Clear Horizon

Regional Stewardship of Aged Care
Evaluation Final Report

Prepared for the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing

June 2026



Certified B Corporation

Acknowledgements

Clear Horizon and the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the traditional owners and custodians of the lands and waterways across Australia on which this project took place. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, of all Australia's Indigenous peoples.

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Disclaimer

This document has been produced with information supplied to Clear Horizon by the department, including project documentation and internal administrative datasets for the period January 2021 and November 2025. Primary data collection informing this evaluation was undertaken during the period July 2023 to November 2025. While we make every effort to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this report, any judgements as to suitability of the information for the client's purposes are the client's responsibility. Clear Horizon extends no warranties and assumes no responsibility as to the suitability of this information or for the consequences of its use.

Executive Summary

Background

This report provides the background and contextual information, findings and recommendations for the evaluation and Value for Investment (VfI) assessment of Strengthening Regional Stewardship of Aged Care (regional stewardship). The evaluation was conducted by consultants at Clear Horizon.

Regional stewardship is a response to shortcomings identified by the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (Royal Commission), which found that the Australian Government (the government) lacked sufficient local presence to identify and monitor variations in aged care services across the country.

> *"There is ... a great and pressing need to strengthen the current arrangements if the trust and confidence of the Australian community in the government's stewardship of the aged care system is to be rebuilt and maintained... Stewardship requires a governance system that is characterised by active engagement to ensure that the aged care system is the very best that it can be."* – (Royal Commission, 2021, p. 87).

After initially providing funding for regional stewardship for 12 months from 1 July 2021, followed by 6 months, the government committed to extend and expand the regional stewardship approach to December 2026. This investment expanded staffing in existing capital city offices and established new sites in regional areas, forming what is now known as the Local Network. Funding also supported a central office team, and ongoing operational costs, including system tools, travel and logistics, regional office leases and this evaluation.



Evaluation purpose

The evaluation aims to support the ongoing development of the stewardship approach and provide evidence to inform future investment and strategic decisions. The evaluation covers the period from July 2023 to November 2025, while acknowledging what went before. A developmental evaluation approach was considered the most appropriate evaluation approach because it supports continuous learning and adaptation within a complex, interconnected network of services that must respond dynamically to evolving needs and challenges. It has been used to support the development of a shared understanding of stewardship and to enable ongoing learning through regular data collection and reflection.

This report focuses on the VfI to evaluate outcomes and assess the value regional stewardship is creating for older people, providers, the department and First Nations communities, and the extent to which it has been worth the investment.

Key Evaluation Questions

The evaluation sought to answer the following Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs):

Context: What are the population-level trends in outcomes over time for providers and older people accessing aged care and the health and aged care systems?

Value for Investment: To what extent does regional stewardship represent good value for investment?

Outcomes: To what extent are the culture, mindsets and conditions enabling the successful implementation of a stewardship approach?

Outcomes: To what extent are the core practices of stewardship contributing to outcomes (intended and unintended) in the health and aged care systems?

Key findings

Despite the complexity and pace of reform within the sector, the evaluation has found that regional stewardship is contributing to local improvements in integration, responsiveness and equity of the aged care system. The additional resourcing provided through the stewardship budget measure has enabled the Local Network to shift away from program management and compliance functions towards more proactive and genuine engagement with providers, older people and communities, which enables them to build relationships and connections across their jurisdictions, including in regional, rural and remote areas. The Systems Strategy and Network Support Branch (SSNS) acts as an enabling function, supporting the Local Network and the rest of the department to set the foundations, and create the right conditions, culture and mindsets for stewardship practices to occur and deliver positive outcomes across the health and aged care systems.

Contribution to outcomes

In partnership with the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission (ACQSC), whose role is to independently regulate service quality and compliance, and central office teams such as the Market Adjustment Branch, the Local Network has been instrumental in earlier identification of providers at risk of service closure, intervening with an appropriate response or responses. Interventions include helping providers return to financial viability, facilitating a transfer of management or minimising the disruption and displacement of older people. Their on-the-ground presence means they are actively building sector capability and capacity, particularly among smaller, remote and First Nations organisations, helping them meet quality standards and implement reforms. The Local Network increasingly engages directly with older people through presentations, information sessions, attending expos, information stalls and meetings, helping older people better understand the service landscape and how to access aged care.

Embedding stewardship practices

The evaluation identified four distinct, yet interdependent practices that define how regional stewardship functions on the ground:

- Engaging across the sector and building trusted relationships.
- Capacity, capability-building and awareness raising.
- Solution brokering, problem solving and innovation.
- Gathering, analysing and sharing intelligence, especially local voices.

These practices rarely operate in a mutually exclusive way; they often occur concurrently, in a dynamic and integrated way, improving the aged care system from the ground up. While these four core practices are consistent across all jurisdictions, their implementation varies significantly based on local needs, provider landscapes and strategic priorities. This adaptability is a core strength of regional stewardship, allowing it to generate tangible local and system-level insights and outcomes in a complex health and aged care landscape. So, while there may be opportunities to standardise data collection and administration to improve national consistency, the department should ensure Local Network operations remain flexible and adaptive to local contexts and needs.

Enabling a stewardship approach through conditions, culture and mindsets

The internal enablers and conditions necessary for stewardship, such as workforce capability and capacity, a strong authorising environment, a clear strategic direction, sufficient corporate support, putting the older person at the centre, valuing relationships and the ability to think systemically, are improving, but require ongoing attention to ensure the value and contribution of stewardship are sustained. Clearer articulation of what stewardship means and looks like at a whole-of-department level is required, and connections and collaboration between Local Network and central office staff need to continue to be strengthened to ensure that policy and program guidelines, and funding eligibility, better reflect local needs.



Summary of Value for Investment

The evaluation found that, overall, regional stewardship offers good VfI. Regional stewardship was determined to be 'strengthening' and 'establishing' against most of the criteria, which is commensurate with an initiative in its formative years. The VfI of regional stewardship is only likely to increase as the conditions, cultures, mindsets and practices become further strengthened and embedded over time.

Rating Key

Not yet emerging	Emerging	Strengthening	Establishing
Not yet emerging: stewardship does not meet the criteria for 'emerging'	**Emerging:** stewardship meets the 'emerging' criteria but not the criteria for 'strengthening'	**Strengthening:** stewardship meets the criteria for 'emerging' and some criteria for 'establishing'	**Establishing:** stewardship meets most or all the criteria for 'establishing'

Domain	Rating	Rationale
Conditions	Emerging-strengthening	The department is creating the right conditions for a stewardship approach, with strengths being an engaged and capable workforce, and corporate supports such as data, tools and regional sites that build solid foundations for a networked approach to governance. The expert panel noted that clearer strategy and planning, as well as an authorising environment and operational structure that enable stewardship, are still emerging.
Culture and mindsets	Emerging-strengthening	Stewardship is a new mindset and way of working for government. Shifts towards thinking in systems, valuing relationships and interconnections, and learning and adaptation are evident. Panel members emphasised the need for the department to more meaningfully centre the voices of older people, and to show how their experiences actively shape policy and program design, implementation and adaptation.
Practices	Establishing	The Local Network now engages proactively across the system to build trusted relationships, improve the capabilities and capacity of the sector and communities and collaboratively broker solutions to local issues. The panel agreed that the Local Network gathers valuable local intelligence but noted its use in informing policy remains limited.
Outcomes	Strengthening	Having a locally based workforce is improving the department's capacity to respond to market failure, systemic issues and emergencies. It is likely that government reach has increased somewhat and there are examples of improved system capacity to deliver higher quality care, particularly in regional and rural areas, and among diverse groups of people lacking access to services.
Overall Value	Strengthening	There was evidence of strong value for investment for government and providers, with emerging evidence of value for investment for older people and their families. Value is likely to increase in line with improvements to the culture, mindsets and conditions and if the practices continue to be embedded.

Conclusion

The Royal Commission noted that rebuilding trust and confidence in the aged care system required the department to take explicit responsibility for stewardship, starting with a large and dedicated regional presence to embed department staff within local communities and improve visibility of local needs, service gaps and system pressures. While the department's current hub-and-spoke model is a scaled-down version of the original recommendation, the effective use of existing resourcing and investment in additional staffing, alongside system tools and mechanisms means regional stewardship is delivering in alignment with the intent to create a more engaged, connected and responsive governance structure.

The department has had a workforce operating in state and territory offices for some time, and local level understanding and connections have been important to delivering services. Roles undertaken by these staff have changed over time and, with substantial reform in the aged care sector, some of the roles previously undertaken by this workforce no longer exist. This has also meant that some avenues to interact with service delivery agencies and understand what is happening on the ground have been removed, such as places management. The investment in regional stewardship of aged care increased staffing in state and territory offices, established new offices in regional areas, and shifted ways of working towards stewardship, a substantially different approach for some staff. The evaluation found evidence that this shift is creating value and should be maintained into the future, with some suggested improvements.

Population-level trends suggest pressures on the aged care system will continue to intensify, reinforcing the need for adaptive and locally responsive governance into the future. Through a well-connected Local Network, regional stewardship has demonstrated responsiveness in the face of complex systemic issues like the delayed discharge of older patients, provider viability in thin markets and emergency response. The Local Network's on-the-ground presence can help the department gather local intelligence, build social capital, improve the line-of-sight for Ministers and better tailor policy and program communications to local communities.

With the *Aged Care Act 2024* putting older people at the centre, the Local Network is also uniquely positioned to play an important role collecting and sharing the views and perspectives of older people, their families and carers. As Australia's aged care system undergoes significant reform, the Local Network leverages the relationships it has with the sector and communities to monitor and escalate policy risks or unintended consequences. Crucially, there are several examples of the Local Network strengthening relationships with remote First Nations communities and organisations, which rely on ongoing face-to-face engagement, deep listening and local presence.



Key recommendations

With the evaluation findings and broader system context in mind, the evaluation points to some broad recommendations for the department and government to consider in continuing to improve and embed a regional stewardship approach.

The Local Network's value to government lies in its on-the-ground presence, enabling the establishment of strong relationships, networks and interconnections, as well as local intel gathering and solution brokering. Strong foundations have been established through this investment but will require ongoing resourcing to maintain.	1. The government should **continue to invest** in a Local Network of staff based in capital cities and regional sites across the country, as well as central office enabling staff and other supports.
The evaluation found that there is value in a nationally consistent approach, supported by a central enabling function. While there are opportunities to further streamline systems and processes, regional stewardship operation will continue to look different across different states and territories, and this should be fostered and encouraged.	2. SSNS and the Local Network should **continue to develop and improve data and other tools** with a view to a nationally consistent and locally responsive approach.
The evaluation identified an opportunity to strengthen the authorising environment for stewardship by deepening understanding and clear messaging, especially among senior leaders across the department.	3. The department should develop and communicate a clear, **organisation-wide understanding of stewardship**, including its meaning as a core APS value and its relationship to the System Governor role.
Introduction of the *Aged Care Act 2024* coupled with machinery of government changes present an opportunity to improve understanding and alignment between different teams and units across the department and government more broadly, to support a more joined-up approach to system stewardship.	4. The department should **clarify the purpose and function** of the Local Network within the broader department structure, reinforcing that all areas share collective responsibility for stewardship and need to work collaboratively to achieve positive, long-term outcomes for older people in Australia.
The evaluation found that while the Local Network's place-based presence is highly valued, variability in staffing levels, reports of high turnover in some jurisdictions, and limited clarity around training and career pathways have affected continuity of relationships and local knowledge. This suggests a need to consider more strategic workforce planning and support to sustain capability and maintain relationships over time.	5. The department should **undertake an analysis of Local Network staffing**, turnover, training and development, resources and career pathways, including strategies to attract and retain appropriately skilled staff and maintain external and internal relationships as personnel change.
Collaboration across all levels of the department has improved since the beginning of the evaluation, however there is still room to strengthen mechanisms (technical and relational) for communications, coordination and consultation processes and mechanisms so that local intelligence is well utilised.	6. The department should s**trengthen communications, coordination and consultation** processes and mechanisms to ensure Local Network relationships, insights and intelligence inform policy and program development and implementation.

Expert panel members emphasised the need for the department to more meaningfully centre the voices of older people, and to show how their experiences actively shape policy and program design, implementation and adaptation.	7. The department should consider the role of the Local Network and the stewardship approach in efforts to actively place older people (particularly diverse and hard to reach groups) at the centre including how these **views can be considered** in policy and program design.
The evaluation identified gaps in monitoring data collection, particularly in capturing the perspectives of providers and community stakeholders who engage with the Local Network. As a result, assessments of stewardship's effectiveness rely heavily on internal departmental views and the case studies conducted through the evaluation, limiting the ability to understand the broader impact and value of Local Network engagements.	8. SSNS and the Local Network should consider and develop ways to monitor the ongoing effectiveness of regional stewardship, including capturing provider and community perspectives of engagements with the Local Network, where current evidence is limited.
The evaluation found that while the stewardship model has evolved significantly since its expansion, it is still maturing and continues to adapt in response to local needs, reform changes and emerging system pressures. Ongoing learning and reflection activities, including evaluation sense-making and reflection workshops, are not internally resourced but would be valuable to support continuous learning and improvement.	9. SSNS and the Local Network should continue to **embed learning and adaptation** through investing in monitoring, evaluation and learning activities that support ongoing adaptation and improvements to the stewardship model.

1. Introduction

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In March 2021, the Royal Commission released its final report which made 148 recommendations to significantly reform the aged care system.

Among the issues highlighted were:

- Insufficient government visibility into service gaps and emerging needs at the regional and local level, which severely hampered effective planning and rapid response when issues arose.
- Declining public trust and confidence in the aged care system's ability to deliver quality care and meet the needs of older people.
- Lack of responsibility taken by the department for improving outcomes in the aged care system.

In response to the Royal Commission's findings, the government has been progressing wide ranging reform to improve the standard of care for older people in Australia.

About Regional Stewardship of Aged Care

The regional stewardship budget measure is one of a significant number of programmatic, regulatory and legislative shifts that aim to address recommendations made by the Royal Commission and ensure older people consistently receive safe, high-quality services and support.

It is important to distinguish between three different ways in which the government is committing to and operationalising the concept of 'stewardship':

1. As a budget measure through investment in the Local Network,
2. as a responsibility under the *Aged Care Act 2024*, and
3. as an Australian Public Service (APS) value.

