

Data Linkage Review

The Western Australian Council of Social Service (the Council) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the *Review of Data Linkage in Western Australia*. This review is of interest to members of the Council and the community services sector in general, as better data sharing, data quality and analysis may provide opportunities to drive the design of more integrated and effective community services to deliver better long-term outcomes for vulnerable and at-risk groups within our community. We would welcome an opportunity to discuss these issues in more detail and determine how best we can contribute to this ongoing area of inquiry and facilitate the participation and contribution of the community services sector.

i. The State's strengths, capabilities and capacities in data linkage and consider how they can best be utilised and developed;

In the space of the community services sector, the capabilities and capacities are in some sense relatively under-developed. A number of the larger non-government organisations have developed and implemented outcome-based service evaluation systems, building on models such as Results Based Accountability and Social Return of Investment, and there is a history of collaboration in data linkage efforts in population health, particularly with early childhood development and Aboriginal communities. The community services sector has been engaged in partnership with the WA Government through the Premier's [Partnership Forum](#) in the development and implementation of outcome-based service contracting and procurement processes, but more needs to be done in this space to ensure comparability of outcomes data across services, programs, populations and portfolios. The Council continues to advocate for the development of shared outcome frameworks as a means of driving this work, and notes the crucial role the AEDC has played in the area of early childhood development.

There is hope in the sector that the WA Government's recent in-principle commitments to Open Data policy will see greater sharing of program and system data across levels of government, across departments and agencies, and with service providers and independent analysts (including universities and research centres). The Council believes that better data linkage together with more effective outcome frameworks can play a crucial role in driving more effective and better targeted community services – to deliver better life outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged cohorts within our community and to reduce the growing cost of crisis and tertiary services.

Through better access to data and the capacity to engage in data linkage, the State Government can open up the possibility for services to better measure outcomes and demonstrate return on investment, and to better understand risk factors and target at risk cohorts to enable earlier intervention strategies. There is significant public sector data on community need and service outcomes that include data generated as a result of the reporting requirements of contracted social services. As a result, WA has significant opportunity and potential to develop data linkage capacities that could provide transformative outcomes for the community.

However, we are concerned that WA currently lacks shared capability and capacity across our public, research and community sectors to undertake the strategic analysis required to

deliver on this potential. This needs to be a shared and collaborative approach, and include independent capacity within the community sector to prove truly effective. Through that kind of an approach, we can collectively ensure that the excellent quality research produced within our state's academic institutions delivers the kind of policy recommendations and connections needed to drive systemic change, that data within the public sector that is fully analysed, and reduce the likelihood of reports never seeing the light of day.

ii. The barriers and impediments to data linkage, and address how they can be improved;

Fundamental barriers to data linkage in Western Australia are the lack of explicit data standards and protocols across government departments and agencies, and no clear role or body driving the interpretation and promotion of data.

Data needs to be at the centre of policy development and evaluation in this state, but in order for that to occur, there needs to be clear leadership in setting priorities for social and public good outcomes and a mechanism for commissioning research and analysis to achieve them.

There is no central database of social research within our state that institutes, agencies and universities can draw upon in order to facilitate policy development, which in turn siloes research and actively discourages data sharing.

The absence of Privacy Laws in WA potentially creates a barrier to data sharing, as Commonwealth agencies and other jurisdictions can be reluctant to share and link data in the absence of clear assurances of privacy protection and compliance, and State Government Agencies may be reluctant to link data sets in the context of a lack of clear guidelines and protocols about data protection. Without addressing this issue, data linkage in our state may never be able to achieve its full potential.

