

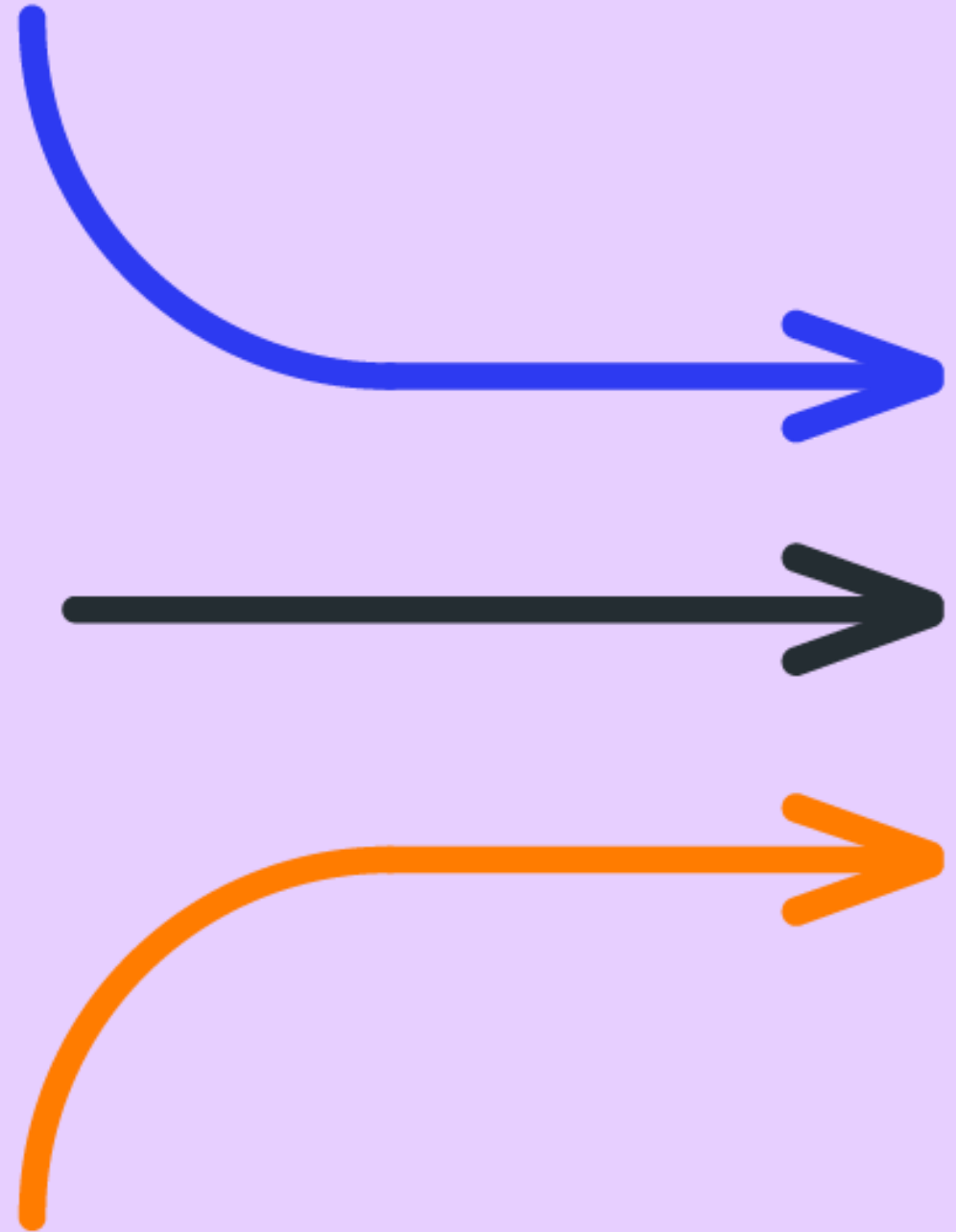


Integration in early years services

Learnings for impact

September 2024

In partnership with **dandolop**partners





Acknowledgement of Country

Social Ventures Australia acknowledges and pays respect to the past and present traditional custodians and elders of this country on which we work.

'After the Rains' by Richard Seden for Saltwater People, 2024

Background

Project context

It is universally acknowledged that there's a need to address siloed services that make it hard for children and families to easily access the services, resources and support they need to thrive.

A more joined up early years service system has been on the agenda for more than 20 years. While progress has been made within government and through innovations from the ground, there's more work to be done.

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) has extensively profiled evidence-based models of Early Childhood Hubs (Moore, 2021; SVA, 2023; Deloitte Access Economics 2023), one of the most promising solutions to bringing services to families, in their communities, and wrapping holistic supports around them.

Yet physical hubs aren't necessarily the best or most appropriate solution for all contexts and communities, and the aspiration of a hub within 'pram pushing distance' for all families is a highly ambitious, long-term pursuit. In the meantime, many initiatives, that are not fully-fledged hubs, work to join up services. We are calling such initiatives, integration initiatives.

SVA commissioned dandolopartners ('dandolo') to analyse a range of integration initiative models being implemented across Australia, with the aim of strengthening our understanding of:

- **What's possible** – profiling diverse models of integration and examples of innovation; and
- **What's needed** – the design features and conditions that underpin or enable the effectiveness of integration initiatives.

We have drawn together our experience, the research literature and findings from interviews with eight sites in preparing this analysis.

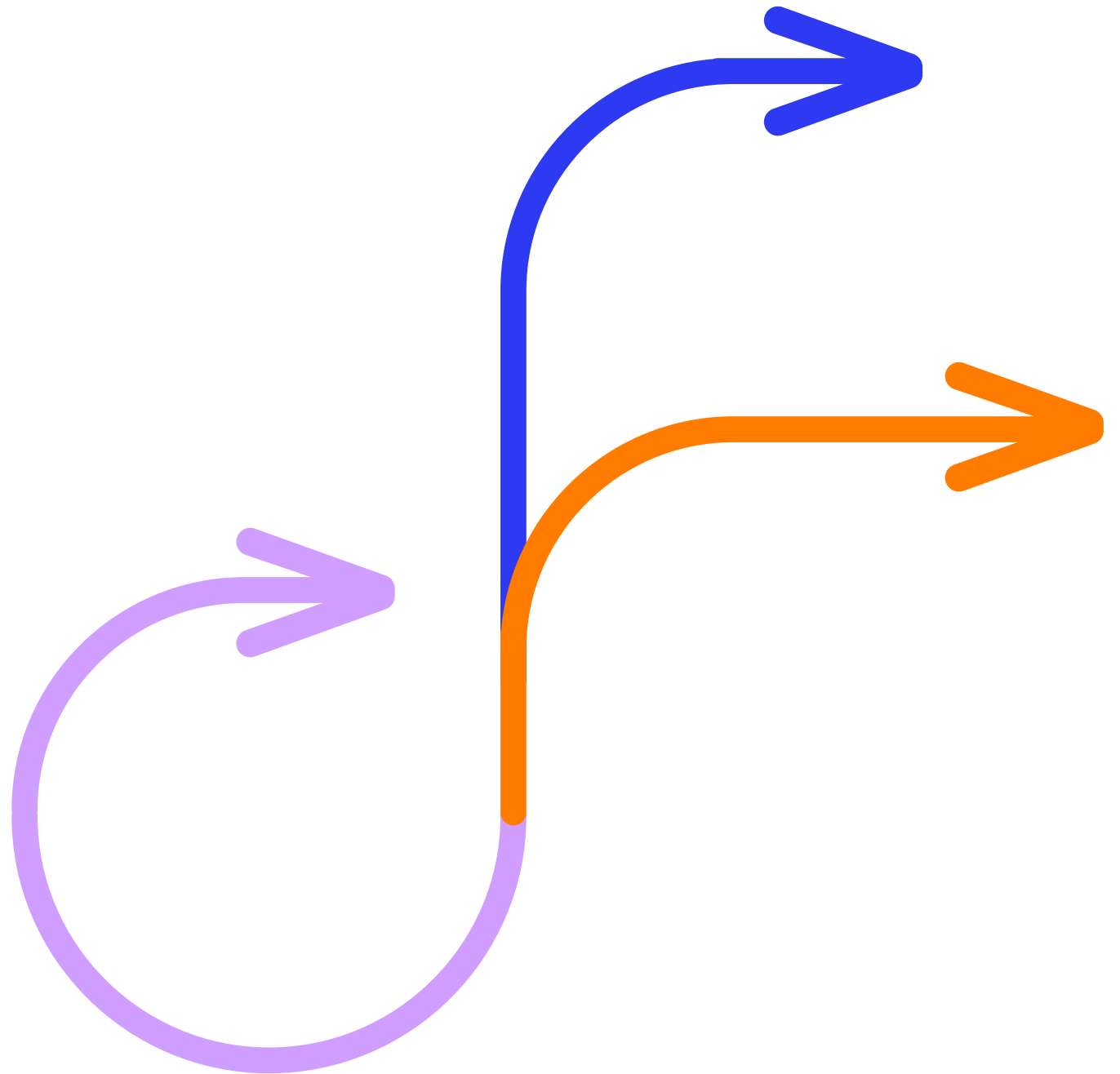
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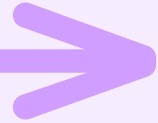
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SVA would like to thank the Berg Family Foundation, Brian M. Davis Charitable Foundation and Chris and Kathy Harrop for their generous support of the Nurture Together initiative within the Young Children Thriving program and their commitment to better understand and mobilise the potential of early childhood hubs to provide high-quality, integrated early childhood services and supports to children and families experiencing vulnerability.





Definitions

Integration: This report uses integration in the context of early childhood services. Integration refers to the extent to which services work together to offer joined up supports to children. Service integration involves increasing levels of cooperation, coordination, information exchange, joint planning, responsibility and accountability and the development of formal partnership structures. This report focuses on examples of service level integration and draws out learnings relevant for seeding integration at a systems level.

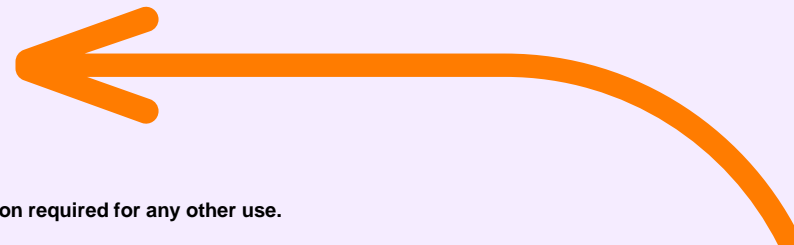
Integration initiative: This term is used to describe services, programs or models of integration that are operating across the country. The report features interviews with eight integration initiatives.

Early Childhood Hub (ECH): A service and social hub where children and families can go to access key services and connect with other families. ECHs usually take the form of a centre that provides a range of child and family services – including early learning programs, maternal and child health, family support programs and targeted services as required by families.

Glue: The underlying leadership, administration and coordination required to operationalise and manage an effective integration initiative. Glue describes many of the intangible elements needed for effective integration such as establishing and supporting networks and referrals with other relevant services, as well as the leadership and coordination among services and across disciplines within the initiative, staff supports (practice frameworks, learning and development, professional supervision), outreach, business oversight, IT and office administration costs. Some of these components may be provided by a backbone organisation if there is one.

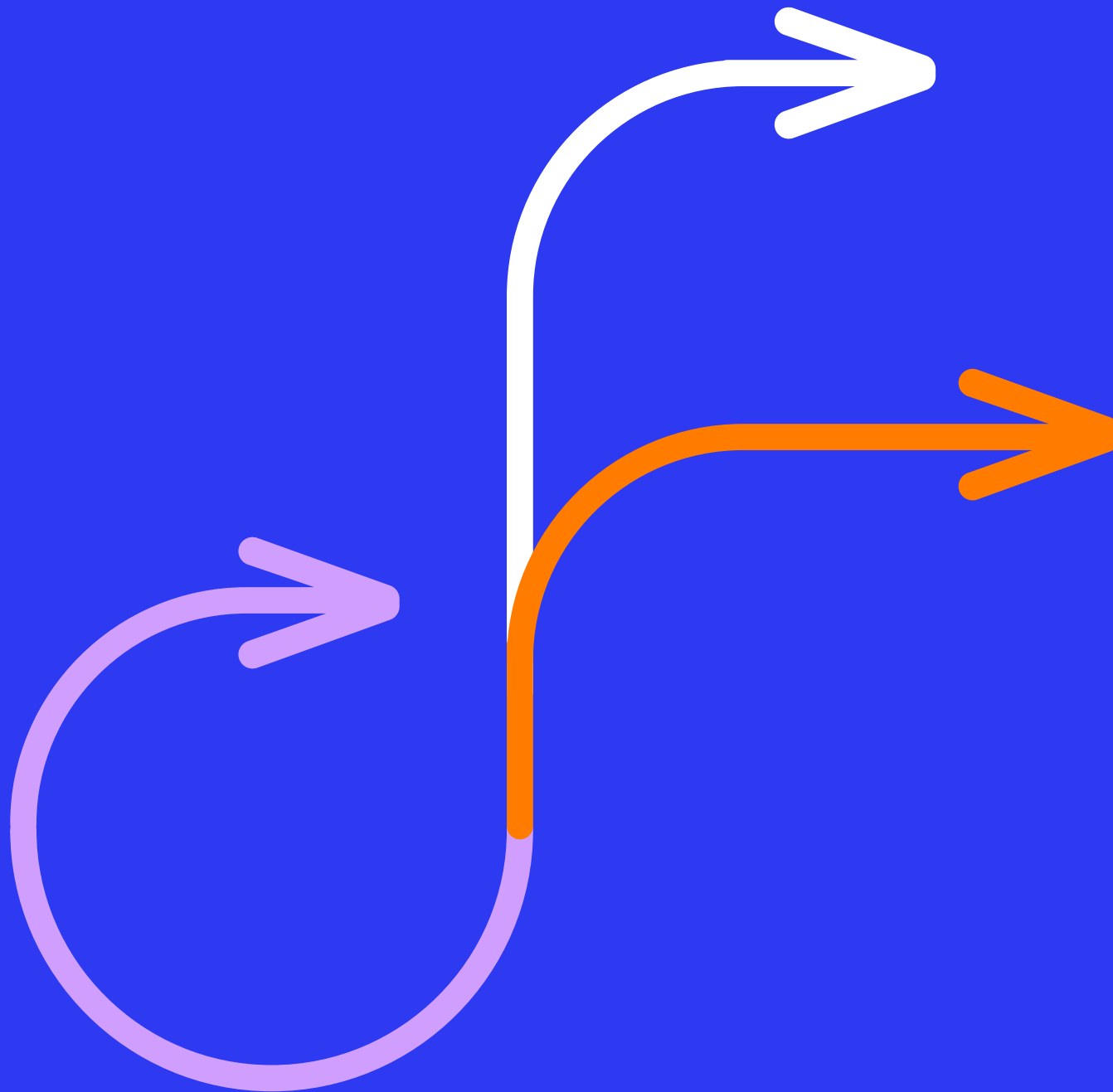
Backbone: Backbone organisations are a core feature that support the function of place-based or collective impact initiatives. This is the support infrastructure for the activities and collaboration required to achieve population level systems change across an area. Although a backbone may do similar things to the glue, a backbone organisation tends to be separate to the organisations involved in the initiative whereas glue activities sit collectively across participants in an integration initiative.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC): Refers to formal early learning, including all forms of childcare (long day care, occasional care, family day care) and preschool.



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Executive summary

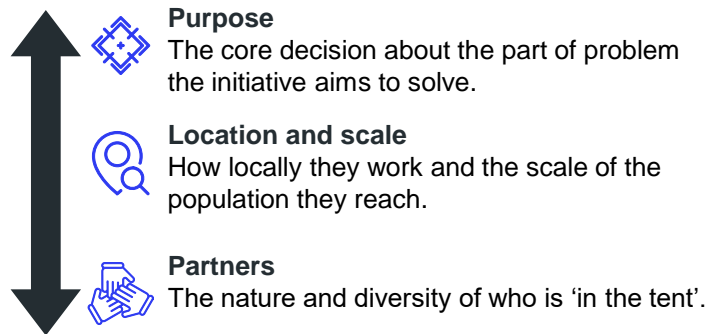


A framework for integration

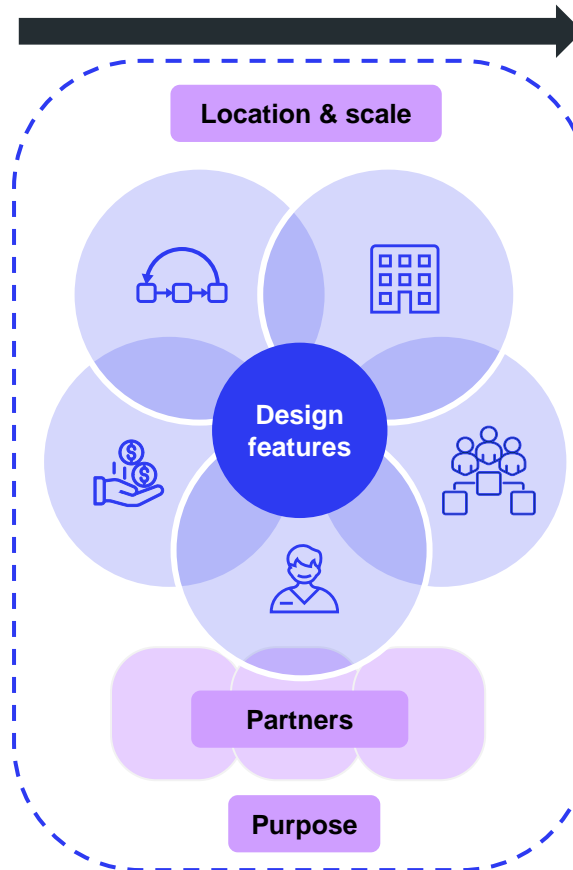
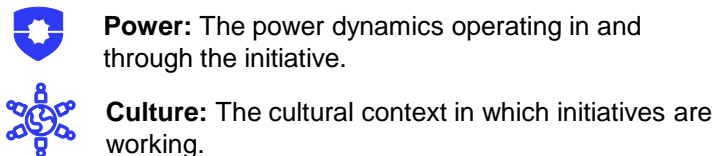
We developed a framework for understanding how early years integration initiatives' operating context inform design decisions

The **operating context** of integration initiatives significantly shapes the types of strategies needed and the design decisions






There are three interrelated and mutually reinforcing elements of the operating context that shape and inform how they work and the design features.



There are **two key additional lenses** that shape and inform how an initiative is designed and operated



There are five critical **design features** of integration initiatives, but what's needed and what works depends on the operating context

-  **Leadership, staffing & capability**
The skill, capability and number of people needed to lead and enable integration initiatives.
-  **Funding and resourcing**
How the work of integration and collaboration is resourced.
-  **Governance**
How decisions are made, how the authorising environment is established and maintained, and who holds accountability.
-  **Adaptation**
The approach to adaptation and iteration and the mechanism for community voice.
-  **Space**
The types of space needed and how space is used and activated.

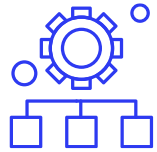


We didn't find any evidence of an optimum set of parameters around these factors.

What appears to be critical is intentional and strategic decisions, clarity and alignment on them, and design features that are appropriate and proportionate

Key insights

Early years integration initiatives are diverse, and there's no single best practice model or ideal implementation pathway, but there are clear ingredients for effectiveness.



There are many strategies that drive more integrated service delivery

There aren't one-size-fits-all solutions, but there are a range of strategies and design decisions that can be effective in different contexts.



Invest in 'the glue' – especially the team of people who lead and drive the collaboration and undertake the relational work needed to make integration happen.

Don't set up the integration initiative to be all things to all people – ensure there are clear boundaries around the initiative aligned to purpose and reflective of place.

Integration is driven by people with the skills and support to do the relational work that overcomes structural issues embedded in the system. The investment in people is as critical as building the infrastructure.

The readiness and ability of organisations and people to work in an integrated way needs to be intentionally cultivated and time allowed for the development of trust.

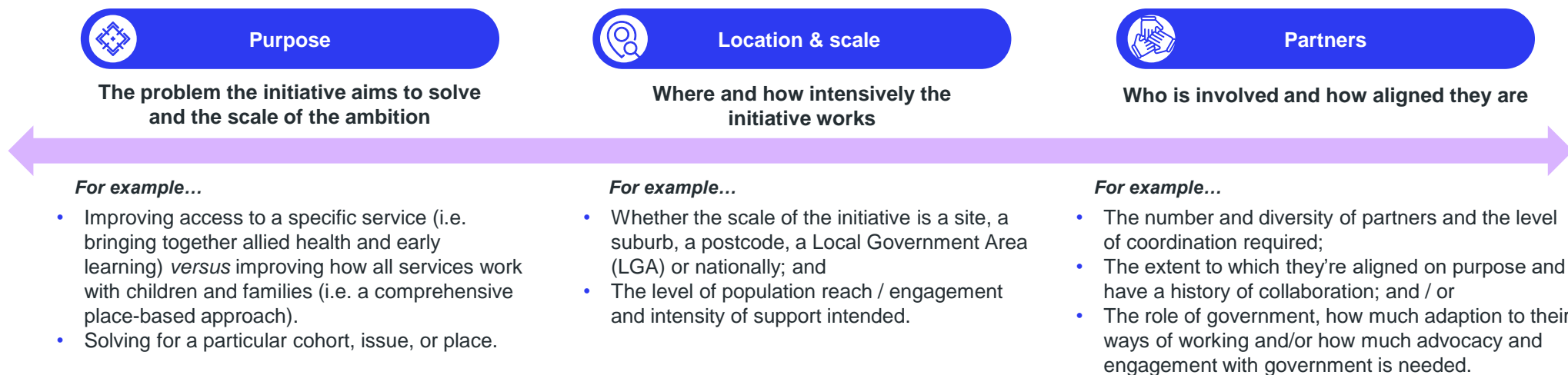
Balance the focus on purpose and outcomes – ensure the focus of the work is optimised for impact but be flexible and adapt as the initiative matures.