Regional Stewardship of Aged Care Budget Measure

Regional stewardship responds to recommendations 8.5 and 8.6 of the Royal Commission's final report, which said that the department should have a focus on stewardship of the aged care system through 'a network of up to 50 small and dedicated regional offices responsible for local planning, engagement with older people, information provision, care finding, assessment, engagement with, and education and support for, providers' (Royal Commission, 2021, p. 214). Regional stewardship was described as requiring active engagement and a well-resourced, locally based network able to listen and respond to the needs of local people and communities.

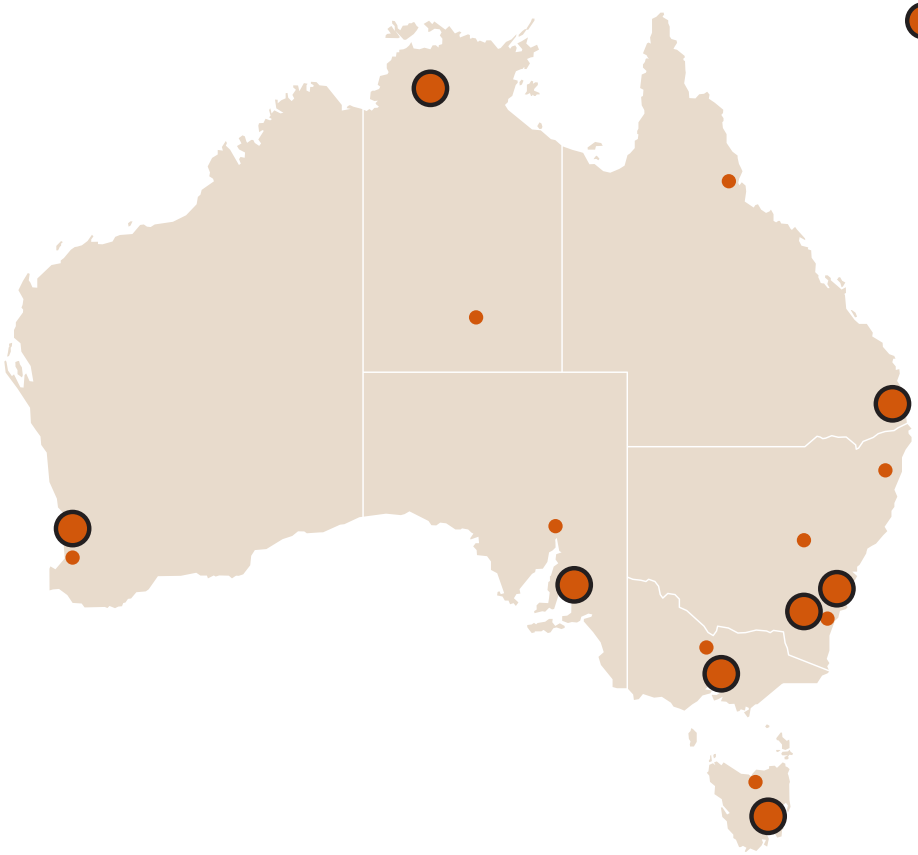
Under the regional stewardship budget measure, the department has expanded its network of state and territory office staff and sites to enable more active management and understanding of aged care at a local level. The department has focused on leveraging a range of existing resources, including the presence of staff in capital cities while also investing in new resources, including one or more regional sites in every state and territory, except the Australian Capital Territory. By having a greater local presence across the country, the department aims to work more closely with local aged care providers, service delivery partners and communities as well as cultural and health organisations.

Through these strong on-the-ground connections, the department can proactively identify problems and collaborate on solutions that work for that local area. With expert local knowledge, local teams can feed back insights on local issues, successes or challenges to departmental central planning and policy areas. This way the department is always looking to improve the system and working to make sure older people living anywhere in Australia receive safe, high quality and consistent care.

Delivery

The department conducted a series of regional stewardship activities through the initial rollout (from July 2021) in each state and territory. In the 2022-23 Federal Budget, the government endorsed the stewardship model and agreed to fund the model for a further four years. While the model has been evolving over time, regional stewardship operates as a hub and spoke model, with 88 staff funded through the measure forming part of the approximately 220 to 230 department employees (the Local Network) who work from eight capital cities (hubs) and nine regional sites (spokes) across Australia. This model of stewardship has been progressively rolled out over three years, aiming to balance a nationally consistent and locally responsive way of working into the operations of the department's existing network of staff.

The Local Network



8 capital cities (hubs)

- Adelaide
- Brisbane
- Canberra
- Darwin
- Hobart
- Melbourne
- Perth
- Sydney

9 regional sites (spokes):

- Alice Springs
- Bendigo
- Bunbury
- Cairns
- Coffs Harbour
- Dubbo
- Launceston
- Port Augusta
- Wollongong

Funding provided under the regional stewardship budget measure also covered the costs of a central office team including 16 staff from January 2023 to June 2024 and ten staff from 1 July 2024 to 31 December 2026. The central office team, which is now part of the SSNS, has responsibilities that help enable the work of the Local Network, including strategy, policy and evaluation, project management, data and analytics and communications. Additional contractors were also brought on board at various points to support the development of the ReSPOND Dashboard (allowing local level data analysis of older people and providers), the Stakeholder and Emergency Management Solution (SEMS) (for recording stakeholder engagements), and communications and change management. An evaluation (this project) was also funded through the budget measure.

Stewardship under the *Aged Care Act 2024*

Overall responsibility under the *Aged Care Act 2024*, known as the System Governor role, sits with the Secretary of the department. While this places formal statutory accountability with the Secretary, many different actors support or enable stewardship under the *Aged Care Act 2024*, including all APS employees who are required to behave in alignment with stewardship as an APS value.

Stewardship as an APS Value

In June 2024, the *Public Service Amendment Act 2024* received Royal Assent, finalising changes to the *Public Service Act 1999* that strengthen the core values and build the capability and expertise of the APS. One of the changes made was to add stewardship as a new APS value.

About the Evaluation

Clear Horizon Consulting was engaged in June 2023, through a competitive procurement process, to conduct a three-year evaluation of the regional stewardship budget measure. While the evaluation acknowledges stewardship as both an APS value and the role of the System Governor, its focus is on stewardship as a budget measure.

This evaluation aims to support the ongoing development of the stewardship model and provide evidence to inform future investment and strategic decisions. To achieve these aims, the evaluation has drawn on two established evidence-based evaluation approaches: Developmental Evaluation (Patton, 2011) and VfI (King et al., 2018). VfI is a rigorous process for determining how well resources are used in public policies and social investments, assessing value across multiple domains and identifying ways to generate additional value. Developed through doctoral research and used worldwide, VfI combines evaluative and economic thinking, providing a practical and contextually responsive framework for interpreting multiple sources of evidence (qualitative and quantitative), guided by explicit criteria and standards.

Final Report Purpose

The Final Report (this document) focuses on the VfI and outcomes, with previous reports, including the Foundations Report (February 2024), Progress Report 2 (July 2024), Progress Report 3 (December 2024) and the Interim Report (June 2025) focused on rapidly sharing back key findings from data collection to inform ongoing adaptation.

2. Methodology

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This section summarises the methodology used in the evaluation of regional stewardship. It includes two important frameworks, the Logic Model and VfI Rubric which guide the evaluation by linking foundations, stewardship practices and enablers to intended outcomes and by assessing the efficiency and impact of resource use. See Annex for a detailed methodology.

Given the complexity of stewardship, a detailed rubric was used by evaluators to bring together multiple lines of evidence to reach transparent VfI judgements.

A range of mixed-methods data collected throughout the evaluation has been analysed separately, then synthesised by the evaluators and tested with State Managers and Local Network Directors through a sensemaking session. Sensemaking provided an opportunity to contextualise data and preliminary evaluation findings and add any relevant data and/or findings that are missing. Following the sensemaking session, preliminary judgements against the rubric were made by the Clear Horizon evaluation team and one department representative. Subsequently, two expert panels consisting of internal and external stakeholders reviewed the preliminary judgements and relevant evidence and engaged in a process of discussion, deliberation and voting to validate the judgements against the rubric.

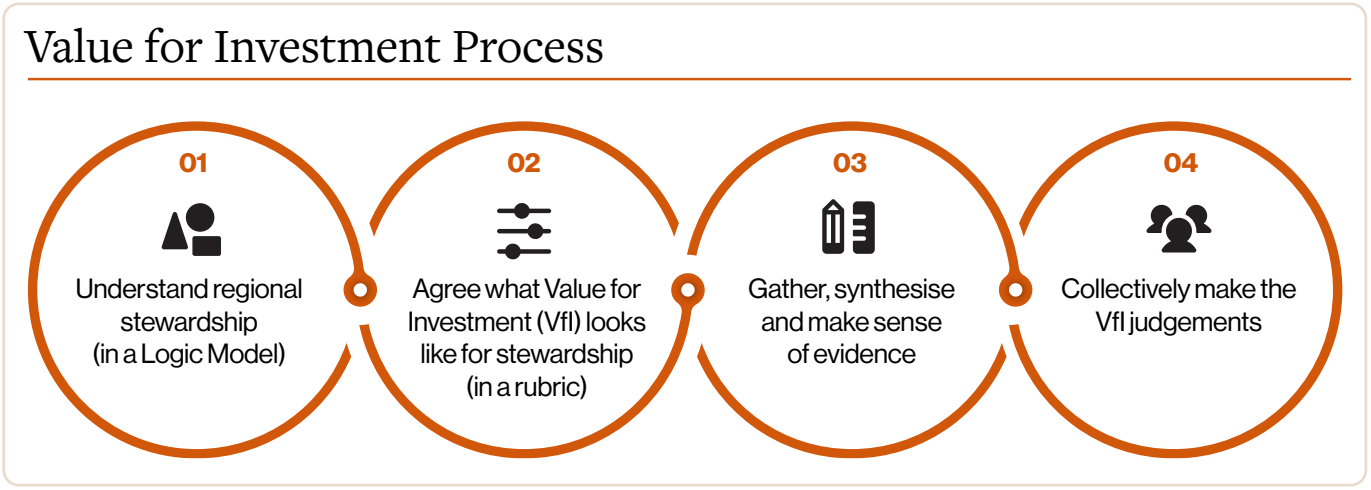


Figure 1: Value for Investment Process

Logic Model

Read from the bottom to the top, the logic model theorises that if the foundations of regional stewardship are in place and if the department adopts the culture, mindsets and conditions required for stewardship as a new way of working, then practices will shift toward engaging more deeply at the local-level and building trusted relationships, aged care understanding and capability, solution brokering and gathering and sharing local intelligence. If the practices are in place and operating well, regional stewardship is expected to contribute to outcomes and, over time, create value for older people, carers and families, the sector (including providers), government and First Nations people and communities.

See Annex for the complete logic model.

Key Evaluation Questions

The evaluation was guided by KEQs that align with different levels of the logic model.

Table 1 below outlines each KEQ addressed in this report.

Table 1: Final Report KEQs

Focus	KEQ	Definition
Context	What are the population-level trends in outcomes over time for providers and older people accessing aged care and the health and aged care systems?	Analysis of population-level trends, including demographic changes, and changes in the availability, accessibility and quality of aged care over time. This is based on publicly available data produced by the department.
Overall value	To what extent does regional stewardship represent good value for investment?	Evidence of efficient and effective resource use, examples of the different ways in which stewardship is starting to produce value for older people, providers, the department and First Nations communities, and the extent to which it has been worth the investment.
Outcomes	To what extent are the culture, mindsets and conditions enabling the successful implementation of a stewardship approach?	Evidence of whether, and how well, shifts in mindsets and ways of working are supporting the department to adopt and implement an effective regional stewardship approach.
Outcomes	To what extent are the core practices of stewardship contributing to outcomes (intended and unintended) in the health and aged care systems?	Examples of the outcomes stewardship is contributing to in the areas of system reach, integration, capability and responsiveness.

Value for Investment Rubric

The VfI Rubric (the rubric) used to make VfI judgements has five domains of value, and each domain of value has four criteria that align with the logic model developed in the early phase of the evaluation. There are also sub-criteria at each level that provide more detail about the meaning of each domain. These sub-criteria are based on the feedback and data collected throughout the evaluation, from people across the Local Network and other teams within the department.

Figure 2 below includes a summary of the rubric aligned to the logic model for regional stewardship. See Annex for a full breakdown of the VfI criteria.

Value Creation Logic Model

Creating overall value and equity for older people and their families, First Nations people, providers and policy makers relative to the investment.

Each criteria has been rated as to whether it is:

Not yet emerging | Emerging | Strengthening | Establishing

Levels	Domains of Value	Criteria			
Systems **Outcomes**	**Creating value through contributing to improvements in system reach, capability, integration and responsiveness.**	System reach: *Government engagement, coverage, and presence have grown locally. Providers, communities and First Nations people have access to relevant information, support and resources.*	System integration: *Better connections, coordination and interface between different levels of government and other services. Stronger relationships with communities and providers lead to improved aged care and emergency response.*	System capability: *Local Network staff, aged care providers and other organisations are better equipped to implement reforms, identify local issues, tailor responses and innovate. Local intelligence is used to better understand the needs of the sector and older people.*	System responsiveness: *Increased trust, flows of information and ability of the department to adapt and respond to local needs. Higher quality services in regional, rural and remote areas, improved transitions and pathways of care for older people. Increased agency for First Nations people.*
Stewardship **Practices**	**Creating value for systems change through stewardship practices.**	Solution brokering, problem solving and innovation.	Engaging across the sector and the wider system and building trust.	Capacity, capability-building and awareness raising.	Gathering, analysing and sharing intelligence, especially local voices.
Enablers **Culture and mindsets**	**Creating value for systems change through culture and mindset enablers.**	Thinking in systems.	Valuing relationships and interconnections.	Embracing learning and adaptation.	Putting the voices of older people at the centre.
Enablers **Conditions**	**Creating value by being a good steward of resources through the enabling conditions.**	Organisational structure and authorising environment.	Sufficient corporate support.	Engaged and capable workforce.	Clear strategy and planning.
Foundations **Investments**	**Creating value by investing in the right foundations for change.**	Leveraging existing policy and resourcing and investing $77.6 million to extend and expand the regional stewardship approach from January 2023 to December 2026 including additional staffing in the Local Network and central office, systems and tools, IT expenses, nine regional offices and developmental evaluation.			