In the short-term, significant improvements could be made by introducing changes to ensure data sets that are already publicly available are made accessible in more usable formats. For instance, useful data collected by government agencies and departments are often included within their publicly available annual reports, but are not necessarily published in such a way as to make finding them easy or the data easily used. Making data available in a format useable in MS Excel as the default should be achievable at little to no cost to agencies and reduce the costs incurred by requests for publicly available data in useable formats. This simple measure would provide opportunities for the value of open data to be realised.

iii. Examine the data linkage systems, infrastructure and processes to determine whether they drive efficient, high quality and secure outcomes; and

The Council is currently not in a position to be able to usefully comment on existing data linkage systems and infrastructure. We are interested in building our capacity in this area and expect to have more to say in time as our engagement with the development of the WA Open Data policy and proposed linkages with Commonwealth data and initiative progress. It is crucial that the community services sector is provided adequate funding to engage in data linkage projects. Without that funding, sector organisations will struggle to have the capacity to engage in the kind of data-driven projects that would enable the development of more innovative early intervention services in order to address entrenched disadvantage.

iv. Examine the governance and funding arrangements for data linkage and assess what is required to meet increasing demand beyond just health.

Currently the accountability of governments and community service providers is limited by the lack of clear and consistent outcomes measures and frameworks across services and programs. In the absence of a consistent approach individual service providers have developed and invested in a range of different outcomes measures and models – but the resulting service outcome measures are not consistent and comparable across services or programs, and in the absence of shared outcome frameworks service contract reporting is likely to produce incommensurate data and there is the risk the choice of outcomes reported is driven more by competitive advantage than the desire to accurately report population and cohort outcomes.

There are examples around the world, where other jurisdictions have recognised the potential of data linkage and engaged in the kind of serious reform required to breakdown bureaucratic barriers and enable the development of evidence-based policy. As part of their Social Investment approach the Government of New Zealand have set up an independent statutory authority called the Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (SUPERU) that arose out of the Families Commission and has responsibility across government “*...to increase the use of evidence by people across the social sector so that they make better decisions – about funding, policies or services – to improve the lives of New Zealand's communities, families and whanau*¹. Their role is to grow the quality, relevance and quantity of evidence base for social priorities and to facilitate the use of evidence for best practice decision making in the social sector. They identify research priorities (to achieve the Government's objectives – linked to the Social Investment model), commission and manage contracts for social science research, set standards and maintain databases.²

It is important to note their role extends beyond data collection, protocols and analysis to the promotion and interpretation of research outcomes and analysis to ensure its use in public policy. The NZ Social Investment model uses an actuarial analysis of the predicted lifetime welfare and support service costs of specific disadvantaged cohorts as a means to target increased up-front investment into intensive wrap-around service delivery to reduce long-term costs (for instance to assist a young person from a background of intergenerational unemployment to secure and maintain a job).

The Council does, however, have concerns regarding the data linkage capacity and capability in Australia that supports the implementation of a social investment model. In particular, the Council has concerns regarding:

- the comparability of existing data sources,
- the ability to link personal data at the level required to identify those at risk, - about individuals and groups missing or under-represented or poorly counted (including the homeless, renters, Aboriginal people in remote communities, those who have fallen out of the social security system)
- the quality of service data on outcomes (given the lack of rigorous measurement protocols and outcome frameworks).

¹ Note that *whanau* (pronounced far-now) is the Maori concept of extended family cultural obligations, including foster children and those who have passed on.

² <http://www.superu.govt.nz/about-us/our-role>

There is also significant concern about the potential abuse of data, the protection of privacy and its potential to underpin punitive and paternalistic approaches.

Through the lessons that can be drawn from examples such as this, however, Western Australia has the opportunity to develop the kind of governance and funding arrangement that could revolutionise the way in which data is linked and evaluated in this country.

In Conclusion

The potential impact of better data sharing and analysis on the improved design and more efficient delivery of community services, as well as the more effective targeting of prevention or early intervention to those individuals and cohorts most at risk of poorer life outcomes and hence greater long-term welfare and service costs, is profound. Through the better use of data, we face the possibility of providing better lives for our community and reducing the cost of services on government.

The Council would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues in more detail with the Commission.

Please contact Chris Twomey on (08) 9420 7222 or chris@wacoss.org.au if you have any questions.

Yours sincerely

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