greater collaboration around community outcomes measurement. By pooling resources, expertise and data, place-based services may be able to generate evidence of their collective contribution to community outcomes that would be difficult to generate individually.

Shared measurement has been a central feature of collaborative and collective impact approaches for more than a decade[32]. However, agreeing on common client outcome measures can be difficult because organisations serve different populations, deliver different services and report to different funders. Community-level outcomes such as belonging, participation, local capacity and service coordination may therefore provide a more practical basis for collaboration because they are relevant across many organisations.

This report therefore examines not only the community outcomes to which Greater Western Sydney's place-based services contribute, but also their capacity and appetite to contribute to a shared approach to outcomes measurement.



Research Questions

What community wellbeing outcomes do Greater Western Sydney's place-based services contribute to, and which outcomes do they prioritise?

What opportunities and challenges shape the contribution of place-based services to these outcomes and their ability to demonstrate that contribution?

How well positioned are place-based services to contribute to a shared approach to measuring client and community outcomes?

ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS AND THE SURVEY

About the participants and the survey

Ethics approval for the study was provided by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee. Prior to the survey's launch, it was piloted with five sector representatives, whose feedback was used to refine the content and structure. Data collection took place between late April and mid-May 2026, and very few data were missing.

The Participants

The participants in this study were mainly senior leaders of Greater Western Sydney place-based services. An anonymous survey link was distributed through the Forum's mailing list and promoted on its LinkedIn page. The mailing list contained approximately 4,000 individuals representing several hundred organisations, although the exact number of organisations represented is unknown. A total of 41 responses were received, representing 41 organisations.

Approximately 56% of respondents were in Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or equivalent positions, 34% were members of a senior leadership team, and 10% identified as having another staff role. The four participants identifying as “other” were retained to maximise the sample size. The 38 not-profit organisations represented were most likely to have annual budgets between $250,000 and $1 million (32%), between $1 million and $5 million (27%), or more than $10 million (22%). Three respondents represented local government, state government or for-profit organisations and were therefore not asked to report an annual budget. Figures 1–3 show the locations in which participating services operated, their areas of service delivery, and the specific population groups they focused on. The response categories used for organisational budget and Figures 1–3 were taken directly from the Forum’s existing surveys to ensure familiarity for participating organisations.

Figure 1. Areas in which participating organisations operate

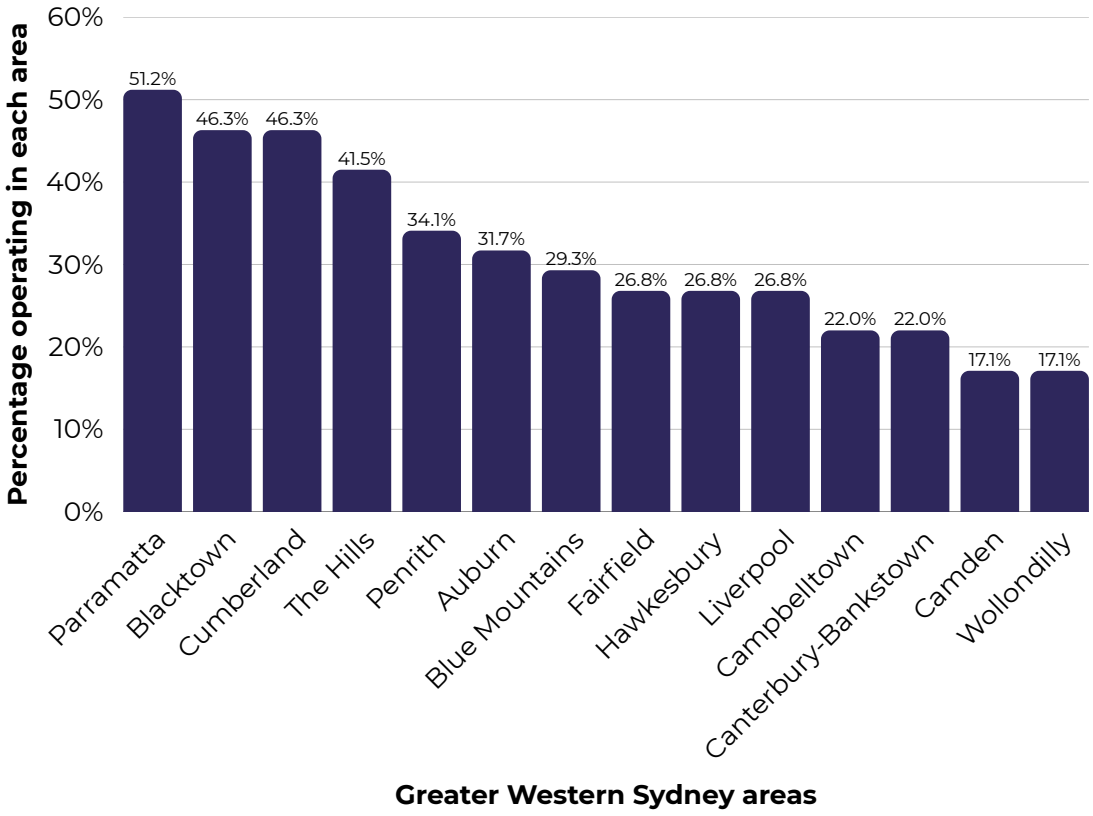




Figure 2. Service areas represented

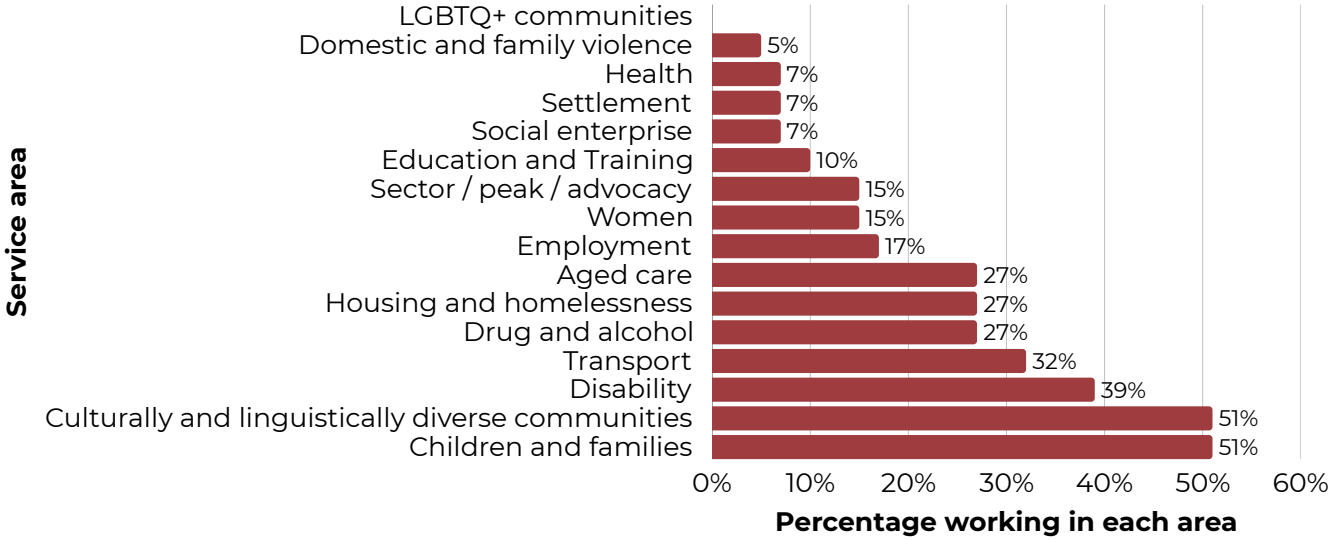
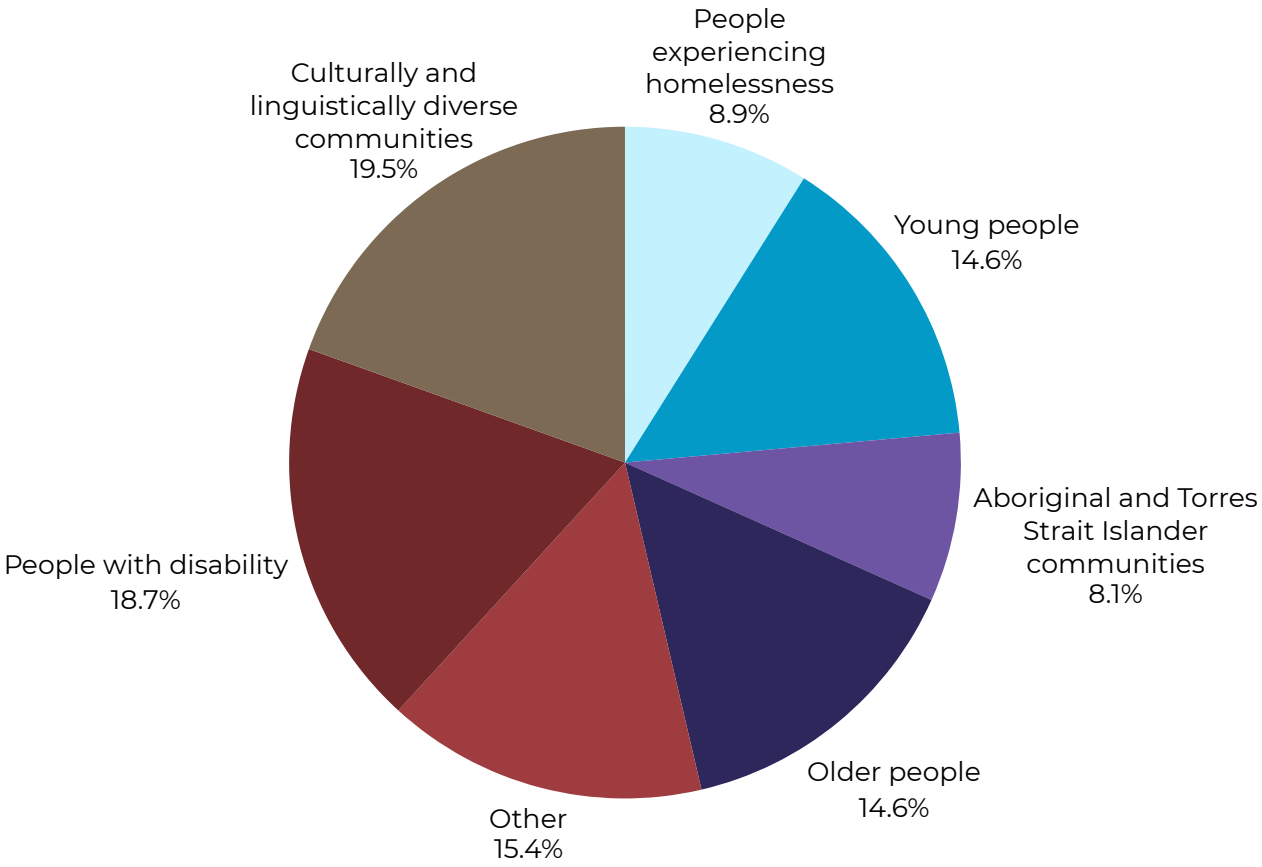