Figure 2: Value for Investment criteria aligned to the Logic Model for Regional Stewardship of Aged Care

Data collection and analysis

Mixed-methods data used to inform the evaluation was generated through primary data collection and secondary data collection and analysis, using department administrative datasets. The Annex provides a data collection and analysis methods table with detailed descriptions of the data sources, samples, methods and tools, and how they were analysed to inform the evaluation.

Primary data collection methods

Discovery consultations

123

Local Network APS staff participated in one-on-one and group discussions during the discovery phase.

Local Network Survey

2024

144

Local Network respondents.

65%

2025

107

Local Network respondents.

48%

Local Network Director interviews

2024

12

Executive Level 2 staff.

2025

16

Executive Level 2 staff.

Senior Executive Service staff interviews

2024

11

Senior Executive Service Band 1 staff.

2025

20

Senior Executive Service Band 1 staff.

Central Office Director interviews

8

Executive Level 2 staff.

Deep dives

3

deep dives generated through interviews with Local Network staff.

Secondary data collection methods

Literature review

76

peer reviewed articles.

9

grey literature related to system stewardship in health and aged care governance.

Administrative data

10

departmental datasets informed national-level trends monitoring.

SEMS

4,308

interactions logged between 1 October 2024 and 30 August 2025.

Local Network Quarterly Reports

42

quarterly reports.

217

activities mapped to stewardship practice categories and intermediate outcomes.

Service Delivery Division Communications

20

instances of impact from fortnightly newsletters.

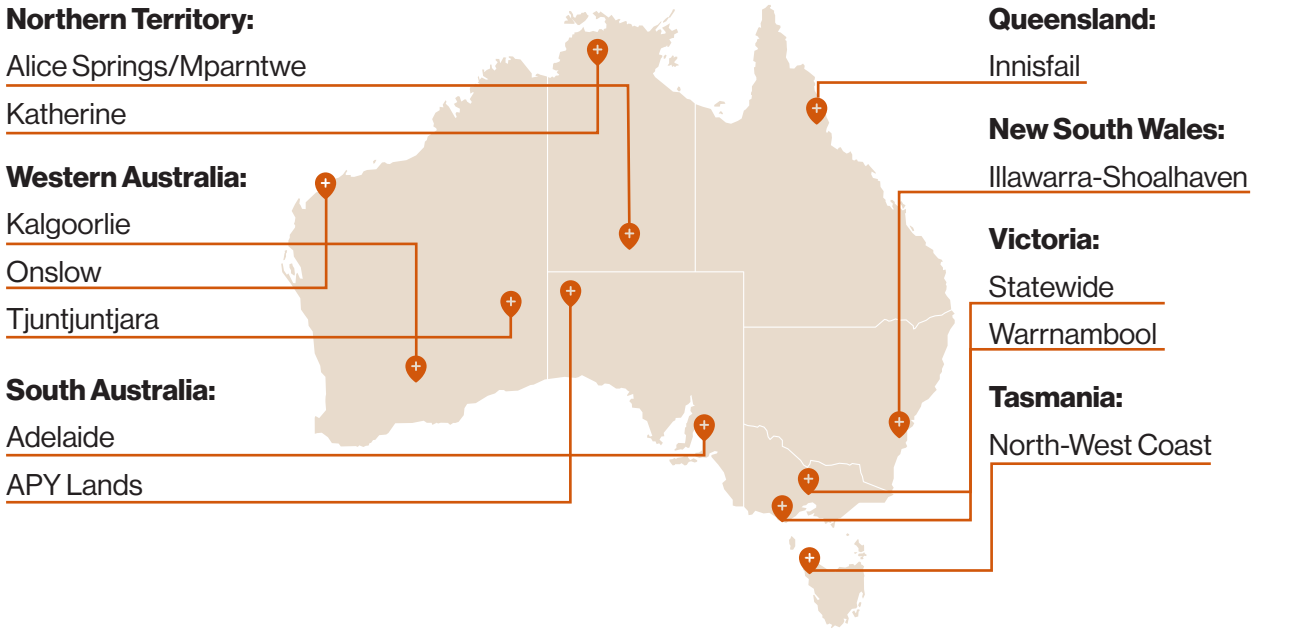
Evaluation Case Studies

Case studies were used as in-depth investigations, drawing together a range of information from different people and data sources, to capture, in detail, examples of outcomes that have been achieved as a result of regional stewardship.

A total of 12 in-depth case studies were conducted, mostly in-field, and written up as stand-alone documents that capture the experiences of 26 internal department staff and 47 external people who have worked with the Local Network to achieve positive outcomes in their organisations and local communities.

Case studies captured the impacts of stewardship for a range of people in the following places:

Case studies



Limitations

A data audit was conducted to identify new data collection methods to supplement existing department data collection. A key limitation of data collection is that it relies heavily on internal perspectives, which is sufficient to measure the culture, mindsets, conditions and practices of regional stewardship, but insufficient to measure the outcomes and value of stewardship for key groups like providers, community members, older people and their families/carers. The evaluation addressed this issue using a comprehensive case study approach and has recommended that the department strengthens how it gathers the perspectives of these groups to better understand stewardship's effectiveness and outcomes in future.

3. Aged Care System Trends

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Changes in the aged care system since 2018 12

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KEQ: What are the population-level trends in outcomes over time for providers and older people accessing aged care and the health and aged care systems?

This section draws on a combination of administrative data published by the government to paint a picture of the context in which stewardship operates. Together, these sources provide longitudinal coverage of system performance across availability, access and quality of aged care services from 2018 to 2024. See Annex: Trends in Australia's Aged Care System for more detail.

Demographic changes

With an increase in the number of older people in the Australian population and people living longer, there is increasing frailty and more likelihood of older people having more than one health condition.

These changing demographics, together with changes in the patterns of disease and dependency and in the expectations of older people and society, are impacting the demand for aged care in a number of ways. This includes the length of stay in residential aged care, the increase in care needs, the demand for a variety of care choices, and the desire of older people to remain in their own homes for as long as possible.

Changes in the aged care system since 2018

The availability of aged care has expanded in absolute terms but declined relative to demand. While the number of residential places and direct care staff has increased, both have grown more slowly than the older population.

The sector is becoming increasingly consolidated, with capacity shifting toward a smaller number of larger and more financially resilient organisations. This consolidation has enhanced overall stability and reduced the risk of sudden provider exits but has also coincided with persistent workforce shortages and the gradual decline of smaller services that often deliver more personalised care. Together, these trends point to a system that is stabilising but under pressure, one in which service availability per capita is falling, even as financial and operational resilience improves.

At the same time, access to aged care has broadened steadily, with a growing share of older people in Australia engaging with some form of government-funded support. Much of this expansion has been driven by rapid growth in home-based care, reflecting policy intent as well as consumer preferences to remain at home for longer.

Access among First Nations people and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities has increased at an even faster rate, signaling gradual progress toward a more inclusive system. However, continued pressures in residential care pathways, including fluctuating wait times and rising hospital days for those awaiting placement, highlight ongoing challenges in aligning workforce, demand and capacity across care settings.

The quality of residential aged care has strengthened over recent years, with steady improvement across all key performance domains. The average value of Star Ratings, introduced in late 2022 for residential aged care, have risen since 2023, underpinned by higher compliance with quality standards, increased staffing quality and a gradual lift in resident experience. The decline in the number of low-rated services and the improvement of nearly all those identified as underperforming, indicate a more responsive and accountable system.

Nonetheless, variation persists, with smaller and more remote services continuing to outperform larger and metropolitan providers on most measures. Overall, these trends reflect an aged care system that is becoming more transparent, better regulated and more capable of correction - yet still balancing the dual pressures of maintaining financial sustainability and delivering consistently high-quality, person-centered care for older people in Australia.

Stewardship and the Local Network

Staff in the department, including those in the Local Network, are aware of and focus their attention on areas of specific concern. The Local Network is also a direct source of intelligence on the impact of broad system changes.

Evidence collected as part of the evaluation shows that Local Network staff have observed the consolidation towards larger providers, noting that smaller standalone providers are finding it increasingly difficult to operate under the strengthened regulatory and quality requirements introduced in recent years. Local Network staff have repeatedly observed the ripple effects that sudden provider exits can have on continuity of care and community confidence, particularly in regional areas where alternative options are limited. A strong emphasis by the Local Network is on supporting provider viability and managing the impacts of potential service closures.

With access to aged care increasing more rapidly for First Nations people and for people from CALD backgrounds than for the aged care population overall, the Local Network has maintained a strong focus on supporting First Nations and culturally diverse providers through building trusted relationships and advocating for culturally safe service delivery.

Delayed discharge of older patients has been a persistent issue and one that the Local Network has actively grappled with. Addressing this challenge requires coordination across multiple stakeholders, including hospitals, assessment services and residential providers.

Throughout the evaluation, the Local Network has described supporting providers of concern as a major area of focus, whether by assisting services to implement quality improvements, facilitating transitions to more capable providers, or managing the impacts of closure.



4. Value for Investment

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Overall value for investment 16

Summary of value created for stakeholder groups 17



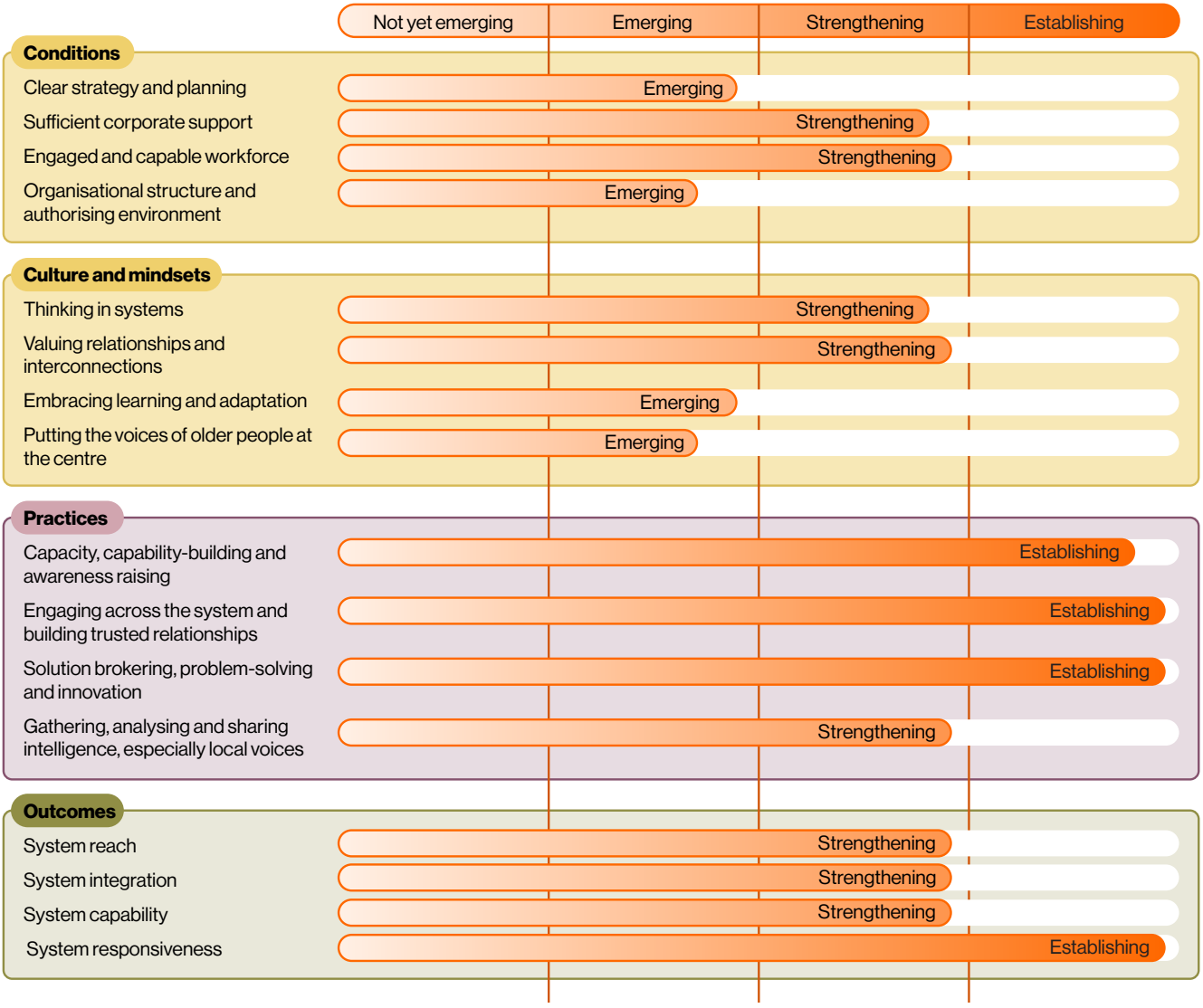
KEQ: To what extent does regional stewardship represent good value for investment?

This section considers the extent to which regional stewardship is offering good VfI. This involves considering the criteria detailed in the subsequent sections, and the types and extent of value created for key groups, relative to the investment. The rationale for this assessment is in the Results and Outcomes chapter.

Summary of the investment

The investment in scope for the evaluation totals **$77.6 million**, which was provided to extend and expand the regional stewardship approach from January 2023 to December 2026.

Summary of ratings against the Value for Investment rubric



Overall value for investment

The evaluation found that, overall, regional stewardship offered good VfI. As detailed in the subsequent sections, across the 16 criteria, regional stewardship was determined to be 'strengthening' in eight out of 16 and 'establishing' in four out of 16, which is commensurate with an initiative in its formative years. Only four criteria were determined to be 'emerging' and none rated as 'not yet emerging'. The VfI of regional stewardship is only likely to increase as the conditions, culture and mindsets and practices become further strengthened and embedded.

> *"A small number of people have delivered real outcomes for communities across a vast geographical area... without the Local Network it would cost the department more to deliver these activities, and the System Governor role wouldn't have a mechanism/ lever to deliver against its functions defined in the Act. As the Local Network continues to develop their capacity and capability, the value delivered will grow into additional regions and other communities"* – (Expert panel member)

Stewardship was found to be 'establishing' (i.e. creating strong value) in three of the four practice domains and there was evidence that regional stewardship is contributing to a range of systems-level outcomes, particularly improvements in system responsiveness.

