

Place-based welfare conditionality in Australia: experiences from the regional city of Shepparton

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Introduction

The concept of conditionality in the Australian welfare system is not new. The introduction and expansion of benefit payments following Federation in 1901, established eligibility criteria that recipients were required to meet in order to access and retain support.

About two decades ago there were significant changes in emphasis for welfare conditionality in Australia, consistent with changes in many other developed countries. The changes had three key features. They sought to alter patterns of behaviour, they were inherently paternalistic and they involved punishment if the rules were not followed².

New conditionality does not offer bonuses or additional benefits as incentives for changing behaviour, but instead demands that behavioural requirements be met on pain of monetary sanctions³.

Some general features of this new conditionality have been applied universally, like participation obligations to access unemployment benefits. There has also been a consistent focus on increasing the workforce participation of families with children, particularly single parents⁴. The most detailed welfare conditionality requirements and associated penalties for non-compliance have however been delivered as a complex patchwork of place-based welfare reform measures, designed by the Commonwealth Government.

The highest profile of these place-based measures was the Northern Territory 'Emergency Response' Intervention (the Intervention) announced in June 2007. The Intervention followed the release of a special Board of Inquiry report into the sexual abuse of Aboriginal children.⁵ It introduced a range of specific rules and limitations including widespread alcohol restrictions, enforcement of school attendance, compulsory management of benefit incomes, work for the dole requirements, increased policing, including an initial deployment of soldiers from the Australian Defence Force and changes in community governance arrangements.

The Northern Territory measures were by design racially focused, framed in a manner that provided exemption from the normal operations of the Racial Discrimination Act.⁶ They were subject to significant criticism in Australia and internationally as a result.⁷ The Racial Discrimination Act protections were reinstated in 2010, however many of the individual elements of the initial package remained. They also formed the basis of welfare reform trials

¹ I wish to thank Kate Carrafa, Naomi Mazzone and Dr Janet Congues for their assistance in preparing this paper and Dr Michele Lonsdale for her comments in drafting.

² D Taylor, M Gray, and D Stanton, "New Conditionality in Australian Social Security Policy," *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 51, no. 1 (2016).

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴ See M Brady and K Cook, "The Impact of Welfare to Work on Parents and Their Children," *Evidence Base* 3 (2015).

⁵ R Wild and P Anderson, "Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle "Little Children Are Sacred", " (Northern Territory Government of Australia: Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children, 2017).

⁶ *Racial Discrimination Act 1975, Australia.*

⁷ See for example Australian Human Rights Commission, "The Suspension and Reinstatement of the Rda and Special Measures in the Nter," (Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011).

in communities outside of the Northern Territory, focusing on benefit types as the primary participation criteria rather than race.

The rationale for selecting trial sites has been linked to elevated levels of disadvantage. The indicators of disadvantage have not applied consistently but each of the trial sites has tended to have higher than average proportions of the population in receipt of benefit payments. Most of the trials have been accompanied by measures to control benefit income expenditure, through specific transaction accounts and linked electronic transfer cards that remove or reduce the cardholder's choice and financial autonomy.

This paper reports on a selection of community experiences in one trial site, the regional city of Shepparton in Victoria. Drawing from a series of interviews with leaders in not-for-profit community service agencies, it explores the impacts of the Shepparton trials. Key themes emerged from the interviews, which underscore the tensions created by welfare conditionality and the additional burdens carried by mandatory participants.

Shepparton as a welfare reform trial site

Shepparton is a rural city with a population of around 65,000, located in Victoria's Goulburn Valley, about two hours' drive north of the State capital Melbourne. It has a history of agriculture, primary production and manufacturing. Like many rural and regional populations, Shepparton has had its share of challenges. For example, changes in markets and climate and the impact of globalisation deliver practical and immediate problems for smaller, regional populations. In Shepparton the problems have included elevated levels of unemployment, a particular issue for young people who either move away in search of more opportunities or disengage from study, work or both.

In spite of the challenges, Shepparton's residents are proud and resilient. The community boasts strong local networks, nowhere more evident than in sporting associations that involve large numbers of people playing, administering, or volunteering. Shepparton has been at the forefront of Australia's multicultural heritage with well integrated and thriving migrant communities. The city has been a major provider of resettlement opportunities for refugee and humanitarian arrivals. There is also a significant Aboriginal population, all adding to a vibrant mix of cultures.

In May 2011 as part of a package of budget initiatives, Shepparton was announced as one of ten place-based welfare reform trial sites, under a program called Building Australia's Future Workforce. The additional measures targeted the long-term unemployed, families without a working parent and vulnerable youth.⁸ As well as increased compliance requirements for participating benefit recipients, additional support options were made available. The extra supports included intensive casework for the long-term unemployed and bonus payments for people volunteering to participate in Income Management, where a proportion of benefit income is quarantined.