Figure 3. Population groups served by participating organisations



Assessing contribution to community outcomes

For each domain, participants were presented with a small number of activities (see Table 1) developed by the authors in collaboration with other members of the Forum and representatives from the Forum's leadership organisations. To minimise respondent burden, participants were asked whether their organisation undertook each activity rather than providing quantitative estimates of its frequency or scale. Participants could also select "none of these" if the activities were not relevant to their organisation.

Additional questions examined organisational characteristics and activities, including contributions to the local economy, collaboration with other services, community leadership and service system coordination. Consistent with the aim of minimising burden, these questions also relied on simple categorical responses rather than detailed quantitative reporting.

Other Measures

The survey also captured information on administrative burden, funding and reporting requirements, organisational expectations for the next six months, current approaches to monitoring, evaluation and learning, and organisations' capacity and appetite to contribute to a shared community outcomes framework.

Taken together, these measures were designed to provide an initial picture of the community outcomes to which place-based services contribute, the context in which they operate, and the feasibility of developing a shared approach to outcomes measurement across the sector.



RESULTS

Research Question 1: What community wellbeing outcomes are Greater Western Sydney's place-based services contributing to, and which outcomes do they prioritise?

This section presents the survey findings for each of the community wellbeing domains. While the survey does not measure changes in community wellbeing directly, it provides evidence of the activities place-based services undertake to strengthen the conditions associated with community wellbeing across Greater Western Sydney.

Access, equity and inclusion

Most organisations reported activities that promote access, equity and inclusion. These included increasing access to information and support (93%), ensuring services were responsive to diverse community needs (88%), improving access to services (85%), reducing barriers for marginalised groups (81%), and providing culturally safe services (71%). In addition, 74% of organisations reported that most, all, or almost all of their clients came to them first for support.

Early support and safety

Early support and safety were assessed through organisations' activities aimed at promoting acceptance and inclusion through culturally safe and welcoming environments (90%), enhancing safety and wellbeing through early intervention and practical support (85%), and supporting clients before issues escalate through the early identification of emerging needs (70%).

Building community capacity, voice and leadership

Most organisations reported activities aimed at building community participation through engagement with community members, volunteers and local leaders (90%), supporting community voice by gathering insights and advocating for change (83%), and developing local leadership and community champions (54%).

Excluding organisations that reported that the question was not applicable or that they were unsure, 40% reported that most, all, or almost all of their board and/or advisory group members reflected the cultural diversity of their clients, while a further 20% indicated that this applied to some members.

Approximately 63% of organisations reported that most, all, or almost all of their employees lived locally, while 87% reported the same for their volunteers.

Contributing to the local economy

Contribution to the local economy was assessed using a measure of local expenditure. Approximately half of the organisations reported spending all or almost all of their expenditure locally, while a further 34% reported spending most of their expenditure locally. Overall, more than 80% of organisations reported spending most, all, or almost all of their expenditure locally.

Community connection and belonging

Community connection and belonging were reflected in organisations' activities to increase access to information and support through information provision, referrals, drop-in services and outreach (93%), build social connection through community events, groups and spaces for connection (85%), and strengthen cultural belonging and inclusion through culturally safe activities and support for cultural identity (66%).

Promoting collaboration and coordination of the local service system

Collaboration and coordination were reflected in organisations' activities to build collaboration across the local system (95%), strengthen referral pathways (78%), and improve system coordination by reducing duplication and addressing service gaps (63%).

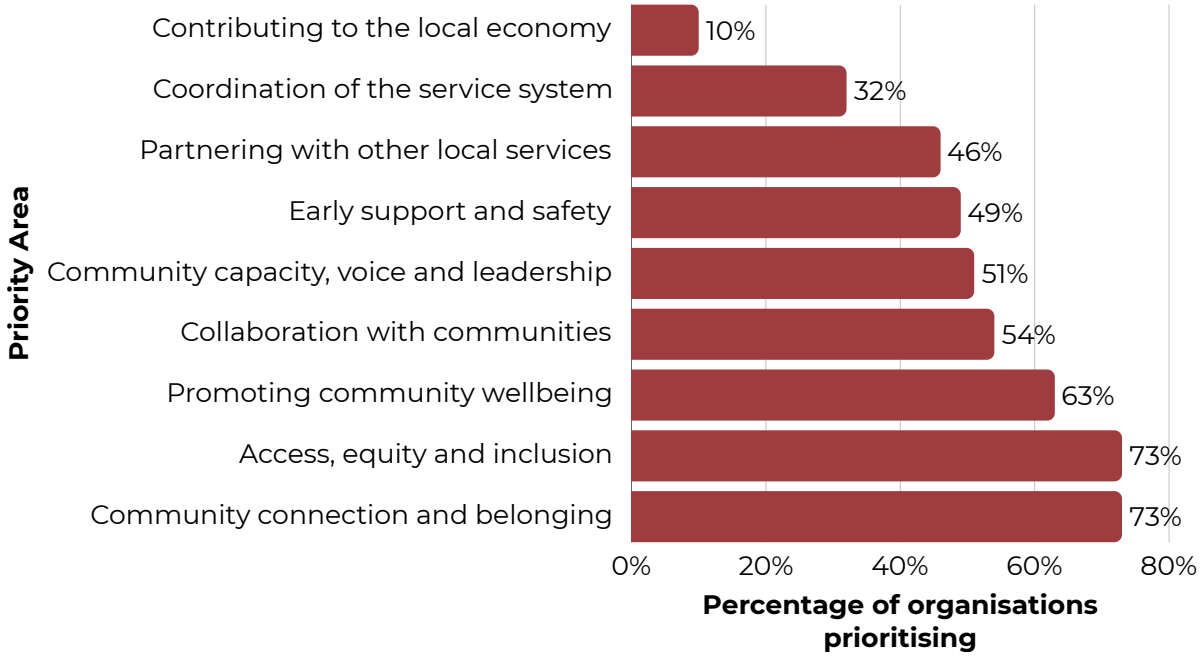
In addition, 24% of organisations reported that most, all, or almost all of their client referrals were made to other local services, while a further 55% indicated that this applied to some referrals.