> *Relative to other government investment and its impact, the value of the stewardship measure is clear and tangible in terms of building relationships and trust"* – (Expert panel member)

> *Regional stewardship via local networks represents good value for investment – the role is critical to support the shift to more locally responsive and person-centred aged care"* – (Expert panel member)

> *Stewardship represented good value for investment, particularly when considering broader system impact and stakeholder trust, alignment with reform objectives and positive outcomes in the case studies"* – (Expert panel member)

In addition to considering the value created through the conditions, cultures and mindsets, practices and emerging systems-level outcomes, the evaluation team and expert panels considered the extent to which regional stewardship had offered good VfI for government, providers, older people and their families and First Nations people. As detailed below, there was evidence of strong VfI for government and providers, with emerging evidence of VfI for older people and their families. Moreover, stewardship has demonstrably benefitted underserved groups, including First Nations people, CALD communities, people with disabilities and those in rural/remote areas by channeling resources to underserved areas.

> *Investment in regional stewardship was critical – and the original funding for this initiative was good value for money. Without the network, I think we would be in a much worse position in terms of access to aged care services particularly in regional, rural and remote Australia"* – (Expert panel member)

Summary of value created for stakeholder groups

Value for government

Stewardship's primary value to Senior Executive Service (SES) staff lies in the investment in on-the-ground presence, through Local Network employees, who gather local intelligence and build trusted relationships that are not easily achievable from a central office role. There is evidence of the Local Network helping gather local intel for Ministers, support ministerial visits and improve Ministers' Offices satisfaction with departmental communication, ensuring decision-makers have access to relevant and timely information about the state of aged care.

Having a local presence means government is able to engage more with the sector and older people, with case studies highlighting the Local Network's role in improving the efficiency of government decision-making and supporting several policy and program areas to identify and mitigate risks early and respond to issues as they emerge. The expert panel reflected that stewardship has enabled government to more effectively respond to the findings of the Royal Commission and will help it meet its new obligations as System Governor.

Value for providers

Stewardship's value to providers primarily lies in the Local Network's ability to serve as a crucial interface, mediating between providers' operations, government and other stakeholders. The Local Network acts as a trusted advisor that is knowledgeable about government, interested in local people and their needs, enables providers access to critical funding and resources and improves their operational capabilities. It supports providers with funding and financial viability issues, resolves workforce constraints and enhances their regulatory compliance.

There are examples of where, through early and coordinated intervention including sustained local engagement by the Local Network, vital aged care services in areas with few alternatives have been stabilised and saved from collapse in vulnerable markets. When the Local Network is perceived as a trusted advisor, providers often reach out early for support when they face challenges, when issues arise and during emergencies such as natural disasters. One provider representative on the expert panel felt that the investment in stewardship had been fully justified by the outcomes experienced by Northern Territory providers alone.

However, despite the support of the Local Network, many providers still feel overwhelmed by the pace and volume of reform taking place across the sector. While the Local Network is building constructive relationships with providers, they are still somewhat limited in the types of support they can offer and rely a lot on their connections with policy and program staff to offer value to providers. These connections can be highly relational, indicating there is room for improvement in the alignment between central office policy and program staff and the Local Network, and improvements in information flows and coordination, as outlined in the conditions and practices sections in chapter 5.

Value for older people, families and carers

There is limited evidence to suggest that, as a result of stewardship and at the population-level, older people and their families have greater choice and control over their care, with their safety and rights increasingly respected and upheld within the aged care system.

However, there are many examples of the Local Network's indirect value to older people through their involvement in ensuring service continuity, preventing the loss of aged care services in rural and remote areas, establishing new services, enabling better discharge planning and supporting equity of access to culturally appropriate services, especially in thin markets and remote locations. These actions have indirectly supported a large number of older people in maintaining or gaining access to quality aged care.

There is some evidence of direct value to individual older people. However, it has been noted that without funding to take direct action, the Local Network's focus, instead of direct engagement with older people, is more centered on providers, policy and systemic issues like emergency preparedness, gathering intelligence and feeding it up to policy areas.

Value for First Nations Australians

Significant progress is evident with some First Nations communities and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). There are several examples of the Local Network building constructive relationships with First Nations communities and organisations to improve understanding of aged care supports and services, and advocate back to central office policy and program teams for more flexible and culturally appropriate aged care support for First Nations people. Case studies highlight instances where the Local Network has taken time to listen to and work alongside communities, facilitating access to funding so First Nations people can develop models of community-controlled care, rather than relying on top-down models that have proven ineffective in First Nations contexts.

However, in 2025, following national consultations, the Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner reported that many First Nations people still find the system culturally unsafe, alienating and difficult to access. Many face additional barriers compared to other older people, making it less likely that solutions will come from centralised government policy and design. Creating aged care services and models valued by First Nations people is just beginning to emerge. First Nations providers will continue to be challenged by systems and processes not designed by them, with them or for them. There is a real need for ongoing stewardship that supports First Nations communities in designing and accessing more flexible and culturally appropriate funding models and removing barriers that allow them to be self-determining about the models of care needed in their communities.



5. Results and Outcomes

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Conditions

KEQ: How are the shifts in conditions, culture and mindsets enabling the successful implementation of a stewardship approach?

The conditions that enable the successful implementation of a stewardship approach are categorised as:

- **Clear strategy and planning.** This includes a vision and strategy for stewardship, and an organisational commitment to improving access, availability and quality of aged care.
- **Corporate support.** This includes Local Network and central office access to resources, IT systems, tools and training that support information flows, intelligence gathering and analysis.
- **Engaged and capable workforce.** This includes workforce planning and an engaged, capable workforce at all levels to lead and implement stewardship.
- **Organisational structure and authorising environment.** This includes leadership for stewardship that supports local action, decision-making and innovation and administrative structures designed to support coordination between strategic policy and the Local Network.

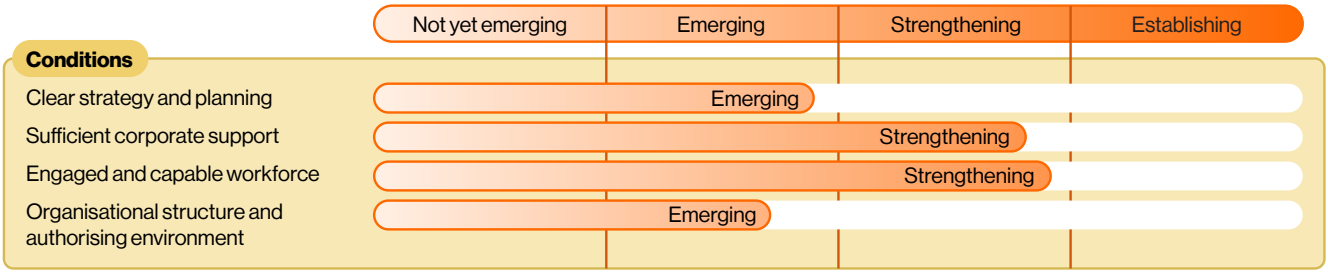
Summary

Following the expert panel sessions, the rating for conditions that enable the successful implementation of a stewardship approach sits between **emerging and strengthening**.

Overall, there have been positive shifts in all the enabling conditions since 2023. Shifts in corporate support are notable, with investments in building and maintaining centralised systems now supporting more nationally consistent approaches to data collection, system monitoring and tracking of local engagement. The growing confidence and capability of the Local Network workforce, and their commitment to building and sustaining trusted relationships with a wide range of local people and organisations were seen as key strengths. By 2025, while recruitment and retention remained a challenge, more staff report feeling supported to build their capabilities and believe their team has the necessary skills and capabilities for stewardship.

Despite improvements, clear strategy and planning, as well as a strong and effective organisational structure and authorising environment for stewardship, are still emerging. A unified vision for stewardship within the broader transformation agenda is not apparent and, while there is a strong commitment to stewardship within the Local Network, it has not been embedded as "everybody's business" across the department. There is an opportunity to further clarify what stewardship as an APS value and the role of the System Governor means and looks like in practice, so that the concept has wider reach and uptake across the department and government more broadly.

Ratings



Results

Clear strategy and planning

91% ▲+2%
of Local Network staff see stewardship as an important part of their role. This increased from 89% in 2024.

77%
of SES staff interviewed were aware of and value the Local Network.

82% ▲+10%
of Local Network staff agree that, across the department, there is a shared sense of responsibility for achieving sustainable improvement in the access, availability and quality of aged care. This increased from 72% in 2024.

Commitment to stewardship has been strong since its introduction, with a large majority of Local Network staff agreeing that regional stewardship is an important part of their role. In discovery consultations, some staff said they had always been doing 'stewardship' whereas others felt it was a new function. Everyone agreed that the budget measure provided additional resourcing and a stronger mandate for direct engagement with the sector and older people. Some also expressed concern with the term 'regional', given that metropolitan teams also operate under the stewardship approach.

Interviews also revealed that there is a **growing awareness, understanding and appreciation for stewardship among SES staff** across the Ageing and Aged Care Group, with 77 per cent (n=17/23) in 2025 recognising the value-add of the Local Network compared with 27 per cent (n=3/11) in 2023. However, stewardship is still seen as the role of the Local Network, rather than an approach to governance that is embedded across the department, enabled by the Local Network.

> "*When people say stewardship, my mind went to the network first... That's the network's primary role... we go there*" – (SES staff member, 2025)

The inclusion of stewardship as an APS Value in 2024 and its articulation as the responsibility of the System Governor under the *Aged Care Act 2024* have served to **elevate the prominence of stewardship across government**. There are similarities across these different contexts in which stewardship is applied, which all emphasise stewardship as a shared responsibility for outcomes, taking a long-term view, increased engagement, equity and access to services and system integrity. However, **stewardship as a new way of working is still unclear to many** across the department, especially those in central office roles who have not had a strong mandate to operationalise a stewardship approach.

> "*... I think they've [the Local Network] been doing a lot of work proactively around what does it means to be a steward of the aged care system. But I don't think stewardship is well understood in terms of our role... and the new formal functions under the Act as System Governor.*" – (SES staff member, 2024)

This presents an **opportunity to strengthen strategy and planning to emphasise that stewardship** aims to ensure the different parts of the system work together more efficiently and effectively to improve aged care and achieve better outcomes for people, in the short and long term. This may support a broader and more coherent approach beyond the current focus on stewardship as synonymous with the Local Network.

Corporate Support

74% ▲+11%
of Local Network staff agree that they have access to the resources they need to do their job well. This increased from 63% in 2024.

74% ▲+15%
of Local Network staff agree that there are formal structures in place for sharing information and insights across the Local Network. This increased significantly from 59% in 2024.

43% ▲+12%
of Local Network staff agree that they are adequately resourced to meet local needs, including those of First Nations people. This increased from 31% in 2024.

87%
of Local Network staff find the ReSPOND Dashboard useful.

55%
of Local Network staff find the SEMS useful.

Positive shifts in the availability and usefulness of tools and systems to support stewardship are notable, with Local Network staff reporting increased access to resources and much higher agreement regarding formal structures for sharing information and insights. In 2023, processes for collecting data and tracking engagements varied across each state and territory, as did the skills and capabilities of staff to effectively use data. However, centralised tools invested in through the budget measure are supporting more nationally consistent data use, collection and sharing.

Another key shift is that early in the evaluation, travel budgets were seen as insufficient in larger jurisdictions. In 2024, allocations were flexibly rebalanced, with smaller jurisdictions transferring some funds to larger ones, demonstrating responsive and efficient use of resources across the Local Network.

Awareness, uptake and usefulness of tools and resources

Tools and resources invested in as part of the budget measure include the ReSPOND Dashboard, which draws real-time data from aged care databases to provide Local Network staff with up-to-date, localised information on the aged care system and the SEMS, a stakeholder management tool which has been rolled out progressively since March 2024.

Responding to feedback from the Local Network, as well as developmental evaluation findings, SSNS has implemented a range of other communications, learning and data collection/sharing tools to support adoption of a stewardship approach. This includes Newsflash emails, a dedicated SharePoint page, Local Network Learning Pathway and the Local Network Insights Portal, which aims to improve feedback loops between providers and older people on-the-ground and central office policy and program teams.

The evaluation found that the **Newsflash emails, Local Network SharePoint and ReSPOND Dashboard have the highest levels of awareness and utilisation**, as well as being regarded as most useful by staff in the Local Network. The Local Network Insights Portal and SEMS have high levels of awareness and uptake, with some areas for improvement noted to increase their usefulness. The Local Network Learning Pathway, which is in the process of being developed and aims to help share useful information, learning and capability building across the Local Network, had the lowest levels of awareness and uptake, indicating that many staff may not be aware of it. However, those who do use it found it highly useful, which suggests promoting wider uptake may be beneficial.

Regional site establishment

Operationalising new sites in regional and remote areas proved highly complex and resource-intensive, with significant challenges for government in adapting a range of corporate operations systems and processes (HR, IT, security, travel, Workplace Health and Safety) designed for metropolitan areas to regional contexts. Despite these barriers, all offices except Alice Springs are now operational, with the Darwin-based unit maintaining they prefer a fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) model to service Alice Springs, given how difficult it can be to retain staff there. Overall, the ongoing process of working through key challenges and adapting corporate services for regional sites is building valuable organisational learning, improved cross-branch collaboration and **establishing the foundation for a regional footprint that supports stewardship in diverse local contexts**.

Engaged and capable workforce

49% ▲+10%
of Local Network staff agree that the capacity of their workforce is sufficient to support the needs of their state/territory. This increased from 39% in 2024.

51% ▲+15%
of Local Network staff agree that their workforce capacity is sufficient to support the aged care reform agenda. This increased significantly from 36% in 2024.

81% ▲+9%
of Local Network staff agree that their unit/team has the necessary skills and capabilities for stewardship. This increased from 72% in 2024.

83% ▲+5%
of Local Network staff feel supported to build their capabilities if needed. This increased slightly from 77% in 2024.

Shifts in capability through stewardship

Capacity and capability are strengthening across the Local Network and SSNS, with notable improvements: Local Network staff are more likely to agree that their unit/team has the necessary skills and capabilities for stewardship, and they feel supported to build their capabilities if needed.