Operating context

We found that intentionality about the scope and boundaries of the initiative's purpose, location and scale, and the partners at the table are critical. These three elements 'create the container' in which integration initiatives work.

While acknowledging the complex ecological web that shapes child and family wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), each initiative we reviewed established boundaries around their work in relation to their purpose, their location and scale, and their partnerships. These boundaries:

- **are necessary and need to be intentionally set.** No initiative can be 'all things to all people'. To change how the system works it is necessary to define which part/s of which systems are in scope. Being intentional about setting the boundary is more important than where the boundary is and supports alignment on purpose.
- **may be chosen or imposed.** The boundaries may be determined by funding arrangements, by geography, or by the interests and priorities of partners.
- **are interrelated.** Purpose, location and scale, and partners aren't mutually exclusive and may indeed partially determine each other.
- **don't need to remain fixed but change needs to be strategic.** Care and intentionality about adaptation is critical to preventing mission creep, diluting impact or taking on more than the initiative is ready for.
- **inform the design features and what's needed for effectiveness.** The decisions made about how you establish, govern, fund and deliver an integration initiative need to reflect and be proportionate to the purpose, location and scale, and partnership approach.



Design features

Integration initiatives make different decisions about how they work depending on the boundaries they set around purpose, location and partnerships.



Leadership, staffing & capability

The skill, capability and number of people needed to lead and enable integration initiatives.

The core set of capabilities needed are consistent across integration initiatives. These include interprofessional competencies, system expertise, emotional intelligence, creativity and flexibility, comfort with ambiguity, strategic nous and courage,

The size of the team and the sophistication of the approach needs to scale up as the purpose, location and scale, and diversity of partners grow in size or level of ambition.



Funding and resourcing

How the work of integration and collaboration is resourced.

The funding approach is related to the purpose of the initiative. Funding needs to be adequate to fully support the breadth of an integration initiative's work. Dedicated resourcing for the 'glue' – proportionate to the purpose / level of ambition – is a core feature of all the integration initiatives.

Funding must be flexible and responsive to community need. Different types and levels of funding are required at different phases of an initiative's maturity.

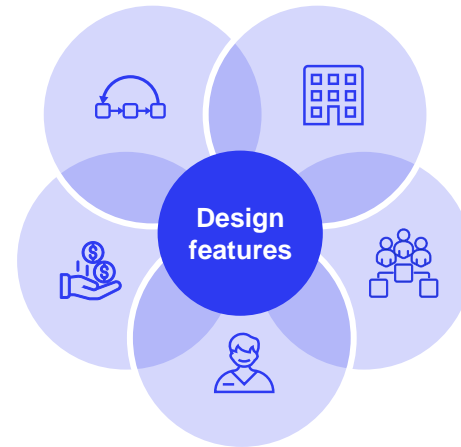


Governance

How decisions are made, authorising environment is established, and accountability maintained.

Governance models are shaped by three key factors:

- Partners: The number of partners involved, the pre-existing level of trust and alignment / shared ways of working, and how government is at the table.
- Location and scale: The extent to which regional diversity needs to be taken into account.
- Power: Intentional mechanisms for giving community a voice and decision-making authority, and the role funders make in informing decisions.



Adaptation

The approach to adaptation & iteration and mechanism for community voice.

All integration initiatives adapt and change over time, but the intentionality and sophistication of the approach to adaptation is influenced by:

- Purpose: the size of the challenge and the level of uncertainty about what the solution is.
- Partners: the needs and priorities of the partners around the table, including funders' appetite for qualitative / quantitative data.



Space

The types of physical or digital environments needed and how it's used and activated.

Integration initiatives use space in different ways and hold different priorities. These are shaped by:

- Purpose: the primary driver of space requirements, as the nature of the collaboration and change in practice should determine the requirements.
- Location & scale, and geographical boundaries: if it's a hyper-local approach, a dedicated space can make more sense than a town or LGA catchment.
- Available infrastructure

Power and culture

There are two key additional lenses that shape and inform how an initiative is designed and operated:



Power

The power dynamics operating in and through the initiative.



Culture

The cultural context in which initiatives are working.

We heard that:

- **Integration initiatives can work to either reinforce or disrupt power dynamics** – including through implicit or explicit decisions about whose voices are heard, what perspectives / which types of evidence are relied on, how decisions are made and who the initiative is accountable to.
- **It's relationships and trust that allow traditional power relationships to be surfaced and disrupted.** This includes:
 - In the way community members are invited in to shape the work
 - The 'ways of working' between partners
- **Clear lines of accountability back to community** – not just to funders – enables ongoing learning and responsiveness.
- **Intentionality about acknowledging and disrupting power imbalances** is important for enabling a wider range of voices and perspectives.
- **Sensitivity to power dynamics – and trust building – is ongoing work, not a 'one-off'**. Power shows up in small interactions as much as big decisions, is an active process to navigate, and can be challenging and at times confronting to navigate well.

This is consistent with research on place-based ways of working and community engagement, where there's clear evidence of its importance and of the challenges many organisations experience doing this work well (Our Place, 2023).

“What works is acknowledging what the person knows about the place, lowering the power imbalance because all people involved are experts. This is where the magic happens.”

“It's important to build trust, build rapport, create space where the power imbalance can be disrupted.”

SNAICC's work on Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) highlights the importance of community ownership for building trust, embedding cultural protocols into ways of working, and ensuring the initiative genuinely meets the needs of children and families.

See pp. 60 for a spotlight on SNAICC's work on integrated early years services.

Considerations for funders and leaders

Funders and leaders looking to seed and scale integration initiatives may need to consider different ways of designing, funding and managing programs.

Funders and leaders of integration initiatives should ...

Be clear on the purpose, scope and scale

Don't set up the integration initiative to be all things to all people – ensure there are clear boundaries aligned to purpose and reflective of place.

Understand site readiness

Understand the level of collaborative muscle, the degree of values alignment, whether there are established positive ways of working, and commitment to a shared agenda.

Invest proportionate to the ambition

The level and type of funding should consider the readiness of the site, the scope and scale of the operation, and length and duration of commitment

Integration initiatives require funders to be:

- Comfortable with sites working at different paces and in different directions,
- Intentional and sophisticated about accountability measures, and
- Willing to come 'on the journey' over time.

Build the right team

Ensure you're able to attract and grow leaders and doers with the skills and capabilities needed to work effectively and collaboratively.

Invest in growing their capability and the support they need to be effective.

Plan for adaptation

Know it's going to take time.

Build in mechanisms (across funding, governance, delivery plans) for ongoing learning, innovation and adaptation.

Ensure the community has a voice in shaping the what and the how.

Remain focused on the shared purpose

Be intentional about the design features

Decisions about the design features should be strategic, responsive to local contexts and priorities, and fit-for-purpose.

In different places and different times, the strategies around features like governance, funding, space may change.

There's a need to strike a careful loose / tight balance that's:

- Tight on clarity of purpose, being responsive to site readiness, and investing in the right team and the necessary elements of the glue; and
- Loose on the what and how so there's space to respond to different community priorities, mature over time, innovate and adapt.

Investment in the 'glue' is a non-negotiable: Initiatives cannot succeed without dedicated funding to support the practices, roles and structures needed for effective integration of services and supports

Considerations for scale

Workforce is the first priority for scaling up integration initiatives, and there is foundational work that funders and decision makers can progress to recognise, grow and develop the workforce.



Recognising, growing and developing the workforce

There is a growing cohort of people in integration initiatives who work to 'span boundaries' – across a diverse set of roles including leaders, community development workers, service system linkers or navigators, members of collaborative governance bodies.

These people are hard to find and recruit, but poor access to the right people with the right skills is a handbrake on expansion of all kinds of integration initiatives (PRF, 2022).



There's a critical role for funders in:

Recognising integration roles as distinct and valuable

- Helping create a language and profile for the 'boundary span-ners', including by recognising or incentivising these roles in grant applications.



Growing the talent pool

- While integration leaders and practitioners are often considered rare and precious, they demonstrate a relatively consistent set of capabilities, skills and mindsets. Many of these capabilities can be taught and cultivated. This could include:
 - Developing training programs and professional learning opportunities that focus on the core skills / competencies needed to move into integration work.
 - Working with core training providers in community services to adapt their programs to include / embed the core capabilities in existing professional training.



Developing the workforce

- Enabling opportunities for learning and growth, including through:
 - Creating / building on communities of practice for both leaders and practitioners.
 - Designing training, mentoring and professional development that is easily accessible.
 - Recognition / reward for exceptional practice (awards programs, profiling in communications, conference presentations, etc.).
 - Specialist qualifications (including micro-credentials) and scholarships for intensive programs.
 - Creating the right scaffolding to recruit people from the community into these roles

Considerations for scale

There are also opportunities to strengthen the authorising environment, deepen the research, and better leverage universal platforms.

Build the authorising environment

Funders – especially government – play a critical role in setting expectations around ways of working that either enable or inhibit integration.

Funders can consider:

- How success is measured in funding agreements.
- Policy and practice frameworks that create clear boundaries and parameters, but enable flexibility in implementation.
- Internal governance arrangements that give middle-managers clarity about their scope of action and that explicitly authorise adaptation and innovation.

Investigate optimum settings

This report has argued that there is no clear evidence on the optimum purpose, location and scale, or partnership approach for integration initiatives. As funders move towards more large-scale investments, there's an opportunity to be more intentional about where best to set the boundaries.

- A more systematic investigation of the optimum scope and scale of integration initiatives will help chart the pathway towards scale.

Create the conditions for effective integration when leveraging universal services

Currently, there is increasing momentum around leveraging universal platforms – like early learning services and schools – to drive more integration. There's an extensive literature on delivering wrap-around health and wellbeing services through schools (Our Place, 2023).

This review has explored models other than fully integrated hubs, but many of the principles remain the same. Key insights include:

Leadership mindset, skills and time are critical

- The commitment, capability and capacity of the principal / centre director is a threshold condition for impact.
- The skillset needed to be a highly effective principal or centre director is necessary but not sufficient for integration initiatives – they also need to be able to bring their team on the journey, foster an environment for intra-professional learning and ways of working, to navigate different service systems, and form partnerships with other organisations.

It's important to assess readiness

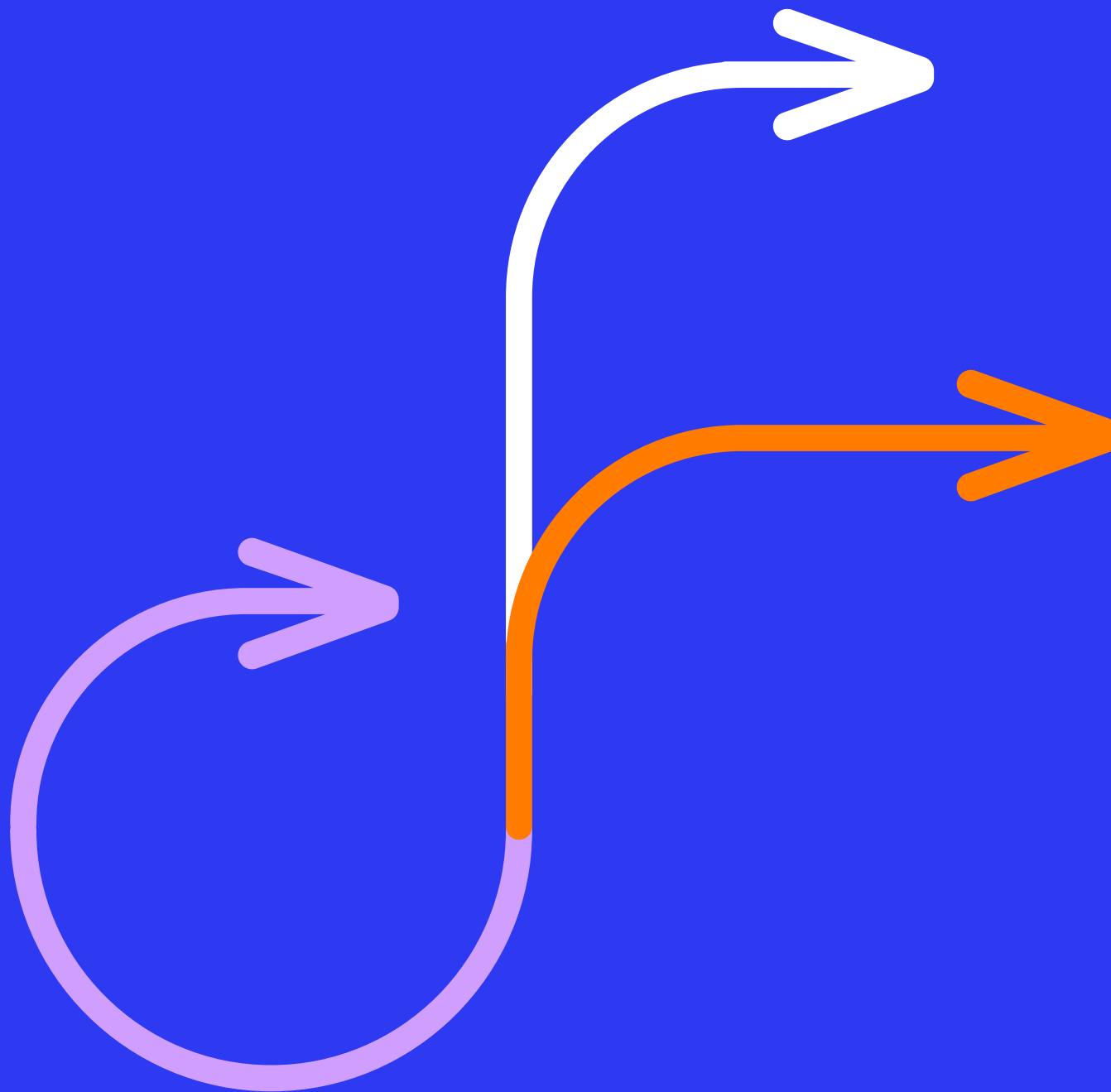
- Rather than 'gifting' greater integration capacity to a site, it's important to make sure the right foundations are in place.
- In particular, that the key people at the site have the right mindsets, are aligned with the intent / purpose, and have already started building strong, respectful relationships with families and the community that they can build on.

Engagement needs to be resourced

- Investment in 'the glue' is foundational – especially the team of people who lead and drive the collaboration and undertake the relational work needed to make integration happen.
- The 'day jobs' of principals and centre directors are already full – if they're being expected to take on a wider role, be more engaged in community initiatives, and to spend time out of the service, they need additional internal leadership support.
- Resourcing participation in integration initiatives is important for everyone involved in integration activities, even if they're not the lead organisation. Participating in integration activities is challenging within the scope of their core roles.

SVA

Our approach



Our approach

Scope

This work considers a range of innovative approaches to providing more integrated early years services – models of collaboration, innovative practices and ways of working in place – that aim to deliver on the goal of more effective, responsive, contextualised support for children and families. The report sets out to:

- Profile examples of innovative practice,
- Identify the types of strategies and approaches they use to bring services and systems together more effectively,
- Unpack the conditions and capabilities required, and
- Distill the key design features and range of options available to providers, funders and policy-makers considering integration initiatives.

We focus on:

- **The early years** – particularly the range of universal health, wellbeing and learning services needed by children and families in the first five years.
- **Approaches to integration** – which we understand as initiatives that bring together different systems, services, professions and / or practices together across boundaries. We focus on the ‘how’ rather than the ‘what’ – the enablers of integration rather than specific initiatives or programs.

We don’t set out to provide a comprehensive ‘how to’ guide or advocate for particular models or approaches. Rather, we aim to highlight key considerations and provide different lenses through which to understand the opportunities and constraints of a range of integration approaches, with an interest in the effective functioning of integration initiatives.

For integration initiatives, the report provides tangible examples and ideas about the range of integration pathways available to them to grow and strengthen their efforts at improving how the service system works for the children and families they serve.

For funders and policy-makers, the report highlights the critical design features of effective integration initiatives and provides key considerations for effective program design and investment.

Methodology

This project draws on dandolo and SVA’s extensive experience working in, with and around early years integration initiatives over many years. In addition:



We conducted a comprehensive literature review and leveraged the substantial and growing body of Australian and international research on approaches to integration.

- This includes a series of papers authored by the Centre for Community Child Health and commissioned by SVA and the comprehensive Our Place papers on the evidence underpinning the Our Place model, authored by dandolo.*



We held in-depth interviews with a select 8 case study sites.

These were chosen for their diversity rather than their representativeness. We were interested in exploring different approaches to integration, different levels of maturity, and diverse contexts.

- With each site, we tested and refined our draft conceptual framework, and worked through their approach to each of the elements in the operating context and design features, aiming to describe and map their approach. All quotes are drawn from case study sites but anonymised.
- We have drawn together our experience, the research literature and findings from our interviews in preparing this analysis.

Integration initiatives: case studies

We interviewed representatives from eight initiatives. All have a common purpose: supporting children and families through collaborative approaches that integrate services and aim to create system change.

The Brave Foundation



The Brave Foundation supports young people who are expecting or parenting in Australia. Their unique Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) mentoring program equips participants to navigate parenting support, resources, and education or employment opportunities in their local community through personalised plans developed with mentors.

They also provide a national database of health, wellbeing, pregnancy and education services for young parents looking for support.

Brimbank City Council Early Years Network



Brimbank, a local government area in Victoria, Australia, provides comprehensive services for children and families and convene a network of local services aiming to identify and address gaps in services.

Services include an immunisation program delivered by registered nurses, the Maternal and Child Health service, and a free primary health service available for all families with children from birth to kindergarten age. Brimbank offers supported playgroups, *smalltalk* program, an Early Years Outreach service, Preschool Field Officers along with central kindergarten registration for sessional kindergartens.

By Five



By Five is a place-based community collaboration initiative in the Wimmera Southern Mallee region of Victoria, Australia. It works across five local government areas to ensure every child and family has access to consistent, quality early years services.

By Five collaborates with service providers, communities, and families to enable equitable access to services, high-quality care, and supportive environments that help children succeed in learning and life.

Far North Early Childhood Network (FNECN)



The Far North Early Childhood Network (FNECN) is a consultative forum that connects early childhood professionals across Far North Queensland, Australia. It aims to raise the profile of the early years and support every child in the region to enter school healthy and ready to learn.

FNECN shares research, best practices, projects, events, advocacy, and expertise while collaborating on problems of practice identified by community partners and Early Childhood Community Networks.

Integration initiatives: case studies cont.

Goodstart's EChO



Goodstart's Enhancing Children's Outcomes (EChO) program offered enhanced support through early childhood services across Australia. EChO centres provided additional support beyond core education and care, including child and family practitioners, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, and social inclusion coordinators.

The program aimed to improve learning, development, and wellbeing outcomes for vulnerable children while also supporting their families and communities and providing access or pathways to more intensive support.

Our Place



Our Place is a backbone organisation that supports the education, health, and development of children and families in disadvantaged communities in Victoria, Australia. They use schools as a universal platform to support site partners to implement evidence-based strategies across five core elements.

Our Place aims to reshape the service system by influencing policies and practices to address the structural causes of disadvantage, helping children and families succeed in life.

The Hive



The Hive is a place-based, collective impact initiative operating in Mt Druitt, NSW, Australia. As the backbone organisation, it works to ensure every child has the best possible start in life.

The Hive takes a holistic and inclusive approach centred around community voice and aspirations, recognising the impact of families, communities, governments, and service systems on children's well-being. By collaborating with services and community members through a shared vision, The Hive aims to achieve sustainable, long-term change.

