

Collective Action for Lasting Change

Final Report



Final report prepared for
Uniting Country SA and the Mid North Local Jobs and Skills
Taskforce

Hearing Country Voices Research Partnership Report no. 19
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Acknowledgement of Country

Flinders University was established on the lands of the Kaurna nation, with the first University campus, Bedford Park, located on the ancestral body of Ngannu near Warriparinga. Warriparinga is a significant site in the complex and multi-layered Dreaming of the Kaurna ancestor, Tjilbruke. For the Kaurna nation, Tjilbruke was a keeper of the fire and a peace maker/law maker. Tjilbruke is part of the living culture and traditions of the Kaurna people. His spirit lives in the Land and Waters, in the Kaurna people and in the glossy ibis (known as Tjilbruke for the Kaurna). Through Tjilbruke, the Kaurna people continue their creative relationship with their Country, its spirituality and its stories.

Flinders University acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians, both past and present, of the various locations the University operates on, and recognises their continued relationship and responsibility to these Lands and waters.

(Flinders University Reconciliation Action Plan May 2020-May 2022)

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Executive Summary

This report is an output from an investigation of Intergenerational Unemployment and Jobless Families being conducted by the Centre for Social Impact at Flinders University in partnership with Uniting Country SA (UCSA) and supporting the work of the Mid North Local Jobs and Skills Taskforce. The Mid North has been facing historically high levels of long-term unemployment, jobless families and socio-economic disadvantage. Yet, in recent years the region has been benefitting from record job vacancies and has a strong economic base and investment pipeline, combined with access to a range of quality services aimed at supporting individuals and families. Without taking proactive steps however, those who are disadvantaged will continue to be left behind, even in the context of economic and employment growth.

This research project provides evidence to inform the development of local strategies and activities to support people who experience intergenerational unemployment and/or are from jobless families into education, training and sustainable employment. The research was guided by the following research question:

What models/local solutions could be successful in supporting people who experience intergenerational unemployment and/or are from jobless families into education, training and employment?

To answer our research question, the project team undertook a desktop review of the current and emerging context within the region and labour market, complemented by key informant interviews. The project followed the journey of the Mid North Local Jobs and Skills Taskforce, including stakeholder engagement and consultations, and interviews with long-term unemployed people to gain insights about their lived experience and aspirations. The next phase, which will be undertaken by the Mid North Local Jobs and Skills Taskforce in collaboration with Pirie Voices, entails deeper listening to community and the subsequent development of a business case based on the evidence generated by the project and presented in this report.

Key Findings

The study findings demonstrate that Mid North organisations and agencies have the will and capacity to work together to leverage their collective experience, knowledge and resources to develop initiatives that will address barriers to participation and support positive, lasting change for individuals, families and their communities. We found that:

- The region has people and organisations with the leadership skills, will and commitment to drive change.
- Community members with lived experience of intergenerational unemployment and/or are from jobless families must be central to the development of locally-led initiatives to ensure lasting positive change.
- Community-based organisations need to identify and establish a lead entity to resource, develop, establish and co-ordinate a place-based approach, drawing on the knowledge and expertise of local and regional people and organisations.
- A Collective Impact approach, led at a local and regional level, is required to develop collaborative programs and projects that can build connections between local jobless families and employers.

- A lead entity (i.e. backbone) for the Collective Impact approach should be established to provide governance and to ensure transparency and accountability, and not also be an individual service provider stakeholder.
- Person-centred and family-centred approaches at a range of intensities are required to support families to navigate systems and overcome barriers to education, training and sustainable employment.

Introduction

The Mid North Local Jobs and Skills Taskforce was established in September 2021 as part of the Australian Government's Workforce Australia - Local Jobs Program and aims to foster greater collaboration across community, industry, and government in addressing local employment and training opportunities and challenges. *Intergenerational unemployment and jobless families* is a key strategic priority identified and being actioned by the Taskforce.

The Mid North Local Jobs and Skills Taskforce key focus areas include:

- Exploring models that are successful in supporting people who experience intergenerational unemployment and/or are from jobless families into education, training and employment
- Gaining a better understanding of the breadth of intergenerational unemployment and jobless families in the Mid North and characteristics of the very long-term unemployed caseload
- Increasing awareness, attention and investment into supporting people facing intergenerational unemployment and for jobless families
- Understanding and mapping of existing programs and services and opportunities for improved connection and collaboration
- Identifying local solutions and place-based approaches that meet the unique needs of communities in the Mid North
- Providing recommendations for further action through the development of a business case to progress short and long term solutions

The research project that informs this report aimed to provide evidence to inform these focus areas by investigating the potential models/local solutions that could be successful in supporting people who experience intergenerational unemployment and/or are from jobless families into education, training and employment.

This report presents study findings, starting with a literature review, followed by an overview of our methods, and findings which include an analysis of successful place-based and intensive support models and of Mid North community engagement activities, and lived experience interview data. We then provide some conclusions which may be used to inform the next steps for the Mid North Local Jobs and Skills Taskforce.

“A labour force shortage stimulates employers to rethink conventional employment practices and perceptions. In many regions, employers have implemented strategies that promote participation and inclusivity through:

- Understanding and recognising the productivity gains from supporting workers with diverse abilities.
- Providing holistic employment support that considers mental health, wellbeing and skills development as part of a person-centred approach to employment services.
- Listening to the voices and aspirations of individuals and communities and developing collaborative, place-based initiatives.”

Hutchison et al.,
Regional Australia Institute (2023)

Literature review

When unemployment is entrenched within specific geographical areas, its social consequences are amplified, contributing to poor lifetime labour market outcomes and increased and multiple disadvantages (Moskos et al., 2014 p. 5).

Workforce exclusion in regional Australia

Australian workforce participation is at its highest in decades since the end of COVID-19 pandemic public health response. Unfortunately, many regional areas are being left behind, with skilled job vacancies increasing at a greater rate than regional skilled labour supply can meet, meaning that potential local workers tend to be overlooked (Hutchinson et al., 2023). Further, many of the excluded workers fall into six main categories: young people aged 15-24, older people aged 55 and over, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, migrants, people with disability and people with dependent children (mostly women) (Hutchinson et al., 2023). Regional families that have been excluded from the workforce for generations are, for the most part, remaining excluded and long-term unemployment is more prevalent in regional areas than it is in major cities (Cassidy et al., 2020).

Long-term unemployment

Long-term unemployment is defined as being without and/or looking for paid employment for at least a year (Cassidy et al., 2020). Despite employment growth in South Australia, long term unemployment has remained static, with around 12,000 people unemployed for at least one year (SAPC, 2024). People experiencing long-term unemployment tend to more likely have previously held lower-skilled jobs than their short-term unemployed or employed counterparts (Cassidy et al., 2020).

One of the observed consequences of long-term unemployment is labour market ‘scarring’; that is, permanent consequences of difficulties transitioning into the workforce (de Fontenay et al., 2020). Difficulties may include very long-term unemployment, or finding employment that does not fit a person’s aspirations in terms of skill requirements, pay or progression (Productivity Commission, 2020).

The Mid North has experienced historically high levels of long-term unemployment, jobless families and socio-economic disadvantage (ABS, 2021). In line much of Australia, the region is currently experiencing record job vacancies and has a strong economic base and investment pipeline, combined

with access to a range of quality services aimed at supporting individuals and families. Yet, the most recent Mid North jobseeker caseload report in January 2025 was 3,665 of which more than three quarters comprises long-term unemployed people, with one third (n=920) unemployed longer than 5 years, making up one quarter of the caseload (DEWR, 2025a). While there is some indication of gradual improvement, there has been very little real change in the Mid North over the past 12 months, with a total caseload of 4,000 at the same time in 2024 (DEWR, 2024). Of the unemployed January 2024 caseload, 430 were ParentsNext clients (420 women, 10 males) while 650 of the total Workforce Australia caseload were identified as parents (i.e. parenting payment recipients) (DEWR, 2024). In January 2025, by comparison, the total 'Parent' caseload was 495, with ParentsNext no longer included in the data, likely because a new Parent Pathways program for parents/carers of children younger than 6 years replaced ParentsNext, commencing in November 2024 (DEWR, 2025a, 2025b). Evidence indicates that without taking proactive steps, those who are disadvantaged will continue to be excluded from sustainable employment, even in the context of economic and employment growth. The longer that people are unemployed, the more likely it is that they will remain unemployed, with repercussions for their families, not least their children (Cassidy et al., 2020; Moskos et al., 2014).