Prioritising community outcomes

Participants were asked to identify their top five priorities from the list of community outcome domains, alongside an overarching domain labelled "promoting community wellbeing". As shown in Figure 4, the highest-priority domains were community connection and belonging (73%) and access, equity and inclusion (73%). These were followed by promoting community wellbeing (63%), collaboration with communities (54%), and community capacity, voice and leadership (51%). The domains least likely to be identified as priorities were contributing to the local economy (10%) and coordination of the service system (32%).

Comparing these priorities with the activities reported in the previous section suggests that organisations often contribute to community outcomes that are not viewed as explicit organisational priorities. For example, while only 10% identified contributing to the local economy as a priority outcome, more than 80% reported spending most, all, or almost all of their expenditure locally. Similarly, although only 32% prioritised coordination of the service system, 95% reported activities aimed at building collaboration across the local service system. These findings suggest that place-based services contribute to a broader range of community outcomes than is reflected in their stated priorities.

Figure 4. Organisational prioritisation of community outcomes

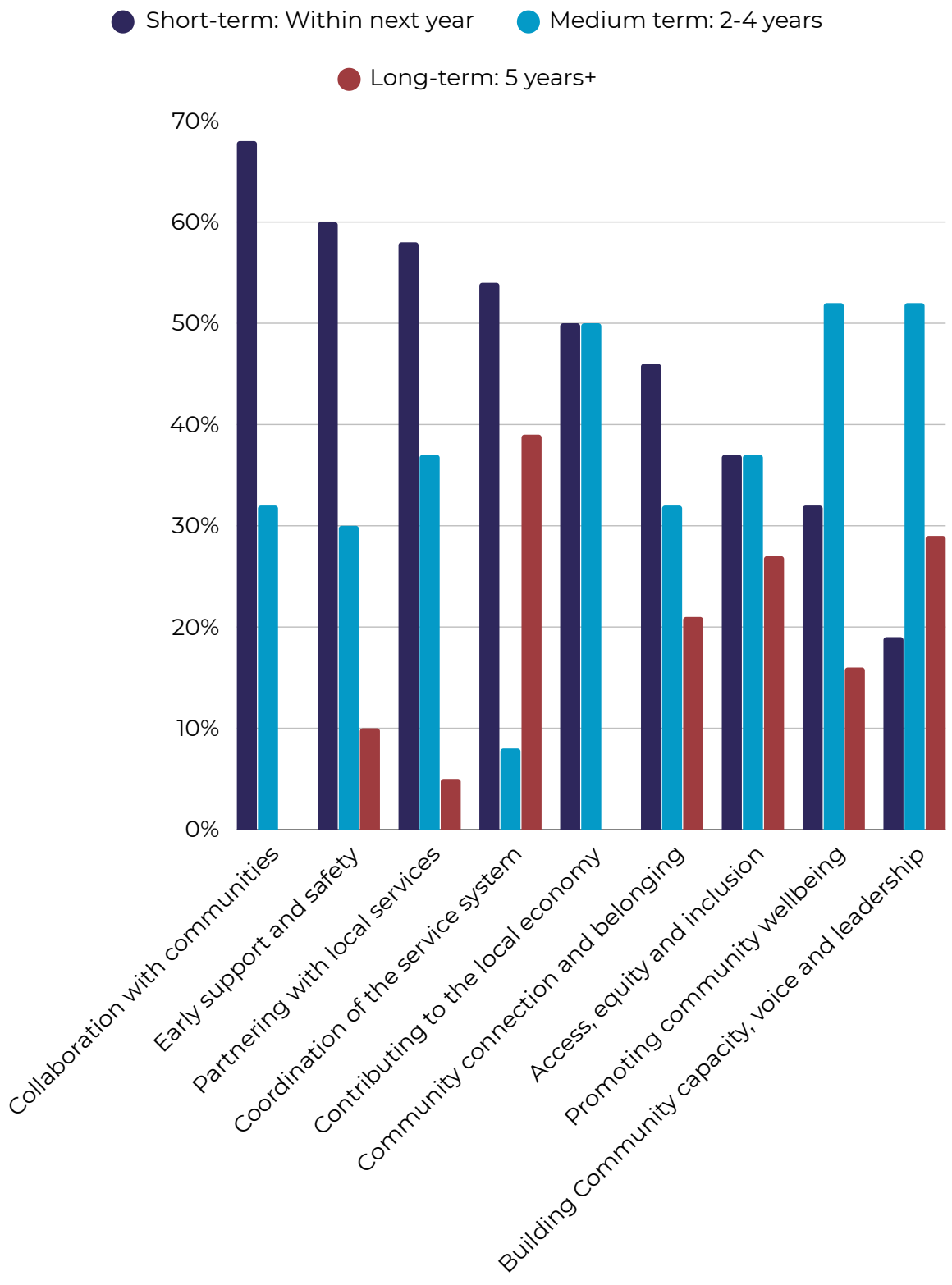


Participants were also asked whether they expected to see change in each priority domain in the short term (within one year), medium term (2–4 years), or long term (5+ years). As shown in Figure 5, expectations varied across domains.

Among organisations that prioritised collaboration with communities, early support and safety, and partnering with other local services, most expected to see change within the next year. In contrast, community capacity, voice and leadership, and community wellbeing were more commonly viewed as medium- or long-term outcomes.

Overall, organisations viewed collaboration, partnerships and early support as outcomes that could be achieved relatively quickly, while community capacity and community wellbeing were more likely to be seen as requiring sustained effort over time. Figure 5 presents the proportion of organisations expecting change within each time horizon for the domains they identified as priorities.

Figure 5. Expected time horizon for change in prioritised outcome domains



Research Question 2: What opportunities and challenges shape the contribution of place-based services to these outcomes and their ability to demonstrate that contribution?

Partnerships for community outcomes

Partnerships are an important feature of place-based service delivery. In 2025, organisations reported substantially more informal than formal partnerships with other local services. Approximately 49% participated in between one and four formal partnerships governed by a contract or memorandum of understanding, while 53% reported having more than 12 informal partnerships.

Looking ahead, 57% of organisations indicated that they wished to maintain their current level of partnership activity, while approximately 40% hoped to increase the number of formal and informal partnerships in which they participated. These findings suggest that partnerships are already central to how place-based services operate and are likely to remain so in the future.

Administrative burden

Administrative burden varied considerably across participating organisations and was associated with the complexity of their funding and reporting arrangements. Approximately one-third of organisations reported to only one or two funders, while a further 44% reported to three to five funders. Just over half were delivering between one and five contracts, with a further 30% delivering between six and ten. The time spent on reporting and compliance activities also varied substantially: approximately 30% reported spending 10 hours or less per week, while a similar proportion reported spending more than 21 hours. However, 24% were unsure how much time these activities required.

Table 2 summarises the reporting systems used by participating organisations. Approximately 71% reported using the Department of Social Services Data Exchange (DEX/SCORE), making it the most commonly used reporting system. Almost 40% also reported using other reporting systems not included in the predefined survey options, indicating considerable diversity in the reporting systems used across the sector. To protect participant confidentiality, several reporting systems used by only one or two organisations (Infoxchange, SHIP, and ETO/Apricot/Salesforce) were combined into a single category.