> *"[State Manager's] cohesion in the leadership group adds to their impact and the supporting/enabling function.... The capability uplift has been a guiding light"* – (SES staff member, 2025)

Workforce capacity and retention

The sensemaking session revealed variations in Local Network Directors' perceptions about workforce capacity, with some feeling they have enough staff and others maintaining they do not. Survey responses are also mixed with around half of respondents agreeing that workforce capacity is sufficient to support local needs and implementation of the aged care reform agenda. This indicates a need for further analysis of workforce capacity and planning across jurisdictions to determine whether workforce levels are sufficient to maintain delivery of Local Network functions.

Interviews suggest **an ongoing challenge with staff retention**, both within the Local Network and SSNS. In the Local Network, **staff retention is seen as crucial to maintain the strong relationships and connections across local communities**. Similarly, turnover in the central office team can mean lost productivity through the loss of corporate knowledge, relationships and disruption to the delivery of strategic projects. This suggests a need to consider strategies to improve the recruitment and retention of staff with the right skills and mindsets for stewardship functions, both at the central office and local levels.



Organisational structure and authorising environment

78% ▲+7%
of Local Network staff agree that leadership provides a clear sense of direction for stewardship. This increased from 71% in 2024.

72%
of department employees agreed that their SES manager creates an environment that enables them to deliver their best.

68% ▲+12%
of Local Network staff feel that new and innovative ideas are encouraged and supported. This increased from 56% in 2024.

Again, there have been positive shifts in the authorising environment for stewardship, with many staff agreeing that leadership provides a clear sense of direction for stewardship. Most department employees also feel that their SES manager creates an environment that enables them to deliver their best, indicating **positive sentiments towards leadership** across the board.

In 2023, the evaluation observed the authorising environment beginning to shift, with senior staff, including the previous Deputy Secretary for Ageing and Aged Care, promoting the importance of stewardship and encouraging collaboration and coordination across the group and department. **Collaboration between the Local Network and other parts of the department improved markedly** by 2025, with 68 per cent of Local Network staff reporting that their unit/team collaborates effectively across the department compared to 42 per cent who agreed that collaboration was increasing across the department in 2024.

> *"It's definitely gotten better. We're starting to see more coordination, more visibility. There's still room to grow but we're in a much better place than 6 or 12 months ago."* – (Local Network Director, 2024)

> *"[SSNS] pulled together the Local Network Directors Forum and they've been really helpful...bringing along different policy areas for us to speak to and raise some of the issues that we're hearing out in the field. Bringing different policy areas and guest speakers to us in these different forums has allowed us to identify who the right people might be able to help us [at the local level]."* – (Local Network Director, 2025)

Despite these positive shifts, interviews and the expert panel revealed that the department still has a way to go to better integrate stewardship at the organisation-level, improve collaboration and ensure smooth coordination of engagement activities with those external to government.



Culture and mindsets

KEQ: How are the shifts in conditions, culture and mindsets enabling the successful implementation of a stewardship approach?

The culture and mindsets have been categorised as:

- **Thinking in systems.** This includes understanding the value of a holistic approach and the use of system data to address the complexity of local and system needs and an awareness of the interface and interconnections across the system, e.g. health and aged care, disability and housing.
- **Valuing relationships and interconnections.** This includes encouragement to build and sustain local relationships and a culture of collaboration across systems using structured and unstructured communication channels.
- **Embracing learning and adaptation.** This includes having systems in place to support learning and adaptation and finding ways to use and share local insights, stories and lessons to improve and adapt policies and practices.
- **Putting the voices of older people at the centre.** This is about older people, including First Nations people and providers, having access to information. It is also about their access to diverse opportunities to engage with the department to ensure aged care services meet their needs.

Summary

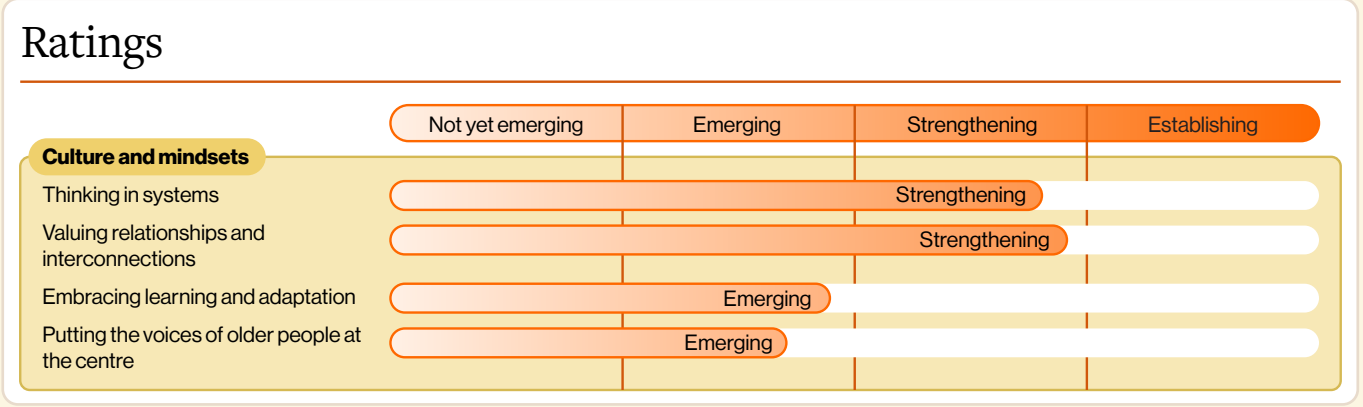
Following the expert panel sessions, the rating for culture and mindsets sits between **emerging and strengthening**.

Shifts in mindsets towards thinking in systems, valuing relationships and interconnections and embracing learning and adaptation were evident, particularly among those working in the Local Network. While this is a positive sign, these mindsets may need to be further embedded across the department to facilitate broader changes in norms, structures and ways of working.

The shift from a compliance orientation to proactive stakeholder engagement is helping the department build more open and trusting relationships with providers, communities and older people. Though this varies between units/teams and jurisdictions, most staff in the Local Network demonstrated a strong shift towards systems thinking, especially through the pursuit of a more integrated approach that acknowledges the interconnections between health, aged care and a range of other service areas to improve outcomes.

Learning and adaptation have strengthened over time, though there is room for improvement regarding how the department leverages and uses local information and intel. Putting older people at the centre received the lowest ratings from both expert panels, who raised that while the mindset and intention is there, the department could be doing more to ensure older people feel heard and seen when consulted with and to understand how their views translate into policy and program improvements.

Ratings



Results

Thinking in systems

84% ▲+2%
of Local Network staff agree they are encouraged to make connections across the interface of aged care, health and other sectors, a slight increase from 82% in 2024.

A **considerable shift in systems thinking** is evident from a narrower focus on program management and compliance to a **more holistic, systems-level perspective**. Several interviewees discussed how stewardship encourages staff to actively strengthen connections between different sectors and across different levels of government. Similarly, survey results show that Local Network staff feel more encouraged to make connections across the interface of aged care, health and other sectors and to proactively build relationships with local people and organisations, suggesting **growing confidence in external partnerships and stakeholder engagement**.

> "*We've got that chance to be able to get a collective view of what's happening across the jurisdiction, rather than just singular kind of pockets...we are able to kind of put that jigsaw together across the state.*" – (Local Network Director, 2024)

Interviews revealed that **institutional silos can act as a barrier to adopting a systems stewardship approach**, which would see staff across government work together to solve complex systemic issues. Work being done to address the issue of delayed discharge of older patients in hospitals demonstrates an emerging willingness for government to work across silos, but this level of collaboration tends to be responsive or reactive, instead of proactive and strategic.

> "*...how do we tackle workforce together? There is no point health and aged care tackling workforce separately because we're just stealing from each other and disability. How do we actually work on some of those big, wicked problems together?*" – (Local Network Director, 2024)

Data limitations were raised as another inhibitor to a more joined-up approach, with the expert panel noting that data is not always able to be shared or used effectively to predict or address broader systemic issues. Leveraging data, such as systems mapping and modelling, is very challenging and requires special skillsets to do it well. If done well, however, this may help the department see the full picture, make relevant connections and better understand systemic issues.



Valuing relationship and interconnections

96%
of Local Network staff agree that relationship-building is essential.

89%
of Local Network staff agree they are encouraged to proactively build relationships with local people and organisations.

Local Network staff agree that **relationships are essential and feel encouraged to proactively build relationships with local people and organisations**. Interviews show that Local Network teams do not just value relationships but also actively seek to proactively build and maintain them. In this way, **the Local Network helps rebuild trust in government by providing a visible, supportive presence** in a sector historically skeptical of government intervention.

> *"Pre-Royal Commission... our stewardship practices were more reactive. I think in this new world, primarily on the back of having additional resources, we can be more proactive in our stewardship approach... For the first time ever, I feel like we've been given the green stamp of approval to do [proactive engagement]."* – (Local Network Director, 2023)

Many interviews and case studies highlighted the value of these relationships. Examples included providers proactively reaching out to the Local Network when experiencing viability issues and the Local Network working proactively to support them to remain operational and financially sustainable, or help them undertake a smooth transition out of the market, reducing the impacts on older people and the workforce. Another example highlighting the value of relationships is that providers are more likely to listen to and try to implement government reform when they have constructive relationships with the public service. This more relational and constructive approach to governance is enabled by the separation of regulatory from supportive functions which was achieved through the establishment of the independent ACQSC.

> *"We've spent the last 18 months building relationships with providers out there, so now... I think we'll show our value if we're helping to really knock out some of the issues and problems..."* – (Local Network Director, 2024)

A key challenge highlighted is that relationships can be personality driven. Relationships require constant resetting and it can take an estimated 18 months to develop trusting relationships. This underscores the importance of strategies to encourage Local Network staff retention as well as more structured/formal processes for maintaining relationships when staff change (see "Engaged and capable workforce" section above).

Internal collaboration and coordination

Collaboration across the Local Network and the wider department has strengthened over time, though there remains room for continued improvement. In 2025, Local Network survey respondents reported:

79%
Collaboration within Local Network branches.

68%
Collaboration with other areas of the department.

71%
Broader collaboration between the Local Network and other Commonwealth Government departments.

Despite progress, interviews indicated that **internal coordination between the Local Network and policy teams remains a challenge**. Interviewees noted that policy updates are often released to the public simultaneously or before the Local Network, undermining its credibility when providers are better informed than the staff who are meant to be supporting them. There was also a desire to better coordinate engagements

across the department to ensure the insights from local communities were being shared across the department, reducing the burden of consultations and visits and ensuring they are leveraged strategically. Local Network Directors felt that the opportunity to sit down with a range of policy and program teams at the Local Network Executive Leadership Forum, organised by SSNS, was an effective way to strengthen collaboration with policy and program teams. More broadly, differences in perspectives and assumptions between local and central office staff were raised throughout the evaluation. Some noted that these tensions are to be expected and can be constructive, while others noted an "us versus them" mentality which can hinder collaboration and reduce openness to shared solutions.

> *I know it's their role to be the engagement officers but sometimes... it becomes an "us versus them". [The Local Network] say "we will take that feedback to Canberra" rather than understanding and working on responses...*" – (Central Office Director, 2025)

Putting the voices of older people at the centre

82%

of Local Network staff feel encouraged to centre the voices and perspectives of older people in their work. This remained relatively stable compared with 2024.

The Local Network has **increased direct engagement with older people**, recording 796 engagement activities to build community understanding of aged care since October 2024. Activities included community education and outreach through tailored presentations and workshops, as well as partnerships with councils, advocacy groups and providers to address local challenges. Activities also included, collecting feedback from consumers and providers to inform departmental planning on key reforms such as Support at Home.

While this reflects growing efforts to share information and bring older people's voices into the system, sensemaking and expert panel sessions revealed that many feel that "putting older people at the centre" is still more of an intention than an embedded practice, with uncertainty remaining about the Local Network's role engaging directly with older people, and **limited evidence that older people's input is influencing policy and program design across the department**.

> *[putting older people at the centre] is an intention rather than something that is being seen... from our perspective, older people feel really unhappy about consultations and can't see any take up of their input... they don't feel like they are being heard.*" – (Expert Panel Member, 2025)

> *The vision for the aged care transformation program and how stewardship is enabling this is not always consistent and clear. It's not clear that everyone understands/has the vision of putting the older person first, and so there can be tension between program guidelines and outcomes. At the Local Network level, we see this firsthand.*" – (Local Network Director, 2025)



Embracing learning and adaptation

95%

of Local Network staff report using local data and insights to inform their work.

There are positive signs that **a culture of learning and adaptation is emerging**, including that the majority of Local Network staff report using local data and insights to inform their work. Most interviewees agreed that the stewardship model has supported improved learning and adaptation, both internally, by escalating feedback, questions or issues, and externally through tailoring government information for local contexts, thus helping government to adapt its communications to meet local needs.

Several mechanisms, such as the Local Network Leadership Forum, a Community of Practice, and the Local Network Insights Portal, have been established to support sharing insights between the Local Network and central office policy and program teams. While these are valued, Local Network staff report that delays in the department's responses to questions and feedback, and a lack of transparency about how insights are used, can undermine staff confidence in the tool. Delays can also cause reputational damage because providers may not receive responses in a timely or efficient manner.

> "*I've got people in my team who don't take that intel seriously, they're not very diligent about how they do the intelligence gathering because they don't think it goes anywhere or that anything comes out of it.*" – (Local Network Director, 2025)

SSNS is taking steps to strengthen the intel feedback loop, including raising awareness with policy teams, encouraging timely responses and introducing an audit process to sort and direct questions to the appropriate units. They have also developed a central Local Network Insights Portal to reduce duplication and are working to clarify what constitutes useful intel and how the Local Network and policy and program teams can better leverage each other's expertise.



Practices

KEQ: To what extent are the core practices of stewardship contributing to outcomes (intended and unintended) in the health and aged care systems?

Four **practice categories** describe the range of activities taking place as part of the regional stewardship approach. These categories, whilst nationally common, are being implemented differently across state and territory offices.

- **Capacity, capability-building and awareness raising.** This includes tailoring and sharing information to help providers meet their obligations, and maintaining ongoing engagement to raise awareness of changes, build capability and capacity, and ensure providers and communities are ready for upcoming reforms.
- **Engaging with the sector and wider system.** This includes meeting with a diverse range of stakeholders, building and strengthening trusted relationships, working across the health and aged care interface and creating opportunities for networking, service coordination and integration.
- **Solution brokering and problem solving.** This includes monitoring and actively working with providers to identify and address risks and gaps in service delivery and to help resolve local issues or emergencies.
- **Gathering, analysing and sharing intelligence.** This includes gathering, analysing and sharing local data, with data used to inform policy, enhance intelligence and fill evidence gaps.