Uniting NSW

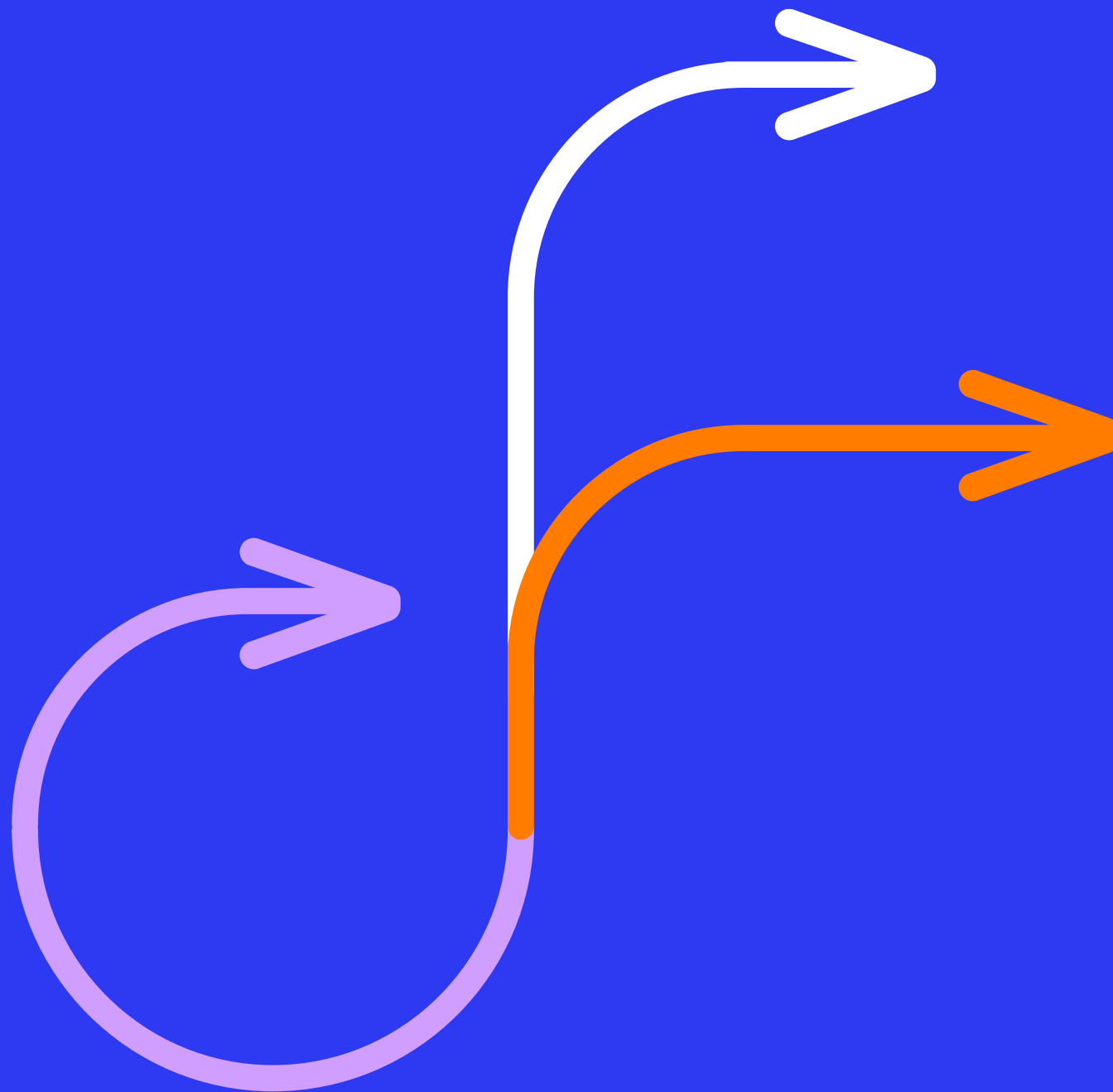


Uniting NSW is a not-for-profit organisation that provides community services across New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. They offer a wide range of programs, including aged care, disability support, early learning, and family services.

Uniting NSW works to empower individuals, families, and communities, advocating for social justice and helping people from all walks of life to thrive.



The case for service system reform in the early years



Enhancing support for children and families

Despite a widespread understanding that services need to be more responsive to child and family needs, complex and siloed service systems still make it difficult for children and families to access the support they need, when they need it.



The Problem

There are over 106,000 children under 6 experiencing significant hardship and living in communities with high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. 33% of children living in the most disadvantaged locations are developmentally vulnerable when starting school.

There is substantial evidence that the current design of service delivery fails to meet the needs of children and families. The key challenges include that:

- The system is fragmented and siloed, and lacks coordination across sectors,
- The system requires clients to navigate service eligibility rules,
- Services fail to consider the family circumstances of clients, and broadly fail to account for children's needs within families,
- Services prioritise crisis response rather than building preventative capability, and
- Services are designed to react to issue rather than anticipate and intervene to prevent problems before they occur (DHS, 2011; State of Victoria 2017 and 2021).

Furthermore, major social and economic changes have transformed the structure of families and the conditions in which children are raised (Moore, 2016). As a result, families are more isolated and experience greater challenges, yet more effort has gone into improving services than on improving the conditions under which families are raising young children. (Moore, 2021).



The Impact

The service system is ill-equipped to provide the holistic support that children and families require. This means that critical opportunities for prevention and early intervention are missed, perpetuating high rates of developmental vulnerability and intergenerational disadvantage (Colizzi et al., 2020). As a result:

- **Families can't access support that would benefit them:** A lack of information or availability of services, resources, and supports, combined with practical obstacles like transport issues, costs and scheduling conflicts, make it challenging for these families facing adversity to connect with assistance (Hall et al., 2022).
- **Support often doesn't hit the mark:** Rigid eligibility criteria, fragmented systems, and narrowly focused programs frequently fail to address the complexity of families' lived experience – they address part but not all of the problem. Even when families do manage to access services, they often find the support provided does not align with their needs (Skattebol et al., 2023; Fox et al., 2015).
- **Trust in available services is eroded:** This erosion of trust stems from past traumatic encounters with services, impersonal bureaucratic processes, or stigmatising requirements to receive support (APS Reform, n.d.). As a result, even potentially beneficial services may be viewed with hesitancy.
- **For families with complex needs or experiencing entrenched disadvantage,** accessing the services they need can be so difficult and overwhelming that they stop trying to access support altogether (Nooteboom et al., 2020; Bekaert et al, 2021).

Breaking down siloes

There's growing evidence about the impact of integrated services and what works to make them happen.

There's consistent and compelling evidence about the benefits of effective integration and collaboration



It provides a holistic, comprehensive approach to supporting children and families. By bringing together education, health, family support, and community services, integrated models enable a 'one-stop-shop' that can address the diverse needs of families in a coordinated way. This is particularly valuable for disadvantaged families who often face multiple, complex challenges that require support across different domains (Cumming et al, 2014; McArthur and Thompson, 2011).



Integration facilitates access and engagement. Co-locating services in convenient community settings reduces practical barriers for families, such as transport. Offering 'soft entry' points and informal pathways alongside formal services helps build trust and relationships with vulnerable families who may be reluctant to engage with the service system (Eber et al, 201; Harbin et al, 2000; Moore in Maier et al., 2017; Schurer Coldiron et al, 2017)



Collaborative practice between practitioners from different disciplines improves the quality of support provided. Shared professional development and regular communication enable a transdisciplinary approach that is responsive to each family's unique context and priorities. Families experience more seamless support when services work together behind the scenes (Olson et al, 2021; Barraclough et al, 2021)



Local integration contributes to stronger, more cohesive communities. Providing welcoming spaces for families to connect, learn and access support together builds social capital and resilience. Schools in particular can act as community hubs that link families to a wider web of local supports and opportunities (Teo et al., 2022; Cleveland et al, 2020; Maier et al, 2017; Press et al, 2015; Sanjeevan et al, 2012).

... but there's also consistent evidence about how hard it is, and what gets in the way.

Delivering the kind of individualised, relationship-based, strengths-based, culturally safe, family-centred, multi-systemic support that is known to be effective has proven challenging through siloed service systems (NDIS, 2023; Poku et al., 2019).

Key barriers include:

- Lack of shared data and information (Panhuis et al., 2014; Topp et al., 2023),
- Restrictive funding agreements that constrain scope and responsiveness to individual needs (Deloitte Access Economics, 2023),
- Poor local priority setting and coordination of actions and funding (Productivity Commission, 2024),
- No dedicated funding for the 'glue' that enables collaboration (SVA, 2023, Ayala-Orozco et al., 2018; Ennis and Tofa, 2020),
- Siloed decision-making between levels of government (Panhuis et al., 2014),
- Lack of skills and time for collaboration (PC, 2024), and
- Misaligned incentives that measure outputs rather than outcomes (PC, 2021).

Policy context

There's increasing momentum for a more integrated early years platform for children and families, but also a real need to connect insights about what works 'from the ground' with policy and funding settings.

There's increasing momentum around driving integration in the early years as part of a historic wave of early childhood reform. This is evident across diverse policy frameworks and reform agendas, including:

- **At Commonwealth level**, the Early Years Strategy, the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education, the Connected Beginnings program, and the Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children.
- **At state and territory level**, initiatives like the SA Royal Commission, Victorian Treasury's Investment framework, and the Putting Queensland's Kids First consultation process.
- **In joint Commonwealth-state initiatives** like the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership and National Vision for Early Childhood Education and Care.
- The work around learning what's required to initiate and sustain more effective integration has been happening at two levels:
- Top down – through government initiatives and investments, including changes in the way government services are commissioned and delivered and an increasing move towards an explicit system stewardship approach.
- Bottom up – through place-based initiatives, community led innovations, collaborations large and small, working around the systemic barriers to define what their communities need and how to make it happen – supported by increasingly sophisticated research.



There's a clear appetite to chart the space between the top-down and bottom-up reforms.

This work needs to surface the insights from the ground and distill what's needed to accelerate and scale effective models in ways that are contextually appropriate.

Example: Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership

The Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership (ECDPP) is a shared decision-making mechanism with Australian governments to improve early childhood outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Co-chaired by SNAICC – National Voice for our Children and the Australian Department of Education, the ECCDPP includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members and representatives from all state and territory governments.

Additionally, the ECCDPP has been co-developed with SNAICC and Australian Government departments who have responsibility across early childhood education and care, maternal and child health and child protection and families.

Example: SA Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

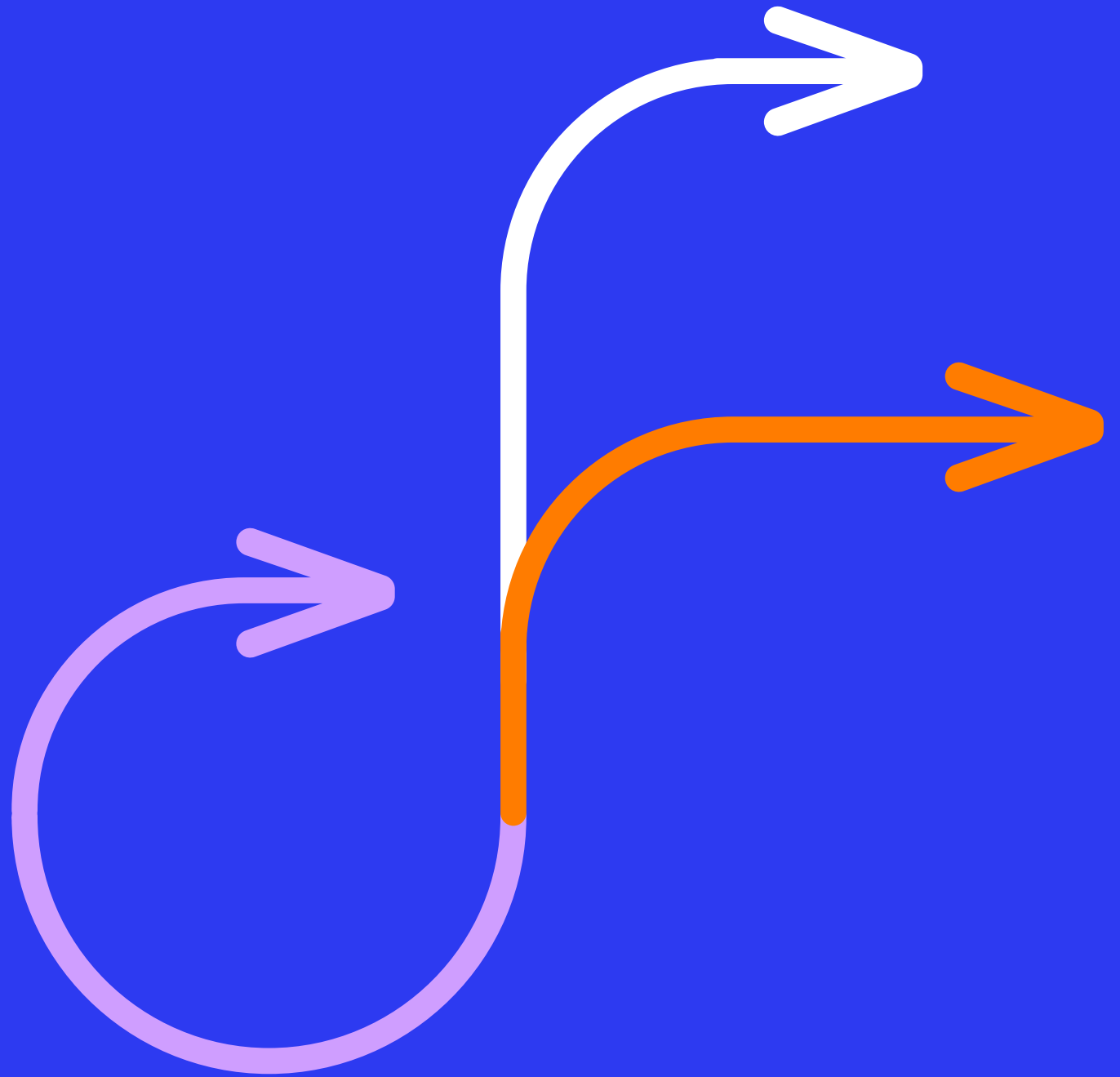
The Royal Commission's recommendations are grounded in the belief that "improving outcomes for South Australian children requires a holistic approach across the entire early child development system."

There are five key elements in a successful early child development system: prenatal care and maternal and child health care (including home visiting); paid parental leave; parenting supports; early childhood education and care; and wrap around health and social services to support families with greater needs.

The Commission's recommendations provide a roadmap for the South Australian Government to draw together the current fragmented early years landscape and build a nation-leading early childhood development system.



Approaches to integration



The integration landscape

A thousand flowers have bloomed and there is huge diversity in approaches to integration

- Over the past 30 years, the 'wicked problem' of joined up government and service delivery has been a priority in social policy. In this time, there has been structural transformations within government, growing recognition of the 'collaborative muscle' and capabilities needed to work in different ways, a rapid expansion of the evidence-base and a wave of innovation from the ground. In considering examples of established and innovative practice, this report spans a huge diversity of models and contexts.
- Although all the approaches we investigated are focused on the early years and prioritise families and communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage, they each operate with markedly different levels of scale, intensity and focus.

There are fundamentally different models ...	Operating in very different delivery contexts.
System linkers / navigators	Specific sites (schools or services)
Integration through universal services	Specific suburbs
Community development and engagement	Across a whole LGA
Cross-sector partnerships	Across a wide geographical footprint
	Nationally



We set out to develop a framework that would describe, characterise and illuminate different models of integration

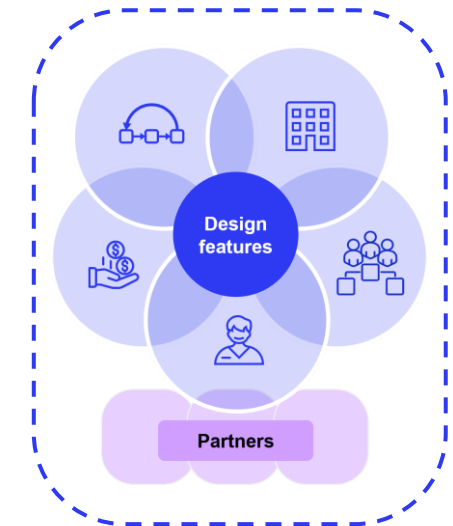
Our aim was to articulate the range of models available and map a clear pathway for practitioners and policy makers to scope and grow integration initiatives.

Like many other thinkers in this space, we started by conceptualising a continuum of maturity and intensity. But the models and evidence we reviewed didn't fit neatly into a spectrum.

Instead, we provide a range of lenses for understanding and scoping the operating context of integration initiatives, and the design decisions that flow from them.



P. 25

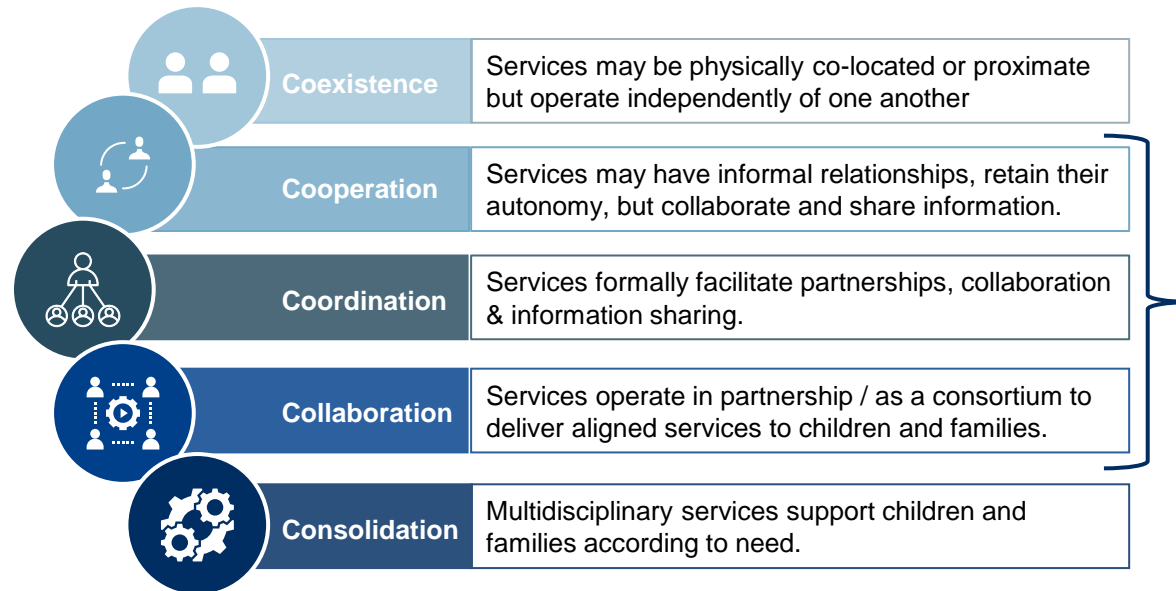


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There's real strength in letting the 'thousand flowers bloom' and learning from different approaches to similar problems across portfolios, jurisdictions, communities and contexts. But that diversity can prove overwhelming when it comes to designing for scale.

A spectrum of integration

We found that it's less useful to think about a spectrum of integration than it is to consider the range of strategies that are fit-for-purpose for different contexts and objectives.



We started with a hypothesis that there is a spectrum of approaches to integration, each progressively increasing in formality, intensity and comprehensiveness ... and potentially in impact.

We aimed to understand the pathway from services that co-exist to the kinds of deep collaboration and integration evident in the best fully integrated hubs.

Our focus was on the range and diversity of practices in the middle, as these seem the least understood and most promising ground for further development.



Our key insight is that there isn't a coherent spectrum of integration models, progressively increasing in sophistication and impact.

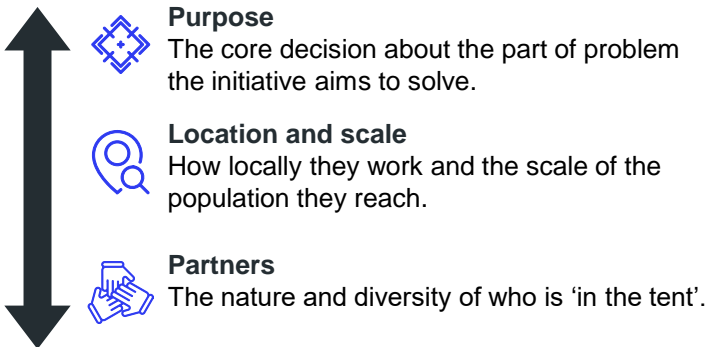
Integrators use different types and combinations of integration strategies at different times and for different purposes. They may indeed be at all points on the spectrum at once.

A framework for integration

We developed a framework for understanding how early years integration initiatives' operating context inform design decisions.

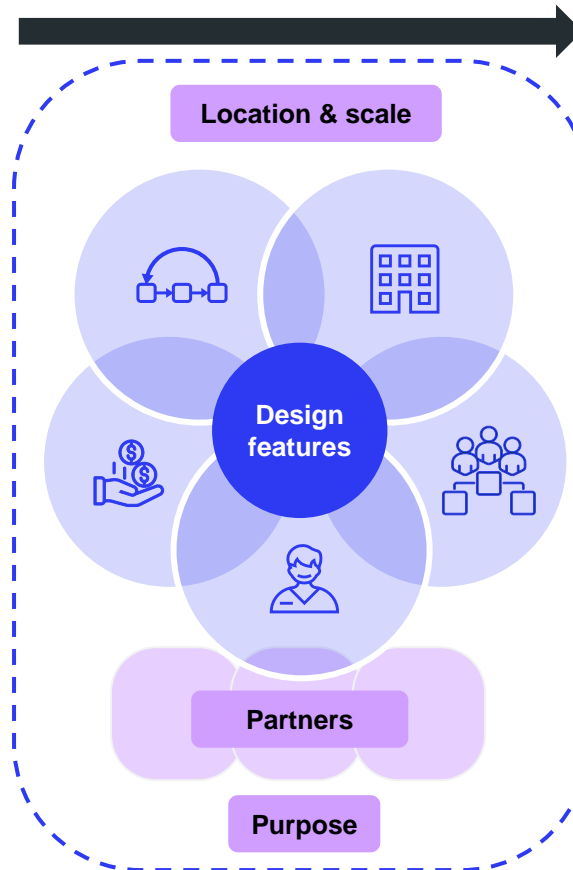
The **operating context** of integration initiatives significantly shapes the types of strategies needed and the design decisions

There are three interrelated and mutually reinforcing elements of the operating context that shape and inform how they work and the design features.