Youth disengagement

Young people's (aged 15-24 years) labour force participation is measured differently from older cohorts (see box insert overpage). Youth disengagement is defined as those who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) or simply as 'not engaged in work or study' (SAPC, 2024 p. 11). Young people have been among the hardest hit in the Australian workforce by the COVID-19 pandemic since early 2020 (BSL, 2020; SAPC, 2024).

By April 2021, youth unemployment remained at 11% in June 2020, while the overall Australian unemployment rate had reduced to 5.5% (ABS, 2021; BSL, 2020). The 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) was already affecting young people's engagement in the labour market, and this was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (de Fontenay et al., 2020; Productivity Commission, 2020). Between 2008 and 2018, young people aged 15-34 years also experienced a decline in income growth and a concurrent movement 'down the jobs ladder' when compared with all other age cohorts (de Fontenay et al., 2020; Productivity Commission, 2020).

These observed declines result from both high unemployment and underemployment among young people and at that time, de Fontenay and colleagues (2020) predicted this could lead to labour market scarring among young people (de Fontenay et al., 2020). Potential difficulties the authors identified included a greater likelihood of long-term unemployment, or finding employment that does not fit young people's 'training, the number of hours they wish or require, or wage rates or career progressions' (Productivity Commission, 2020 p. 8).

The recently released draft South Australian Productivity Commission report, *Positioning All South Australians to Share in the Benefits of Economic Growth* (2024) indicates that young people are indeed

"Each year 800 more young South Australians slip into long-term disengagement from study and work than would be the case if we were at the national average. If we are able to bridge the gap with the rest of our country, after five years, the annual benefits would be around \$53 million to government and \$141 million to the South Australian community."

South Australian Productivity Commission (2024)

more likely to be long-term unemployed in South Australia and especially if they left school without completing year 12, and have never worked (SAPC, 2024). Further, the prevalence of long-term unemployment among young people is linked to where they live and the education level of their parents (SAPC, 2024). Therefore, the impacts of youth disengagement are not evenly distributed, with regional areas being hardest hit (SAPC, 2024).

Policy responses to intergenerational unemployment

A major policy concern leading on from youth disengagement, even without considering the social and mental health consequences which are of themselves devastating, is the risk of intergenerational unemployment (Butterworth et al., 2013; Crowe et al., 2016; Kiely & Butterworth, 2013; Moskos et al., 2014; SAPC, 2024). Over the last half century, much work has been done to combat intergenerational unemployment and to support jobless families (Stanford, 2018). Over that period, from a labour market perspective, Australia has shifted from a relatively egalitarian state to being ‘solidly among the more unequal, business-dominated countries in the OECD.’ (Stanford, 2018 p. 128).

“A human-centered approach is necessary to overcome barriers to employment and create workforce connections. Multiple programs and actions, initiated on a regional level, embrace the idea that every person’s social, cultural, and economic context influences their participation in a labour market. Targeted, person-centred support can lead to significantly improved outcomes.”

Hutchison et al., Regional Australia Institute (2023)

Employment services were introduced in Australia in the WWII Post-War period, when the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) was established to assist returning soldiers regain employment and to provide a basic income in the interim (Olney & Gallet, 2018). The CES was set up not as a welfare system, but as a safety net for workers who were ‘temporarily between jobs’ within an overall ‘system of wage regulation’ (Olney & Gallet, 2018 p. 1). The CES continued until the 1980s recession, following a decade of rising unemployment in Australia and across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. In line with the OECD ‘The Active Society’ framework, the Australian Government introduced the ‘Active Employment Strategy’ in 1988 to address long-term unemployment by integrating income support and labour market training. The focus was on ensuring that jobseekers continued their engagement in the workforce by developing skills and remaining job-ready and would ‘maintain a pro-work ethic under those conditions’ (Olney & Gallet, 2018 p.2).

By the 1990s, the OECD countries were becoming increasingly concerned about the social and economic effects of welfare dependency. In Australia, this translated into successive reforms of the welfare system, shifting from a rights-based to a reciprocal obligation approach. The obligation side of the system became increasingly apparent, with less support and more stick

Approaches to addressing unemployment over the past couple of decades have been loosely categorised as taking either a ‘work first’ or ‘life first’ (also termed ‘human capital’) approach, or sometimes a combination of both (Davidson, 2011; Goodwin-Smith & Hutchinson, 2015; OECD, 2011). Both types have been implemented in Australia, however various iterations of ‘work first’ have dominated workforce policy since the late 1990s when access to state-funded welfare began to be reframed from rights-based to conditional as part of the neoliberal project (Goodwin-Smith & Hutchinson, 2015; Olney & Gallet, 2018; Stanford, 2018). There is now substantial evidence that work

first approaches do not alleviate long-term unemployment and some evidence that it entrenches it (Goodwin-Smith & Hutchinson, 2015; Olney & Gallet, 2018).

What works: Work first vs life first?

While reduction in welfare dependency is an outcome aim for both work first and life first models, the models are based on presuppositions about the reasons behind long term joblessness. Work first approaches are underpinned by a neoliberal understanding of unemployment as an individual problem. Work first models are informed by a supply and demand market model which privileges the needs of the employer over supporting jobseekers beyond immediate employment (Davidson, 2011; Goodwin-Smith & Hutchinson, 2015; OECD, 2011). Life first approaches, in contrast, align with a view of the problem of long-term unemployment as broader community problem.

Life first models are person- or community-centred and strengths-based (Goodwin-Smith & Hutchinson, 2015; Moskos et al., 2014). Evidence indicates that long term unemployed people engaged with work first services tend to cycle between low skilled, low paid jobs and unemployment with few opportunities to develop skills that would lead to fulfilling, secure, better paying jobs (Goodwin-Smith & Hutchinson, 2015).

Disadvantaged jobseekers rarely make a sustainable transition from welfare to work without quality support. This is the key to understanding why work first policies reliant on market-oriented solutions have failed long-term unemployed people and their families (Olney & Gallet, 2018).

Firstly, work first approaches tend to preclude possibilities for undertaking long term development through formal education and training and ignore the long term employed person's life context and aspirations (OECD, 2011). Secondly, work first policies and associated funding and reporting requirements tend to measure service outcomes (i.e. outputs) rather than real outcomes for jobseekers such as a sustainable employment (Olney & Gallet, 2018). This is because long-term or 'hard-to-place' jobseekers that require high levels of support end up being excluded as poor investments (Olney & Gallet, 2018).

Thirdly, the politically popular mutual obligation approach to addressing unemployment has not proven to be successful in turning around intergenerational unemployment because it precludes opportunities to develop appropriate skills and reduces the time available to seek sustainable employment (Olney & Gallet, 2018). Rather, the strongest outcome has been that it is experienced as punitive and counterintuitively reduces the likelihood of gaining sustainable employment (Holdsworth, 2017; O'Halloran et al., 2020). This appears to be particularly the case for women placed in the ParentsNext program (Holdsworth, 2017; Klein, 2021). The federal government lifted the mutual obligation requirement for ParentsNext clients in May 2023, which was eventually replaced by the voluntary Parent Pathways program in November 2024 (DEWR, 2024, 2025b).