Shepparton's selection as a trial site was not discussed with the community prior to the government's announcement. It left local community leaders struggling to answer questions from media organisations about why the city was included in a national short list, based on disadvantage.

The reform measures have evolved in the seven years since the announcement in 2011 and across changes of government. The target groups are still largely the same. There have been modifications to participation rules but compliance requirements and related penalties

⁸ Australian Government, "Budget 2011-12: Building Australia's Future Workforce: Trained up and Ready for Work," (Parkes, ACT: Treasury, 2011), 28.

have continued and in some instances intensified. Many of the additional support measures have been reduced, or discontinued.

Community leaders' views of Shepparton's conditional welfare measures

Not-for-profit agencies deliver a significant proportion of welfare support services in Australia and Shepparton is no exception. Those service providers work directly with people required to comply with welfare conditionality measures. They are a potential conduit for the views of participants. They will also have experience relevant to the design of the measures and testing effectiveness.

In Shepparton, local not-for-profit agencies were not consulted about the need for welfare reform measures or in their design prior to introduction. There has also not been any coordinated effort to canvass the views of these providers about the impact of the measures as part of evaluation activities that might determine design variation, or whether the trials should continue. Formal evaluations conducted for or by Government have generally excluded local community provider views. Where those views have been collected, it has tended to be on the initiative of Shepparton providers, or independent researchers.⁹

The limited scope of local engagement reflects a broader conversation about the use of terms like place-based, which give the impression of being community led interventions. The place-based welfare conditionality trials were centrally designed and delivered in a number of places, rather than having established engagement with the selected communities. Mendes describes this approach to community as a 'spray on solution'.

Government-Controlled community programmes may superficially imply a commitment to forming partnership with local communities... but in practice seem to be mostly about diverting responsibility for social disadvantage from the state to individuals and voluntary organisations.¹⁰

In the absence of a coordinated collection of local perspectives, leaders in not-for-profit agencies with a physical presence and service responsibilities in Shepparton were approached and five agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews about their experiences of the welfare reforms. The questions that guided the interviews included:

- Who was impacted by the trials?
- Were the impacts for participants positive, negative or mixed?
- What effect have the trials had on Shepparton?
- Is welfare conditionality compatible with the mission and values of your organisation?¹¹

The number of interviews was small limiting the conclusions that can be drawn. A number of common themes emerged however, which raise questions about the rationale for and

⁹ See P Mendes, J Waugh, and C Flynn, "The Place-Based Income Management Trial in Shepparton: A Best Practice Model for Evaluation," (Clayton, Vic: Social Inclusion and Social Policy Research Unit, Monash University, 2013). And M Banks and D Tennant, "Community Worker Perspectives of the Income Management Regime in Shepparton," *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 51, no. 4 (2016).

¹⁰ P Mendes, "Community as a 'Spray-on Solution': A Case Study of Community Engagement within the Income Management Programme in Australia," *Community Development Journal* 53, no. 2 (2017): 2.

¹¹ The questions used as a guide for the semi-structured interviews are included in Attachment A. The interview participants are acknowledged in Attachment B.

effectiveness of the welfare conditionality trial measures and invite more detailed investigation.

Who was impacted by the trials?

The place-based welfare conditionality measures delivered in ten communities including Shepparton, defined the groups of benefit recipients who would be impacted. Vulnerable young people, particularly teenage parents, jobless families and the long-term unemployed were the primary target groups.

Across the interviews, the disproportionate representation of young people and single parents in the trials was clear. Both these groups feature prominently in data reflecting poverty in Australia. In particular, there has been a pronounced increase in the rate of poverty in single parent households in recent years, from 25.7% in 2003/04 to 29.1% in 2013/14.¹² These observations are consistent with other research linking increases in poverty amongst single parents with welfare to work reform.¹³ Benefit status is a clear indicator of poverty.

Most of the interviews suggested the reform measures not only targeted people living in poverty but included those experiencing more acute vulnerability and disadvantage. Specific reference was made to the inclusion of humanitarian refugees at a rate above their representation in the general community. Similar observations were made about Aboriginal families, both in relation to their over-representation and lack of appropriate consideration of needs.

Overall, a common thread evident across the interviews was that the most vulnerable members of the Shepparton community were the most likely to be required to participate in the trials.

Were the impacts for participants positive, negative or mixed?

Each of the community leaders interviewed work in non-government agencies delivering welfare support services in Shepparton. All of them noted that people who used their services had been impacted adversely by the trials, to greater or lesser degrees. The service user groups are not uniform across the five agencies, however there are significant areas of overlap. The experiences reflected in the interviews are consistent to those noted at FamilyCare, which is also a Shepparton-based service provider.