There are **two key additional lenses** that shape and inform how an initiative is designed and operated

- Power:** The power dynamics operating in and through the initiative.
- Culture:** The cultural context in which initiatives are working.



There are five critical **design features** of integration initiatives, but what's needed and what works depends on the operating context

- Leadership, staffing & capability**
The skill, capability and number of people needed to lead and enable integration initiatives.
- Funding and resourcing**
How the work of integration and collaboration is resourced.
- Governance**
How decisions are made, how the authorising environment is established and maintained, and who holds accountability.
- Adaptation**
The approach to adaptation and iteration and the mechanism for community voice.
- Space**
The types of space needed and how space is used and activated.



We didn't find any evidence of an optimum set of parameters around these factors.

What appears to be critical is intentional and strategic decisions, clarity and alignment on them, and design features that are appropriate and proportionate

Unpacking the context and design

The following sections unpack each of the operating context and design feature elements.



Key insights

Consistent themes

A summary of what was consistent across the literature and evidence, and what we heard in interviews and why it's important



Overview

An overview of the concept

A brief summary of how we're defining each of the elements

Summary of the evidence base

Key concepts from the research evidence and identification of key gaps in knowledge and evidence



What we heard

Insights from our fieldwork

Key themes and insights from the case study integration initiatives we interviewed



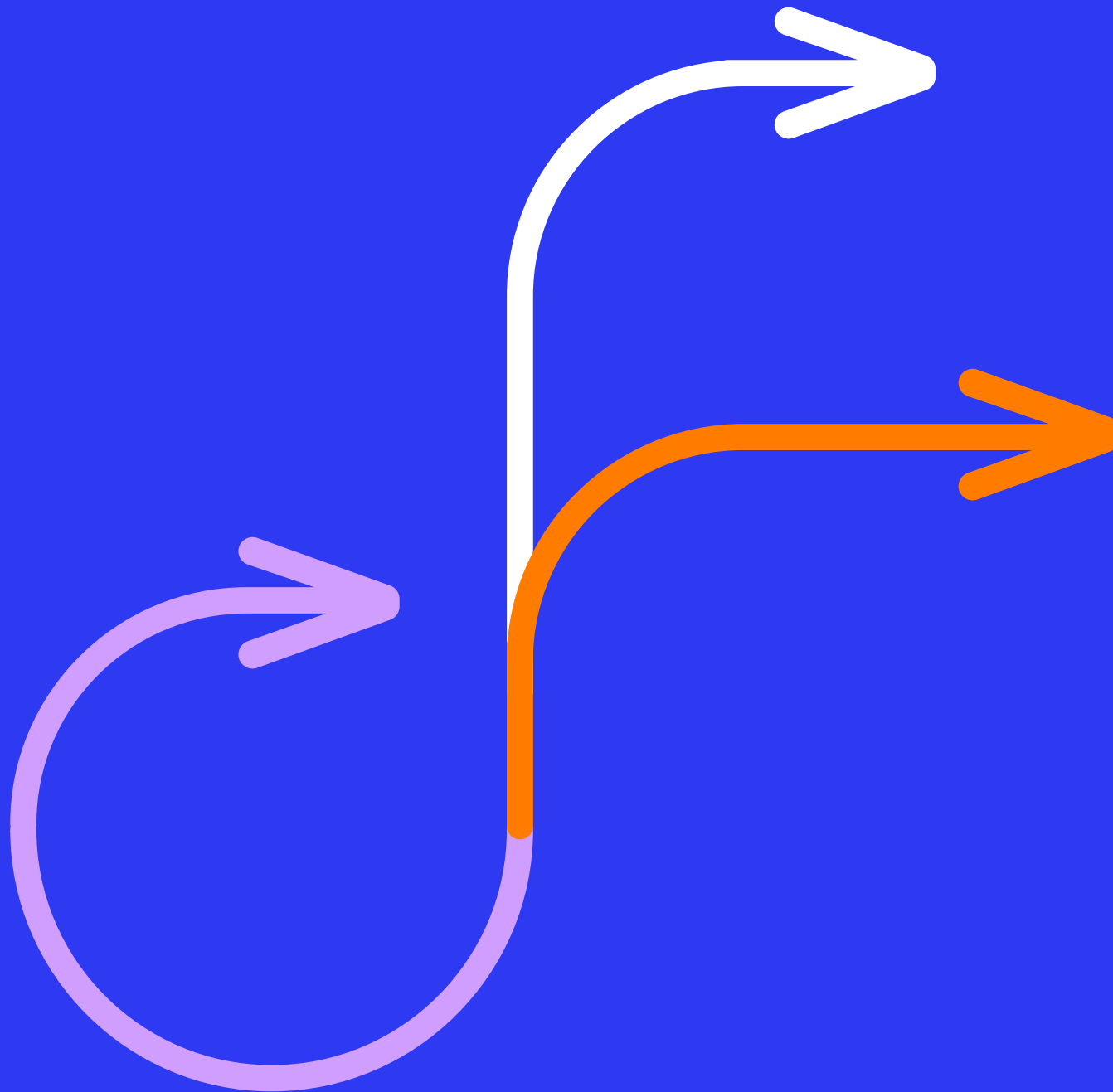
In practice

Examples of what different decisions look like in practice

Illustrations of the decisions different initiatives make depending on their purpose, location and scale and approach to partnership

SVA

Operating context



Operating context

We found that intentionality about the scope and boundaries of the initiative’s purpose, location and scale, and the partners at the table are critical. These three elements ‘create the container’ in which integration initiatives work.

While acknowledging the complex ecological web that shapes child and family wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), each initiative we reviewed established boundaries around their work in relation to their purpose, their location and scale, and their partnerships. These boundaries:

- **Are necessary and need to be intentionally set** – no initiative can be ‘all things to all people’, and to change how the system works it is necessary to define which part/s of which systems are in scope. Being intentional about setting the boundary is more important than where the boundary is and supports alignment on purpose.
- **May be chosen or imposed** – the boundaries may be determined by funding arrangements, by geography, or the interests / priorities of partners.
- **Are interrelated** – purpose, location and scale, and partners aren’t mutually exclusive and may indeed partially determine each other.
- **Don’t need to remain fixed, but change needs to be strategic** – care and intentionality about adaptation is critical to preventing mission creep, diluting impact or taking on more than the initiative is ready for.
- **Inform the design features and what’s needed for effectiveness** – the decisions made about how you establish, govern, fund and deliver an integration initiative need to reflect and be proportionate to the purpose, location and scale, and partnership approach.



Purpose

pp. 32-34

The problem the initiative aims to solve and the scale of the ambition

For example...

- Improving access to a specific service (i.e. bringing together allied health and early learning) *versus* improving how all services work with children and families (i.e. a comprehensive place-based approach)
- Solving for a particular cohort, issue, or place.



Location & scale

pp. 35-37

Where and how intensively the initiative works

For example...

- Whether the scale of the initiative is a site, a suburb, a postcode, an LGA or nationally; and
- The level of population reach / engagement and intensity of support intended.



Partners

pp. 38-40

Who is in the tent and how aligned they are

For example...

- The number and diversity of partners,
- The extent to which they’re aligned on purpose and have a history of collaboration, and / or
- The role of government, how much adaption to their ways of working and/or how much advocacy and engagement with government is needed.

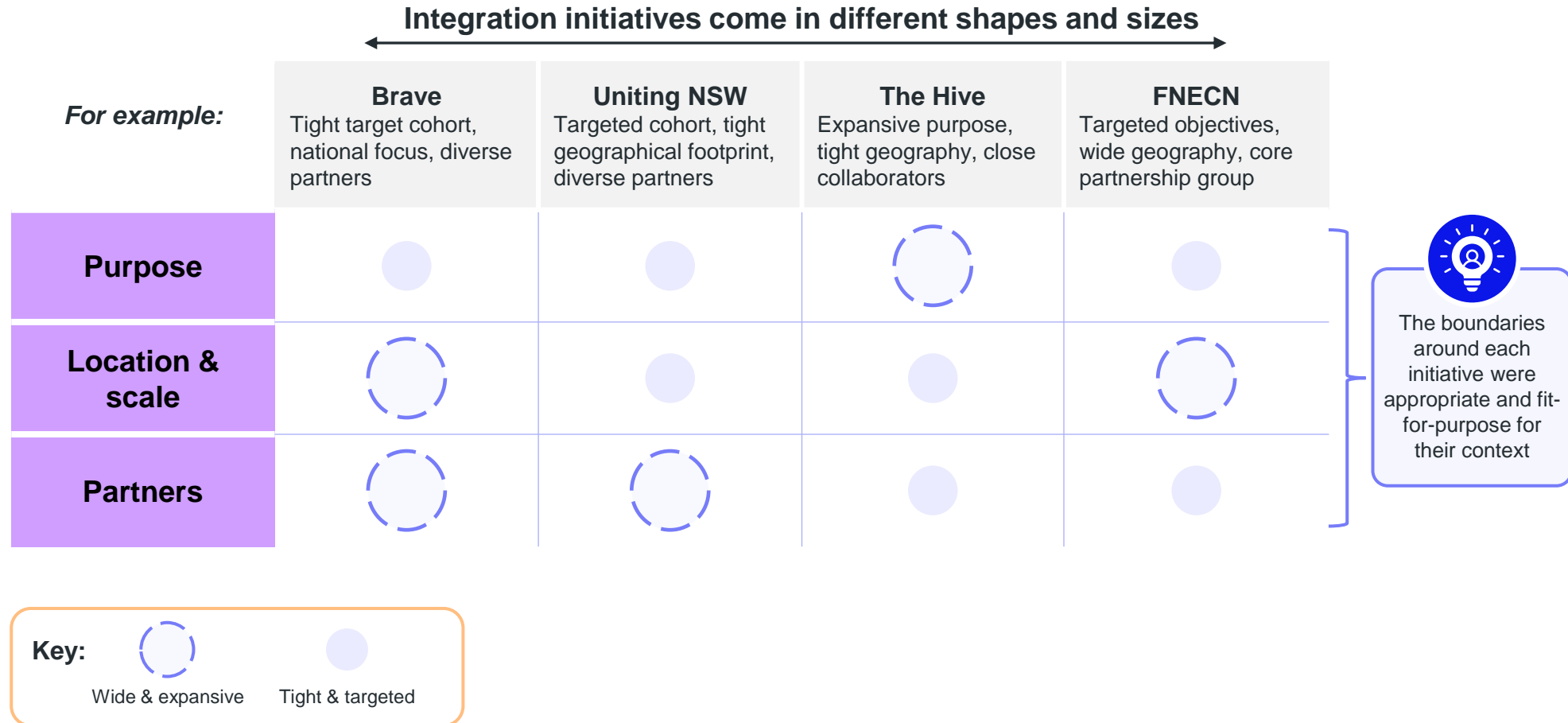


We didn’t find any evidence of an optimum set of parameters around these factors.

What appears to be critical is intentional and strategic decisions, clarity and alignment on them, and design features that are appropriate and proportionate

Diverse approaches

We saw a diverse range of approaches and configurations of purpose, location and scale and partnership. All were appropriate and fit-for-purpose in their context.



Operating context: Key insights

Despite the diverse approaches of initiatives, all required time, resources, and skill to build trust, create and maintain collaborative relationships, and ensure alignment of purpose.

Purpose

A clear purpose and shared vision is critical for successful integration



Initiatives need to establish intentional boundaries around their work to:

- Protect against mission creep
- Ensure alignment between partners
- Enable strategic adaptation over time

Integration needs to be supported by dedicated roles and ways of working. This includes:

- The practices, roles and structures needed for effective integration of services and supports. A dedicated backbone role may be needed.
- Clarifying and communicating an integration initiative's purpose.
- Ensuring stakeholders continue to align to the purpose.
- Strategically managing change when the purpose needs to adapt.

Location and scale

Responsiveness to place is critical, but its not clear 'how local' an initiative should be



Integration is more successful when closely connected to the unique dynamics and culture of community

- The quality and nature of collaborative relationships shapes how well an initiative understands a community and its real needs and priorities.
- Being 'close to community' also means enhanced accountability from direct exposure to the impact of the work.
- Depth and intensity of relationships appear to have a greater impact than location or scale – although there are different risks, benefits and opportunities at different levels of scale

Partnerships

Trust takes time to build and resources to maintain – but it's a core enabler.



Everyone around the table needs to work together to address complex challenges. But cross-sector collaboration and diverse partnerships require deep interpersonal skills, new ways of working, and often complex governance arrangements. Key factors include:

- Taking time to build trust and 'collaborative muscle' - mistrust is a key reason partnerships fail and history of collaboration is a strong predictor of success.
- Ensuring and maintaining alignment between partners.
- Recognising the different dynamics and drivers at play when government is at the table.

Purpose: Overview



What do we mean by 'purpose'?

The problem the initiative aims to solve and the scale of the ambition

Integration initiatives make different decisions about the problem they aim to solve and the part of the solution they want to deliver.

They necessarily draw boundaries around their work – no one initiative can be all things to all people and still be effective. For example:

- Improving access to a specific service (i.e. bringing together allied health and early learning).
- Improving how all services work with children and families (i.e. a comprehensive place-based approach).
- Focusing on a particular cohort, issue, system, or place.

The scope of an initiative depends on factors like community readiness, stakeholder willingness to collaborate, governance structures and alignment with other community priorities and investments.

The evidence base highlights the importance of clarity of purpose

Research is clear that alignment about purpose and clarity about the problem an initiative is aiming to solve is a key requirement for effective integration.

Literature reviews on effective integration consistently highlight the importance of a shared vision among partners

- A shared vision helps crystallise the agenda, create alignment between existing efforts and broader agendas, and secure buy-in of partners (Our Place, 2023).

Research also highlights the importance of the purpose aligning with community aspirations

- Engaging community in the process of articulating and defining the purpose is considered essential for ensuring the work of the integration initiative brings the community along and focuses on what matters locally (Smart, 2017).

However, there's no clear evidence about the type of purpose or level of ambition that's optimum

Across the evidence base, there are a range of effective integration initiatives that prioritise different cohorts, issues or places.

However, while:

- Literature suggests that more comprehensive initiatives are important in communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage (Klepac et al., 2023; Ferris & Hopkins, 2015), and
- Being responsive to community priorities is clearly important, ... there is no empirical evidence to clearly guide decisions about the scope of a problem an initiative should aim to solve.

Evaluations of individual place-based initiatives show they can be effective at improving outcomes for children, but the research evidence is rarely able to pinpoint specific elements that drive impact (DPMC, 2012). Isolating particular factors within multi-component initiatives in complex community contexts is methodologically challenging (Wilks et al., 2015; Katz et al., 2010).

The most appropriate focus and problem-definition likely depends on specific contexts, capabilities and may change over time.

Purpose: What we heard

In our interviews with integration initiatives, we heard:

It's important to recognise you can't be all things to all people – and to draw a boundary around the work.

We saw different decisions about where those boundaries are drawn, including:

- Priority cohorts (e.g. young parents, First Nations families, families in contact with child protection),
- Systems (e.g. early childhood education and maternal and child health, education and allied health),
- Issues (e.g. financial security, parenting, access to early childhood education),
- Places (e.g. various issues but in a specific place), and
- Or a bespoke mix of the above.

“You need to know where you fit and the contribution you make in the ecosystem [...] It would be very easy to have mission creep – we're good at what we do and people want us to expand, but we're clear on our purpose, ... we don't want to duplicate or create new programs, we stay in our lane...”

Being intentional about setting the boundary is more important than where the boundary is.

We heard different decisions about:

- The part of the eco-system they're best placed to contribute to, play a role in changing or fill a gap in, and
- Which 'slice' of a complex systems issue each initiative takes on or attempts to tackle.

These decisions were shaped by:

- Their context (what's most needed),
- Expertise (the skills and knowledge they hold), and
- Capability (how big a slice of the pie they're able to address).

Alignment on purpose is a foundational enabler of integration, and a key component of the glue

Initiatives need a shared understanding of the problem being solved and the scope of the initiative's work. We heard that commitment to purpose drives collaboration, innovation, and creates the authorising environment for changing system norms.

Initiatives were clear that this alignment on purpose does not happen automatically and is not a 'one off' event. People need time and space to come together, build that understanding, and adapt it over time.

“Everyone's here because of the shared vision. There's no MOU, no one is forced to be there. It's the will ...”

“[The backbone] drives a lot of the shared vision among the partners, bringing them along on the journey.”

Boundaries don't need to remain fixed, but change needs to be strategic

The boundaries around purpose are to some extent arbitrary and they can change:

- As the needs of the community change,
- As the initiative matures and grows its capability / capacity, and
- As specific opportunities for impact arise, for example, through new funding, new partners or new opportunities.

However, care and intentionality about adaptation is critical to preventing mission creep, diluting impact by stretching too far too fast, and taking on more than the initiative is ready for.

“We're not trying to add new programs, but stay in our wheelhouse, and adapt around the edges”

Purpose: In practice

The Hive



The Hive takes a hyper-local approach to improving outcomes for children through community development and in how services work together with the neighbourhood community.

The Hive defines its 'patch' by drawing a tight boundary around place but applying a broad understanding of the context that contributes to improving outcomes for children.

The Hive's early years focus is primarily on overcoming barriers families face accessing early education and child health services, as well as building the capacity of ECEC services. It works deeply with families as well as educators, health services, and broader systems. However, The Hive also recognises that a dual community and early years approach is required to support children to start school well. The Hive collaborates with stakeholders and communities in four key suburb areas around priorities for children but also broader ones such as transport, safety, infrastructure, and engagement with all residents not just families recognising these are the communities in which children are growing up.

While the geography is relatively small, the breadth of their work is considerable. For example, recognising the relationship between employment and child outcomes, the Hive is currently focused on employment pathways for parents and is co-leading advocacy alongside community partners around the public transport arrangements that close off employment and training options for residents. The Hive is working with residents, partners and government to improve access to public transport – knowing this will contribute to its overarching goal of ensuring every child starts school well.

Brave



Brave serves a clearly defined cohort and aims to support young parents develop their confidence and capacity and to navigate the service system.

In contrast to the hyper-local approach of The Hive, Brave is focused on a single target cohort – young parents – and the breadth of needs of its clients. Brave is a national organisation, and while still responsive to the places in which it works and is connected into local networks, it is focused on helping individuals develop their confidence and capacity as parents and navigate the service system as it is rather than reshaping local system dynamics.

Their scope of work is defined by the priorities and needs of each individual they work with, within the context of a practice framework that is informed by evidence and lived experience.

Clarity about who they serve helps to maintain clear boundaries about what they do and don't deliver.

Uniting NSW



Uniting NSW Links to Early Learning Program has a very specific purpose and serves a target cohort

Uniting NSW's Links to Early Learning (L2EL) program has a clear purpose: to improve access to early learning for children and families experiencing significant disadvantage.

L2EL is a connector program rather than a direct service provider, and L2EL Linkers foster warm referrals and transitions, acting as an intermediary to coordinate efforts across early childhood education, family support, and health services.

L2EL acts as a connector, helping families navigate complex early childhood systems rather than focusing on transforming complex, national, slow-moving systems. By defining a target cohort, they are not trying to be everything to everyone and can build specialist expertise. Because they understand the barriers faced by disadvantaged families and can adapt their strategies for individuals, their delivery model is flexible and they build relationships across the sector and tap into existing expertise, rather than duplicating services.

Location & scale: Overview

What is location and scale?

Where and how intensively the initiative works

Integration initiatives operate at vastly different levels of scale – spanning national collaborations to hyper-local solutions.

This impacts who they work with, the intensity of their focus, and informs key decisions.

For example:

- Whether the scale of the initiative is a site, a suburb, a postcode, an LGA or nationally; and
- The level of population reach / engagement and intensity of support intended

Research is clear that being responsive to context is important for impact

There is consensus in the literature that being responsive to place is critical to effectively integrating services.

Responsiveness to place is essential because every community is unique. Understanding the specific dynamics of a community helps ensure that integration initiatives are aligned with local priorities and needs (Moore, 2011) and build on existing strengths and assets.

Research also suggests that proximity can be an enabler for collaboration, creating opportunities for formal and informal alignment and potentially breaking down access barriers for families by creating connectivity between the networks of services that families interact with day-to-day (Moore, 2016).

However, there is no clear evidence about the optimum level of scale

There's not consistent messages or empirical findings in the research to guide decisions about how local the geographical area needs to be – for example, if hyper-local / neighbourhood level efforts at collaboration and integration are more effective than taking a larger-scale, postcode or LGA level perspective (or the circumstances in which one approach is more appropriate than another).

Further, even if services are co-located or operating in the same community, they may not work together because of misalignment of values, ways of working or capacity (McCormack & Verdon 2015; Conway et al., 2022; Stuart et al., 2023).

There is, however, a large body of evidence about how to work effectively in place and responsively to community

The evidence base highlights the importance of:

- **Understanding community priorities, service gaps and needs:** Undertaking intentional needs assessment processes, conducting regular evaluations and needs assessments to monitor service utilisation, satisfaction, and outcomes can inform strategic decisions about service expansion, relocation, or redesign to meet the evolving needs and preferences of the communities.
- **Prioritising community voice:** Engaging local residents, community leaders, and cultural brokers in the planning, design, and implementation of integrated early years services to build trust, foster ownership, and promote sustainability.
- **Taking a community development approach:** Nesting within the fabric of the community and fostering connections with local businesses, institutions, and community organisations can enhance community resilience. Hosting community events, workshops, and celebrations at service locations and partnering with local stakeholders to address community needs and priorities can strengthen relationships and build a sense of belonging and ownership.