Tackling long term or intergenerational unemployment with a life first lens, on the other hand, privileges a person-centred, human capacity-building approach and focuses on the unemployed person's whole life context. There have been several successful initiatives that align with a life first view. These fall under three main model types: place-based, collective-impact, and intensive case management (demonstrating high levels of coordination and collaboration across service providers).

Place-based

Place-based approaches to address disadvantage have been promoted for several decades in a range of contexts including the provision of human services, community development, health and education (Klepac et al., 2023). 'Place-based' refers to programs and activities that are delivered within a defined geographical area at the level of individual communities (Byron, 2010).

Typology of place-based development approaches

1. People-centred models

People are the main focus, e.g. jobseeker assistance programs. They may include community development approaches, but without agreed governance structures can fail to allow a transfer of power and decision-making to local people.

2. Active regional development

Decentralising approaches to development by relocating enterprises from affluent to deprived regions. These approaches have been criticised for not considering the local context for their relocation. More recently, these approaches have included public-private partnerships with a view to being place-based.

3. Transformative

Mobilises endogenous potential and obtains broad local stakeholder engagement. Central to this approach is co-design with local people and accounting for geographic, social, cultural and institutional context.

Transformative place-based approaches facilitate transparent knowledge and power exchange, foster place-based leadership and actively pools resources – from within and outside spatial boundaries.

Adapted from Bentley and Pugalís (2014).

It has long been recognised that the provision of equal resources does not produce equality (O'Dwyer et al. 2007; Baum 2008). How disadvantage is measured in relation to place is dependent on the disadvantage indicators and spatial scales used (Byron 2010). Further, places do not exist in isolation – they are intrinsically connected to broader social, cultural, political and economic contexts (Frieberg, Homel and Branch 2010; Byron 2010; OECD 2011, 2019; Wilks, Lahausse and Edwards 2015).

Entrenched disadvantage tends to be concentrated 'in some locations, reinforcing spatial inequality' and local people must be part of the solution (Byron 2010, p. 20). Adopting place-based approaches provides avenues for delivering services more equitably than individualised and disempowering needs-based approaches (Klepac et al., 2023; OECD, 2011, 2018; Wilks et al., 2015).

While the current appetite for policy uptake of place-based approaches aligns with a general withdrawal of state-funded and/or state-managed social services, place-based approaches require ongoing high level support, governance, and agreed approaches to ensure accountability (Klepac et al., 2023). Addressing these challenges can help ensure unequal power and knowledge relationships are adequately managed. If not, there is a danger of further deepening inequities and entrenching disadvantage (Klepac et al., 2023).

A 2019 OECD report on engaging Indigenous communities in regional development processes identified a number of governance challenges which can inhibit place-based approaches (OECD, 2019). Governance challenges result from the ongoing effects of colonisation (Barolsky, 2022; James et al., 2020; OECD, 2019). Such challenges include inattention to the development of local leadership, a lack of local and high-level Indigenous political representation, a lack of coherence in service delivery and 'limited opportunities for Indigenous organisations and communities to shape policy planning and resource allocation decisions' (OECD, 2019 p.35).

Another challenge is ensuring that local communities have sufficient opportunity to contribute to policymaking and resource allocation decisions, which requires adequate representation on decision-making bodies, proper protocols for consultation and decision-making, and culturally appropriate forms of engagement.

Similarly, there may be a lack of coordination across the levels of government and sectors involved to realise the potential for policy and practice complementarities (OECD, 2018). Jurisdictional issues and lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities can contribute to this problem.

Bentley and Pugalis (2014) have developed a typology of place-based initiatives (in box p. 10) which reveals the importance of understanding the underlying assumptions when initiating a place-based approach. Where community transformation is the agreed community-generated goal, place-based initiatives would respond to one or more complex social issues that are identified by a community, involve strong partnerships and power-sharing with the community, and account for the importance of place in the life of the community (Klepac et al., 2023).

Co-design of programs and activities, and the sharing of knowledge and power with community, and ownership of initiatives by community are central features of transformative place-based approaches. However, there are invariably multiple and often opposing or competing cultural, economic and socio-political interests in any given place (Harrison 2014). Mechanisms need to be established early to address governance challenges in establishing and maintaining genuine place-based approaches (OECD 2019). To address these challenges, a form of place-based work that aligns with a transformative place-based approach that has gained popularity in Australia is Collective Impact (Dart, 2018).

Collective Impact

‘Collective Impact’ is an approach to solving social problems or community concerns by bringing together people and organisations that may have previously been working towards similar goals but doing so separately and with different agendas (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Kania et al., 2022).

It is an approach that has been taken up by governments, including in Australia, largely because it is an effective (ideally) place-based way to pool otherwise fragmented resources (DSS, 2019). Communities for Children is one example of a Collective Impact model that has been used in Australia for close to two decades, funded by the Australian government. That model involves a Facilitating Partner organisation as the ‘backbone’ that is responsible for directing federal government funding to and co-ordinating locally run programs that support children’s safety and wellbeing across a distinct geographical area (Coram et al., 2022; Dart, 2018). Local or regional committees are established to contribute to decisions about community needs and resources, and the Facilitating Partner has ultimate responsibility for funding allocation (Dart, 2018).

Place-based and Collective Impact models are reliant on people being engaged with the services

Collective Impact requires:

1. A common agenda, shaped by collectively defining the problem and creating a shared vision to solve it;
2. Shared measurement, based on an agreement among all participants to track and share progress in the same way, which allows for continuous learning, improvement, and accountability;
3. Mutually reinforcing activities, integrating the participants’ many different activities to maximize the end result;
4. Continuous communication, which helps to build trust and forge new relationships;
5. A “backbone” team, dedicated to aligning and coordinating the work of the group.

Kania, J et al. (2022)

or programs that are attached to them. Another approach, which is also most often place-based, is person-centred or family-centred case management, which is a way of working with individuals and/or families to link them into local services, programs or other community support systems. One of the key downsides of intensive case management is that it tends to be funded at the program rather than community level, with key performance indicators, however with greater emphasis on multidisciplinary and utilisation of the Wraparound Approach, it has become increasingly place-based.

Intensive Case Management

Intensive case management models are collectively referred to as ‘systems of care’ and tend to include therapeutic as well as social and community elements. They also tend to be linked into community development and rely on the existence of community-based programs and services to be effective. As noted above, in order to work in a place-based, collaborative context, they require agreed community-owned governance structures. Intensive case management, for example the Wraparound Model has been used successfully in child protection contexts (Kinsey & Schlösser, 2013; Olson et al., 2021).

The Wraparound Approach involves allocating a designated care-coordinator to individuals and/or their families to work with the family to assemble a Wraparound team which then systematically links them to a range of community-based care, services and programs, often beyond program/service boundaries (Olson et al., 2021). The Wraparound Approach comprises ten principles: starting with family voice and choice, they are team-based, include natural supports, involve collaboration, are community-based, culturally competent, individualised, strength-based, involve persistence and are outcome based (Olson et al., 2021). Intensive case management is also compatible being embedded within a Collective Impact approach, because it would facilitate collaboration between place-based service providers.

Summary

Place-based approaches focus on delivering programs and activities within specific geographical areas to address complex social issues identified by the community. To be successful, initiatives require strong partnerships, power-sharing, and to recognise and emphasise the importance of place in community life. Place-based approaches usually aim to provide services equitably, but face challenges such as governance issues, being inclusive of the diversity across local communities and the need for ongoing support and accountability (Bentley & Pugalís, 2014).

Collective Impact is a place-based approach that brings together various stakeholders to solve social problems collaboratively. Intensive case management models can also be place-based, drawing on local resources, and can provide comprehensive support by linking individuals and families to community-based services. Ideally, intensive case management models are team-based, culturally competent, focus on family voice and choice within community context and within a place-based context, community-responsive.

Overall, place-based approaches are human and place centred and aim to address disadvantage by harnessing community strengths and ensuring coordinated, equitable responses. Ideally, place-based approaches should be transformative and sustainable. The next section we outline our methods to explore what models/local solutions have been successful in supporting people who experience intergenerational unemployment and/or are from jobless families into education, training and employment.