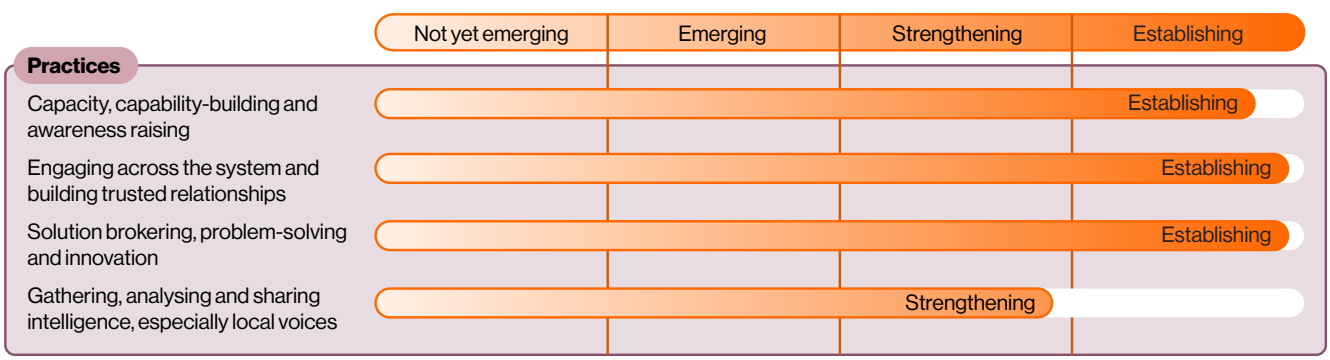
Summary

Following the expert panel sessions, the rating for practices sits within **establishing**.

The evaluation found almost all practice categories to be establishing within the Local Network. The practices are recognised as interdependent, often occurring concurrently during visits with providers or communities, when Local Network staff engage with stakeholders, gather intelligence and provide education simultaneously. While there are variations in how these are implemented across jurisdictions, the Local Network is strengthening engagement and building relationships across the system, especially through increased face-to-face engagements, with examples of this leading to strengthened trust between government, providers and consumers. Evidence shows the Local Network has been supporting providers and communities to understand and prepare for aged care reforms, with a particular focus on supporting smaller, high-risk providers. Evidence also shows the Local Network supporting older people who face barriers navigating the system, such as First Nations people and CALD populations.

The Local Network also plays a crucial role brokering solutions in thin markets, responding to local issues, and providing rapid, context-sensitive responses and support during crisis and emergencies. Investments in new systems have also strengthened the Local Network's ability to more easily and systematically collect and share local insights. While many SES staff highly value the intelligence generated by the Local Network and see their role as critical for identifying system risks, there is room to improve how insights are analysed and used to inform policy.

Ratings



A key difference identified in stewardship practice is between metropolitan and rural and remote stewardship. The table below illustrates some of these differences.

Feature	Metropolitan	Rural and remote
Context	High volume of providers; focus on systemic issues like delayed discharge and complex policy implementation	Immediate risk mitigation (e.g. provider failure, service collapse, infrastructure issues); deep place-based work; intensive support
Engagement practice	More resource-intensive due to provider volume; relies heavily on group sessions, roadshows, forums, webinars and industry meetings	Requires extensive travel to remote locations; more reliance on face-to-face visits to build trust and gather local knowledge
Risk and outcome profile	Can seem less reactive and the outcomes more ambiguous or harder to measure, as immediate crises are less frequent	Often resolving immediate, high-risk issues such as provider insolvency or service continuity issues, leading to more tangible outcomes
Data	Likely to rely more on data (e.g. the ReSPOND Dashboard) to target engagement efforts strategically	On-the-ground intelligence and relationships to understand unique local challenges is vital

Results

Capacity, capability-building and awareness-raising

91%
of Local Network staff agree that their unit/team adapts information to be locally relevant and user-friendly

18%
of Local Network interactions involve building community understanding of aged care

33%
of Local Network interactions involve building provider understanding of aged care

4
case study examples (Tjuntjuntjara, Kalgoorlie, Adelaide, Alice Springs)

Over 2024 and 2025, the most frequently cited engagement activities involved building provider and community understanding of aged care, which includes preparing the sector for the transition to Support at Home and implementation of the Aged Care Act 2024. Interviews suggest that **many jurisdictions have strategically focused engagement efforts on smaller, standalone, high-risk providers**, helping them navigate reforms and fill gaps in the market, because they know that this is where the highest level of risk exists.

> *"...really, really need the State Network, to act as stewards in making sure that this legislation is understood, and, you know, be advocates for this new system. Because there will be some areas of resistance. So, it's important that the State Network understands it, and is able to really communicate what this new legislation is about."* – (SES staff member, 2025)

With only a few examples shared, expert panel members noted that the evidence points to much of the engagement work centering around information sharing rather than direct capacity and capability building. However, there are examples of the Local Network connecting the sector to advisory services and grants that are tailored to capability-building, and providing more targeted capability support where needed, particularly for smaller providers and local councils.

Case Study Summary

Tjuntjuntjara, Western Australia

Tjuntjuntjara is a remote community located in the southeast of Western Australia. Its population includes First Nations individuals born pre-European contact and forcibly relocated due to nuclear testing in Maralinga, South Australia.

Paupiyala Tjarutja Aboriginal Corporation (PTAC) deliver a range of services in the Tjuntjuntjara community of Spinifex People, including aged care. Since 2019, Western Australia's Country team has focused on building PTAC's capability to deliver better care, focusing on awareness-raising, capacity building and relationship facilitation. In 2024, they advocated for PTAC to be considered as a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flexible Aged Care Program provider, noting that the increased flexibility with this funding would allow them to take a more holistic and effective approach to supporting older people in the community. However, after engaging with policy teams, they realised that policy change would take significant time and effort.

Country WA continued to support the community. In 2025, they facilitated a visit to Tjuntjuntjara for the Interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner and key partner agencies, enabling 13 older people to receive face-to-face assessments that would otherwise have been difficult due to remoteness. The team also supported PTAC through aged care education sessions, connections to development programs and improved communication around assessment processes, to better identify and respond to local needs.

Image source: https://www.spinifexhealth.org.au/



Engaging across the system and building trusted relationships

94% ▲+5%
of Local Network staff agree that their unit/team proactively builds relationships with stakeholders (outside of the department) across their state/territory to improve outcomes for older people. A slight increase from 89% in 2024.

4,308
interactions have been logged by the Local Network since October 2024

1,672
in-person visits to providers across Australia and its overseas territories have been logged since October 2024

12
case study examples (all case studies)

Evidence shows that **regional stewardship has led to more proactive engagement with providers, service delivery partners, government agencies and communities** on local issues affecting service provision. Since October 2024, the Local Network has logged a total of 4,308 interactions in SEMS, including 1,672 in-person visits to providers across Australia and its overseas territories.

Interactions contribute to a wide range of aged care priority areas, as shown in Figure 3:

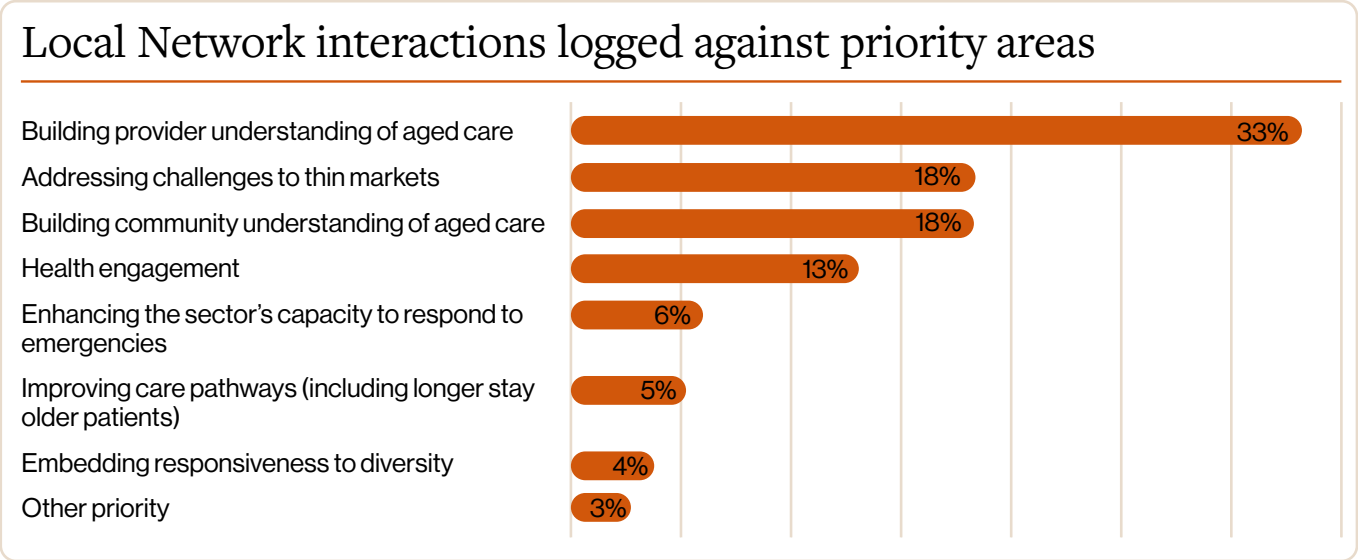


Figure 3: Percentage of Local Network Interactions logged against priority areas

SES staff view the Local Network as the 'department's eyes and ears', providing valuable on-the-ground intelligence that complements central datasets. Through their frequent engagement and close relationships with providers and older people, they offer real-time insights into service capacity, local challenges and unintended policy consequences, often identifying issues early and preventing potential reputational risks for the department. Also highlighted was their role as 'connectors', linking organisations on-the-ground to the people, programs and information they need as well as local providers to relevant units across the department including policy, program, regulatory and funding areas.

> *"The aged care sector isn't homogenous; we know there are different issues in different locations, and this is where we get valuable, deep insights, rather than a broad brush. And this is where we need a tailored approach – I don't think we would have that without the Local Network. It would be hard to cover..."* – (SES staff member, 2024)

A notable shift has been the increase in direct engagement with older people by attending a range of expos, information sessions or conducting direct community outreach through local councils, aged care providers or other community organisations. In this way, the Local Network is helping consumers navigate the client-focused assessment and navigation functions delivered through service delivery partners or other government agencies, such as My Aged Care channels including Aged Care Specialist Offices in Services Australia and Care Finders, a specialist navigation support for people needing additional assistance.

Case Study Summary

Adelaide, South Australia

To reach consumers where they are, in South Australia, the Local Network established partnerships with local councils, retirement villages and seniors' groups and designed a series of engaging and informative presentations targeted to local context, so that older people would receive information relevant to their location and needs, in locations they frequent.

Between October 2023 and April 2024, the Local Network engaged with a total of 1,200 older people, along with their families and carers, providing advice on how to navigate to relevant client-focused channels to access aged care services. Engaging directly with consumers increased older people's awareness of how to navigate to the My Aged Care system or access one-on-one support through Care Finders and equipped them with information to make more informed choices about services that best meet their needs. Strong relationships with local councils were also established and councils indicated that they would reach out to the Local Network in the future if issues arise.

> *"It shows they are engaged and they care... [previously] you would never see the people at the top because people further down were client facing. So, it's great to see [public service employees] out in the community. It's good for them to know how their decisions are impacting the community."* – (local council employee)

In 2025, when the Market and Workforce Division needed to undertake widespread consultations with local councils, they were able to leverage these relationships to collect data and intelligence on the barriers facing local councils and the risks for them regarding upcoming reforms.



Solution brokering, problem-solving and innovation

84%
of Local Network staff agree that their unit/team brings stakeholders together to co-develop local solutions tailored to context

18%
of Local Network interactions relate to addressing challenges in thin markets

5
case study examples (Kalgoorlie, Victoria, Warrnambool, Onslow, Alice Springs)

The Local Network actively works with providers, particularly in thin markets, **to identify and address risks and gaps** in service delivery as well as across the sector to support the development of innovative solutions, tailored to local contexts and needs. The Local Network has also demonstrated being **highly responsive to local needs in emergency situations**, enabling business continuity.

Evidence shows that the core practices are contributing to strategic outcomes such as:

- Supporting market and system transitions, e.g. facilitating a shift to the Single Assessment System in Victoria.
- Ensuring service continuity in thin markets through early intervention and facilitating funding access, e.g. Alice Springs and Warrnambool.
- Tailoring policy and programs to better suit local contexts by feeding up local intelligence, e.g. advocacy for flexible capital grant funding eligibility guidelines for ACCOs in the Northern Territory.
- Supporting sector readiness and reform, specifically preparing providers and communities for the *Aged Care Act 2024*, with a focus on regional, rural, remote or under-served groups.

Interactions recorded in SEMS that focused on addressing challenges in thin markets, include:

- Tackling workforce shortages by connecting providers to workforce training and housing initiatives.
- Supporting provider sustainability by connecting them with government grants and programs, e.g. Business and Workforce Advisory Services, the Service Development Assistance Panel and the Market Adjustment Program.
- Facilitating collaboration through the establishment of networks and new and innovative models of care to address local service gaps.
- Engaging with councils and community stakeholders to maintain services and support providers to develop more culturally appropriate care for First Nations communities.

Problem-solving supports government to mitigate risks and address gaps in thin markets

In situations of market failure or risk, the Local Network plays an important role. Case studies demonstrated that the Local Network works closely with providers to identify quality and viability risks or concerns, and address gaps in service delivery. Most of these interventions lead to either a provider remaining operational or a successful market transition that reduces the impacts of service closures or transitions on older people, their families and carers. Case studies often demonstrated how the Local Network works collaboratively with others across the department, especially the Market Adjustment Branch, to identify and address gaps in service delivery by connecting services with government grants and other support. In almost all cases, the Local Network was responding to local issues, some using more innovative methods than others.