Location & scale: What we heard

In our interviews with integration initiatives, we heard:

Understanding place and context is critical

Understanding the unique dynamics and priorities of specific places is important for:

- Leveraging existing strengths and/or meaningfully filling real gaps – and not duplicating what’s already there or adding to the complexity.
- Building visibility and trust with community.
- Building accessible, local pathways to support for families – and removing transport and other access barriers.
- Connecting the dots between macro-level policy/program objectives and what’s needed and possible at local levels.

“Place is at the core of everything – especially in an area that is geographically isolated”

“Government initiatives are often too big to bring the relational element – local brokers can connect local needs with broader systems”

The quality and nature of the collaborative relationships are more important than the location or scale.

We heard that the quality and intensity of the relationships between partner organisations is the primary driver of effectiveness – its what enables innovation, creates the authorising environment and accountability for working differently, and enables entrenched ways of working to be disrupted.

Proximity can enable relationships, but more important is the time and skill to develop the relationships and trust that drive integration.

“Relationship and capability are the cornerstone – even across the broader, more diverse geography”

While there does not seem to be an optimum scale, there are different complexities at different levels of scale

We heard that:

- Where there’s greater scale, there’s often more need to plan for structured process and decision making – where bespoke workarounds can be achieved at a smaller scale.
- Single personalities within a team, network or community can have significant impact at a small scale that might otherwise be diluted at larger.
- Working with a ‘bird’s eye’ view across jurisdictions comes with extra complexity but can open up horizons around what’s possible and how things can be done differently.
- Digital platforms and pathways can deliver meaningful improvements in service access – but some cohorts need a more intensive offering.
- There are benefits of working hyper-locally, including more direct and regular engagement with local community, more able to pinpoint challenges and tailor responses, and offering more visibility and presence in community – in a way that strengthens trust.

“Operating in lots of jurisdictions gives us a good lay of the land, we have a bird’s eye view and can manage some myopic views”

“To be visible to community is fundamental. [We] wouldn’t work without that”

“Taking services into place takes the mental load [for families] out of the picture”

Location & scale: In practice

By Five: Regional



By Five operates as a regional backbone, fostering collaboration across a rural region in Victoria.

Acting as a regional backbone, By Five facilitates coordination and alignment across the region, fostering collaboration between local early childhood education and care providers, health services, and community organisations.

By engaging closely with local networks and stakeholders, By Five ensures that its initiatives are responsive to community priorities and build on existing strengths. Ultimately, By Five's approach demonstrates how strong local relationships and a shared commitment drives integration in a rural context.

The Hive: Hyper-local



The Hive's deep community engagement forms the basis for meaningful integration at a neighbourhood level.

Finding that the greater Mt Druitt postcode was too large and diverse an area to cover with the intensity needed, The Hive identified four underserved suburbs within Mt Druitt for an intensive community development approach tailored to their varying needs. The Hive does work across the entire postcode with its early year's initiatives, with its Linkers, Early Childhood Educators Network and child health work while a focus on place in these targeted suburbs is always considered. In practice this means that it works intensively in a small geographic radius but can understand and be responsive to the different community dynamics, networks, priorities and needs in each neighbourhood.

FNECN: Regional and remote



For the Far North Queensland Early Childhood Network (FNECN), relationships rather than proximity drives connection.

Addressing the challenges posed by the vast distances across Far North Queensland, FNECN aims to cultivate and enable a mindset of 'doing what's needed' to address gaps in access to more formal services and support. It does this by uniting stakeholders behind a shared vision, bringing people together to build relationships, and cultivating partnerships between 'on the ground' service providers.

Members of the network develop connections across a large geographical area, advocate for the communities they're in touch with, and leverage the strengths of the network. FNECN's approach demonstrates how integration relies on strong relationships rather than physical proximity alone.

Brave: National



Brave Foundation supports young parents across Australia through either a face-to-face mentoring program, or a digital program where a physical presence isn't suitable.

Brave understands that being a young parent can be isolating, especially in areas with limited services, so connects young parents to support regardless of location.

Brave's national database of health, wellbeing, and education services provides a virtual entry point for young parents seeking help. For more intensive support, Brave's Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) program offers personalised mentoring adapted to each participant's context.

By leveraging technology and local relationships, Brave demonstrates how integration can be flexible across geographies to meet the needs of a dispersed cohort.

Partners: Overview



What are partners?

Who is in the tent and how aligned they are

Partnership is necessary for more integrated services – which necessarily involve organisations moving beyond ‘business as usual’ and working in different ways.

The design of integration initiatives is shaped by:

- The number and diversity of partners,
- The extent to which they’re aligned on purpose and have a history of collaboration, and / or
- The role of government – as leader of the initiative, funder, part of governance, as service delivery partner.

Collaborative partnerships are complex and require support to be effective

Diverse, cross-sector partnerships are essential for addressing complex challenges

Collaborations that bring together partners from early education, health, social services, community organisations and government are needed to provide holistic support for children and families (Lata, 2024; Stadler et al., 2024). However, complex partnership models require time and effort for partners to adopt new ways of thinking (Ferdinand et al, 2017).

Shared vision and aligned goals among partners are critical for successful integration, helping to coordinate mutually reinforcing activities (Smart, 2017; Estacio et al., 2017).

Trust and relationships are the foundation for effective partnerships

Building trusting relationships between partners takes dedicated time and resources, especially when partnerships are mandated by funders rather than forming organically. Investing time in building strong interpersonal connections, open communication and mutual understanding between partners is crucial.

Mistrust is a key reason why partnerships fail (Lata et al., 2024; Virtanen et al., 2020; Smart 2017).

Involving families and community members as partners enhances relevance and impact

Engaging parents and residents in co-design and decision-making helps ensure services are responsive to local needs and context (Moore et al., 2016; CCCH, 2012).

Partnerships between organisations and community groups is a foundational factor in creating and conducting place-based interventions (Crimeen et al., 2018).

However, there are some gaps in the evidence base:

Most of the research focuses on the process of partnership, less on how different partnership models impact child and family outcomes. There is limited exploration of how power dynamics and resource imbalances between partners, particularly between large government agencies and small community organisations, affect integration. This is also little evidence on strategies for engaging families experiencing disadvantage as genuine partners in integrated initiatives.

Partners: What we heard

In our interviews with integration initiatives, we heard:

It matters who is around the table ... and who isn't

It's deeply consequential who is part of the integration initiative – but the right partners depend on the context, local power dynamics, and the purpose of the work. We heard:

- Diversity of partners is important for solving complex problems. Engaging partners from different sectors (government, business, non-profit, community) and with different perspectives helps develop more effective solutions.
- There's a fundamental tension between bringing in a breadth of partners / all organisations who are relevant to child and family wellbeing and needing to work with the people who are aligned, engaged and committed.
- The way that community is invited into the initiative is critical, including how they're given a voice, how their expertise is recognised and valued and how they're supported to engage.
- It can be hard for some key players to engage in collaboration, for example, ECEC centre directors have limited time for engagement beyond their BAU.
- Careful and intentional decisions need to be made about when / when not to have child protection / DFV / AOD services onsite / in the tent.

"You actually need everyone at the table to improve outcomes for children – it takes a village"

"It helps to pick up who's missing from the network – who you can bring in to the work"

"You need to have the right people involved, particularly the ones around the transition points between systems"

The approach is different when government is at the table

There were distinct differences in approach and design when government is:

- At the table as a partner – and was willing to be part of the problem-solving effort and open to finding solutions to systemic barriers,
- A participant in an initiative, but without the authorisation / commitment to working differently,
- The target of advocacy from the initiative but not a core collaborator.

Having government at the table as a partner often:

- Increased the formality and structure of an initiative – in ways that were sometimes beneficial (e.g., giving a sense of legitimacy) and sometimes constraining (e.g., risk aversion and reporting requirements stifling innovation)
- Added significant value in helping navigate the system-level barriers that get in the way of effective integration, provided there was a commitment to working differently to solve systemic barriers, and alignment between government priorities and goals of the initiative.

"Government programs are often too big to bring the relational aspect, to translate to local contexts. There's a role for local brokers to translate between local context and the broader system"

Values alignment and collaboration history shapes the approach to partnership

The approach to governance, the level of funding required, the staffing model and leadership capabilities needed, and the timeframes for delivery and impact are all significantly impacted by:

- The level of alignment between partners on the nature of the problem and the priorities for the solution,
- If shared ways of working are already in place – both logistically and relationally,
- The extent to which 'collaborative muscle' has been built, especially the trust and confidence to navigate conflict.

"Find and work with the people who are aligned. They might not be the usual suspects"

Partners: In practice

Our Place



Our Place establishes partnerships at the state and local government levels and community level.

Our Place has a formal partnership with the Victorian Department of Education and is involved in planning each site's physical design and use of space, participates in governance at multiple levels, and works in close collaboration with school leadership.

Our Place also facilitates local partnerships in response to community needs, identified through consultation and engagement. For example, community feedback may highlight a gap that leads to partnering with a new service provider.

FNECN



FNECN maintains a network of partners

FNECN facilitates coordination across the vast Far North Queensland region by connecting early childhood partners through a multi-level structure.

Local Early Childhood Community Networks highlight similar challenges across communities, which inform FNECN's regional priorities. FNECN's governance committee, with representation from key stakeholders like the Department of Education, large early childhood providers, and universities, reviews this local feedback to guide collective efforts. This network of partners enables local responsiveness across a geographically diverse early childhood system.

Brimbank City Council



Brimbank City Council aims to facilitate partnerships to enable more joined up ways of working.

Brimbank City Council facilitates a more joined up way of working for children and families by fostering strategic partnerships. After running an Early Years Network for a decade, Brimbank looked to expand its reach by engaging new partners. They developed a clear purpose, objectives, and value proposition for the network, and created a flyer outlining key details. Brimbank then mapped potential stakeholders for the network to invite new partners aligning with priorities.

By proactively approaching partners with a compelling case for collaboration, linked to their individual needs, Brimbank is forming the foundation for an integrated approach to delivering local council early years services.

By Five



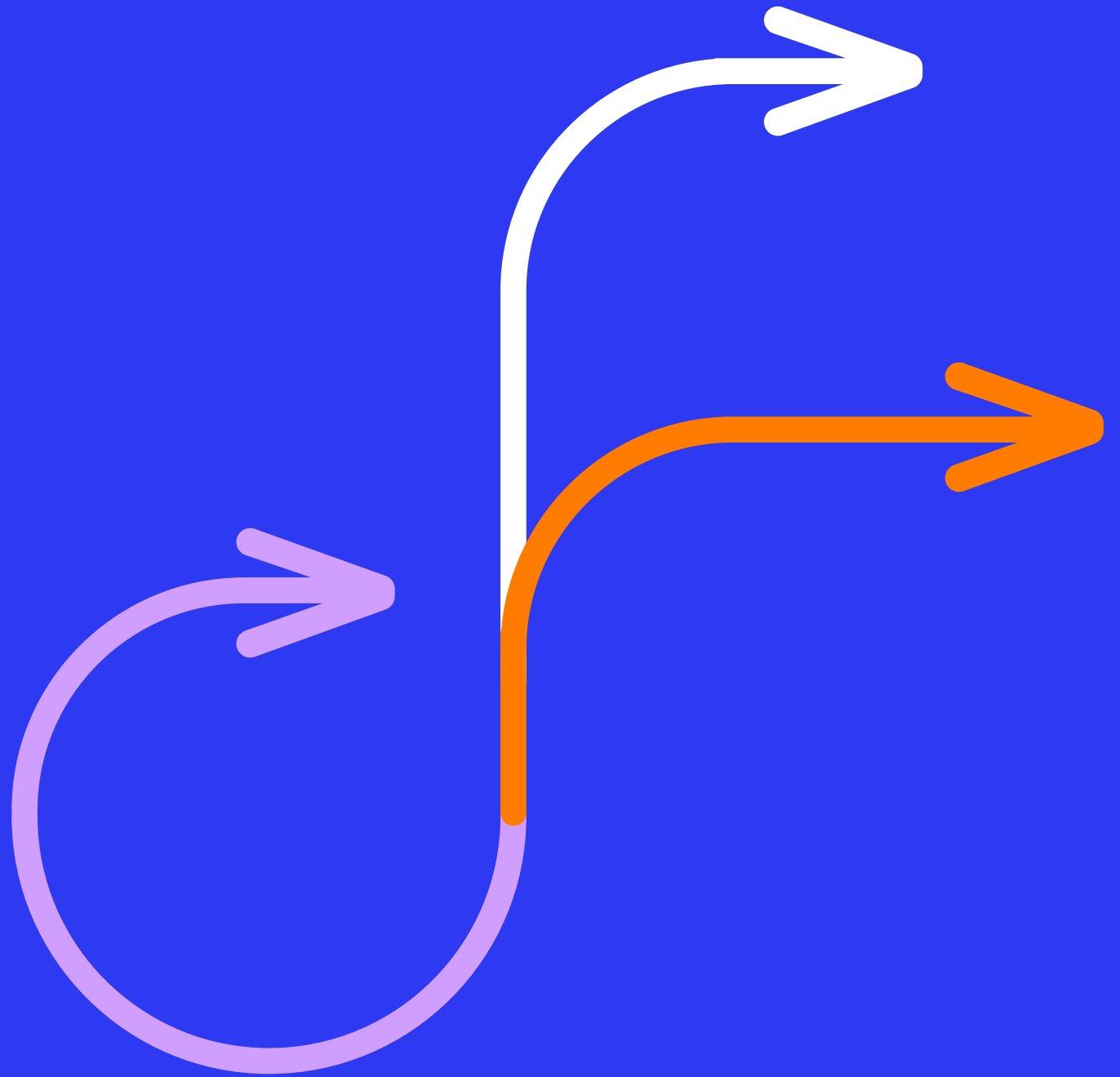
By Five demonstrates how building trust and relationships and aligning objectives of partners contributes to improved health outcomes for children.

By Five is a partnership initiative between the Wimmera Development Association, the Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership, and the centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute.

By Five brings these partners together to develop a shared understanding of regional strengths and needs, and to co-design strategies to increase access to quality early years services. For example, when the shortage of child health specialists in regional Victoria was identified as a significant barrier to improving outcomes, By Five developed the Paediatric Project. This project brings together, paediatric specialists from Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital, local maternal and child health professionals to enhance local primary health care, building on existing services through telehealth and digital solutions.

SVA

Design features



Design features

Integration initiatives make different decisions about how they work depending on the boundaries they set around purpose, location and partnerships.



Leadership, staffing & capability Pp. 44 - 47

The skill, capability and number of people needed to lead and enable integration initiatives.

The core set of capabilities needed are consistent across integration initiatives. These include interprofessional competencies, system expertise, emotional intelligence, creativity and flexibility, comfort with ambiguity, strategic nous and courage,

The size of the team and the sophistication of the approach needs to scale up as the purpose, location and scale, and diversity of partners grow in size or level of ambition.



Funding and resourcing Pp. 48 - 50

How the work of integration and collaboration is resourced.

The funding approach is related to the purpose of the initiative. Funding needs to be adequate to fully support the breadth of an integration initiative's work. Dedicated resourcing for the 'glue' – proportionate to the purpose / level of ambition – is a core feature of all the integration initiatives.

Funding must be flexible and responsive to community need. Different types and levels of funding are required at different phases of an initiative's maturity.

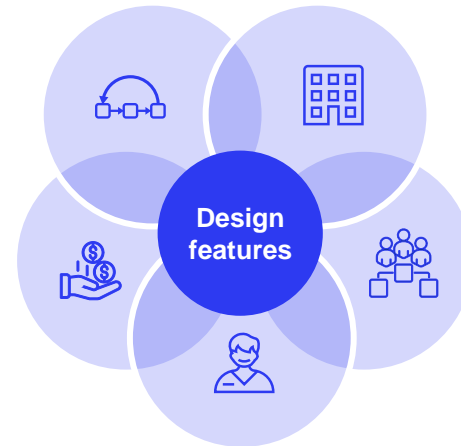


Governance Pp. 51-53

How decisions are made, authorising environment is established, and accountability maintained.

Governance models are shaped by three key factors:

- Partners: The number of partners involved, the pre-existing level of trust and alignment / shared ways of working, and how government is at the table.
- Location and scale: The extent to which regional diversity needs to be taken into account.
- Power: Intentional mechanisms for giving community a voice and decision-making authority, and the role funders make in informing decisions.



Adaptation Pp. 54-56

The approach to adaptation & iteration and mechanism for community voice.

All integration initiatives adapt and change over time, but the intentionality and sophistication of the approach to adaptation is influenced by:

- Purpose: the size of the challenge and the level of uncertainty about what the solution is.
- Partners: the needs and priorities of the partners around the table, including funders' appetite for qualitative / quantitative data.



Space Pp. 57-59

The types of physical or digital environments needed and how it's used and activated.

Integration initiatives use space in different ways and hold different priorities. These are shaped by:

- Purpose: the primary driver of space requirements, as the nature of the collaboration and change in practice should determine the requirements.
- Location & scale, and geographical boundaries: if it's a hyper-local approach, a dedicated space can make more sense than a town or LGA catchment.
- Available infrastructure.

Design features: Key insights

Design features need to be responsive to context and purpose, but intentional, ongoing investment in ‘the glue’ forms the foundation of all integration initiatives.

Explicit funding for relational and coordinating roles of the ‘glue’ is a non-negotiable



It's necessary to invest in 'the glue' – the team of people who lead and drive the collaboration and undertake the relational work needed for impact. The 'glue' plays a critical role in capacity-building for integration among partners, as well as the ability of initiatives to adapt, innovate and experiment.

Recognising, growing, and developing the workforce is critical



The work of integration is driven by people with the skill and support to do the relational work that overcomes structural issues embedded in the system. This workforce exists, but they need to be found, cultivated and given the authorising environment to work differently. The investment in people is as critical as building the infrastructure.

Readiness and collaborative muscle can be developed but takes time and needs to be intentionally cultivated



Often readiness, capability and impact grow cumulatively over time. Community readiness for integration initiatives is a critical consideration for the level/type of funding needed, the speed at which the initiative will run, and the types of impacts it will be reasonable to expect. Readiness can be intentionally cultivated and built – but this can be challenging when early KPIs have the wrong focus or are too rigid.

There's no one right way to design an effective integration initiative – context will determine what strategies to use when



The design elements need to be proportionate and appropriate to the ambition, the scale and the people. Decisions about the design features should be strategic, responsive to local contexts and priorities, and fit-for-purpose. In different places and different times, the strategies around features like governance, funding, space may change.

Leadership, staffing & capability: Overview



What is leadership, staffing, and capability?

The skill, capability and number of people needed to lead and enable integration initiatives.

The core set of capabilities needed are consistent across integration initiatives. These include interprofessional competencies, system expertise, emotional intelligence, creativity and flexibility, comfort with ambiguity, strategic nous and courage.

The size of the team and the sophistication of the approach needs to scale up as the purpose, location and scale, and diversity of partners grow in size or level of ambition.

There's consensus in the literature that a dedicated 'backbone' and skilled people are the core drivers of effective integration

Integration requires explicit investment in the glue to support relationship-building and delivery

Research is clear that effective collaboration is enabled by relationships, with informal connections between partners identified as a key predictor of levels of trust and engagement in collective efforts (Gilliam et al, 2016).

A consistent theme across the literature on integration is the importance of dedicated roles with the time and capacity to invest in relationship development, navigating inevitable areas of complexity and conflict, and coordinating activity towards a shared goal (Branch et al, 2022; Lynn 2018).

The concept of a 'backbone organisation' comes from recognition that "the expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is the most frequent reason why it fails" (Kania and Kramer, 2011).

Multiple studies identify the absence of sufficient dedicated staffing as a key handbrake on delivery and impact (Javanparast et al, 2018; Department for Education, 2022; Teo, 2022; SPSP Backbone Team, 2022; Niddrie et al, 2017; Lynn 2018).

The work of integration is sophisticated and requires the right mindsets and explicit cultivation

The relational work of collaboration requires specialised skills and mindsets (Grace, 2009). There are consistent sets of capabilities identified, including:

- Highly effective communication – understanding different perspectives, building trust and rapport quickly, bringing people on the journey.
- Being organised and systematic – the ability to connect rhetoric to practice and deliver
- Creative and flexible problem-solving – a willingness to work 'outside of the box' and be pragmatic
- Being strategic and outcomes-focused – holding and maintaining the vision (PRF, 2022; Teo, 2022; Chandler & Cleveland, 2020, 2021).

The quality and consistency of leadership is a critical enabler for effective collaboration and integration. Multiple studies point to the critical role of leadership in driving effective integration – for creating the authorising environment, keeping the focus on purpose, and navigating roadblocks (Press 2012; Lewing et al., 2020).

The ability to effectively engage – and be comfortable sharing power with – members of the community the initiative serves is another critical capability. However, this ability to work genuinely and effectively with community, to be attuned to power dynamics, and to be open to learning / being outside of the expert role is consistently identified as a challenge and skill gap (Abresch et al, 2022; Lynn et al, 2018; Lewing et al, 2020).