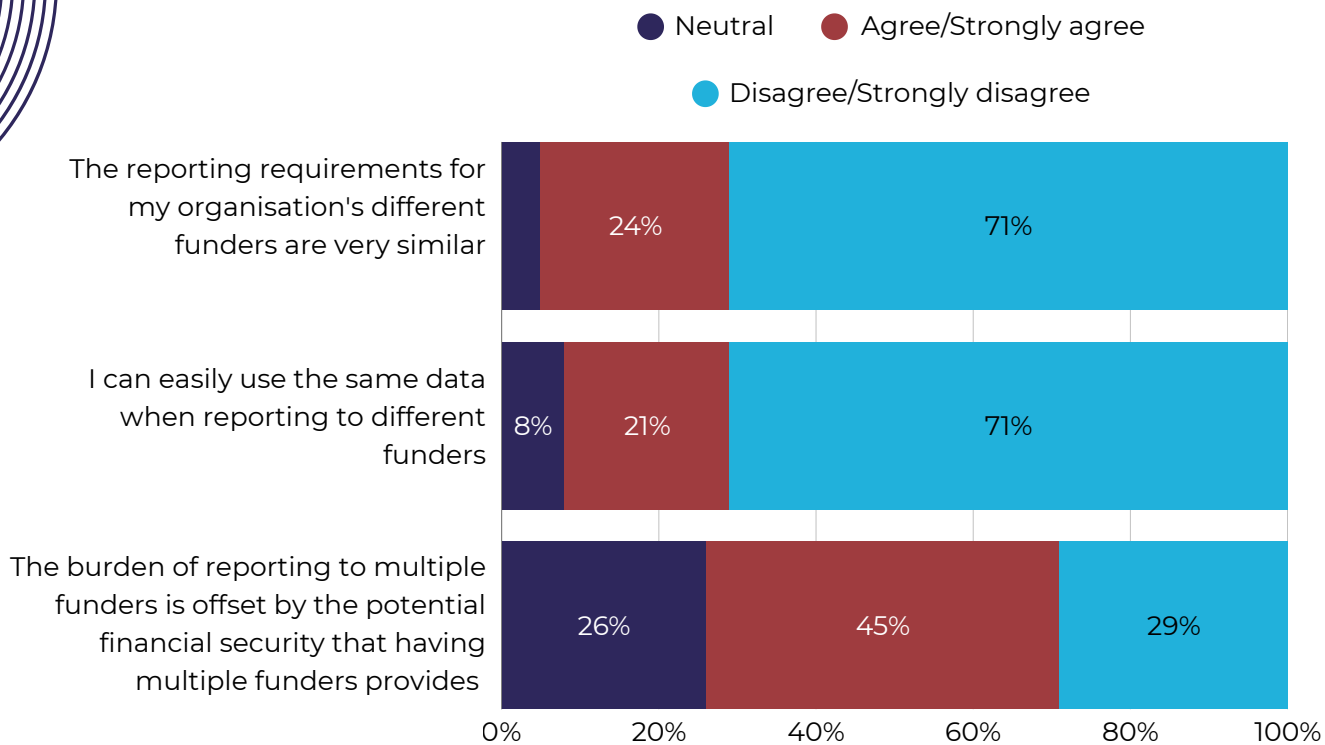
Table 2. Reporting tools used by organisations

Reporting Tool	N	%
DEX / SCORE (DSS Data Exchange)	29	70.7
Other	16	39.0
NDIS Provider Portal / PRODA	14	34.1
My Aged Care	13	31.7
ChildStory / KiDS	8	19.5
CIMS	4	9.8
Infoxchange / SHIP / ETO / Apricot / Salesforce	5	12.1
Penelope / RediCASE / Outcome Star Online	0	0.0

The number of reporting systems used also varied considerably. Approximately 40% of organisations reported using a single reporting system, 22% used two, and 39% used three or more. Among organisations relying on a single system, half used DEX/SCORE and 38% used another reporting system not included in the predefined survey options. By contrast, organisations using three or more reporting systems almost universally reported using DEX/SCORE (94%), with many also using the NDIS Provider Portal/PRODA (69%), My Aged Care (63%), and ChildStory/KiDS (31%).

Figure 6 highlights the challenges associated with managing multiple reporting requirements. Approximately 71% of organisations disagreed that reporting requirements were similar across funders, and a similar proportion disagreed that the same data could be easily reused across reporting processes. At the same time, 45% agreed that the burden associated with reporting to multiple funders was offset by the potential financial security provided by funding diversification. These findings illustrate the tension between the benefits of multiple funding sources and the administrative burden they create.

Figure 6. Administrative burden in funding and reporting

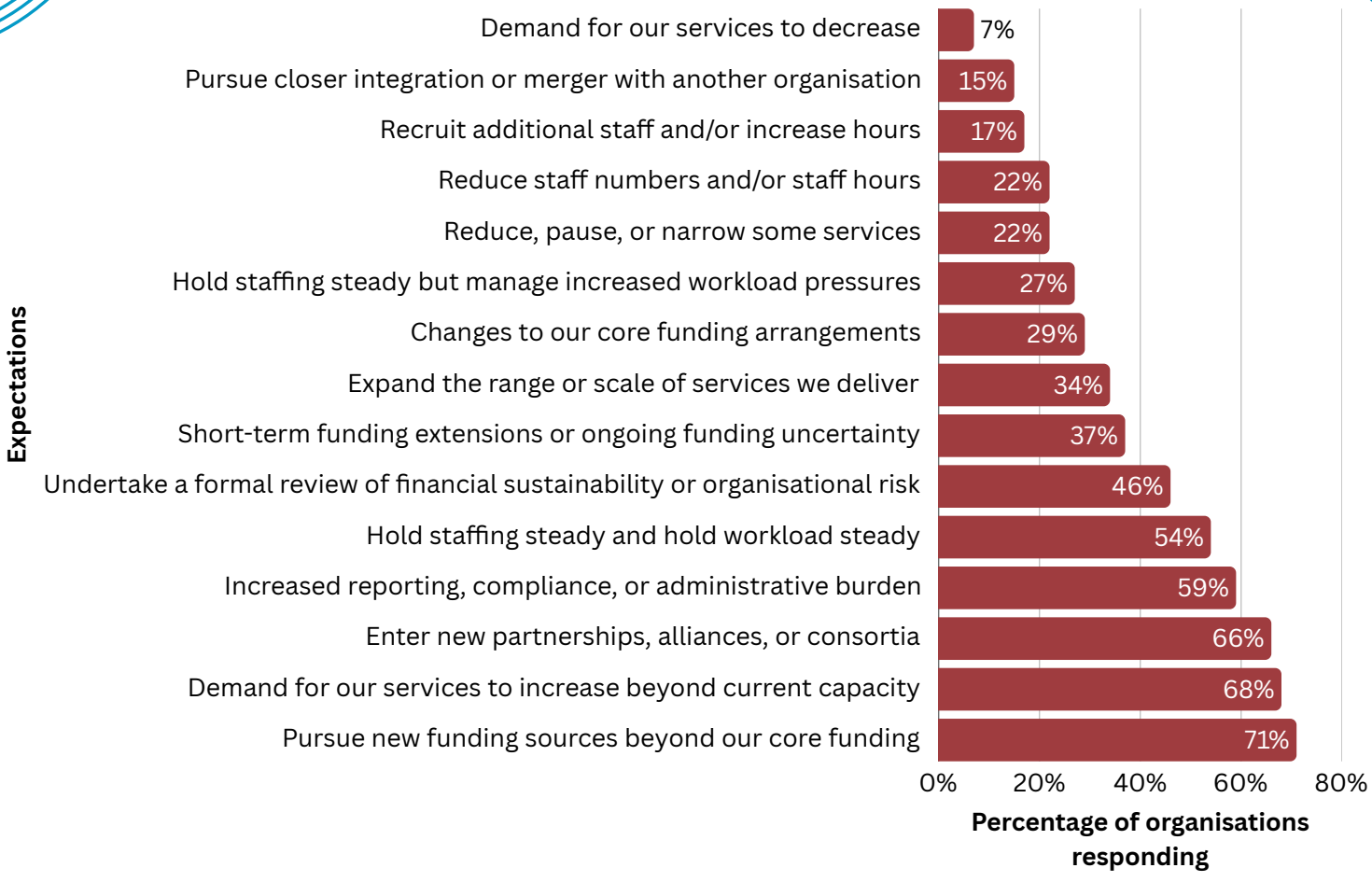


Services' expectations for the next six months

Many services expected to operate in a more challenging environment over the next six months. Most anticipated that demand for their services would increase beyond current capacity (68%), expected to pursue new funding sources beyond their core funding arrangements (71%), and anticipated growth in reporting, compliance and administrative requirements (59%). At the same time, 66% expected to enter new partnerships, alliances or consortia.