Case Study Summary

Alice Springs, Northern Territory

Mparntwe or Alice Springs is a remote town in Australia's Northern Territory, halfway between Darwin and Adelaide. Alice Springs has a population of almost 40,000 people, including 2,494 First Nations people over the age of 50, but very few aged care services. Australian Rural and Remote Community Services (ARRCS) run the only three residential aged care homes in Alice Springs. In 2022 and 2023, ARRCS was facing significant financial viability issues, resulting primarily from workforce shortages and an over-reliance on FIFO agency contractors to meet regulatory and quality standards.

The Local Network established a working group with staff from different parts of the department who were all working on this and related issues. This was to ensure clear lines of communication and that everyone was working toward the same outcome. At one meeting, ARRCS was invited to present to the working group so that everyone understood the key issues from their perspective, and the Local Network was able to provide valuable local context, particularly in relation to the impacts service closure would have on other local services and the community.

> "*Stewardship was about connecting the provider to decision-makers to ensure they were well informed to make the right decision.*" – (Local Network employee)

The Local Network provided background and historical information which supported the decision making of the Market Adjustment Branch around viability grant funding. In June 2023, ARRCS was awarded a COVID-19 Viability Fund grant of $13.9 million to assist with operational losses and support workforce initiatives to address shortages of permanent care staff. Other funding sources were provided in 2024 for retention bonuses for registered nurses, rental accommodation, transport, operational shortfalls and capital assistance for staff accommodation. To date, ARRCS has been able to access funding and support from the department and other parts of the Commonwealth Government to address its workforce challenges more sustainably.

Further to this, from August 2023 to May 2024, the Local Network helped ARRCS to use grant funding flexibly in their community aged care service delivery so they could continue to fund services that were in demand, including respite housing, a social support group, social support to individuals and nursing in Darwin and Katherine. They achieved this by working collaboratively with ARRCS, the Commonwealth Home Support Program team and the Community Grants Hub to negotiate outputs and vary ARRCS' agreements to accurately reflect and allocate outputs to the service delivery areas where they were needed and being delivered.



Image source: https://www.arrcs.org.au/

Gathering, analysing, and sharing intelligence, especially local voices

84%
of Local Network staff agree that their unit/team collects and uses local information, data and perspectives to inform their work

89%
of Local Network staff agree that their unit/team shares intelligence to support system improvement and policy linkages

4
case study examples (Kalgoorlie, Tasmania, Katherine, Adelaide)

Investment in stewardship has enabled the development of new tools and systems to help the Local Network gather, analyse and share local intelligence. Interviews with several SES staff highlight that **the Local Network is valued for its ability to gather authentic, deep insights directly from the community, providers and service delivery partners**.

> *"[The Local Network] have been critical in engaging with providers and bringing back what they are learning. Nearly one thousand providers work in the home care space, so Local Network outreach has been really important for us in this space. We are running this as a large change exercise: we have change champions in each [state and territory] and lead people to run a range of activities."* – (SES staff member, 2025)

Intelligence gathering is established as a central function of the Local Network, serving as its primary mechanism to understand local contexts, identify systemic risks and inform policy development.

> *"The idea of regional stewardship is to listen to what's happening in your region and be responsive to the needs of your region... it was also an opportunity to hear directly from the public which helps us create a better picture of the aged care sector as a whole."* – (Local Network staff member, 2025)

While these are positive shifts, **concerns were raised about how local intelligence is used to support improved policy design and delivery**. In the most recent Provider Pulse Survey, a few providers reported that engagement with the Local Network felt superficial or ineffective, describing it as "box-ticking" and noting that their feedback did not appear to lead to change. This contributed to perceptions that Local Network officers were unable to provide useful answers or influence outcomes. The tension of creating a strong feedback loop between Local Network staff and central office policy people has been well documented in the evaluation. On the one hand, when the Local Network act as conduits for information and feedback, local people and providers expect timely responses and want to see how their feedback is being used to inform improvements to policy or program development. On the other hand, policymakers are working under tight timeframes to deliver a significant reform agenda and sometimes do not have the capacity to respond to every question or piece of feedback. Some also report finding some local information difficult to translate into a national program or policy context.

Case studies demonstrated multiple ways the Local Network gathers and listens to local voices. These include numerous examples of consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, forums with providers, direct community feedback, as well as responding to issues that arise or are escalating. Their presence and deep understanding of the geographic regions in which they work means they are well placed to ensure government funding is allocated to organisations and communities with the highest level of need.

Case Study Summary

Katherine, Northern Territory

Located 300 kms south of Darwin, Katherine is a sparsely populated region, with a high proportion of First Nations communities and people. In 2022, the then Department of Health and Aged Care announced a $25.5 million funding round for critical infrastructure projects to support Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) to continue their critical work. However, many ACCHOs in the Northern Territory were unable to access this funding because they leased their buildings/structures from the Northern Territory Government, making them ineligible for Commonwealth funding that aimed to improve health outcomes for First Nations people.

The Local Network team, based in Darwin, began collecting evidence of poor building conditions at health services across the Northern Territory. They shared this information with the Service Operations and Infrastructure Branch (who oversee management and implementation of the Commonwealth Government's Service Maintenance Program), to inform grant managers about the difficulties local providers face in securing long-term leases and the unsatisfactory condition of health infrastructure across the region. This effort was supported by strong relationships between Local Network staff and the ACCHO sector. After 18 months of gathering evidence, engaging with ACCHOs and advocating for more flexible program guidelines in the Northern Territory, the Service Operations and Infrastructure Branch agreed to consider these organisations eligible to apply for Commonwealth maintenance grant funding. Now, providers who have applied for a long-term lease are considered eligible to apply for capital grant funding, even if they do not yet have a formal lease in place.

As a result of the Local Network team's intel and advocacy, a total of 12 services successfully received capital grant funding. Katherine West Health Board received $500,000 in the first round and identified an additional $750,000 they may be eligible for in a future round. The grant funding has directly benefitted First Nations staff and community service users across the Katherine region.

> *"Government is so large, but they don't seem to collaborate well. It's clear from the outside looking in that things are very siloed. Having [local staff] being tenacious and knowing the right people in the department to advocate to makes a big difference."* – (Northern Territory ACCHO, 2024)



Outcomes

KEQ: To what extent are the core practices of stewardship contributing to outcomes (intended and unintended) in the health and aged care systems?

Outcomes align with departmental objectives and the objectives articulated in the regional stewardship budget measure. They include stewardship's contribution to system change across the following categories:

- **System reach.** Government engagement, coverage and presence have grown locally across Australia, and providers, communities and First Nations people have access to relevant information, support and resources.
- **System integration.** Stewardship contributes to better connections, co-ordination and interface between different levels of government and other services as well as stronger relationships and collaboration with communities and providers, which lead to improved aged care outcomes.
- **System capability.** Local Network staff, aged care providers and other organisations in the system are better equipped to implement reforms, identify local issues, tailor responses and innovate solutions. The government gathers and analyses local intelligence and uses it to better understand the needs of the sector, older people and their families.
- **System responsiveness.** Stewardship contributes to increased levels of trust and more effective escalation of risks and issues, improved ability of the department to adapt and respond to diversity and local needs, higher quality services in regional, rural and remote areas and improved transitions and pathways of care for older people. Also, examples of increased agency for First Nations to have aged care services that meet their needs.

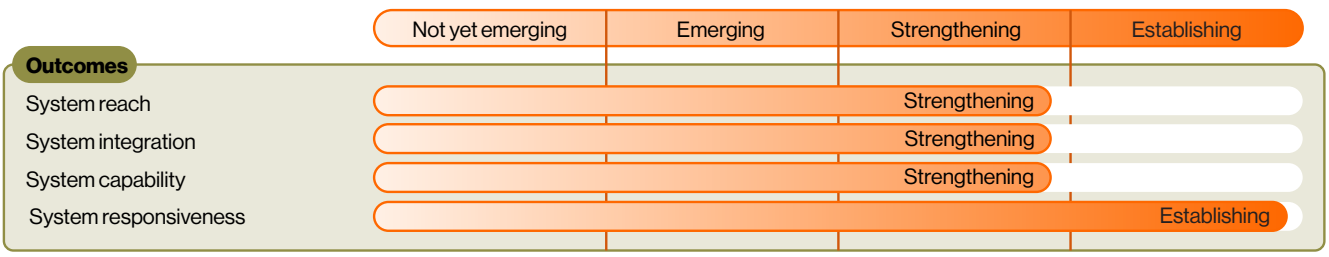
Summary

Overall, the evaluation found that stewardship's contribution to outcomes sits within **strengthening**.

Measuring contribution to system-level outcomes has been challenging due to the volume and pace of concurrent aged care reforms, with data suggesting that despite some positive signals, the system overall is still struggling to meet the demands of an ageing population. However, evidence shows that, during this period of aged care transformation, stewardship has played a critical role helping providers and community understand and implement reforms, improve links across different care systems, sectors and service areas (particularly the interface between hospitals and aged care) and build system capability by tailoring information to local contexts so that aged care providers and consumers can access information they need in an accessible and timely way. The highest rated outcome was system responsiveness, demonstrating that through investing in on-the-ground presence and increased public sector capacity, government can improve its responsiveness to local needs and emergencies.

The Local Network do not achieve these outcomes alone, but rather through building strong relationships and collaborating effectively across the department, including with the Market and Workforce Division and with the ACQSC, and with a range of other organisations like state and local governments, providers and communities. In this way, stewardship is about adopting a networked model of governance, where multiple organisations come together to resolve complex problems. Stewardship works best when everyone comes together with a shared objective, even if they have differences of opinion, and collaboration includes a range of people and organisations who care about improving outcomes for older people.

Ratings



Results

System reach

Robust evidence of increased government reach as a result of the investment is limited, however the evaluation has **demonstrated higher levels of engagement happening across the health and aged care sectors, especially with consumers**, as well as with previously disengaged stakeholder groups and communities, such as rural/remote First Nations communities. There are several examples of **First Nations providers and elders having better access to support and resources that meet their needs** and for **local people and providers to be better informed** about aged care services and reforms.

> *"The regional stewardship model moved us into direct communication with consumers who may not be accessing traditional services. [Before stewardship] we didn't go out to libraries or older person aids and equipment providers etc... a lot of groups in the past considered very peripheral are now more central."*
> – (Local Network Director, 2024).

Four case studies highlight examples where the proactive work of the Local Network has led to the continuation or expansion of aged care service delivery across Australia, ensuring that older people, particularly those from marginalised communities, are accessing aged care support/services.

The following deep dives (mini case studies) also demonstrate work currently underway to ensure aged care reaches those who need it across Australia, including in an overseas territory.

System integration

There are several examples of **stewardship leading to better connections, co-ordination and interface between different levels of government and other services** and strengthening collaboration with communities and providers to improve care outcomes. As previously mentioned, despite not directly managing program funds or grants, the Local Network's presence, social capital and familiarity with their jurisdictions means they often facilitate networks and connections, **bringing together local service providers, service delivery partners, state government and local councils**.

As stated above, Local Network staff and other staff across the department highlighted a **need to better coordinate engagements across the sector**, noting that providers can be visited by two separate parts of the department in one week, without the department being aware. This is inefficient and reinforces perceptions of siloed working and a lack of cohesion across departmental functions. This also occurs in relation to other departments such as the Community Grants Hub in the Department of Social Services.

Case studies demonstrate Local Network staff helping coordinate between the federal aged care system and state-run health policy and services, with one of the most pressing issues being delayed discharge of older people from hospitals. In many cases, the Local Network was able to leverage their local relationships and presence to improve discharge processes between hospitals and aged care by reaching out to both hospitals and aged care providers. In cases where this was not possible, the Local Network still played a role feeding-up local intelligence to senior staff to support broader cross-jurisdictional and government negotiations.

Case Study Summary

State-wide Victoria

In 2024, in line with Royal Commission recommendations, the department began transitioning to a Single Assessment System to streamline access to government-funded aged care services for older people. Victoria was the only state with a high number of organisations delivering Regional Assessment Service (RAS) assessments, a total of 89 compared with 2-5 in other states and territories. During the assessment transition, subcontracted RAS providers, many of whom were local governments, were given just three weeks' notice that they would need to tender for a new six-month contract with the Commonwealth to continue delivering assessment services. This meant they needed to transition 10,000–12,000 active clients, while also completing complex tender specifications.

> *I think we felt powerless because of the lack of engagement and participation... I think there was a lack of respect by both the state government and the Commonwealth Government for that fact that people had done really hard work for a long, long time and... no thought about the financial impact on councils*." – (local government representative, 2025).

The Local Network responded quickly, leveraging their existing relationships with local governments and the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) to establish the Victorian RAS Transition Advisory Group (the Advisory Group). The Advisory Group worked to ensure a smooth handover from outgoing to incoming providers, prioritising clear communication, resolving technical IT issues, supporting the retention of experienced assessment staff where possible and maintaining two-way feedback between departmental policy and assessment teams and local providers on the ground.

Despite many councils exiting the market, the work of the Advisory Group and the Local Network enabled a smoother workforce transition between outgoing and incoming assessment services, and the successful transition of the 10,000–12,000 active clients.

> *Local government cares so much about the broader community across so many different facets, and I think that was brought to the fore in this situation. We could have easily just said no... but we all engaged... and I think that was also testament to [the Local Network's] relationship with us and them having that conversation with us, acknowledging and hearing us*." – (local government representative, 2025)

> *A better outcome was definitely achieved because of the relationship and connections between the Local Network, MAV, and [local] councils. Stewardship is really relevant in a local government context and played a really important role in how we were able to mitigate a lot of potential risks in this project.*" – (MAV representative, 2025)

System capability

The **Local Network is increasingly confident and effective in its stewardship role**, especially in providing a personable connection for stakeholders who might otherwise only interact via generic mailboxes or large webinars. Provider Pulse Survey results show ongoing concerns about providers' capacity and capability to implement reforms, and the Local Network has played a key role in sharing nuanced local intelligence on these challenges with policy teams, while also supporting vulnerable providers and underserved communities to build understanding of how the reforms could affect them. Local Network Directors emphasise the need to recognise the diversity of the aged care sector, from large, well-resourced organisations to small, high-risk providers with limited capacity, and that, while central policy design often serves the average older person, the Local Network plays a key role in serving those who might fall through the gaps.

Case studies highlight many examples of the Local Network's role in capability and capacity uplift in areas such as interpreting government requirements, clarifying program eligibility, education, securing funding and other supports and addressing workforce and infrastructure constraints.