Leadership & staffing: What we heard

In our interviews with integration initiatives, we heard:

Leaders create the authorising environment for working differently – and need both enough time and the right skills and mindsets

Leadership that ‘brings people along’ is central to the effectiveness of integration initiatives – they play a critical role in keeping the focus on purpose and creating the space and drive to work differently.

The ability to draw the dots between local experiences and systemic issues, to support people through change, and the courage to challenge the status quo were identified as critical characteristics.

There is huge potential in better leveraging universal platforms like ECEC and schools to drive integration – but that leadership commitment and capability is ‘make or break’.

Working in integrated ways often requires different leadership skills and different decision-making processes – it’s possible to be a highly effective leader, and not the right person to lead an integration initiative.

It’s necessary to create dedicated time for leaders in universal services providing expanded services – it’s not feasible to expand their role without growing the support around them.

Integration can’t happen “off the side of the desk”

It’s clear in the literature and across all the initiatives we reviewed that dedicated resourcing is essential – to get traction, integration needs to be an explicit and intentional part of the job, not something that’s ad hoc or additional.

We saw considerable differences in the size, type and scale of resourcing. For example,

- Some initiatives dedicated a portion of an existing role to the work of integration,
- Others had small teams coordinating among partners, and
- A few had substantial and sophisticated centralised capability.

The size and type of capability needed depended significantly on:

- Purpose: how ambitious the agenda is, and how much of a stretch from ‘business as usual’ is required,
- Location and scale: the level of population reach needed, proportionate to size, and
- Partners: the number of partners who need to be coordinated, and the level of pre-existing alignment and ‘collaborative muscle’.

“We needed to grow the leadership capability and confidence to do this work. We worked with them on building and strengthening interprofessional teams, get the team ready for changes in how they work, creating communities of practice... and then had to work on the annual plan, balancing what’s meaningful and doable, and then implement”

“A leader that’s very KPI focused and doesn’t make the time to collaborate won’t enable integration to happen”

“An early learning centre can’t fulfill the backbone role alone... they can’t do all the additional work that’s unfunded, difficult to quantify and essential, that’s the glue”

“The size of the team depends on how far you want to go, how many partners are involved, how big the community is, what the issues are.”

“You need to invest in leadership development. There’s no question, you can’t do this work without the groundwork and professional learning in place-based ways of working. Great confident leaders create the authorising environment”

“When you’re leveraging universal services, you need to create capacity for the leaders – they have a big job already, they can’t be out in the community, building connections, without properly resourced opportunities to expand that role.”

Capability: What we heard

In our interviews with integration initiatives, we heard:

Integration is highly skilled work

A common thread across the evidence-base and the integration initiatives we interviewed was the critical importance of people with the right mindsets and skills. Stakeholders identified a consistent set of characteristics of effective integration workers, including:

- **Interprofessional competencies:** the ability to work across professional boundaries, bridge differences, and adopt new ways of working.
- **System expertise:** knowledge of how ‘the system’ works and knowing what to do / who to talk to, to get things done.
- **Emotional intelligence:** the ability to engage with people from all backgrounds, from a family in crisis to senior executives, and to have and hold space for uncomfortable conversations.
- **Creativity and flexibility:** people comfortable working outside of prescribed processes, able and willing to be flexible about the what and how.
- **Comfort with ambiguity:** ability to see value in small changes and indirect impacts, and comfort with not knowing the answer.
- **Strategic nous:** holding a clear vision of the outcome and the ability to navigate tactically towards it.
- **Courage:** willing to challenge the status quo.

“There are better ways to bring people together than bricks and mortar. It’s people and their capabilities that drives collaboration”

These skills can be deliberately cultivated

Skilled people are the most critical element of integration initiatives, but its possible to recruit people with the right mindsets and then build their capability.

Qualifications and specific skills are less important than passion, disposition and mindsets and sufficient time/ resourcing for capacity building, including:

- Professional supervision and structured reflection.
- Communities of practice, for sharing learning, collaborative problem-solving, and structured reflective practice.
- Practice frameworks that are structure and principle-based and establish shared ways of working and explicit authorisation to work in integrated ways.
- Coaching that creates a safe space for working through challenges, stretching learning and embeds routine reflection.
- Training in intra-professional ways of working, to scaffold the collaboration between specialists.

Some models also intentionally recruit community members, offering the benefit of their lived experience, community insights, and existing relationships / trust into the team; while requiring appropriate pay and support to manage this additional load.

“Space for leaders to think about the work and their role as leaders has been crucial for retention”

Readiness for integration is impacted by relationship continuity

Continuity of relationships is important for building and cementing integration initiatives – especially for building collaborative ways of working into the ‘DNA’ of organisations. Readiness for integration is cultivated – with individuals and organisations – progressively over time.

Stakeholders reported that their work was often disrupted by changes of personnel, after considerable work to build trust and alignment.

Working with leadership to create sustained authorising environments for collaboration but also more flexible ways of working was identified as critical. This was seen as more challenging with government than other sector partners.

The importance of continuity also impacts funding models. The level of staffing churn within a partnership network means that the assumption that a large ‘one off’ investment in relationship-building and partnership formation doesn’t work in practice.

“Some sites weren’t even able to get started – the pre-requisite for the model was that there was already relationships with families, and where we could work with the natural motivations of the sites”

“It takes time for a local system to think differently about their work, and shift how they serve community”

Leadership, staffing & capability: In practice

Goodstart's EChO



Investing in leadership capability, evidence-based professional development for interprofessional practice, and ongoing capacity building

Goodstart recognised that leadership would be critical for the effective implementation of the EChO model.

In preparation for implementation, Goodstart invested in leadership development to equip the centre directors with the capabilities they'd need to lead integrated sites. They established a bespoke leadership course with modules on creating collaborative, intra-professional teams, bringing staff along on the journey, and working collaboratively to develop meaningful and feasible implementation plans. A key learning was the importance of ensuring that central and area managers were aligned and equipped to guide centre directors.

Enabling different specialists (especially teachers/educators, allied health and family support professionals) to work together effectively was also critical. EChO centres had a 'stacked' range of additional staffing options, such as child and family practitioners, speech pathologists, and occupational therapists. Interprofessional practice was fostered through joint professional learning and ongoing investment in leadership capability for centre leaders and allied health staff to understand each other's perspectives and work effectively as a transdisciplinary team.

However, high staff turnover, particularly in long day care settings, was a challenge for sustaining the model. Ongoing investment was needed to maintain the skill base as staff changed. Dedicated resourcing for professional supervision was important for supporting leaders and retaining staff.

Our Place



Leadership buy-in, key integrative roles, and continuous capability development

Our Place emphasises the commitment of school principals to collaborate and share leadership with early years partners, over time finding that the principal's buy-in is make or break.

Carefully selected 'glue' roles are also critical for building relationships and driving a shared vision across diverse stakeholders, including, for each site:

- Community facilitators, who need strong relational skills, comfort with ambiguity, and resilience to effectively engage families and connect services. They 'loiter with intent', building rapport with families in informal spaces, and
- Partnership managers, who require interpersonal finesse to have courageous conversations and align partners around common goals.

And at head office:

- A central backbone team of subject matter experts who work with each site to interpret evaluation data, identify opportunities to strengthen implementation, and provide coaching to build local teams' capacity.

Further, staffing continuity is vital, as it enables the consistent relationships essential for building trust.

Brave



Leadership is crucial for setting the vision, and it's essential for staff to have the right mindset.

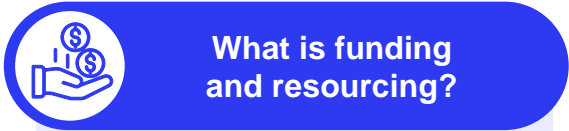
Leadership is critical for Brave:

- Brave's CEO plays a critical role in setting the vision, maintaining purpose, and fostering a culture of transparency where all staff understand how their work contributes to supporting young parents.
- The Head of Program builds deep relationships with mentors and stakeholders to ensure the core mentoring program remains responsive to their needs.

In terms of staffing, Brave intentionally selects mentors for their mindset, relational skills, and ability to build trust with young parents, using psychometric testing and behavioural interviewing rather than focusing solely on qualifications. Mentors are also typically recruited from the local community to enable contextual understanding.

Building capability is an ongoing priority at Brave. The Head of Transformation plays a vital role in ensuring Brave employs a structured approach including a measurable evidence-based practice framework, regular training, fidelity monitoring, communities of practice, and individual coaching, empowering staff to adapt the consistent program model to their specific context.

Funding and resourcing: Overview



What is funding and resourcing?

Integrated initiatives benefit from a range of approaches to funding depending on the scale, ambition, and stage of implementation

How the work of integration and collaboration is resourced.

Dedicated resourcing to support the practices, roles and structures needed for effective integration – proportionate to the purpose / level of ambition – is a core feature of all the integration initiatives.

The funding approach is related to the purpose of the initiative. Funding must be flexible and responsive to community need. Different types and levels of funding are required at different phases of an initiative's maturity e.g. building readiness, establishing vision and alignment, delivering early wins / building trust, driving innovation and expansion, and when sites are in a maintenance phase.

Current approaches to funding are a barrier to effective integration

Siloed funding models create additional administrative burden, inconsistency in service delivery, short-term mindsets, competition, and instability (Loblay et al., 2022; Sullivan & Juster, 2019; SVA, 2019; Rodrigues & Fisher 2015).

Funding for service delivery tends not to adequately resource the work of collaboration or 'cross portfolio ways of working' (Christens & Inzeo, 2015; Kania & Kramer, 2011; 2013).

Explicit funding for the relational and coordinating work of 'the glue' is essential

There is consensus that collaboration across organisations and sectors is difficult and needs dedicated resourcing. Funding the 'glue' is essential. Investments in the infrastructure needed to coordinate and sustain collaboration over the long-term is considered necessary to see sustained improvements in outcomes (SVA, 2019; Sullivan and Juster, 2019; Smart, 2017; Christens & Inzeo, 2015; Kania & Kramer, 2011; 2013),

For some integration initiatives, separate backbone support with dedicated staff is also needed. While the critical role of backbone support is well-established, the quantum of backbone funding required, and the impact of different levels of backbone investment has not been established empirically.

Alternative models of funding have been identified, but their efficacy has not been established

Different models of funding may be appropriate for different integration initiatives and at different stages of an initiative's maturity. These could include:

- Models that enable community participation and co-design (CCCH, 2012),
- Needs-based funding models (Deloitte Access Economics, 2023),
- Recurrent block-based funding tied to factors like the size and complexity of initiative rather than outputs or activities (Deloitte, 2023),
- Pooled or collaborative funding models (Wilks et al. 2015),
- Tiered funding approaches with different levels of flexibility (Loblay et al., 2022), and
- Longer funding cycles that support relationship and trust building (Klepac et al., 2023).

There are underpinning principles across these models, but limited consensus about an optimum approach.

Funding and resourcing: What we heard

In our interviews with integration initiatives, we heard:

Dedicated funding for the work of the 'glue' is a non-negotiable

The initiatives we reviewed could not operate without explicit resourcing for the intangible relational and coordinating roles of the 'glue'. This was often provided by a dedicated backbone team.

This funding differed in size and focus, but included resourcing for:

- Leadership and clear responsibility to bring people together,
- Strategy and planning, including holding the vision,
- Ongoing relationship building and engagement,
- Data and analysis, including accessing and creating evidence and measuring impact,
- Advocacy and system influencing, including engagement with funders and government, leading the 'legwork' around funding applications and building the profile of the work, and
- Innovation, including resourcing for small but sufficient initiatives that build trust with community or that amplify or extend the impact of partners.

These are all roles that are hard to hold and maintain when focused on BAU.

"All the partners have really good intentions. But goodwill doesn't create time and capacity"

Being adaptive and responsive to evolving community needs or new opportunities requires flexible funding

The nature of integrated work is adaptive and evolving – and while discipline and accountability for funding is important for 'staying on mission', some level of funding flexibility is critical.

This does not need to be the whole funding allocation – not least because too much flexibility can contribute to mission drift.

Integration initiatives use flexible funding to:

- Build trust – with community and with partners,
- Create quick wins – that help others come on board and see the value,
- Seize opportunity – being able to bring in specialist expertise, take the time to build a relationship with a funder or test new models / approaches, and
- Feel confident stopping something that isn't working.

Philanthropic funding was particularly powerful for many initiatives, and initiatives valued funders who were:

- Focused on purpose and impact but not hung up on specific KPIs,
- Willing to come along on the journey and learn,
- There for the long term – recognising the work takes time to bear fruit, and
- Able to count partnership as a KPI in its own right.

Different types and levels of funding are required at different times – planning for the offramp is important

Sustained investment in the backbone is important, but it doesn't need to be at the same level and from the same funder at all times.

Some case study sites highlighted the value of beta-testing new programs / innovations, which are ideally taken up into the system. To do this, it helps to know who the long-term delivery partner is, to engage them along the way, and build the evidence they need for systemic take-up.

"We thought we'd need two years of higher investment, and then scale down. But staffing turnover meant that we needed a consistent funding base"

"An injection of funding from philanthropy enabled us to take time for authentic consultation and deep listening. Being philanthropically funded means there's no fear of not hitting KPIs, there's flexibility"

"Funding and resourcing for evaluation meant we could document and show our work. Proving our case made a big difference for government"

It's important for all partners to have a stake in the work – but it doesn't have to be a financial contribution

Initiatives noted that sometimes partners aren't able to contribute financially, but often brought significant in-kind contributions, including:

- Relationship capital – the trust and connection with members of the community and/or government,
- Specialist knowledge – expertise that is otherwise missing, whether it's subject matter expertise (speech therapy) or a valued skill (graphic design), and
- Space or equipment – a venue trusted by community, a coffee cart or boardroom.
- Aligning existing programs / funding – bringing other programs into the fold.

Funding and resourcing: In practice

Uniting NSW



Backbone support functions need to be adequately resourced to create space for partners to come together, define problems, build relationships, and drive a shared vision and strategy.

Uniting NSW has experience across a diverse range of integration initiatives, from ones it has designed and implemented itself to other collaborations formed through government initiatives.

They found that services brought together through top-down funding need time to build relationships and shared ways of working – collaboration is hard to ‘switch on’ quickly. This is most effective when supported by dedicated, flexible, long-term funding that resources both service delivery and the ‘glue’ that is required for collaboration.

Organisations brought together by funders rather than organic partnerships need time and resources to properly design how they will work together, determine who is suited to play which roles, and build complimentary ways of working – but this work is often not explicitly resourced.

Goodstart’s EChO



Upfront investment in readiness set centres up for success, and then needed flexible resourcing to remain responsive to community need.

Goodstart found that there was a strong relationship between readiness, implementation and effectiveness – and adapted its funding approach for EChO centres accordingly. Rather than making investment decisions based only on need (i.e. services with the highest proportion of children experiencing vulnerability) it selected the services where there was strong evidence of need and the interest from centre directors was highest – helping direct investment where it could have the greatest impact.

They also found more sustained investment was needed through the life of the initiative. While they envisioned an initial ‘setup cost’, turnover rates in the early learning and allied health sectors meant that ongoing investment in professional learning and implementation support was needed.

This meant that the funding model needed to be flexible – both to be responsive to the specific service delivery needs of each service, but to their different and dynamic implementation pathways.

The Hive



Long term funding for both services and ‘the glue’ supports authentic community engagement

The Hive's long-term philanthropic funding for both services and the 'glue' role supports community engagement and ensures the time required to build trust and relationships. This flexible funding allows The Hive to invest time in deep listening and consultation without the pressure of meeting short-term output targets. Flexible funding also allows time to trial innovative pilot projects to respond to community need, test and evaluate their effectiveness and work to embed these into the mainstream systems for sustainability, or pause, reflect, and try something new.

Securing sustainable resourcing for new solutions takes significant time and requires investment to build a supporting evidence base. For example, The Hive's stable funding enabled it to collect data, build credibility and relationships, and advocate for 6-7 years to prove the need for a local paediatrician.

The Hive also encourages core partners to make contributions to reaching the Collective’s goal. This contribution can be in-kind support, not just financial resources. Partners offer space, expertise, resources, and relationships that are critical to the collaborative effort. But this gives them ‘skin in the game’ and supports commitment and engagement.

Governance: Overview



What is governance?

How decisions are made, how the authorising environment is established and maintained, and who holds accountability.

Governance models are shaped by three key factors:

- **Partners:** The number of partners involved, the pre-existing level of trust and alignment / shared ways of working, and how government is at the table.
- **Location and scale:** The extent to which regional diversity needs to be taken into account.
- **Power:** How intentional the mechanisms for giving community a voice and decision-making authority are, and the role that funders make in informing decisions.

Research indicates that collaborative governance is a different way of working and requires significant backbone support to be effective.

Collaborative governance requires partners to work in different ways.

Collaborative governance requires a significant shift from siloed, programmatic service delivery to more holistic approaches that respond to local contexts and are tailored to individual needs.

Unrealistic timelines, overly hierarchical leadership styles, and lack of dedicated capacity for governance and stakeholder engagement can derail these complex, long-term efforts. (VSG, 2023; Klepac et al., 2023; Rong et al., 2023). Further, the work of collaborative governance is difficult, and increases in complexity as the number of partners and scope increases (Belrhiti et al., 2024; Grootjans et al., 2022).

There is widespread agreement about the importance of dedicated backbone roles or organisations to drive and hold shared governance.

Backbones play a critical piece in guiding vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, supporting shared measurement, cultivating community engagement and outreach, advancing policy and mobilising resources (Collective Impact Forum, 2021). Backbones facilitate the governance arrangements that enable joint decision-making and accountability among partners, and they can help manage the complex relationships and competing institutional logics that can arise in collaborations (Lata et al., 2024; VSG, 2023). Even in the absence of formal governance arrangements, backbone support can provide the necessary accountability to 'stay on track' (DuBow et al., 2018).

Backbones often also play a key part enabling community engagement to help ensure the collaborative effort is grounded in community voice and priorities (VSG, 2023). However, more research is needed on different backbone models (e.g. new entity vs existing organisation, single vs multiple organisations) and their relative effectiveness in different contexts and there is limited empirical evidence quantifying the impact of backbone support on the outcomes of collaborative initiatives compared to similar efforts without backbones.

Given the complexity of the change, skilled facilitation and leadership is critical.

Skilled facilitation enables diverse stakeholders to work together productively in the face of differences, such as organisational cultures, power dynamics and incentives (Brunet et al., 2023; Schmitz, 2021). Effective leadership is critical for articulating a shared vision, fostering trust and collaboration, and mobilising partners around a common agenda (VSG, 2023).

There are some important gaps in the evidence base.

The importance of community engagement is often mentioned but there is limited in-depth exploration of how to meaningfully share power and decision-making with community members in governance arrangements (Osborne et al., 2021). There is also a lack of longitudinal studies examining how governance arrangements evolve over time as place-based initiatives mature and adapt to changing contexts.

Crucially, more research by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is needed to demonstrate effective governance models for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and self-determination in place-based initiatives.

Governance: What we heard

In our interviews with integration initiatives, we heard:

Governance creates the authorising environment for working differently

There are many different governance models, and the level of formality and role of governance bodies was highly diverse. The two elements that drove effectiveness was:

- **Governance that created the explicit permission to work differently**, be creative, and deploy resources in different ways – an authorising environment which empowered people ‘on the ground’ to work more collaboratively and holistically.
- **A channel to engage decision-makers in conversations about addressing systemic barriers** or enabling new / different ways of working that are responsive to place. In some contexts, this looked like having government around the governance table, and in others, it was a backbone with the right relationships and influencing capability.

A key challenge is supporting decision-makers with working differently across different locations, knowing when to flex their approach for specific contexts – even if this means that different sites will progress at a different pace.

Multi-site initiatives pointed out their unique ability to challenge the status quo because of their familiarity with system design parameters and possibilities in other contexts.

“Ownership from senior leaders is important”

‘Backbone’ roles are the enablers of effective governance

Backbones are the mechanism that allows integration initiatives to ‘rise above the day-to-day’ and:

- Hold and keep the focus on the overarching mission and aspiration,
- Be the custodian of the shared values and ways of working, including modelling these and inducting new partners into the collective,
- Lead advocacy and manage the relationships with funding partners,
- Create and hold space for the voice of the community and lived experience,
- Collect and interpret data to identify priorities and monitor, and ensure the integration initiative is held accountable, and
- Provide authority to lean into, resolve conflict between partners, and navigate the challenges that come from scarcity.

These functions keep an integration initiative working and focused on impact but are easily squeezed in the routines of business as usual.

“Someone needs to hold the overarching aspiration”

“Competition for money brings out weird dynamics”

Agreed ways of working matter more than formal governance

While formal processes and agreements can be important (or necessary), it is clarity of purpose and agreed, routine ways of working that mattered more than the specific forum and function of the governance arrangements. We heard that:

- The people around the table need a willingness to acknowledge the status quo and the humbleness to lean into doing things differently.
- Governance arrangements shape who gets a voice – who is acknowledged as an expert, who gets to make decisions. You need people around the table who recognise that the expertise might sit outside the room.
- Accountability back to the community is important for building trust, and accountability to the other partners enables integration – when your decisions affect each other, organisations have ‘skin in the game’ and a level of interdependence, collaboration is taken seriously.
- There needs to be willingness to leave organisational ego aside.

“Interagency meetings can be a well-intentioned move to be more integrated. But at best, its light touch coordination – they hand out a referral form and then don’t talk again”

Effective governance connects system leaders with what’s happening ‘on the ground’

Integration usually requires working outside of business as usual, and this means there needs to be authorisation from the top, alignment across organisations, and opportunities for feedback loops from the ground.