Collectively, these expectations point to a sector preparing to respond to rising demand through greater collaboration and funding diversification while managing increasing administrative pressures.

Figure 7. Services' expectations for the next six months





Research Question 3: How well positioned are place-based services to contribute to a shared approach to measuring client and community outcomes?

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)

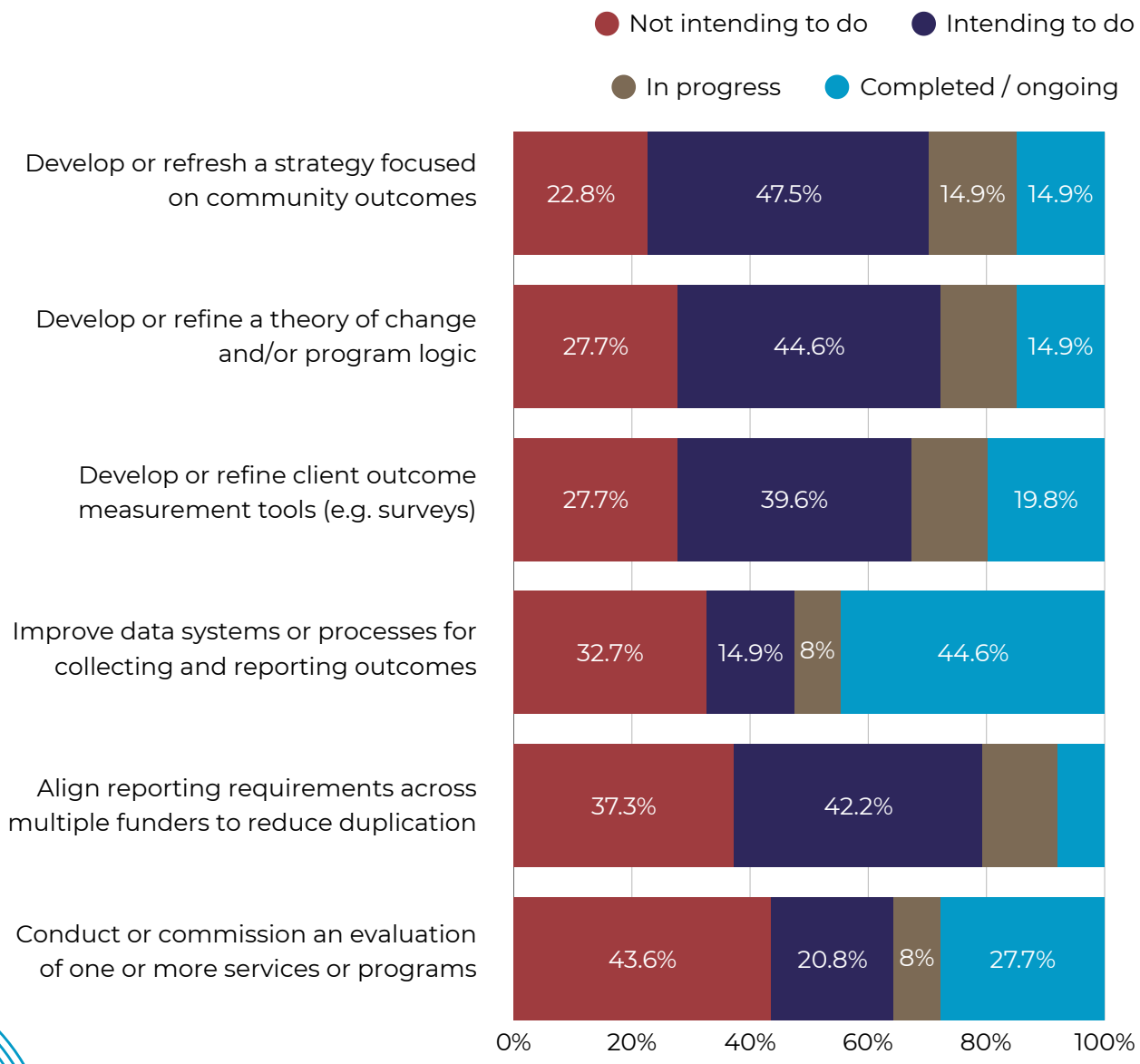
This section examines participating organisations' current MEL activities and their intentions to strengthen these practices over time.

Approximately 30% of organisations had completed or were currently undertaking activities such as developing or refreshing organisational strategies, theories of change and outcome measurement tools. A further 40–47% intended to undertake these activities in the future. More than half reported having improved, or being in the process of improving, their data collection systems.

In contrast, relatively few organisations reported that they were actively working to align reporting requirements across multiple funders (13%) or had already done so (8%). External evaluation was also relatively uncommon, with 36% reporting that they had commissioned an evaluation, compared with 44% who did not intend to do so.

Overall, organisations demonstrated a strong commitment to strengthening their monitoring, evaluation and learning practices, although their intentions and progress varied across activities.

Figure 8. Evaluation activities and intentions



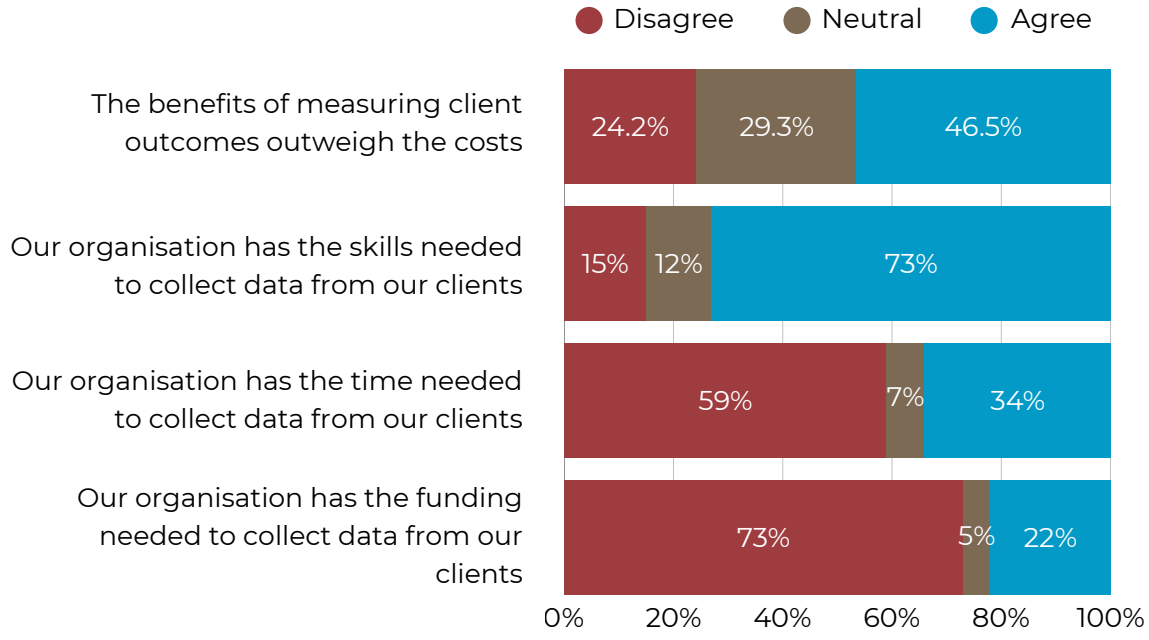


As shown in Figure 9, only 46% of organisations agreed that the benefits of measuring client outcomes outweighed the costs involved. Approximately 24% disagreed and 29% responded neutral, suggesting that a majority of organisations were either unconvinced or uncertain about whether outcomes measurement generated sufficient value relative to the effort required.

To better understand this finding, we compared responses with organisations' willingness to contribute to a shared approach to outcomes measurement (discussed later in this report). Respondents who placed a high value on outcomes measurement were no more likely to support a shared approach than those who placed a lower value on outcomes measurement. This suggests that concerns may relate less to measurement itself than to the way it is currently undertaken and the resources required to do it effectively.