Methods

This research project is informed by the following research question:

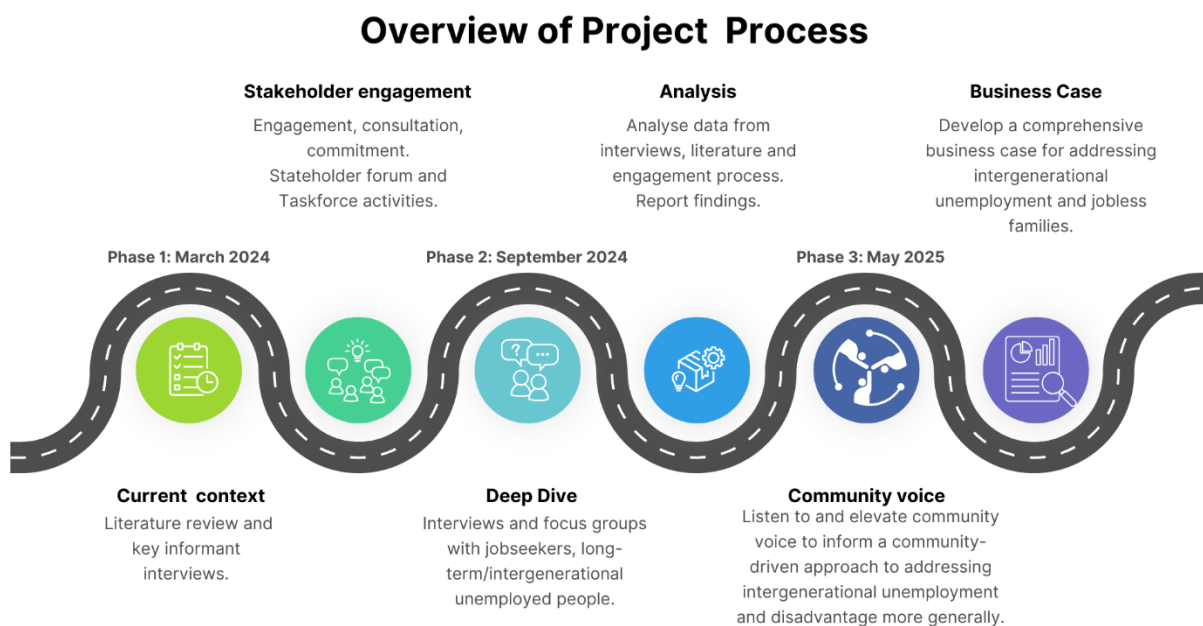
What models/local solutions could be successful in supporting people who experience intergenerational unemployment and/or are from jobless families into education, training and employment?

Sub questions:

1. *What and where are the existing programs and services relevant to this opportunity and what are the opportunities for improved connection and collaboration between these in the Mid North?*
2. *What is the experience of intergenerational unemployment and jobless families in the Mid North and what are the characteristics of being very long-term unemployed?*
3. *What are the social and economic benefits of implementing short- and long-term place-based solutions for supporting people who are long-term unemployed and/or are from jobless families into education, training and employment?*

To answer our research question, the project team undertook three phases of research (see Figure 1). The first phase involved a *desktop review* of the current and emerging context within the region and labour market, complemented by *key informant interviews*. The second phase comprised *stakeholder engagement and consultations* and a *deep dive* to understand the lived experience and aspirations of long-term unemployed people through interviews. The third phase, which will be undertaken by Pirie Voices, entails community-led community engagement which will inform the development of a *business case* based on the evidence generated by the project and Pirie Voices.

Figure 1. Overview of collective impact project process



Findings

What works?

Case Study 1: Building Family Opportunities

A successful intensive case management initiative that was trialled as a South Australian demonstration program was Building Family Opportunities (BFO) (Moskos et al., 2014). The Building Family Opportunities program was a family centred demonstration project which initially operated for four years fully funded from 2010, followed by a further three years with reduced funding. The program used a strengths-based approach supported by intensive case management to assist long-term unemployed people and their families to obtain employment. The program was designed to provide 'practical assistance to address complex and interrelated personal, family and vocational barriers to employment' (Moskos et al., 2014 p. 4). The types of assistance offered were tailored to the jobseeker and their family's goals, and to address the barriers to achieving these. Assistance ranged from resume writing, course/enrolment applications/forms, course fees and facilitating work experience opportunities (Moskos et al., 2014). One of the key informant interview participants also spoke about supporting families by arranging childcare and putting in place support for ensuring that their school aged children attended school.

Families engaged in the BFO program were offered an initial 18 months, and an additional 6-month period of support for jobseekers who obtained employment to enhance their likelihood of maintaining their employment. The BFO program was evaluated by Flinders University researchers over a two and a half year period until June 2012, capturing some of the early outcomes (Moskos et al., 2014). By that time, 347 families were actively participating, with 393 jobseekers. That early evaluation indicates that BFO was successful in achieving its main objective of supporting long-term jobless families to gain sustainable employment. An average of 35% of jobseekers, compared with similar jobseekers engaged in Jobs Service Australia ranging from 23% to 31% over the evaluation period, obtained employment (Moskos et al., 2014). The evaluation found that 44% of jobseekers 'successfully engaged in education and training following entry into the program' compared to their Jobs Service Australia counterparts participating in a course being between 16% and 20% (Moskos et al., 2014). One of the most successful components of the program appears to be the inclusion of whole families. Of the non-jobseeker participants, 28 family members also found work and 54 engaged in education or training.

Interviews with two key informants involved in the Building Family Opportunities pilot at different levels provided insights into its success. Key drivers for success included: high level support; strong multi-level, multi-organisational and multidisciplinary collaboration; person/context centred, intensive case management as one point of service connection; and, built-in evaluation.

High level support

Building Family Opportunities was an initiative driven by the Social Inclusion Board, which was established by the Rann Labour Government in 2002. The Social Inclusion Initiative's remit was to 'confront the causes of social exclusion rather than just the symptoms' (Premier Mike Rann in Capps, 2009, p.2). The Social Inclusion Initiative was informed by UK Prime Minister Tony Blair Government's Social Exclusion Unit and drew on Rann's philosophical connections to his infamous predecessor the late Don Dunstan who was State Premier during the 1960s and 1970s. As one of the key informants noted:

It helped that it came out of the Social Inclusion Board, so there was the [high level] commitment to have that Board, [and] it elevated social inclusion as a primary objective of government (Key informant 2).

High level support, with active contract management, gave rise to establishing structures that ensured the successful operation of the program. Active contract management fosters a partnership rather than a more hands-off funder-provider contract management relationship, described below:

Several times a year they would bring all the BFO providers together... You book the premier into it, a photo op and things like that, which is important to celebrate the success, but it [also] puts it in front of the ministers and so it was very hands on... I think that helps because it felt like a genuine partnership with the organisations that were contracted to do it (Key informant 2).

While high level support is essential for success, it also requires political support, which is unfortunately beholden to election cycles.

Collaboration

Along with the partnership approach fostered by the state government as abovementioned, the program was supported by strong multi-level, multi-organisational and multidisciplinary collaboration. This meant that the case workers and support workers on the ground had access to a system of support and could link families into services and programs plus provide information about what was and was not working, described below:

One of the other key things of this program was we had [regular] meetings with all the key stakeholders. So, Centrelink would be there, RDA would be there, job networks would be there, training places will be there, and I think DCP. So, there was all different players sitting around that table and you know [it was] solution-focused (Key informant 1).

The key informant went on to say how this worked in practice, whereby the real lives of program participants could be considered:

In that environment we were able to really let people know ... What they're maybe doing or saying is a trigger. [For example] if we felt, you know, if [program participants] say they're not gonna go to Centrelink ... then Centrelink might say, 'well, how about we get somebody to come to you?' ... I think that that was a huge success and it was a very, very committed group of people (Key informant 1).