“Services are reliant on government funding decisions, on their management, on their Board and the systems above them – this all affects what happens on the ground. But it means the work is vulnerable to changes at that level”

“Things get lost in the middle. The top says ‘do whatever it takes’ and people on the ground just want to get things done ... it often gets stuck in the middle”

Governance: In practice

Our Place



Our Place have a collaborative but formal governance approach, balancing local leadership with diverse perspectives and decision-making authority – shared responsibility for improving outcomes.

Our Place has three layers to its governance structure. Each layer plays a crucial role in enabling integration across education, health and community services:

- At the system level, the Inter-Departmental Committee (IDC) is a group of representatives from different government departments who ensure cross-departmental coordination and create the authorising environment for an integrated way of working.
- The Partnership Management Group (PMG), consisting of senior leaders from the Department of Education and senior Our Place staff, ensures the effective implementation of the Our Place approach in alignment with the formal partnership with the Department of Education. The PMG sustains and enhances the effectiveness of the partnership over the long-term by sharing collective learnings, identifying system-level barriers, supporting issue resolution, facilitating access to expertise and resources, fostering accountability, and monitoring outcomes. The PMG regularly reviews data and community feedback to identify strategic opportunities to strengthen integration, such as committing resources, revising ways of working, and addressing system barriers to enable frontline teams to better support children and families.
- At each site, the Site Partnership Group (SPG) brings together senior leaders from school, early childhood services, health services, local government and other community organisations to develop a shared understanding of community needs and co-design strategies to support children and families. The SPG may identify improving school attendance as a priority and work together on a campaign to support families in the transition from early learning to school, reinforcing the importance of attendance from multiple angles. While competition between partners is common at the beginning, the SPG fosters a culture of openness and trust.

The Hive



The Hive's governance model facilitates integration through a values-based approach to partnership.

The Hive selectively partners with organisations that demonstrate genuine commitment to the initiative's principles and a willingness to share accountability for outcomes.

The governance group, comprising senior representatives from partner organisations and local community members, meets intensively for half a day every two months to guide the work. While The Hive works collaboratively with government, they aren't a part of the formal governance arrangements. The leadership group's regular, in-depth engagement fosters strong relationships and ensures all partners have 'skin in the game'. Across the collective, there's a focus on creating opportunities for all partners (not just the governance group) to socialise together regularly, building the trust required for collaboration.

The Hive's approach to partnership emphasises aligned ways of working, however they will use more formal mechanisms like MOU where needed (i.e. when receiving government funding), but in practice they find that it's the shared commitment and alignment in ways of working that drives action and sustains their partnerships.

FNECN



FNECN's governance model has evolved as the collaboration has matured, from a university-led initiative to a formalised regional network.

FNECN now has a governance committee with representatives from key organisations across Far North Queensland, such as the Department of Education, large early childhood providers, and universities. The committee meets bi-monthly to collaborate on projects prioritised by the early childhood community.

FNECN has developed Terms of Reference to outline how it operates, but it is the shared mindset and commitment of partners that drives collaboration. Partners take turns to lead on organising meetings, setting agendas, and capturing minutes as part of their day-to-day roles, enabled by their organisations' recognition that networking and partnership-building is legitimate work.

Adaptation: Overview



What is adaptation?

The approach to adaptation and iteration and the mechanism for community voice.

All integration initiatives adapt and change over time, but the intentionality and sophistication of the approach to adaptation is influenced by:

- Purpose: the size of the challenge and the level of uncertainty about what the solution is, and
- Partners: the needs and priorities of the partners around the table, including funders' appetite for qualitative / quantitative data.

Data driven decision-making is an aspiration for integration initiatives, but can be difficult to achieve in practice

There's a strong focus on data-driven decision-making and shared measurement in integration initiatives

The focus on data and measurement reflects the importance of:

- Understanding local needs and priorities – and building a picture of local system dynamics, gaps and barriers.
- Building consensus on priorities for action and catalysing collaboration / a shared sense of purpose.
- Monitoring progress and supporting learning, adaptation and iteration.
- Measuring impact and being accountable to funders and the community (Fox et al. 2015; Kingsley, Coulton & Petit 2014; Smart 2017; Crimeen et al., 2018).

Integration initiatives often aspire to measurement systems that “provide real-time feedback on the multiple outcomes expressed in their theory of change or strategy” and “have robust processes for sense-making and decision-making” (Cabaj and Weaver, 2016, p. 8).

However, its challenging to be precise about the impacts of more integrated services.

Given the ambitious outcomes sought, the complex systems involved, and the long timeframes required for population-level change, clear empirical evidence is difficult to establish. Some challenges include:

- Building consensus on what to measure, what indicators matter, and what elements of the work it's important to focus on – especially the balance between implementation and outcome indicators (Michgelsen et al., 2023; Gill & Smith, 2017).
- Difficulties measuring structures, processes and outcomes, and tools and measurements often fail to capture the full scope and nuance of impact (Wankah et al., 2020).
- Accessing and consolidating the data needed, in timeframes that can guide insights and adaptation (Gill & Smith, 2017), as well as the data literacy and capability needed (BSL 2015; Kingsley, Coulton & Petit 2014).
- Attributing outcomes to the specific practices that contribute to change is difficult when multiple components and actors are involved (Datta & Petticrew, 2013; Trankle et al., 2019).
- Practical and methodological barriers to rigorous evaluation designs (like randomised control trials) have required the development of alternative evaluation approaches – but these do not always meet the expectations of funders (Kelly et al., 2020; Smart, 2017).

Adaptation: What we heard

In our interviews with integration initiatives, we heard:

Readiness determines the pace and scope of change but can be intentionally cultivated.

Across many of the case study sites, the issue of readiness for change was identified. We heard:

- Readiness determines pace - sites that had strong foundations in place moved faster and further,
- Readiness is enabled by a history of working collaboratively – including existing relationships between partners, and alignment around the vision,
- It's possible to foster integration in more 'greenfield' sites, it just takes more time and the scale and pace of the work may need to be smaller at the start, and
- Buy in from the community or from leaders is more effective than 'gifting' an integration initiative, even if it comes with more resourcing.

"We learned to much in the first year. Some sites couldn't even start, there were too many barriers to building the foundations to work differently ... some were working really well from the start. 'Gifting' an integrated model wasn't the best approach – we needed to work with the natural motivations of the site"

Initiatives should expect and plan for change

All sites we spoke to had changed and adapted over time:

- As they learnt more about community or became more effective at tapping into community perspectives,
- As new people / partners came into the initiative and brought new skills / perspectives / networks or resources,
- When new funding opportunities arose, and
- As capability grew and the ambition could grow proportionately.

Integration initiatives noted that there's a risk of drift in purpose through the adaptation cycle, or of moving on if results don't appear immediately. On the other hand, too much focus on short term outcomes or the initial theory of change creates pressure and risks locking in initiatives that aren't the right fit for the community. There's real skill in holding the balance and judging the right times and places to adapt.

A clear theory of change, intentionally updated over time, ensures clarity of purpose and prevents mission drift.

"We have a learning mindset, informed by evidence and lived experience"

"We bring in the perspective of people with lived experience, alongside a rigorous monitoring and learning framework"

Adaptation emerges over time and requires innovative mindsets, community voice

Across all the case study sites, the adaptation process was one of continual improvement and leveraging the foundations to take on bigger challenges and/or focus on where and how to have impact.

- **It can take years to build the foundations for ambitious initiatives** – collaboration is slow, it takes time to get to know and understand a community, and to build their trust.
- **It's important to 'have your ear to the ground'** so you understand from families and community members what's going on – integration initiatives have formal and informal processes for gathering, feeding up, and synthesising insights from community.
- **The willingness to be adaptive to what you're hearing on the ground is critical**, but there's underpinning skills and mindsets that support innovation, including:
 - The ability to bring people along on the journey: community members, partners and funders.
 - Using diverse data sources to guide decisions: triangulating qualitative insights from multiple sources 'on the ground' with quantitative data from local sources and government datasets.
 - Comfort with uncertainty and with taking risks.
 - Balancing the focus on process and outcome.

"You've got to be willing to try something new and maybe fail. Hear from community about what they need, what's not working, and what might work. And adapt when you need to"

"We tried to measure children's outcomes too early – we should have created space for implementation and evaluated the design and implementation process [first]"

Adaptation: In practice

Our Place



Our Place aims to balance formal evaluation with informal community input so they can effectively adapt their approach.

Our Place has a robust approach to formal evaluation to assess how well their model is working in each unique school community context. They collect data on key metrics aligned to their theory of change, such as family engagement and service coordination.

Our Place uses a 'test and learn' methodology, piloting new elements at specific sites, rigorously evaluating the results, and refining before scaling promising practices across their network. A dedicated director works closely with each site to interpret the evaluation data and identify opportunities to strengthen implementation, providing tailored coaching to build local teams' capacity to adapt.

Insights from local evaluation feed up to Our Place's central team and Site Partnership Group (SPG) to inform ongoing model improvements. The SPG reviews data and community feedback to guide strategic adaptation, where to commit resources and how to address system barriers.

By Five



By Five has evolved over time into a backbone organisation in response to the needs of their region

By Five has evolved their approach over time to enable more integrated support for children and families. Established in 2017 in response to community priorities identified through the Regional Partnership, By Five initially focused on mapping and streamlining early years services across the dispersed region. However, recognising the need for more transformative change, they have taken on an active backbone role to bring together diverse partners, including service providers, families, researchers and government, and co-designing innovative, place-based solutions.

By Five facilitates coordination across the dispersed Wimmera Southern Mallee region by connecting partners through a multi-level structure. Local insights from community networks inform By Five's regional priorities, allowing the initiative to evolve in response to emerging needs in different parts of the region. The By Five Paediatric Project emerged from this collaborative process, establishing new partnerships between local professionals and specialist services to improve access to care via telehealth.

By Five has also adapted to advocate for the systems change required to sustain new integrated approaches, using the evidence and insights generated through its local trials to influence policy and funding decisions. This reflects an understanding that supporting integration requires working at both the grassroots and systems level.

FNECN



FNECN's mission, focus, ways of working, and partnerships have flexibly changed over time to respond to the shifting context and needs of the sector.

Starting as a university initiative, FNECN's focus gradually shifted to connecting the sector more broadly. The facilitation of the network was then taken over by the Department of Education, adopting a wider early years lens. Responding to funding changes, the lead facilitation of FNECN was taken on by Mission Australia in partnership with other organisations such as The Benevolent Society and The Smith Family and adapted its structure to sustain the network.

Brave



The Brave Foundation uses a monitoring and evaluation framework to continuously improve their core mentoring model for young parents.

Brave fosters a learning mindset and has a structured approach to building mentor capability through training, coaching and communities of practice.

Brave is careful to avoid mission creep by staying focused on its specialisation in supporting young parents, only cautiously adapting its model when a clear need is identified, such as recently piloting a program co-designed with young fathers.

Space: Overview



What is space?

The types of physical or digital environments needed and how it's used and activated.

Integration initiatives use space in different ways and hold different priorities. These are shaped by:

- Purpose: the primary driver of space requirements, as the nature of the collaboration and change in practice should determine the requirements.
- Location and scale, and where geographical boundaries are set – where there's a hyper-local approach (a specific service/school or suburb) a dedicated space can make more sense than a town, region or LGA catchment.
- Available infrastructure.

Creating a welcoming, non-stigmatising environments is key to engaging families. Shared space and co-location can also be powerful enablers of integration.

Accessible co-location of services in the community can facilitate integration and access.

Co-locating early childhood education, maternal and child health, and family support services provides a "one-stop-shop" for families and enables practitioners to work together more seamlessly (Wong & Press, 2020; Wong et al., 2012). A study of an integrated child and family centre in Tasmania found that co-location facilitated access to multiple services and enabled a more holistic approach to support (Jose et al., 2021).

Services which are co-located enable access to multiple services, which in turn enables a fuller assessment of needs and faster delivery of appropriate services. They also create space for families to come together (Barnardos, 2024; Moore, 2023). This is particularly valuable for families experiencing vulnerability (Urbis, 2014).

Flexible spaces enable multiple uses and collaboration between practitioners.

Shared staff spaces strategically located between services encourage informal relationship-building and collaboration and flexible consultation rooms enable private discussions as well as group sessions (Jose et al., 2021; Urbis, 2014; Wong et al., 2012).

Multipurpose spaces that can be used for playgroups, parent education, and community events support a range of programming (Wong et al., 2012).

Welcoming environments are key to engagement

Creating welcoming, non-stigmatising environments is key to engaging families who may be reluctant to access services. Informal gathering spaces like cafes, playgroups and community gardens provide a soft entry point and help build trust. Designing spaces that are 'homely' and inviting can help build rapport with families (Urbis, 2014; CCCH, 2012). Having spaces where families can informally interact, like welcoming foyers, facilitates social connections and linking to supports (Our Place, 2023).

New infrastructure is not always necessary – re-purposing and adapting existing community spaces can be an effective approach (McShane & Coffey, 2022). Such spaces also need dedicated roles to 'activate' the space (Klepac, 2023; Rong, 2023).

There are some gaps in the evidence base

Much of the research is qualitative and based on case studies, with limited empirical measurement of the impact of physical space on integration outcomes and there is a lack of comparative studies examining integrated initiatives with and without co-located or purpose-designed facilities. Much of the literature focuses on the role of physical spaces in enabling integration, with less exploration of how virtual spaces and digital systems can facilitate collaboration. More research is also needed on designing culturally safe spaces for diverse families, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (CCCH, 2012).

Space: What we heard

In our interviews with integration initiatives, we heard:

Dedicated space is essential for some initiatives but less important for others...

A well designed space can significantly improve the ability of an initiative to provide integrated support for children and families. It can do this by providing a welcoming space for families and using physical proximity to encourage collaboration between services.

However, we also heard that dedicated space for integration initiatives isn't the only – or necessarily the best – option for all communities.

There were two key reasons for this:

- **Centralising services doesn't always work.**
 - Co-location doesn't necessarily guarantee collaboration, and
 - It also doesn't necessarily enhance accessibility for families, especially where there aren't good public transport links.
- **Families benefit from support within their neighborhood**
 - Regardless of whether there is a dedicated space, accessibility is greater when families can access resources, support and services within 'pram-pushing distance'.
 - Using community spaces like parks, libraries, schools or early learning services can be more effective than dedicated facilities.

For some initiatives, what mattered most was being visible and present for community. This could look like a coffee cart at the school, a community worker onsite regularly and routinely, or regular play sessions in the park – or working with whichever partner is most present or embedded in a community. However, it was generally recognised that it's important that 'the person on the ground' is resourced with the knowledge of pathways into more comprehensive or specialised support as needed.

Many of the integration initiatives included a 'linker' or 'navigator' function as part of their model, as this created the capacity to create accessible pathways to support for families.

... but safe places and seamless pathways to support are important

While there were various perspectives on the type of spaces needed, the importance of trusted and safe places was clear.

Some initiatives pointed to the different community dynamics that can arise when there's a safe space that's available to the community.

They also noted the power of using spaces like schools and early learning services to build relationships and engage with families who may not be likely to engage with a more formal service offering.

However, while we heard it wasn't necessary to co-locate services, initiatives identified the importance of bringing services to families and/or making the pathway to support easy and safe. This requires the ability to make connections, warm referrals and support to navigate system complexity.

This does not have to be a permanent presence – and models where resources are shared across a community cluster of schools / services are considered promising. The key aim is bringing the service to the community, school or early learning service to reduce mental load for families – rather than putting the onus onto the family to get to the service.

"There's a risk that purpose-built facilities reduce how much to move out into the community"

"Co-location doesn't equal integration"

"When families have a safe space, the ways families interact changes – this can eliminate barriers"

Space: In practice

Our Place



Our Place leverage the design of physical space to enable and support integrated ways of working.

Early on, Our Place identified that the physical design and use of space can significantly impact the ability to provide integrated support for children and families. By co-locating services, through a single entry creating welcoming environments, and using space to build relationships, Our Place creates the physical conditions for professionals from different disciplines to work together and with families in more holistic ways.

Co-locating early learning centres, maternal and child health services, and other family support services enables families to access multiple services in one familiar, convenient location. The physical proximity encourages collaboration between professionals from different disciplines who can more easily connect with each other and with families in informal ways.

Our Place's community facilitators use space intentionally to build relationships with families. They spend time in waiting areas, playgrounds, and school drop-off zones to have informal conversations with families, build trust, and link them to supports. This 'loitering with intent' leverages the physical environment to create opportunities for engagement.

Our Place also designs their physical spaces to encourage relationship-building. For example, they create welcoming, shared front entrances where families and staff can interact, and community spaces where families can gather and connect with each other and with service providers. They work with partners to create physical environments that break down silos between services and challenge unhelpful power dynamics.

The Hive



The Hive uses whatever space is available and can meet the needs in its community.

The Hive's approach to space is grounded in its commitment to being place-based and community-led. By leveraging partners' spaces, going to where families naturally gather, and enabling staff to work across sites, The Hive works with the physical conditions available in the communities to enable integrated support.

By meeting the community where they are, The Hive breaks down barriers to engagement. For example, The Hive understands that residents in Bidwill may not travel to a hub in Willmot, so they bring services into spaces that are familiar and convenient. When families were struggling to access a paediatrician, as public transport options are poor, The Hive and other partners advocated to the local health district and collaboratively started a bulk-billed, place-based outreach paediatrician clinic one day a week at the Willmot Community Hub which is more accessible and trusted by families.

The Hive chooses the right space for the right outcome. For more sensitive conversations or service delivery, they may use a partner's private consulting room. For large community events, they'll take over a park or community hall. For a family with a past, negative experience with a service, they may meet at a playground or at McDonalds so the kids can play while the parent and Linker can talk. This flexibility allows them to tailor their approach to the purpose of the engagement.

The Hive's own staff often work out of their partners' offices across Mt Druitt. Even though their salaries may be paid by different organisations, they share the same physical space, facilitating collaboration, relationship-building, and seamless support for families. Hot-desking and co-location enable The Hive's team to work side-by-side with partners.

Brave



The Brave Foundation does not rely on physical space as part of its integration model.

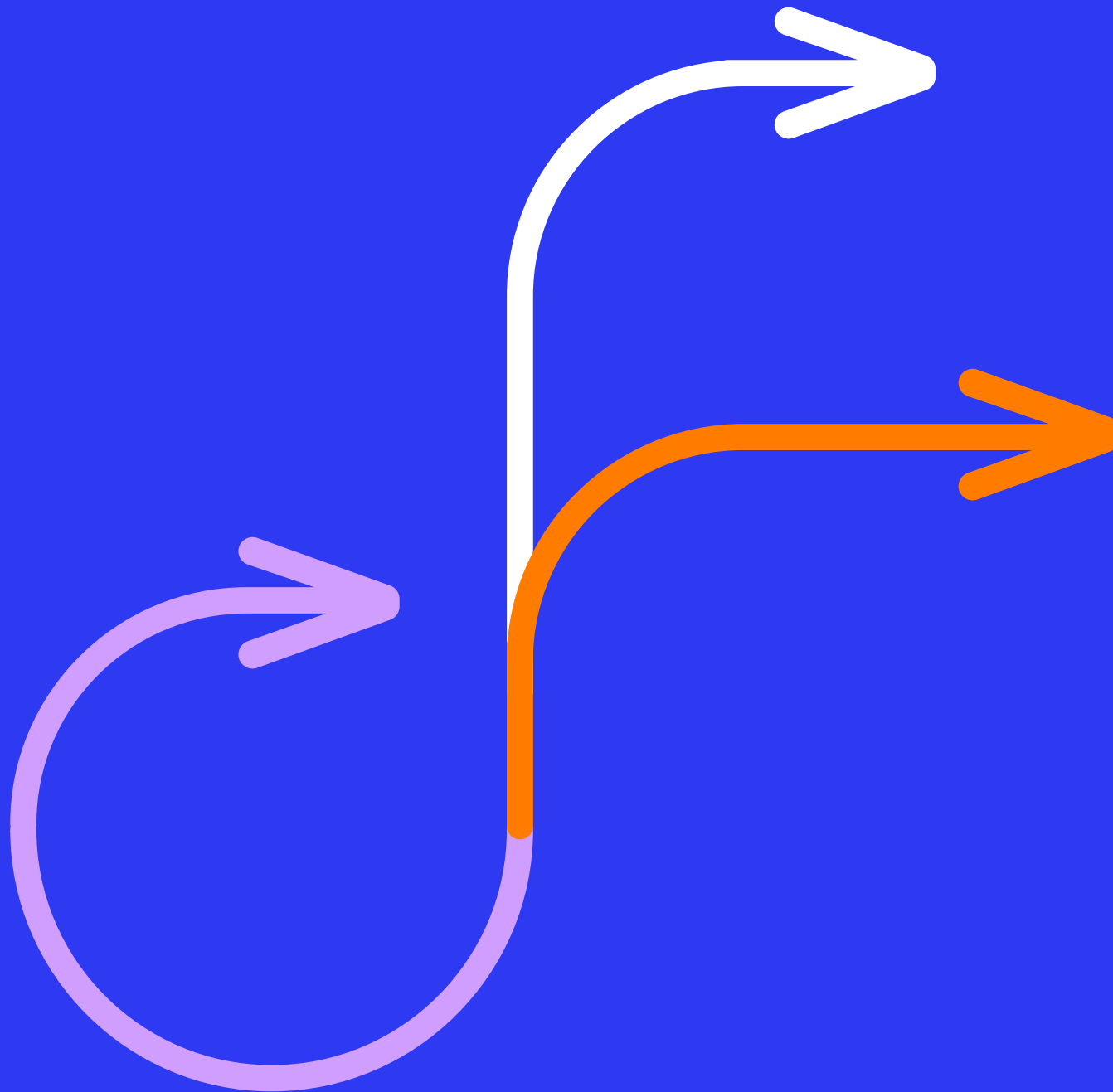
The Brave Foundation works in different ways in different parts of the country, partnering with local organisations to meet the needs of their mentor program participants.