Most organisations reported having the skills needed to collect client outcome data (73%). However, substantially fewer reported having sufficient time (34%) or funding (22%). The associations between these resources and the perceived value of outcomes measurement were not statistically significant. Given the small sample, these exploratory patterns should be interpreted cautiously. Organisations reporting greater time and funding were somewhat more likely to agree that the benefits of outcomes measurement outweighed the costs. This pattern is consistent with, but does not demonstrate, the possibility that resource constraints influence organisations' perceptions of outcomes measurement.

Figure 9. Measurement culture



Approximately 80% of organisations reported measuring outputs, such as the number of people supported or activities delivered. Around 55% used pre-post measures to assess client outcomes over time, while 40% measured outcomes only when clients exited the service. A further 30% used a retrospective pre-post approach, asking clients at exit to reflect on how their circumstances had changed since entering the service. Overall, while output measurement was widespread, organisations used a variety of approaches to assess client outcomes.

Table 3 summarises the outcomes frameworks used by participating organisations. Approximately two-thirds reported using the Department of Social Services Data Exchange (DEX/SCORE) framework, making it the most commonly used framework, while around half had also developed an organisation-specific framework. The remaining frameworks were used by smaller numbers of organisations. To protect participant confidentiality, responses relating to less commonly used frameworks and those entered as "Other" were combined into a single category where there was a risk that individual organisations could be identified.

Table 3. Outcome frameworks used by place-based services

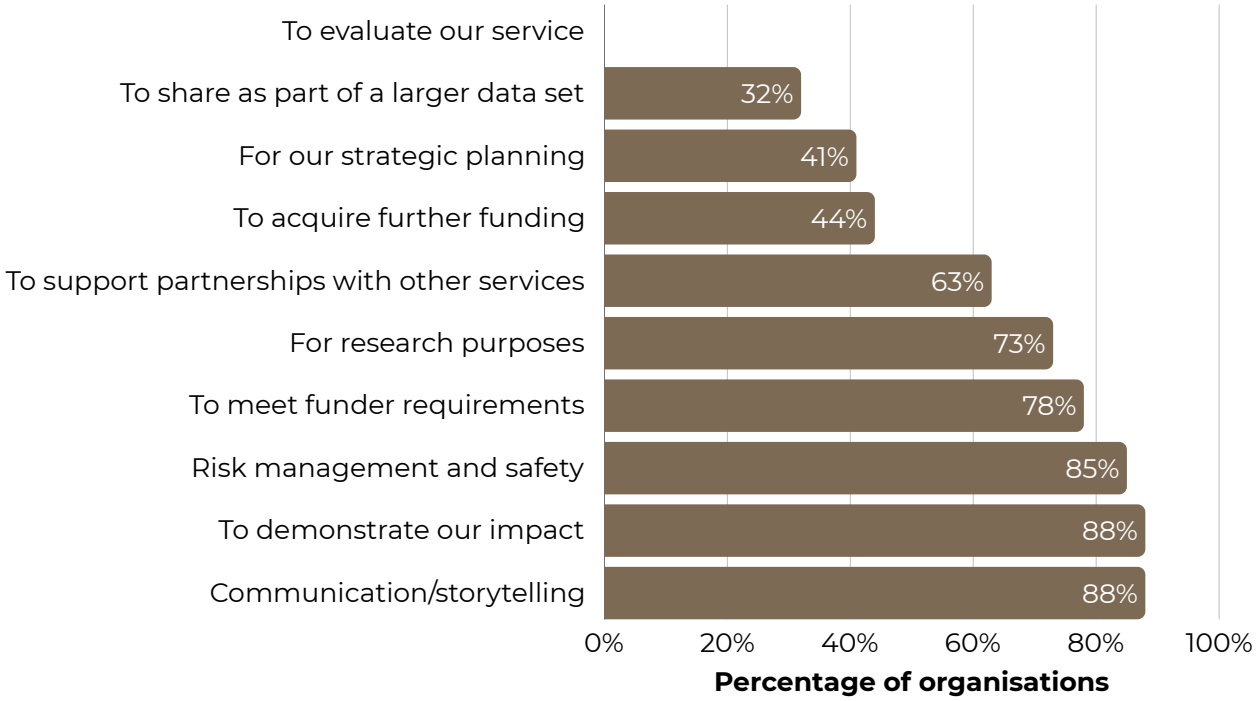
Outcomes framework used	n	%
SCORE - DEX Standard Client/Community Outcomes Reporting system.	26	63.4
Organisation-specific framework	21	51.2
Targeted Early Interventions Outcomes Framework	19	46.3
Other	19	46.3
Human Services Outcomes Framework (HSOF)	13	31.7
NDIS outcomes framework	12	29.3
Aged care outcomes framework	8	19.5
Multicultural NSW outcomes framework	6	14.6
Local council wellbeing indicators	5	12.2

Approximately 30% of organisations reported using only one outcomes framework and, for almost two-thirds of these organisations, this was an organisation-specific framework. By contrast, a similar proportion reported using between five and seven different outcomes frameworks. Among these organisations, almost all were using the Targeted Early Intervention Outcomes Framework (92%) alongside a range of other government, sector-specific and organisation-specific frameworks. These findings highlight the diversity and number of outcomes measurement frameworks used across the sector.

Figure 10 shows how organisations use the data they collect. The most common uses were communication and demonstrating impact, with 88% of organisations reporting that they used data for these purposes. Risk management and safety (85%), funder reporting (78%), and research (73%) were also common uses.

In contrast, fewer organisations reported using data for strategic planning (41%), seeking further funding (44%), sharing as part of a larger dataset (32%), or for their own internal evaluation and learning (0%).

Figure 10. How client data is being used by services



Appetite for implementing a shared community outcomes framework

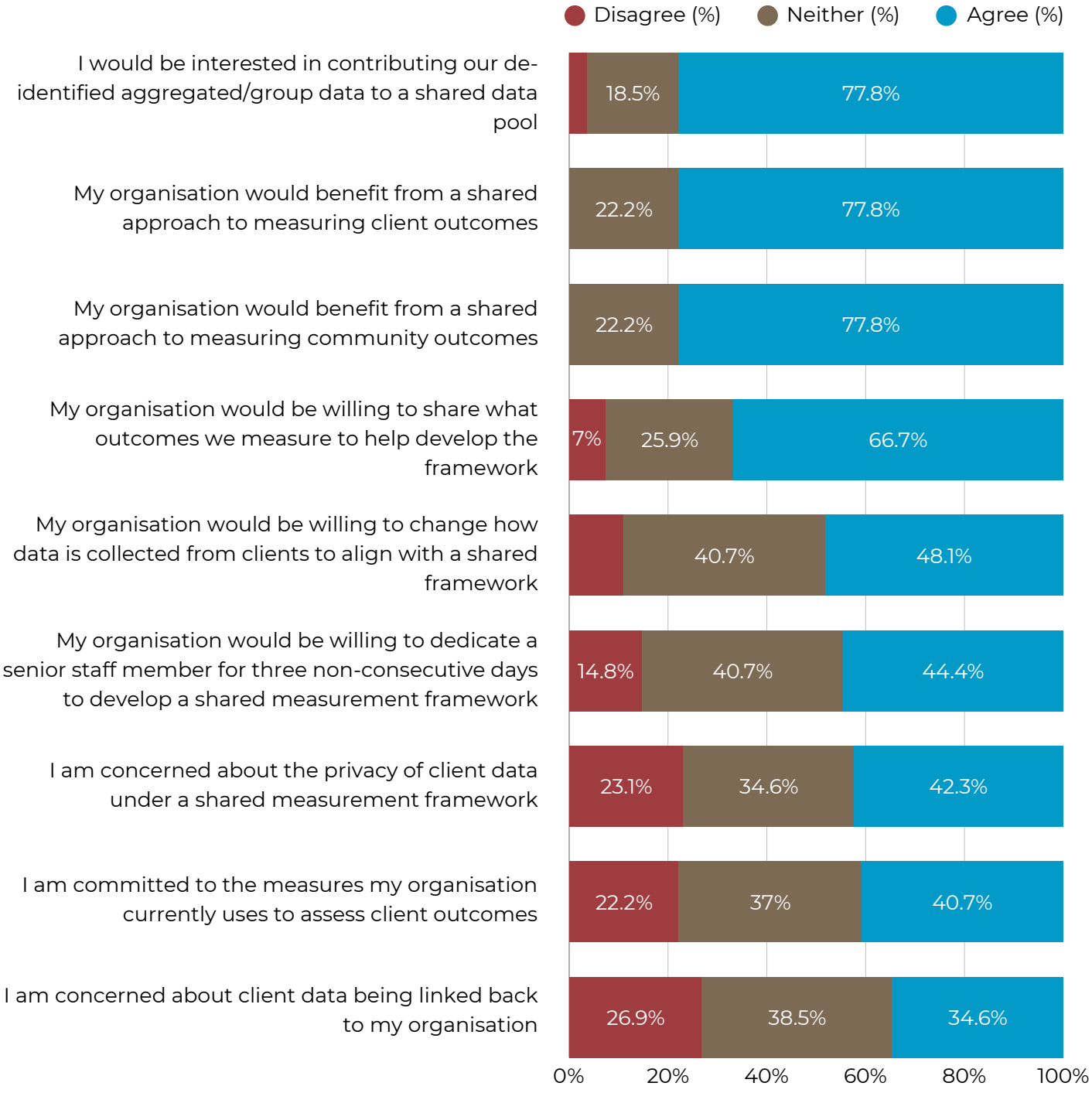
Participants were asked whether they would be interested in contributing to a shared approach to measuring community outcomes. Approximately 32% indicated that they would be interested, 36% responded "maybe", and 32% indicated that they would not be interested. Those who responded "yes" or "maybe" were then asked a series of additional questions about shared measurement.