The key informants gave numerous examples of the way in which collaboration directly influenced program outcomes, from access to a psychologist, through to assistance getting children to school. The linkages at the different levels and with different agencies and sectors, along with willingness to be involved, meant that solutions could be found to solve most barriers to accessing training or employment.

Person/context centred intensive case management

Strong collaboration supported another major contributor to the program's success, which was the ability to tailor the program to individual family contexts, starting with the initial jobless family member, and identifying their goals and aspirations, as illustrated below:

We would meet with them and find out what their needs are and different families kind of had different need. We always started with the aspiration. If you if you could do anything what is it? ... What did you need to do to get there? So well, you have to have something on literacy, start by doing a literacy course or you know so then we've

done that. So, what next? So, we would work towards the aspiration and be really realistic with them too (Key informant 1).

The key informants spoke about the ways in which trauma operates across generations and is a major barrier to people seeking assistance. As identified in the program evaluation and elsewhere, a first step in any work with people who have experienced trauma is fostering supportive relationships. The key informants spoke about the value of building a relationship with one case manager who could link participants into multiple service, program or community support avenues rather than multiple case workers from multiple agencies/programs/services as follows:

I think at the end of the day, a person just wants to have a connection more to a case managed approach than digital systems or extended service arrangements ... It was all about the relationship (Key Informant 2).

From that point, case managers could link participants and their family members into relevant programs, services and various community support systems. One of the key informants described why, in their view, a reliance on a purely place-based model that excludes intensive case management risks further entrenching inequities between places. This is because some places simply do not have access to the programs or services that people need, as noted below:

This is where government can be helpful. It can bring together stakeholders and do things that can't happen organically in the market. All those providers won't do it themselves, and so government can come in and set the conditions for that (Key Informant 2).

Further, as noted above in the literature review, Key Informant 2 described why compliance driven systems have not achieved long-term success:

I think when you've got people who have got intergenerational unemployment, long term unemployment, there is no way that compliance driven systems for their benefits - I just can't see how that works to the same level or depth (Key Informant 2).

There is a great deal of evidence that supports the centrality of relationship building when working with marginalised populations, so it comes as no surprise that this is also the case when working with people experiencing long-term or intergenerational unemployment (Mackenzie & Goodwin-Smith, 2019; Mendes & Purtell, 2021; Roufeil & Battye, 2008).

Built-in evaluation

Although built-in, robust evaluation did not ensure the continuation of Building Family Opportunities, it provided an evidence base regarding what worked and how similar programs may be developed in the future. The Key Informants identified evaluation as being an important tool for arguing for the program to be supported, and using an independent evaluator meant that the evaluation would be comprehensive and robust:

At the strategic end when we're trying to get money and trying to argue the case. From state and national governments to, you know, to fund that sort of intervention, it was a particular model and it had a lot of evaluation around it through NILS [National Institute of Labour Studies] (Key Informant 2).

Evaluation is an essential component of program development (developmental evaluation) so that programs can adapted and enhanced over time and measured in terms of cost-benefit as noted below:

There [were] two evaluation stages. One was sort of implementation and then longitudinal, two years later, and then we had a Deloitte Access Economics piece which came at it from a cost benefit analysis angle (Key Informant 2).

Conducting evaluation can inform the extent to which a program is working as intended and to measure the cost-benefit. However, it is essential that time is spent on decisions about what is measured. For example, what are the desired outcomes at person (e.g. jobseeker and their family), community, stakeholder, and broader social and regional levels?

Summary

The BFO program was highly successful for the participants involved, but it was now more than 10 years ago and much has changed in the employment and unemployment landscape. The key drivers for its success included: high level support; strong multi-level, multi-organisational and multidisciplinary collaboration; and, person/context centred, intensive case management as one point of service connection. Having built-in evaluation added flexibility so that if something was not working well, it could be adapted whilst aspects that were working well could be built upon. Nevertheless, it was unsustainable without external ongoing funding and continued high-level support.

Case Study 2: Stronger Places, Stronger People

The Stronger Places, Stronger People initiative is a more recent, large-scale place-based initiative established in 2020, with strong federal government-level support. A Parliamentary Inquiry into Intergenerational Welfare Dependence (2019) found that entrenched disadvantage was complex and multi-faceted, and that intergenerational welfare dependence was associated with other, often interrelated, factors. These factors included geographic location; Indigenous status; parental status; suitability of available employment; educational attainment; health and family welfare; and availability of appropriate support systems. The Inquiry also concluded that place-based approaches are among the most successful in ameliorating entrenched disadvantage, particularly when they use a collaborative, integrated framework with different agencies working together towards common goals.

High-level support

The Federal Government response to the Inquiry supported the recommendation that ‘the Australian Government continue to prioritise funding for place-based and wrap-around services that can demonstrate evidence of successful programs for people living with entrenched disadvantage’ (Australian Government 2020, p. 3). This terminology suggests The Government subsequently introduced a 10-year ‘Stronger Places, Stronger People’ (SPSP) initiative, with an initial \$35m 5-year funding commitment. The SPSP initiative is place-based and uses a Collective Impact framework (Department of Social Services 2019).

To start with, SPSP tended to support communities that were already engaged and already working together, but with insufficient resources, as noted below:

These community led initiatives were really operating on that smell of oily rag, they didn't have the appropriate resourcing to really step in and accelerate the changes that they were looking to implement at the local level. So when the SPSP initiative was established, the idea was that you would tap into communities where they already had the foundations for change in place, that there were there was evidence of a local initiative or movement for change that the community had demonstrated that they'd come together and were willing and ready to work collectively, and that there was

readiness to partner with government. And then the SPSP funding could be brought in to accelerate that approach at the local level (Key informant 3).

While rewarding communities for developing the foundations for place-based transformation makes sense, not least because of a higher likelihood of success, it is inequitable when considering disadvantaged communities that may not have pre-existing leadership or governance structures in place (OECD, 2018).

Collaboration

Central to the SPSP initiative is the establishment of a Backbone Team comprising local community members at each site (SPSP Backbone Teams, 2022), and is what the government program funds (Key Informant 3). The role of the Backbone Team is to:

...hold that independent role of community led change where they can genuinely engage with community, bring community voice, data, measurement, understanding into the work, distil that into the development of the strategy or agenda for change, [...] constantly updating their understanding of the data, their knowledge about what's happening in the community [and] being able to feed that back to the community based on what it is that the community needs, not just listening to the voices about what community wants, but using lots of different types of data to genuinely understand what the community needs are (Key Informant 3).

This ensures that initiatives are community-led rather than service or program led and that they follow a Collective Impact approach, so that Backbone Teams 'engage with those who do hold funding for programs and services across community and work with them to align their efforts to the needs and aspirations of Community' (Key Informant 3).

One of the stand-out success stories of SPSP in terms of community engagement is the Logan Together initiative (Logan Together, 2022). The most significant change attributable to Logan Together has been increased community cohesion (Logan Together, 2023). Community cohesion has been a direct result of power-sharing and shared decision-making and has also led to many other positive impacts. Perhaps the most significant measurable impacts have been the number of First Nations mothers attending antenatal visits increasing from 77% in 2015 to 88% in 2022 and the number of First Nations still births reducing to 0.3% compared to other parts of Queensland which ranges from 1% to 5% (Logan Together, 2023). Being able to work with communities to change programs that are not working is one of the keys to the Logan Together approach, as noted below:

[Knowing] what's going on the ground and being able to advocate back and say, 'Look, this is just not meeting the needs of our community. This is how we think we could do it better'. So, a couple of examples of where that has played out. A really strong one is in Logan Together with the Communities for Children and Facilitating Partner funding. The organisation that is funded there to run Communities for Children worked really closely with the Logan Together Backbone Team and leadership to look at: What the outcomes were from the program and which needs it wasn't meeting. So, which families and children were falling through the cracks (Key informant 3).