Case Study Summary

Onslow, Western Australia

Located in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, Onslow is the oldest town in the Ashburton Shire, and has a mining, pearling and pastoral farming history.

In July 2022, after a critical home care provider started reducing its face-to-face services, it became apparent that the community was not receiving sufficient aged care support. The Local Network collaborated with assessment service providers, who established that there was in fact a need for more aged care services in the community.

With support from the Local Network, a community-led solution to meet local needs was brokered, involving several community partners. Country Mile Home Care became the new provider of home support in Onslow, and as the number of clients increased, the care worker decided to move to Onslow and is now a part of the local community.

The community feels they have a tailored solution that ensures sustainable access to aged care services for older people in Onslow.



System responsiveness

The evaluation found evidence of stewardship **contributing to increased levels of trust, flows of information and the ability of government to adapt and respond to local needs**. Stewardship is also helping **improve the quality of services in regional, rural and remote areas**, improve pathways of care and equity of access. There are a few examples of the Local Network advocating for agency for First Nations people.

The Local Network is often playing an advocacy role, encouraging more equitable allocation of government funding and resources. This was evident in multiple case studies, interviews with the Local Network and also in the sensemaking workshop, where the Local Network identified their role as being to advocate for the "5 per cent who fall through the gaps of national policymaking, which often solves for the 95 per cent".

> "*The sector feels heard as a result of being engaged with the Local Network...having a sector that thinks we are trying to help – I think that's the result of the network.*" – (SES staff member, 2024)

The Local Network Survey found that the Local Network has high levels of confidence in their ability to provide local intelligence to help ensure aged care policy and programs meet local needs (93 per cent), address challenges to thin markets (83 per cent), improve care pathways for older people (80 per cent), help aged care providers increase equity of access to aged care for diverse groups (73 per cent), help aged care providers increase equity of access to aged care for First Nations people (72 per cent) and more broadly help aged care providers increase equity of access to aged care for older people (70 per cent).

Responsiveness is particularly evident when the system faces emerging challenges like the delayed discharge of older patients, provider viability risks/issues and emergency response.

> "*There were so many things in flux—compliance issues, staffing shortages, even union and WorkSafe involvement. To have the department's support during that time, including help to return to compliance, was invaluable.*" – (provider representative, 2024)

Examples of stewardship improving equity of access to aged care services

At the national population-level, **there are early signs that the equity of aged care may be improving**, with access among First Nations people and CALD communities increasing at a faster rate than for the general population, signaling gradual progress toward a more inclusive system. Evidence from interviews and case studies demonstrate that the Local Network has maintained a strong focus on supporting First Nations and culturally diverse providers by building trusted relationships and advocating for culturally safe service delivery.



Deep Dive Summary

Indian Ocean Territories, Offshore Australian Territory

The Indian Ocean Territories (IOT) comprise two Islands located in the Indian Ocean. Technically a territory of Australia, these islands are much closer to Southeast Asia than to Australia itself, roughly 490 kms from Jakarta and over 2,600 km from Perth.

Despite growing aged care needs across the islands, there are no Department of Health, Disability and Ageing funded aged care programs, with only a small number of health services currently operating, funded through a Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts program. Since mid-2024, the Country WA team has been working closely with this department to find solutions to the growing unmet needs of older people across the IOT. They visited the islands in 2025 meeting with local organisations to understand service need and improve aged care literacy. They also coordinated the visit with the assessment workforce to increase the number of assessments conducted. The Local Network has advocated for the inclusion of the IOT as an aged care planning region. So far, this work has resulted in the inclusion of the IOT as an aged care planning region in the Single Assessment Tender and 20 assessments of local people who are eligible to receive aged care support/services. Next steps for this work will be working with assessment agencies to better understand the aged care need and working with a Perth based provider who is interested in supporting the aged care need across the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, one of the islands making up the IOT.

Deep Dive Summary

Northern Territory

The Northern Territory has a significantly lower ratio of aged care beds to its over 65 population compared to the rest of Australia. This is particularly the case in Darwin where no new places have been brought online since 2018. Higher operating and staffing costs make the Northern Territory less feasible for both for-profit and not-for-profit providers of aged care. Recognising these challenges, the Local Network (in this case Queensland based staff) started making calls to Chief Executive Officers from a list of Queensland providers they keep with an 'expansion mindset', to gauge their interest in the Darwin market. After identifying interested providers, the Local Network wrote a submission to the Minister to seek partial funding for this build, aiming to increase the number of aged care beds and reduce the pressure on Darwin's public hospitals.

In April 2025, the Prime Minister announced a commitment by the government of up to $60 million, through the Aged Care Capital Assistance Program, to build a new 120-bed residential aged care home in Greater Darwin. The government has put out an Expression of Interest to identify a delivery partner. This new home will directly tackle the urgent issue of around 70 long-stay older patients at Royal Darwin Hospital who require aged care placements. It will also help to ease the capacity problem in Darwin's aged care services. The new home will include a Memory Support Unit and deliver targeted services to meet local needs, including for older First Nations people and people with complex and higher care needs.

Capacity to respond to emerging crisis and emergencies

The Local Network also plays an **active role in coordinating and supporting emergency response**. Their value is **considered essential for crisis response** during emergencies, such as natural disasters (e.g., floods and fires), where immediate action and local knowledge are critical and their **on-the-ground relationships with providers and understanding of the local environment allows for an immediate response** to both natural and unnatural crises.

> *"...having on the ground relationships and having an understanding of the provider environment...we have very strong responsiveness to emergency – natural and unnatural disasters. [The Local Network] play a really important role. We should retain that. In an emergency, you need to shortcut, to have relationships in place – to know what resources and challenges there are..."* – (SES staff member, 2025)

Deep Dive Summary

Responding to Cyclone Alfred

In Queensland, the Local Network team supported the sector during Cyclone Alfred by connecting providers to resources and has since started planning preparedness workshops. Staff from NSW and Victoria also stepped in to provide support when Queensland staff were personally affected by the disaster.

> *"...Cyclone Alfred, most of our office is South East Queensland based. So that was quite a unique challenge in some ways...a lot of people went offline and we had to adjust for that"* – (QLD Director)

The NSW team engaged providers before Cyclone Alfred arrived to check their preparedness and plans, enabling them to offer timely support like sourcing fuel for generators. They also assisted Queensland colleagues during Cyclone Alfred, stepping in to help when Queensland staff were without power.

Case Studies

The following two of twelve case studies demonstrate contribution to the following stewardship outcomes:

- → tailored solutions to local issues
- → relevant local intel is escalated to policymakers and senior internal stakeholders
- → aged care services are available in regional, rural and remote areas
- → increased agency for First Nations to develop, design and implement aged care services that meet their needs
- → a range of flexible aged care services and supports are available for older people, so they have agency and choice.

Case Study: Maintaining service access in thin markets

Warrnambool, Victoria

In early 2023, Lyndoch Living, a major regional aged care provider in Warrnambool, faced imminent financial collapse. With a capacity of 214 residential aged care beds (195 of them publicly funded), and a secondary facility in Terang (May Noonan Centre), its failure would have displaced up to 178 older people in a region with few alternatives.

Lyndoch's decline was due to financial distress, including debt from an underperforming Primary Health Care (PHC) facility. The organisation's status as a Victorian Public Sector Residential Aged Care Service (PSRAC) and its obligations under the *Safe Patient Care Act 2015* made it a complex and unattractive acquisition target.

Enabling a Safer, Smoother Transition

The Local Network played a central coordination and facilitation role across 18 months, helping to stabilise operations and support the transition to a new provider (Respect Group). Their actions included escalating emergency COVID-19 grant claims to ensure payroll continuity, supporting a $11.45 million Structural Adjustment Fund grant, and fast-tracking Australian National Aged Care Classification reassessments to secure funding uplifts.

They provided hands-on support during the closure of May Noonan, deploying surge workforce to enable safe resident relocation. Through regular engagement with the provider and state agencies, they helped translate the complexities of Victoria's PSRAC system for Commonwealth stakeholders and built confidence with external actors. When Lyndoch initially failed to attract buyers, it was the Local Network that reconnected with Respect Group, enabling renewed interest once finances improved. They also worked behind the scenes to broker local solutions, such as working across different stakeholders in facilitating the sale of the PHC facility to Gunditjmara Aboriginal Health Service.

Primary Outcomes:

- Successful merger between Lyndoch and Respect Group in June 2024, securing continuity of care for 178 residents.
- Safe closure of the May Noonan facility, with residents relocated and the site repurposed for worker housing.

Secondary Outcomes:

- PHC facility divested to a local First Nations health provider.

Implications for Stewardship

Local presence and system fluency enabled the department to respond quickly and collaboratively in a high-risk situation. The Local Network's ability to work across jurisdictions, provide targeted support and maintain relationships with stakeholders helped ensure a coordinated transition. Stakeholders agreed the outcome may have eventually occurred, but the process would have been more chaotic and higher risk without the Local Network's presence.

External stakeholders valued the Local Network's support and coordination, which helped smooth and stabilise a difficult transition

> *"There were so many things in flux—compliance issues, staffing shortages, even union and WorkSafe involvement. To have the department's support during that time, including help to return to compliance, was invaluable."* – (provider representative)

Case Study: Transforming First Nations Aged Care

APY Lands, South Australia

The Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (APY Lands) covers 103,000 square kilometers of arid and mountainous land in the far northwest of South Australia.

During Local Network and ACQSC visits to the APY Lands, local community members highlighted several issues including a limited range of services available to support ageing on country and low levels of community engagement by the existing service provider.

Building trusted relationships

The Local Network was able to build trusted relationships with local Aboriginal Elders by visiting the region, listening carefully to local community members, and sequencing communications through local arts centers, stores and community councils.

Between September 2023 and July 2025, the Local Network and ACQSC brought together people from within the department, nurse advisors, Two-Way Futures and community members, to develop better understanding of local needs and build the provider's understanding of quality standards and culturally safe care.

When the provider decided to exit the market, the Local Network helped coordinate a time-limited-service transition and supported a local group of Elders and community members to establish the Tjilpi / Pampa Advisory Group (Warraritja Aboriginal Corporation).

> *"What's going on is very exciting... people are much happier. For a while there were a lot of people sent to Alice Springs - Old Timers and Hettie. They walked away leaving their spirit behind. We all have a spirit and it's connected to our lands."* – (Aṉangu Elder)

Primary Outcome:

- Establishment of a Local Advisory Group working towards an Aboriginal-led approach.

Secondary Outcome:

- Aged care assessments and 220 care plans that will enable more people to access services and supports.
- Temporary provider who is delivering a wider range of high-quality care and listening to community needs.

Implications for Stewardship

Collaboration and coordination across government, advisory services and with community means smoother transitions when providers enter/exit the market, which reduces the impacts on older people.

Transforming aged care for First Nations people means government taking time to build relationships, listen to the voices of community and being open to supporting more flexible approaches to aged care that meet the unique needs of remote communities, particularly emphasising First Nations self-determination.

There is a strong line of contribution from stewardship to the outcomes identified, including a more community-led approach to aged care in the APY Lands. Multiple interviewees outside the Local Network said that the outcome may not have occurred without stewardship.

> *"Without a regional stewardship model, this wouldn't have happened, and this hasn't happened anywhere else in Australia."*

> *"Without the Local Network...this would have been a lot harder to facilitate...We wouldn't have had the intel they had about the demographics or the issues being experienced across communities... [the Local Network] was integral to the engagement: who to engage with at what particular time."*

6. Conclusion



Commissioner Briggs noted that rebuilding trust and confidence in the aged care system required the department to take explicit responsibility for stewardship, starting with a large and dedicated regional presence to embed department staff within local communities and improve visibility of local needs, service gaps and system pressures. While the department's current hub-and-spoke model is a scaled-down version of the original proposal, the effective use of existing resourcing and investment in additional staffing, alongside system tools and mechanisms, means *regional stewardship is delivering in alignment with the intent to create a more engaged, connected and responsive governance structure.*

Regional stewardship as an investment in local staffing, supported by enabling central functions, represents a shift away from a centralised, compliance-focused approach toward more proactive, relational stewardship of the system. The Local Network works collaboratively with the ACQSC providing a **complementary balance of support and assurance functions** so the sector is both supported and held accountable for improved quality and safety of aged care services.

> "*The fundamental change is in where we are putting our focus... this has now moved from working with the providers and services in aged care sector to ensure they comply with required regulations and rules... to working with various stakeholders, especially providers and services, to support them in providing quality aged care services to senior Australians – specifically through issues identification and developing solutions with those stakeholders*." – (Local Network Director, 2024)

Since 2024, **the concept of stewardship has evolved** beyond an investment in an expanded regional presence. It is now enshrined as a responsibility under the *Aged Care Act 2024* (System Governor) and has been added as a new value for the APS (*Public Service Act 1999*). This demonstrates a commitment to embedding stewardship as a mindset and way of working across government. The evaluation found that, while the Local Network feel well equipped to deliver stewardship, other parts of the department are not yet clear on how they should practice stewardship. This presents an opportunity to further clarify a consolidated, organisation-wide understanding of stewardship, including its meaning as a core APS value and its operationalisation through the System Governor role. There is also a pressing need to improve understanding and alignment between different teams and units across the department and government more broadly, to support a more joined-up approach to system stewardship.

Australia's aged care system is undergoing significant change as it continues to adapt to an ageing population and a decade of major reform. The *Aged Care Act 2024* puts older people at the centre, and the diverse needs of older people (including those who are hard to reach) from across the country need to be brought to the central policy table. This will take a strong commitment from across the department, with the Local Network uniquely positioned to play **an important role collecting and sharing the views and perspectives of older people, their families and carers**. To strengthen connections and trust between local people and decision-makers, governance processes will need to prioritise feed;back loops across the system, requiring not just technical skills, but also the capabilities to analyse, translate and effectively communicate relevant and timely information.

Furthermore, population-level trends suggest pressures on the aged care system will continue to intensify, reinforcing the need for adaptive and responsive governance. **Regional stewardship was found to help improve the department's responsiveness** by providing local intelligence, acting as an early warning system and a line of sight for Ministers, collaboratively supporting provider viability and managing the impacts of potential service closures.

Crucially, the evaluation found that regional stewardship is helping the department **rebuild relationships with First Nations communities**. Meaningful engagement with First Nations and CALD people and communities can help government and the sector better understand the unique barriers people face which can lead to more flexible and culturally safe service delivery.

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