Among these organisations, there were high levels of agreement that a shared approach could improve their ability to understand both client and community outcomes. Most also indicated that they would be willing to share de-identified, aggregated data and contribute their existing outcome surveys to support the development of a shared measurement framework. Approximately two-thirds reported that they would also be willing to share the outcome measures currently used by their organisation.

At the same time, respondents expressed concerns about client privacy and organisational confidentiality. Approximately 40% also reported being committed to the outcome measures they currently use. Overall, more than two-thirds of organisations were interested or potentially interested in contributing to a shared approach to measuring community outcomes, although participation would need to address issues relating to data governance, privacy and compatibility with existing measurement systems.



Figure 11. Attitude towards a shared measurement approach



DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings suggest that the contribution of place-based services to community wellbeing extends beyond direct support to individual clients. The following sections consider these findings in relation to each of the three research questions.

Research Question 1: What community wellbeing outcomes are Greater Western Sydney's place-based services contributing to, and which outcomes do they prioritise?

The findings reinforce the view that place-based services contribute to community wellbeing in ways that extend beyond direct support to individual clients. Rather than focusing solely on service delivery, participating organisations reported activities that strengthen the social, relational and institutional conditions associated with thriving communities, including access and inclusion, community participation, belonging, local leadership, collaboration and local economic activity. Together, these findings support the proposition that place-based services function not only as service providers, but also as contributors to the broader social infrastructure of Greater Western Sydney.

The prioritisation results provide further insight into how organisations view their role within local communities. Community connection and belonging, together with access, equity and inclusion, emerged as the highest priorities, suggesting that organisations place particular importance on strengthening social connectedness, reducing barriers to participation and ensuring services respond to the needs of diverse communities. These priorities are consistent with contemporary understandings of community wellbeing, which emphasise social relationships, participation and inclusion alongside individual outcomes[14,17].

Perhaps the most interesting finding was the distinction between the outcomes that organisations identified as priorities and the broader contributions they made through their day-to-day operations. While relatively few organisations explicitly prioritised outcomes such as contributing to the local economy or coordinating the service system, many nevertheless reported activities that supported these domains. This suggests that place-based services may contribute to a wider range of community benefits than are explicitly recognised in their stated priorities, reinforcing the importance of approaches that capture both intended and broader contributions to community wellbeing.

Research Question 2: What opportunities and challenges shape the contribution of place-based services to these outcomes and their ability to demonstrate that contribution?

The findings suggest that place-based services are operating in an increasingly challenging environment characterised by rising demand, funding uncertainty and growing administrative burden. At the same time, organisations appear to be responding to these pressures through partnerships and collaboration, highlighting the importance of collective approaches to addressing complex community needs.

Partnerships emerged as a significant organisational strength. Most organisations reported maintaining or expanding their collaborative relationships, suggesting that partnership-based approaches are already embedded within the sector. Given that many of the community outcomes identified in this report, including belonging, inclusion, participation and community wellbeing, depend on coordinated action across organisations, collaboration is likely to remain an important mechanism for contributing to community-level change.

However, these opportunities exist alongside substantial organisational pressures. Respondents reported considerable administrative burden associated with managing multiple funders, contracts and reporting systems, particularly where reporting requirements differed across funding programs and data could not be easily reused. While funding diversification may provide greater financial security, it also increases the time and resources devoted to compliance and reporting[28,30].

Looking ahead, organisations expected demand, reporting requirements and funding uncertainty to continue increasing. Collectively, these findings suggest that the sector will need to balance growing service demands with increasing administrative complexity, reinforcing the importance of approaches that strengthen evidence generation without adding to reporting burden.

Research Question 3: How well positioned are place-based services to contribute to a shared approach to measuring client and community outcomes?

The main barriers to a shared approach to outcomes measurement appear to be not willingness or capability, but time, funding and administrative burden. Many organisations were already collecting outcome data, strengthening their evaluation practices, and expressing interest in collaborating on outcomes measurement. However, fewer than half of organisations (46%) believed that the benefits of measuring client outcomes outweighed the costs involved. Organisations are therefore unlikely to support approaches that increase reporting burden without providing clear benefits in return.

Readiness for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Many place-based services appear committed to strengthening their MEL practices. Organisations were undertaking or planning improvements to strategic planning, theories of change, outcome measurement and data systems, indicating broad recognition of the importance of monitoring, evaluation and learning across the sector.

Progress was nevertheless uneven. While improvements to organisational data systems were common, relatively few organisations had aligned reporting requirements across multiple funders. This likely reflects the fragmented funding environment, where reporting requirements are externally determined and vary considerably between funding programs. As a result, strengthening MEL capability is likely to depend not only on organisational investment but also on greater alignment across reporting systems.

Measurement culture

While most organisations reported having the skills needed to collect outcome data, far fewer believed they had sufficient time or funding to do so effectively. Importantly, fewer than half believed that the benefits of measuring client outcomes outweighed the associated costs.

This suggests that strengthening outcomes measurement will require more than technical training or additional guidance. Organisations appear to be weighing the value of outcomes measurement against the resources required to collect, analyse and report outcome data. In this context, approaches that reduce reporting burden while increasing the practical value of data may be as important as efforts to build measurement capability.

How client data is currently being used

Organisations were considerably more likely to use client data for accountability, communication and compliance than for organisational learning, strategic planning or seeking additional funding. This suggests that, while many organisations are already collecting substantial amounts of data, the potential value of these data for organisational learning and continuous improvement may not yet be fully realised. At the same time, almost one-third of organisations reported already sharing data as part of a larger dataset, indicating that an important foundation for future collaboration already exists.





Appetite for a shared data approach to measuring ommunity outcomes

The findings suggest a strong foundation for future collaboration on outcomes measurement. More than two-thirds of respondents indicated that they were either interested or potentially interested in contributing to a shared approach to measuring community outcomes. Among these organisations, there was broad support for sharing de-identified aggregated data and a belief that a shared approach could improve understanding of both client and community outcomes.

However, support was clearly conditional. Respondents expressed concerns regarding client privacy and organisational confidentiality, while the broader findings highlight the importance of avoiding additional reporting burden. In addition, a substantial minority reported being committed to their existing outcome measures, suggesting that a highly standardised approach may be difficult to implement across a diverse sector.

Any future shared approach would therefore need to minimise additional reporting burden, protect client privacy and organisational confidentiality, and provide sufficient flexibility to build on existing measurement practices rather than replace them. These considerations are likely to be critical to the successful implementation of any future shared outcomes framework.

Implications for Greater Western Sydney

The findings from this report reinforce the importance of investing not only in Western Sydney's physical infrastructure, but also in the place-based organisations that strengthen the region's social infrastructure[33]. While recent reports have highlighted the importance of community capacity, local leadership and social connection to the region's future[1,34], this study provides evidence that place-based services undertake activities that contribute to these outcomes across Western Sydney.