The Logan Together Backbone Team identified that the previous program was not working because it was based on evidence from US-based programs designed for White people which 'simply were not fit for purpose' when working with First Nations families (Key informant 3). Other Logan Together initiative impacts include the introduction of new employment pathways and the KoKo Youth Justice initiative leading to 61% of young people not re-offending, and 59% being removed from the Serious

Repeat Offender List (Logan Together, 2024). The Logan community, with a population of close to 400,000, comprises culturally and linguistically diverse communities, with many people excluded from employment opportunities, which is also being addressed by Logan Together as follows:

For things like employment, particularly for mums who are new to Australia, who struggle to engage with the early childhood system, providing them with culturally appropriate programs has meant that they've also had much greater engagement with lots of the mums and parents through being able to diversify and adapt their programs. That has led on led to much greater outcomes for a lot of those families as well (Key informant 3).

The impacts described above have resulted from strong community-led collaboration which was supported by the first phase of SPSP, much like collaboration was the key to BFO's success. Yet, while ostensibly communities decide what to focus on, the revised version of SPSP restricts the focus to children and young people. Nevertheless, each of the SPSP Communities articulate specific goals and focus areas, and there are multiple positive outcomes beyond children and young people. This is demonstrated by the number of Government policies that the SPSP Communities are contributing to beyond each community's focus area (see table 1).

Two of the initiatives which commenced in the pre-2023 SPSP focussed on employment: Burnie Works and the Barkly Region. The Burnie community in Tasmania established Burnie Works in 2014, predating SPSP (David & Faivel, 2023). In addition to SPSP funding, the initiative is supported by Burnie City Council, the Tasmanian Government and other partners including the Paul Ramsay Foundation, the Tasmanian Community Fund and the University of Tasmania (Burnie Works, 2023). At its heart, Burnie Works has consistently maintained an ethos that for enduring change, the community must be central to decision making and to have the 'the individuals most affected by issues should have the greatest say in determining the solutions' (Kowa, 2024, p. 7). Each of Burnie Works' four key focus areas include initiatives and systems change elements. The four areas include:

- Education and Youth Engagement: Building Foundations for Lifelong Learning and Opportunity
- Employment and Economic Development: Pathways to Sustainable Livelihoods
- Early Childhood Development: Laying the Foundation for Lifelong Wellbeing
- Community Wellbeing: Addressing the Social Determinants of Health

Each of these focus areas have been identified by and for the Burnie community. However, the new key focus areas above do not directly, but clearly are now required to, link focus areas to children and young people. The SPSP initiative was evaluated in 2022 and has been re-funded, \$64m over 6 years, until mid-2029 to 'extend and enhance the existing partnerships' (Bramston, 2023; DSS, 2023). The new iteration uses stronger language around equity but also brings a change in focus, with less emphasis on generational disadvantage and more emphasis directed towards 'children and their families' (DSS, 2023). Whether this dampens the extent to which SPSP funded place-based initiatives can still be community-driven and wholly collaborative is yet to be seen.

Tensions within communities and between organisation can also create barriers for power-sharing, particularly when the Backbone Team comprises service providers whereby they are 'privy to a whole range of information that other service providers and community might not have access to' therefore as noted below:

It's really important to ensure that the right governance and information sharing structures are in place and that the lines aren't too blurred between a role as a service provider, or part of a collaboration of service providers, and the role of holding that

independent space and ensuring that you are genuinely representative of community (Key informant 3).

Given that the most significant positive impacts for both BFO and SPSP have resulted directly from collaboration, a model for the Mid North to be designed to address intergenerational unemployment and jobless families will clearly benefit from being community-driven and co-designed.

Table 1. SPSP Communities contributions to Australian Government Policy Priorities. Source: SPSP Backbone Teams. (2022). Disrupting Disadvantage: Early Evidence of the Impact of Community-led Change.

SPSP Community	Closing the Gap	Early Years	Youth	Justice and Family Safety	Health, Wellbeing and Aged Care	Education and Skills	Housing	Jobs and Employment
Burnie Works	First Nations leadership and engagement	- Restacking the Odds - First 1000 Days - Works with CB - CYWB Data project with Tasmanian Government	- Dream Big - Up Close and Big - Youth Council - Youth Making Changes around Burnie - More for Children (ANU)	Justice Group (youth justice, family safety)	- First 1000 Days - Mental Health Action Plan - CAPITOL Project	- Books in Homes - Knowledge Collector Project - Dream Big - Up Close and Big	Community Support for Youth Foyer and other youth accommodation initiatives	- Hosting Tas Govt Regional Jobs Hub - Host Employment Partnership Group - Youth Pathways Program
Far West Community Partnerships	- Empowered Communities joint decision-making - Driving data sovereignty - Transforming government through partnerships on policy and funding design	- Leading the Ceduna Services Collaboration - Christmas toy drive - Relationship building with CB	- Community Festival - Forming a Regional Education Reform Strategy and Working Group - Supporting Youth Leadership Project	Social Reinvestment strategy including leading creation of "nunga court" Partnership with Red Cross Community Hub and satellite service hubs in community	- Covid-19 response – culturally appropriate isolation policies, and facilities - Development of Health and Wellbeing Regional Development Strategy	Forming a Regional Education Reform Strategy and Working Group	- Shared Decision making with South Australian Housing Authority on the Aboriginal Housing Strategy - Development of Regional Housing and Infrastructure Strategy	- Supporting and empowering ACCOs - Regional Economic Development and Employment Strategy
Gladstone Region engaging in Action Together	- First Nations Leadership Group - Identification and analysis of data that supports Indigenous self-determination	- Child health assessments - Early Intervention Strategy – shared cross-sector service capacity (reduced waitlists)	Data project identifying representation in youth support programs	- Child protection data and analysis - informing target locations and cohorts - Voices of Resilience – photographic case studies	- Integrated Service Sector Working Groups - Rio Tinto Partnership – Gladstone Region Wellbeing Data Hub – community owned data asset	Upskilling and motivating community to engage in systems change	- Growth Management Planning Working Group - Housing Supports Working Group – data and place-based solutions	- Skills Attraction Workshop (KPMG), strategies; employer toolkit - Partner with Rio Tinto on data hub
Hands Up Mallee	- First Nations leadership and engagement in governance - First Nations representation in all aspects of the work	- One of Australia's first Intergenerational Early Years Services co-located with an Aged Care facility - Fun in the park - Rich Home Learning Environment - Voices of Children	- Engaging youth in a co-design process to set priority actions for youth focused activity - HomeBase Hoops - HomeBase development partner – an after hours youth drop in service	Developing early responses to local youth disengagement and problem behaviours in culturally appropriate ways alongside community leaders	- Coordinated Covid-19 local Emergency Food Relief Response - Covid-19 vaccination active outreach model - Drug and alcohol Rehabilitation centre - Generations Music Together program	- Providing paid opportunities for community expertise - Supporting community members to apply for voluntary and paid opportunities through providing Backbone references	- Continually raising Housing as an issue in community which impacts on children, young people and families - Presenting housing data to highlight issues in community	Supported community members to have input into recently announced local Department of Transport review
Logan Together	- FN leadership (Gnirigomindala Karulbo) guiding LT strategy and decision-making - Dedicated FN Maternal and Child Health Hub - Walking Together for Logan's Children - strengthening ACCOs	- Logan's Early Childhood Development system - Restacking the Odds framework - The Logan Core Suite - Toddler Development Index to offer new insights into developmental status at Age 2		Walking Together for Logan's Children – authentic co-design of community-led solutions for Logan's child protection system	- Maternal and Child Health Hubs - Targeted nurse home visiting (right@home) and early diagnosis and referral for developmental delays (Thriving and on Track) - Eagleby Early Childhood Development	- Working to realise data sovereignty and data literacy by providing access to community data - Building local Backbone Teams - Engaging in cultural Training across movement - Two-way learning philosophy	Identified in 2022 Collective Plan as major strategic focus	Identified in 2022 Collective Plan as major strategic focus
Maranguka	- Joint decision making and First Nations leadership - CSLG - Data sovereignty	- Welcome baby to country - Baby Expo - Connected Beginnings co-located - Healthy Kids Bus Stop	- Daily check-ins addressing youth crime and disengagement - Tribal Links (night patrol) - Afternoon Activities ie: Touch Footy, Dance Workshops	- Justice Reinvestment in Bourke. - Return to Community - How to work in Bourke Collaboration Agreements		- Supporting community re-entry to Education - The Rising Star Program - increase school attendance and student participation.		