While Brave aims to be embedded in local communities and tailor its approach to local contexts, it has a good sense of what other services in the area offer and focuses on connecting participants to support in their community.

Through a partnership model, it uses community spaces to meet young parents, helping to foster a sense of connection with their local community. However, it recognises that mentoring occurs through individual relationships rather than being tied to particular physical location or space. Brave does use online mentoring when a physical presence isn't suitable but notes that mentors require a very high level of interpersonal skills to be effective if the relationship is largely online.

SVA

SNAICC: ACCOs



Integration in ACCOs early years settings

ACCO integrated early years services' deep connection to the cultural context in which they work enables the greatest possible local impact.



SNAICC published a substantive report on funding models for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) delivering integrated early years services in 2024. The report highlights the vital role ACCOs play in delivering culturally safe, holistic early years services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

The report highlights that many ACCOs have long delivered integrated services, often without specific funding, demonstrating their commitment to supporting children and families.

For more information, we urge further engagement with this work through SNAICC and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations.

SNAICC: ACCOs

The connection and accountability that ACCOs have to community makes them uniquely placed to identify the services and supports that are most needed and will have the greatest impact on a local level. ACCO services go well beyond the mainstream scope of childcare and early education to provide holistic wrap around support for children and extended families. This approach is a response to the gaps in culturally safe services and the need to support community to navigate government and non-Indigenous service systems.

With culture at the centre of service delivery, ACCOs have a unique understanding of how each child fits within the kinship and community context and can deliver high-quality, culturally safe programs consistent with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural ways of child rearing. This includes practices such as storytelling, play-based learning, lifelong learning, and collective education with multiple care givers.

The report identified three core components of ACCO-led integrated early years services, noting that these services:



Are community-centred, building trust with children, families and their communities



Provide universal service offerings



Provide flexible services in response to need.

These three core components mean ACCOs can provide integrated services that:

- Deliver a broad range of services that are place-based and in line with community needs
- Deliver services based on trust and relationships
- Embed culture in all aspects of service delivery
- Take a strengths-based, child-centered and family-led approach
- Provide a broad range of integrated services beyond just childcare.

Attribution: This summary is based on the SNAICC report on funding model options for ACCO integrated early years services. For the full report, see: <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/240507-ACCO-Funding-Report.pdf>

Principles for ACCO integrated services*

SNAICC's report outlines six key principles underpinning ACCO integrated early years services.

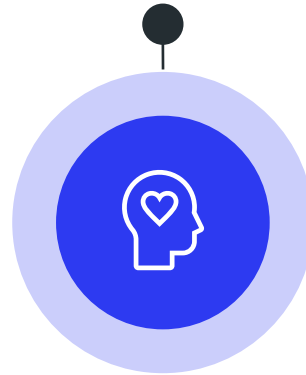
Self-determination

ACCOs are a vehicle for self-determination, allowing communities to direct the services and supports they need.



Strengths-based and family centred

Strengths-based services recognise children and families as experts on their own lives, and celebrate their unique skills, knowledge and abilities. Family-centred approaches provide personalised responses to meet the needs of families within the communities and contexts in which they live.



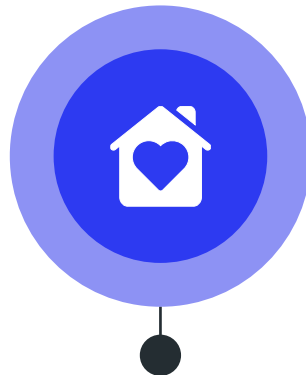
Multi-systemic and integrated

Integrated services break down silos and remove barriers for families seeking support. Integrated services leverage existing trust structures to improve services and achieve greater outcomes for children and families.



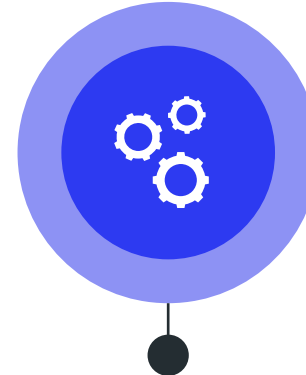
Cultural safety

First Nations children and families flourish when they are supported by culturally safe services, where their ways of knowing, doing and being are recognised and celebrated.



Tailored, relationship-based support, and continuity of care that is responsive to need

Children and families thrive when their unique needs and circumstances are recognised, and the support they receive is built on trust, strong relationships and a tailored approach to respond to their unique priorities and aspirations. Continuity of care supports trusted relationships, and better alignment of services to respond to children and families' needs.



Place-based and community-centred

Place-based approaches are collaborative and sustained, supporting communities to flourish by partnering with them to respond to local challenges with local solutions.



*These design principles should not be confused with the **funding principles** the report also identified, which can be found on p88 of the report: <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/240507-ACCO-Funding-Report.pdf>

Key barriers for integrated ACCO services

Current funding approaches limit ACCOs' ability to provide the services communities want and need.

SNAICC's report identifies several major barriers for ACCOs delivering integrated early years services:



ECEC funding requirements limit access and engagement

The Child Care Subsidy (CCS) system is overly complex and primarily designed for working families, which discourages participation from the most vulnerable children and families. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families disengage from ECEC due to the activity requirements to qualify for sufficient subsidised care, associated debt and the overall complexity of the system.



Current funding approaches are insufficient and inflexible

Current funding approaches do not provide sufficient resources to cover the full cost of delivering holistic, culturally responsive services. This includes a lack of funding for cultural curriculum, language programs, cultural teachers, and on-Country experiences, as well as programs / training to support those with disabilities and trauma. The funding is often narrowly targeted and siloed, which hampers the ability of ACCOs to provide integrated services effectively.



Multiple funding streams is an administrative burden

The complexity of navigating multiple funding streams and the associated administrative and reporting requirements create significant administrative burdens for ACCOs. This patchwork funding approach increases uncertainty and diverts resources away from service delivery.



Support to embed culture into service delivery is limited

There is limited, if any, ongoing, sustainable funding for embedding culture into service delivery. ACCOs often rely on personal relationships and additional unpaid work to integrate cultural elements into their programs, which is not adequately supported by current funding models.



Early years workforce challenges are even more intense for ACCOs

The early years workforce faces poor wages, demanding conditions, and staffing shortages. These issues compound for ACCOs, who struggle to attract and retain local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff due to insufficient resources and support for professional development and training.

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Considerations for ACCO integrated services

In addition to the general considerations for integration initiatives, for ACCOs, effective integration is grounded in community control and shared decision-making.

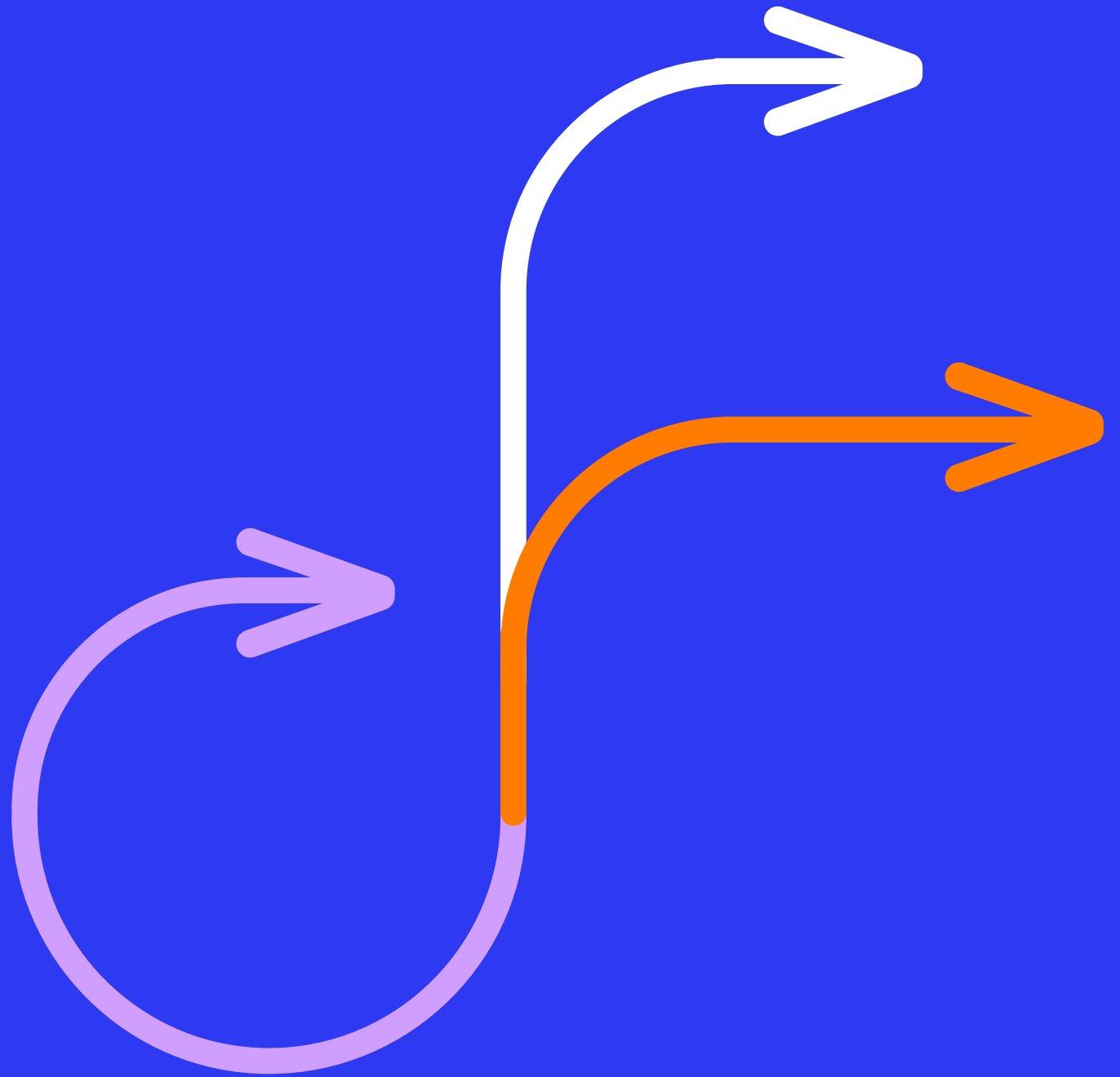
SNAICC's report highlights several key considerations for effective integration of early years services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



Attribution: This summary is based on the SNAICC report on funding model options for ACCO integrated early years services. For the full report, see: <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/240507-ACCO-Funding-Report.pdf>

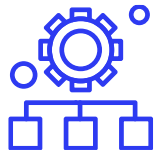
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Considerations



Key insights

Early years integration initiatives are diverse, and there's no single best practice model or ideal implementation pathway, but there are clear ingredients for effectiveness.



There are many strategies that drive more integrated service delivery

There aren't one-size-fits-all solutions, but there are a range of strategies and design decisions that can be effective in different contexts.



Invest in 'the glue' – especially the team of people who lead and drive the collaboration and undertake the relational work needed to make integration happen.

Don't set up the integration initiative to be all things to all people – ensure there are clear boundaries around the initiative aligned to purpose and reflective of place.

Integration is driven by people with the skills and support to do the relational work that overcomes structural issues embedded in the system. The investment in people is as critical as building the infrastructure.

The readiness and ability of organisations and people to work in an integrated way needs to be intentionally cultivated and time allowed for the development of trust.

Balance the focus on purpose and outcomes – ensure the focus of the work is optimised for impact but be flexible and adapt as the initiative matures.

Considerations for funders and leaders

Funders and leaders looking to seed and scale integration initiatives may need to consider different ways of designing, funding and managing programs.

Funders and leaders of integration initiatives should ...

Be clear on the purpose, scope and scale

Don't set up the integration initiative to be all things to all people – ensure there are clear boundaries aligned to purpose and reflective of place.

Understand site readiness

Understand the level of collaborative muscle, the degree of values alignment, whether there are established positive ways of working, and commitment to a shared agenda.

Invest proportionate to the ambition

The level and type of funding should consider the readiness of the site, the scope and scale of the operation, and length and duration of commitment

Integration initiatives require funders to be:

- Comfortable with sites working at different paces and in different directions,
- Intentional and sophisticated about accountability measures, and
- Willing to come 'on the journey' over time.

Build the right team

Ensure you're able to attract and grow leaders and doers with the skills and capabilities needed to work effectively and collaboratively.

Invest in growing their capability and the support they need to be effective.

Plan for adaptation

Know it's going to take time.

Build in mechanisms (across funding, governance, delivery plans) for ongoing learning, innovation and adaptation.

Ensure the community has a voice in shaping the what and the how.

Remain focused on the shared purpose

Be intentional about the design features

Decisions about the design features should be strategic, responsive to local contexts and priorities, and fit-for-purpose.

In different places and different times, the strategies around features like governance, funding, space may change.

There's a need to strike a careful loose / tight balance that's:

- Tight on clarity of purpose, being responsive to site readiness, and investing in the right team and the necessary elements of the glue; and
- Loose on the what and how so there's space to respond to different community priorities, mature over time, innovate and adapt.

Investment in the 'glue' is a non-negotiable: Initiatives cannot succeed without dedicated funding to support the practices, roles and structures needed for effective integration of services and supports

Considerations for scale

Workforce is the first priority for scaling up integration initiatives, and there is foundational work that funders and decision makers can progress to recognise, grow and develop the workforce.



Recognising, growing and developing the workforce

There is a growing cohort of people in integration initiatives who work to 'span boundaries' – across a diverse set of roles including leaders, community development workers, service system linkers or navigators, members of collaborative governance bodies.

These people are hard to find and recruit, but poor access to the right people with the right skills is a handbrake on expansion of all kinds of integration initiatives (PRF, 2022).



There's a critical role for funders in:

Recognising integration roles as distinct and valuable

- Helping create a language and profile for the 'boundary spanners', including by recognising or incentivising these roles in grant applications.



Growing the talent pool

- While integration leaders and practitioners are often considered rare and precious, they demonstrate a relatively consistent set of capabilities, skills and mindsets. Many of these capabilities can be taught and cultivated. This could include:
 - Developing training programs and professional learning opportunities that focus on the core skills / competencies needed to move into integration work.
 - Working with core training providers in community services to adapt their programs to include / embed the core capabilities in existing professional training.



Developing the workforce

- Enabling opportunities for learning and growth, including through:
 - Creating / building on communities of practice for both leaders and practitioners.
 - Designing training, mentoring and professional development that is easily accessible.
 - Recognition / reward for exceptional practice (awards programs, profiling in communications, conference presentations, etc.).
 - Specialist qualifications (including micro-credentials) and scholarships for intensive programs.
 - Creating the right scaffolding to recruit people from the community into these roles.

Considerations for scale

There are also opportunities to strengthen the authorising environment, deepen the research, and better leverage universal platforms.

Build the authorising environment

Funders – especially government – play a critical role in setting expectations around ways of working that either enable or inhibit integration.

Funders can consider:

- How success is measured in funding agreements.
- Policy and practice frameworks that create clear boundaries and parameters but enable flexibility in implementation.
- Internal governance arrangements that give middle-managers clarity about their scope of action and that explicitly authorise adaptation and innovation.

Investigate optimum settings

This report has argued that there is no clear evidence on the optimum purpose, location and scale, or partnership approach for integration initiatives. As funders move towards more large-scale investments, there's an opportunity to be more intentional about where best to set the boundaries.

- A more systematic investigation of the optimum scope and scale of integration initiatives will help chart the pathway towards scale.

Create the conditions for effective integration when leveraging universal services

Currently, there is increasing momentum around leveraging universal platforms – like early learning services and schools – to drive more integration. There's an extensive literature on delivering wrap-around health and wellbeing services through schools (Our Place, 2023).

This review has explored models other than fully integrated hubs, but many of the principles remain the same. Key insights include:

Leadership mindset, skills and time are critical

- The commitment, capability and capacity of the principal / centre director is a threshold condition for impact.
- The skillset needed to be a highly effective principal or centre director is necessary but not sufficient for integration initiatives – they also need to be able to bring their team on the journey, foster an environment for intra-professional learning and ways of working, to navigate different service systems, and form partnerships with other organisations.

It's important to assess readiness

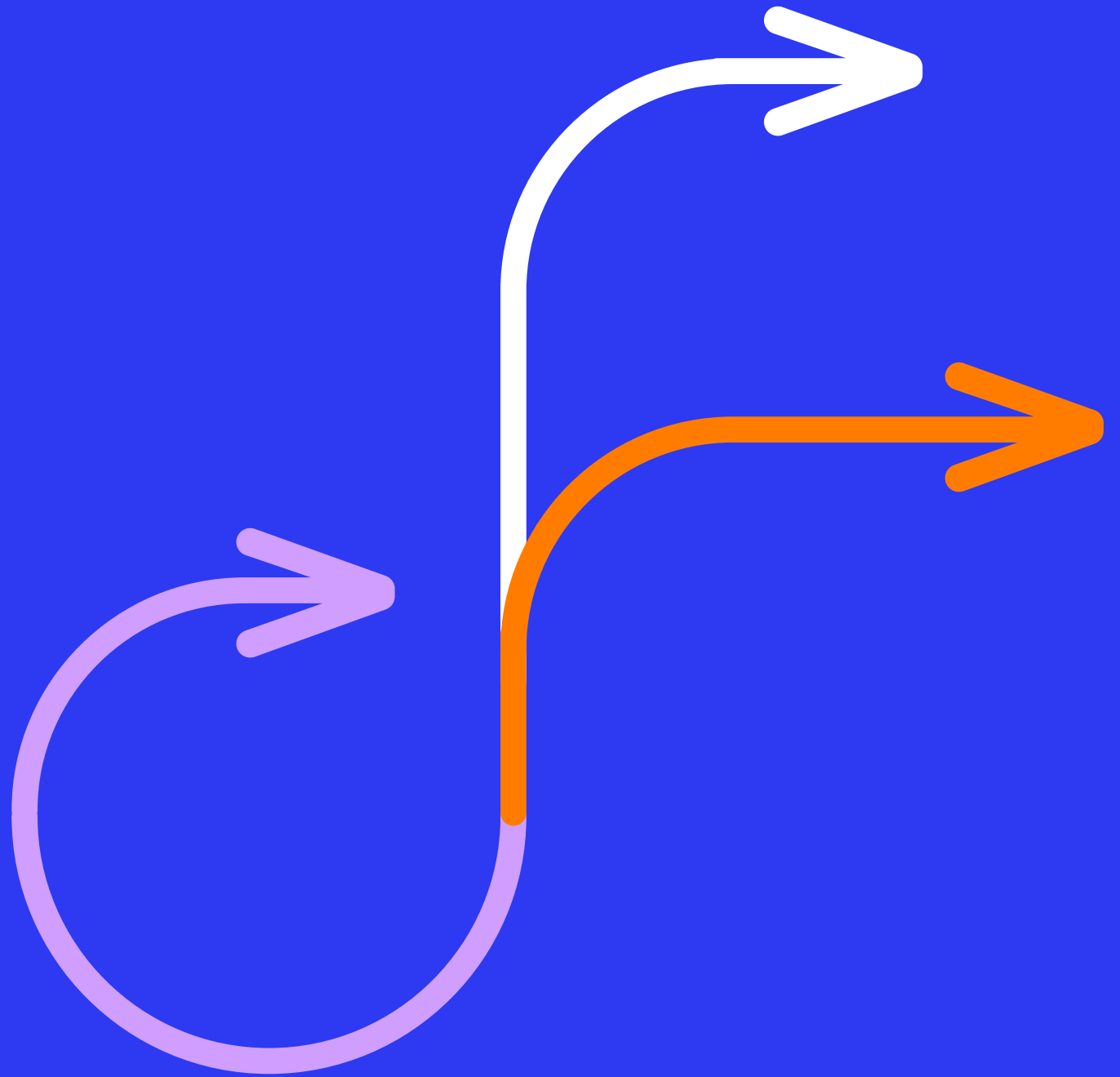
- Rather than 'gifting' greater integration capacity to a site, it's important to make sure the right foundations are in place.
- In particular, that the key people at the site have the right mindsets, are aligned with the intent / purpose, and have already started building strong, respectful relationships with families and the community that they can build on.

Engagement needs to be resourced

- Investment in 'the glue' is foundational – especially the team of people who lead and drive the collaboration and undertake the relational work needed to make integration happen.
- The 'day jobs' of principals and centre directors are already full – if they're being expected to take on a wider role, be more engaged in community initiatives, and to spend time out of the service, they need additional internal leadership support.
- Resourcing participation in integration initiatives is important for everyone involved in integration activities, even if they're not the lead organisation. Participating in integration activities is challenging within the scope of their core roles.

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