At the same time, the findings highlight a disconnect between the contribution these organisations make and the way that contribution is currently measured. Existing funding and reporting arrangements often focus on individual client outcomes, making it difficult to demonstrate the broader community-level benefits to which place-based services contribute. As a result, many of the contributions that strengthen community wellbeing may not be adequately captured within current evidence systems.

Strengthening the evidence base for place-based services is therefore about more than improving measurement. It is about ensuring that governments, funders and communities have access to evidence that better reflects how these organisations contribute to stronger, more connected and more resilient communities. Doing so would support more informed planning, investment and policy decisions across Greater Western Sydney, while strengthening the sector's ability to demonstrate its collective contribution to community wellbeing.

Recommendations

Develop a shared community outcomes framework for Greater Western Sydney's place-based services

Invest in shared evidence infrastructure for Greater Western Sydney's place-based services

Reduce administrative burden by aligning reporting requirements

Develop a shared community outcomes framework for Greater Western Sydney's place-based services

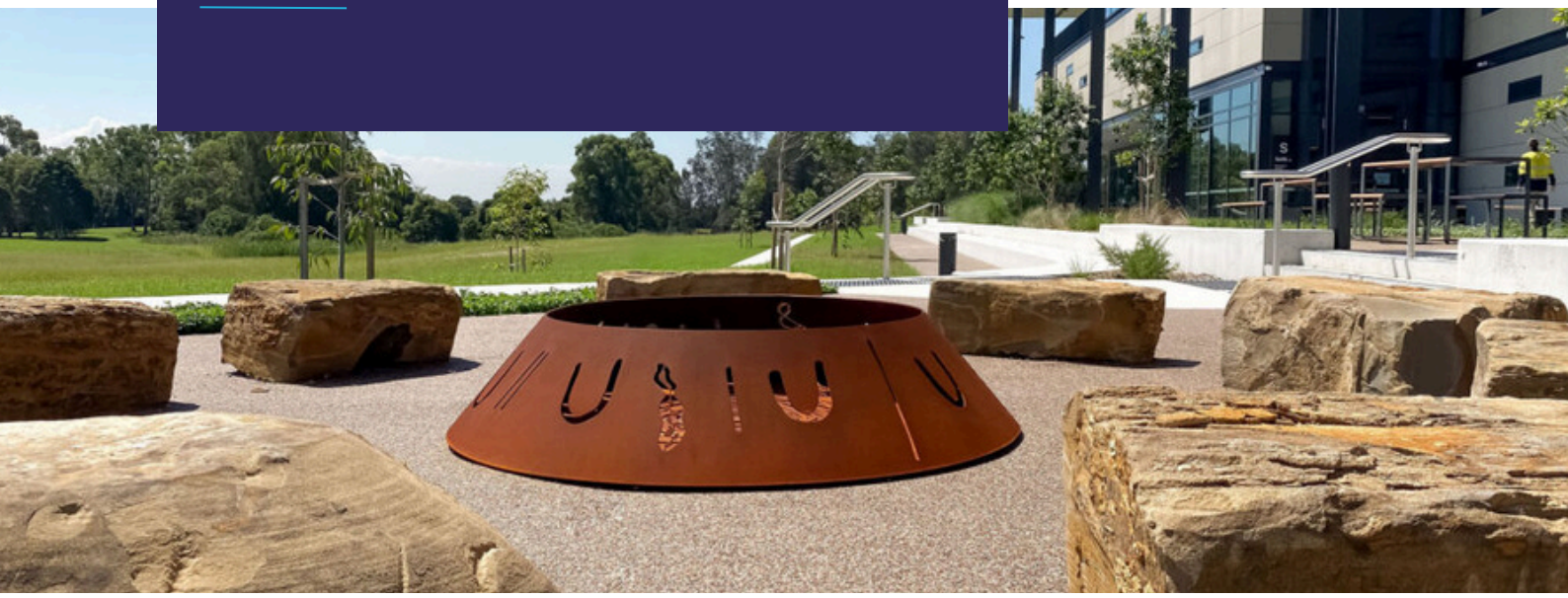


The findings indicate a strong foundation for a shared approach to measuring community outcomes across Greater Western Sydney's place-based services. Many organisations already collect outcome data, have expressed interest in participating in a shared measurement approach, and have indicated a willingness to contribute aggregated data.

Importantly, this report represents a first step towards developing such a framework. This research combined a literature review, consultation with the Forum and member organisations, and testing with 41 place-based services to develop and pilot a preliminary community wellbeing framework. The framework can now be refined in partnership with the sector.

The next stage should focus on developing a shared outcomes framework that provides a common language for describing how place-based services contribute to both client and community wellbeing, while allowing organisations to retain flexibility in how they deliver services and measure outcomes. Over time, this could strengthen the evidence base for the sector and improve its ability to understand, demonstrate and communicate the collective contribution of place-based services across Greater Western Sydney.

Invest in shared evidence infrastructure for Greater Western Sydney's place-based services



A shared outcomes framework will require practical mechanisms for organisations to contribute, analyse and use data collectively. Investment in shared evidence infrastructure would enable participating organisations to contribute aggregated outcomes data through existing reporting processes wherever possible, thereby minimising additional reporting burden.

Shared infrastructure alone, however, will not be sufficient. Additional funding should be provided directly to participating organisations to cover the staff time, capability and systems needed to prepare, contribute, analyse and use outcomes data. Only 22% of surveyed organisations reported having sufficient funding, and 34% sufficient time, to collect client outcome data. Dedicated resourcing should therefore be built into the shared approach from the outset, rather than expecting organisations to absorb this work within already constrained budgets.

Invest in shared evidence infrastructure for Greater Western Sydney's place-based services



Rather than simply supporting accountability, shared evidence infrastructure should generate practical value for participating organisations through benchmarking, tailored reports and regional insights that support organisational learning, service planning and advocacy. It would also provide governments, funders and the Forum with a stronger evidence base for understanding the collective contribution of place-based services to community wellbeing.

The findings suggest that many of the building blocks for this already exist. A substantial proportion of organisations are collecting outcome data, many are already sharing data as part of larger datasets, and more than two-thirds indicated that they were interested or potentially interested in contributing to a shared approach to measuring community outcomes. Investment can therefore focus on connecting and strengthening existing evidence systems and practices, rather than creating entirely new reporting systems.

Reduce administrative burden by aligning reporting requirements



The findings highlight the substantial administrative burden associated with managing multiple funders, contracts and reporting systems. Governments and major funders should work with the sector to identify opportunities to reduce duplication, improve alignment across reporting requirements, and make better use of data that organisations are already collecting.

This could include better aligning reporting frameworks, increasing the reuse of existing data, and exploring whether existing reporting processes, such as DEX reporting and ACNC annual reporting, could support the collection of shared sector-level outcomes where appropriate. Such approaches have the potential to reduce reporting burden while improving the consistency and usefulness of evidence across the sector.

Reducing duplication would allow organisations to devote more time and resources to service delivery, organisational learning and continuous improvement, while strengthening the evidence available to governments, funders and communities about the contribution of place-based services to community wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

This report demonstrates that place-based services make important contributions to community wellbeing across Greater Western Sydney that extend well beyond support for individual clients. Organisations reported widespread activities that strengthen access, inclusion, belonging, community participation, local leadership and collaboration across the service system, highlighting the important role of place-based services in creating the conditions that enable communities to thrive.

At the same time, the report highlights a disconnect between these contributions and the way they are currently evidenced. Place-based services operate within fragmented funding, reporting and outcomes measurement systems that make it difficult to demonstrate their collective contribution to community wellbeing, despite a widespread commitment to monitoring, evaluation and learning.

Importantly, the findings suggest that Greater Western Sydney is well placed to address this challenge. Many organisations are already collecting outcome data, strengthening their evaluation practices and expressing an interest in collaborating on community outcomes. Building on this existing foundation presents an opportunity to strengthen the region's evidence capability without imposing unnecessary reporting burden on services.

Ultimately, strengthening the evidence base for place-based services is about more than improving measurement. It is about ensuring that decisions about Greater Western Sydney are informed by evidence generated within Greater Western Sydney itself. This evidence should reflect not only the outcomes achieved for individuals, but also the broader contribution that place-based services make to stronger, more connected and more resilient communities.

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CONTACT US

Phone

02 9687 9669

Email address

info@wscf.org.au

Website

www.wscf.org.au

Address

Level 4, 169 Macquarie Street, Parramatta