Built-in evaluation

SPSP has ensured built-in evaluation from the outset, with a focus on measuring governance and accountability and provides evaluation tools for communities to use. However, despite its aims and intentions, providing evaluation tools is somewhat constraining, contradicting the ethos of being community-driven and co-designed. The Burnie Works Progress Mapping report (Kowa, 2024) suggests that the measurement tools prescribed by SPSP are imposed, overly complex and not entirely fit for purpose, which goes against the idea of community co-design.

Burnie Works, supported by Kowa, co-designed an alternative measuring tool and in doing so, cemented community relationships and support. Nevertheless, power-sharing remains a constant struggle, and ‘traditional power structures still influence decision-making processes’ (Kowa, 2024, p. 29).

Summary

The SPSP place-based and Collective Impact approach enables communities to foster community engagement and participation to co-design programs and services that work, demonstrated by the positive, measurable impacts outlined above.

Many of the elements that led to positive outcomes for communities are similar across both BFO and SPSP – in particular high-level support, communication and collaboration. While the two case studies are not directly comparable, with BFO being on a much smaller scale than SPSP, both approaches have brought about demonstrable success.

We now turn to exploring the lived experience of people living in the Mid North who are unemployed or underemployed. Hearing the in-depth perspectives of people with lived experience sheds light on the local context and provides insights into the types of support that could be helpful in the Mid North and potentially other similar regional areas.

Deep dive – lived experience of un/underemployment in the Mid North

The researchers undertook five in-depth interviews with people who were unemployed or underemployed. Three of the participants had been unemployed for one or more years, while two were underemployed (3 hours per week/intermittent). Two participants were male and three female, across a broad range of ages. Participants lived in a range of locations in the Mid North, with some having lived in different places within the region. We have used pseudonyms to maintain participant confidentiality.

Participants shared their experiences which produced data informing the types of aspirations they held, including job type and conditions, and the challenges and supports they experienced in their efforts to achieve their aspirations. We have structured the findings thematically, starting with the participant’s aspirations, followed by challenges and supports.

Aspirations

Participants spoke about their aspirations in terms of the type of job they would like and/or the job conditions, such as flexibility (i.e. part time) and the psychosocial work environment. Participants tended to speak about their aspirations in terms of the employment opportunities that were locally available, rather than state aspirations that may not be attainable in the region.

Tom, who had been unemployed for more than 12 years, spoke about cooking as a passion he held for most of his life, stating that:

I've always enjoyed cooking since I was 16 years old. It was a passion... my ideal job still would be working in the kitchens, cooking (Tom).

One of the women spoke about wanting to be self-employed, with a dream of owning a small property, selling farm produce describing that:

My future job is to own my own business, self-employed... what I want to do is get my own property ...one of those farmsteads, to be self-sufficient, make a little veggie store or something like that (Marianne).

Two participants were keen to work in the care industry. Teagan, one of the younger participants, was interested in nursing, stating that 'I like helping people', and hoped to do her training with the Australian Defence Force. Similarly, Trinity, who was a single mum, was interested in working in aged care or as a disability support worker. The three women were all interested in finding flexible employment, which seemed to be an important starting point, with Trinity stating that:

To me as a single mum, probably flexibility, flexible hours and days and stuff like that... I'm currently training to go into aged care and support and disability, because there's lots of jobs up here for that (Trinity).

Marianne, by comparison, had many years of taking care of family and was not interested in care work, and so was aspiring to obtain certificates for operating machinery, 'traffic management and getting my bobcat and excavation license' and was waiting for her child to start school so that she could gain employment, initially in traffic management.

The two male participants spoke about being open to working in any type of job, so long as the psychosocial work environment was good, with James stating his ideal job would 'have a good, friendly atmosphere'. Secondly, the two males described the frustration of working in jobs with insufficient hours to be able to stop Centrelink and the obligations involved in accessing Centrelink, described by James below:

I'm happy really with anything, as long as I'm getting a decent wage that will get me off unemployment. It's a real hassle having say you got 20, 20 to 25 hours, but you still got to fill out a form for unemployment and potentially see a job network [provider]. You're working and it's just added stuff that I wish I didn't have to do. If I've got a job, I want to be able to do my job and not worry about unemployment anymore (James).

All five participants articulated their aspirations and had thought about how their aspirations may be actualised in the available local context. In other words, the reasons that participants gave for their interest in particular occupations were largely because they were industries that needed a workforce and seemed accessible. Thus, participants spoke about what was possible in their local and lived contexts, such as access to training and the likelihood of future employment once they were qualified. Participants therefore matched their aspirations to what was locally available. The next sections present the challenges and enablers for achieving their training and employment goals.

Challenges

Despite having clear aspirations, the participants described a range of challenges, including environmental challenges directly related to living in the country, structural challenges such as the way public services operate, and personal challenges such as limited (or no) support networks, being a single parent, and experiencing poor mental health.

Country context

Participants described having fewer employment and training options, resources and supports in the country compared to the city. Marianne spoke about other participants in the program that she was involved in being unable to make appointments and having difficulties completing courses without the support that they may have had if they were in an urban setting as follows:

A couple of mums, they missed their appointments, they get stuck in a rut, they wake up, don't want to get out of bed, but in that same position as well, not having a social worker to come like once a week, even to your house to help you. They don't have that kind of stuff. There's a lot that they don't have here compared to the cities (Marianne).

Marianne's perspective suggests that support such as that offered by BFO, whereby workers can make home visits rather than expect clients to attend appointments, could help turn around people's struggles to get out of the house. Trinity spoke about feeling disheartened by the ways in which she would be treated if she was not meeting provider expectations as follows:

When having to work through like the job seeker places they're very professionally rude. They expect you to have everything done in very unrealistic times, so it makes it even more difficult to do, and that kind of discourages me, yeah, from doing the study and stuff (Trinity).

A person-centred, strengths-based approach would mean that Trinity could be encouraged and enabled to complete set tasks rather than feel disheartened about feeling unable to accomplish unrealistic goals. Marianne went on to describe other ways that made the transition from living in the city to moving to the Mid North difficult, particularly when it came to taking care of her health:

It has been really hard for me coming from city to regional area and not having as much as the support that I could find, which was within a city than learn a regional area, just even the hospital here is not really updated to the point where everyone still has to go to Adelaide, two and a half hours away just to get stuff done because we're all booked out, or we don't have enough doctors, or we don't have enough time for the electric side of it, like CTs and CAT scans, just for that, CAT scans and other [technology] to do with the hospitals (Marianne).

Transport was also more difficult in regional areas, with very limited if any public transport options. Participants who did not have a driver's licence (or car) spoke about difficulties accessing both training and employment in the Mid North without a licence, as noted below:

There's the opportunities for the course and that. There's not a lot to help you with [driver's] licence. So, I'm on my learners, and there's really no help here, and I don't want to fork out hundreds of dollars... most of my family have moved away (Trinity).

Participants identified ways in which living in the country meant they had less support than their urban counterparts which meant that they were less likely to be able to achieve their aspirations. They offered practical ideas about how they could be supported, such assistance for everyday activities or fulfilling personal needs, that would assist them to gain and maintain training and employment.

Age, experience and qualifications

Barriers such as age and not having specific qualifications were also common among participants. Being either too young and inexperienced, or older and therefore eligible to be paid more than a young person, were both experienced as barriers to employment. Participants felt that employers are

required to pay older workers more, and therefore expect older workers to have more experience and training than younger workers as noted by James:

The trouble is, as you get older, it seems to be harder to find work. [...] Some employers like older people. But if you haven't got the tickets or things like that, it's harder to pick up jobs (James).

A couple of the participants also spoke about local employers hiring people from outside the region who have existing skills or training, rather than local unemployed people, with Marianne stating that, 'people that are here, that are not working or on Centrelink, they don't change, but people are coming from other states to come and work here'.

Thus, both age and experience were barriers in different ways, with participants noting that employers were filling positions with workers from outside the region to ensure they have the skills and experience required, rather than training local people which would likely be more expensive.

Fear of debt

As with services, many courses that are available in the city are not available in the country, which means that for participants to follow aspirations that require qualifications only accessible in the city, they would have to arrange transport and accommodation to attend the relevant course/s, as described by Tom:

I was looking at Commercial Cookery Cert III through Regency TAFE [...] it's gone up to, I think, \$35,000. I can't afford that kind of money while living in the country. I'd have to find accommodation somewhere in the city for doing the course for six months, and yeah, paying two lots of rent, I couldn't afford to do it (Tom).

Tom and other participants spoke about the conundrum of going into debt to get ahead, for example in order to enter into training Tom noted that:

One of my job network members goes, 'Oh, well, just go get loans and get into debt for it'. And I'm like, 'No, the only time I'll get a loan and get into debt is if I'm buying a home', I've done my absolute best to stay out of debt my entire life. I don't own credit cards (Tom).

Similarly, Marianne spoke about the dilemma of gaining full time employment meaning she would lose benefits associated with Centrelink, such as her health care card, support for medications and rent assistance, and added that she would also be paying tax:

I've been on Centrelink for my whole life, and I really don't care for Centrelink money, the contents of the Centrelink benefits is going to be the one that's going to hurt me the most, especially with my medication and childcare and just rent. So, it's gonna feel a bit a bit overwhelming when I first work [...]. So, they're telling me it can be between \$35 to \$45 an hour. [...] So, once I get a fully good routine, that's when I can start looking at full time. But when I think about full time, and all those benefits have helped me and my son. Now I gotta, like, think ahead - I gotta put extra here. I've got to put extra there. And then tax as well. [...] Then one of my medications, which I'd normally get for \$6.90 it would go up to \$30 (Marianne).

Nevertheless, Marianne was keen to transition into work and out of Centrelink, so that she could work towards her goal of owning a property, stating that, 'Centrelink is convenient, but it's not going to get you that property. It's not going to get you that house'.

To summarise, participants identified their aspirations and articulated the ways they felt they could be supported to achieve their aspirations. Even within a small group of participants there was some diversity of experiences and challenges. Participants also identified challenges for other people they know in the region. Their lived experience suggests that a person-centred approach, such as that offered by BFO, would facilitate, at an individual and family level, their participation in training and/or employment. Their stories suggest that a Collective Impact approach to addressing intergenerational unemployment and jobless families in the Mid North would have a high chance of success.

Stakeholder engagement

The Mid North Local Jobs and Skills Taskforce held two workshops in 2024 to bring together organisations that would likely be stakeholders in a Collective Impact model for change, addressing intergenerational unemployment and jobless families. The initial meeting worked as an introduction to the project and to discuss the types of models that have worked elsewhere, and to seek community commitment to collaborate for lasting change. The second workshop brought together community-based organisations to brainstorm ways in which they could work together towards a shared vision. Organisations attending the second workshop ranged from non-government community services through to local government, state and federal government agencies and local businesses. Details about the workshop can be accessed from the Mid North Jobs and Skills Taskforce (2024). Eighteen organisations signed a commitment to collaboration and one of the key outcomes of the community forum was the development of a draft action plan, addressing the following key components:

1. Governance and structure
2. Communication and engagement
3. Partnerships and collaboration
4. Securing additional resourcing and funding.

Further, there was a strong agreement that, for the Collective's work to be successful, it is imperative that people with lived experience are at the table. Over the following months, the collective worked up a community-led proposal to jointly fund and deliver the first stage of a plan that builds on the principles of community ownership, collective action and systems-wide change - Pirie Voices.

Pirie Voices

In December 2024 the Port Pirie Regional Council endorsed a proposal to partner with a consortium of organisations called Pirie Voices. The consortium has broad representation from different sectors including local and state government, community organisations, industry and employment services. Drawing on evidence from place-based and collective impact approaches, the establishment of Pirie Voices ensures shared responsibility from inception and a genuine partnership approach. Emerging from the Collective Action for Lasting Change workshops, Pirie Voices is fully locally generated rather than being driven by external impetus, incentivisation or facilitation (whether by government, philanthropy or other). Pirie Voices will prioritise systemic change, empowering community members as experts and active drivers of solutions.

Summary and conclusions

The study findings demonstrate that there are excellent examples of place-based, Collective Impact approaches available that the Mid North Local Jobs and Skills Taskforce can draw on. It is clear that local organisations and agencies have the will and capacity to work together to leverage their collective experience, knowledge and resources to develop initiatives that will address barriers to participation and support positive, lasting change for individuals, families and their communities. We found that:

- The region has people and organisations with the leadership skills, will and commitment to drive change.
- Community members with lived experience of intergenerational unemployment and/or are from jobless families must be central to the development of locally-led initiatives to ensure lasting positive change.
- Community-based organisations need to identify and establish a lead entity to resource, develop, establish and co-ordinate a place-based approach, drawing on the knowledge and expertise of local and regional people and organisations.
- A Collective Impact approach, led at a local and regional level, is required to develop collaborative programs and projects that can build connections between local jobless families and employers.
- A lead entity (i.e. backbone) for the Collective Impact approach should be established to provide governance and to ensure transparency and accountability, and not also be an individual service provider stakeholder.
- Person-centred and family-centred approaches at a range of intensities are required to support families to navigate systems and overcome barriers to education, training and sustainable employment.

Next Steps

Drawing on the work to date, the Taskforce will contribute to co-developing a community-owned, community-led change initiative with Pirie Voices, starting by developing its own version of 1000 Voices. The first stage is focusing on listening to the community, leveraging the leadership of multiple trained community facilitators to reach at least 1,000 people. These conversations will inform a community-generated roadmap, outlining aspirations, challenges, and actionable steps for the future.

Phase 1 focusses on mobilising the Port Pirie community to explore their hopes, goals, and ideas for the future. Through inclusive, locally driven conversations, individuals, informal networks, organisations, and businesses engaged in shaping a vision that reflects their lived experiences. As Port Pirie's first fully community-owned and led change initiative, Pirie Voices draws on evidence of successful models initiated by other Australian communities to build a foundation for sustainable, grassroots-driven transformation.

The insights from Pirie Voices will inform the next phase of community-led action, ensuring that the priorities and aspirations identified are translated into tangible initiatives. Future steps may include the establishment of working groups to progress specific community priorities, partnerships with local organisations to co-design solutions, and advocacy efforts to secure resources for long-term change. A commitment to accountability and transparency is planned to be embedded in Phase 2, with regular community forums, feedback sessions, and public reporting on the progress of the initiatives developed through Pirie Voices. Based on evidence reported herein, this ongoing engagement promotes power remaining with the community, and that collective action continues to drive meaningful, sustainable change. Pirie Voices is a **place-based transformative initiative** that positions decision-making and power in the hands of the community. By embedding respect for community strengths, skills, and valuing community knowledge, this initiative fosters long-term social change, community cohesion, and increased community agency. The vision of Pirie Voices is to extend beyond the immediate outputs, providing a strong foundation for sustainable, community-driven change.

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