The themes in responses related to impact were similar across the interviews. Both consistent and pronounced was a view the conditionality measures create additional challenges for people whose lives are already complex and prone to crisis. Several indicated this had negative consequences for service users' reported wellbeing, with comments indicative of this view including:

"They have just been rejected on so many levels to me it's just another form of rejection; another form of saying 'you're not good enough.'"

There was consistent concern expressed about the removal of choice and its impact on participants. All of the interviews included references to the removal of individual agency as being harmful and reducing the capacity of participants to manage for themselves and their

¹² ACOSS and Social Policy Research Centre, "Poverty in Australia 2016," (Strawberry Hills, NSW: Australian Council of Social Sciences, 2016), 19.

¹³ Brady and Cook, "The Impact of Welfare to Work on Parents and Their Children," 9.

families. One interviewee reflected on service user feedback that the mandatory nature of conditionality was unfair.

“There was resentment. Anything you are told to do I think you resent.”

Another reflected on the potential for conditionality to ignore the impact of trauma and to undermine a sense of safety for refugees.

“Concepts of choice, what opportunities a person can have to determine and drive that for themselves, deal with whatever traumas and histories that they’re having to deal with and establish themselves in a brand new country, those things just fly out the window.”

Observations about the lack of choice were not limited to benefit recipient participants and included comments about service system impacts. Several of the community leaders worked in agencies with a direct involvement in delivering programs related to the reform measures. One noted the lack of flexibility was similar for both providers and participants.

“Conditions upon receiving the services and conditions upon delivering the services.”

Another likened the prescriptive nature of the programs to be delivered as a “cookie cutter” approach. Notwithstanding the strict delivery framework there was a sense of responsibility to interpret rather than narrowly apply compliance rules that might result in penalties.

“What benefit was dobbing them in to Centrelink and having their benefits cut, other than seeing them come in for all our other services?”

Across all five interviews there was a clear theme that the conditionality requirements were insufficiently sensitive to service user needs. In most instances interviewees indicated a view that individual needs were irrelevant. One interviewee offered a blunt assessment of the potential advantages for participants:

“The Government’s portrayal of this being a mutually beneficial arrangement is not right. It is beneficial for the Government and our clients are basically going along with it.”

The lack of relevance between conditionality rules and participant need was reported as being particularly problematic for young people. For example, making conversations about employment central for those too young to have ever been in a work environment, was seen as symptomatic of a framework that lacks age appropriateness. Similarly, several of the interviewees questioned the usefulness of rules requiring young parents to give priority to activities other than caring for their children.

There were acknowledgements of positive outcomes for participants whilst they were involved in welfare reform programs. Consistent with other formal evaluations, two of the interviews noted that the Income Management measures were seen as helpful by participants who chose to take the option up. One interviewee summarised the feedback from volunteers for Income Management as follows:

“Oh ok, this could be handy – get a little bit of money for it, so why wouldn’t I do it?”

When the trials commenced, bonus payments of \$250 every six months were made to encourage voluntary participation in Income Management. The bonus payment system for volunteers was withdrawn in mid-2017 and there has been a noticeable drop in the numbers selecting that option since.

All interview participants expected that there would continue to be positive outcomes. An equally consistent view however was that the positives are occurring in spite of compulsory conditionality rather than because of it. As one interviewee put it:

“I can think of a number of occasions where our support assisted with positive change. I cannot think of a single occasion where conditionality caused the improvement.”

Across the interviews the assessment of trial impacts on participants was predominantly negative. Perhaps most negative of all, was the view that welfare conditionality is aimed at people who contribute to their own disadvantage and who are less deserving as a result. Several interviewees referred either directly or by implication to a distinction, coined by a former Australian Treasurer in 2014 and several years after the place-based welfare reform trials were announced, that people were either ‘lifters’ or ‘leaners’.¹⁴ To briefly paraphrase the former Treasurer’s use of the terms, Lifters work and contribute; Leaners do not work, draining resources through their reliance on benefit incomes and requiring the firm hand of welfare conditionality.

How have the trials impacted Shepparton?

Each of the interviews included a discussion about how Shepparton as a community had responded to its selection as a welfare conditionality trial site. Some common themes emerged. The first was consistent with the increased focus on individual responsibility inherent in new welfare conditionality policy. Interviewees reflected on the manner in which the trials and public discourse surrounding them has sought to emphasise differences and has in the process exacerbated a sense of separation between participants and the rest of the community.

A practical example of the focus on differences is the presentation of the easily identified Basics Card. Participants subject to Income Management generally have to use the distinctive lime green Basics Card to access quarantined funds at permitted shops for approved purchases. Less overt but more important have been additional layers of segregation applicable to people subject to the welfare conditionality measures. One interview referred to a growing divide between the *“haves and have nots”*. Even within user groups for welfare service activities, unhelpful extra distinctions have emerged. Another interviewee reflected on parents of young children not wanting to attend an activity attended by people required to be there as part of a compulsory participation plan. They saw that as unsurprising, because of the otherwise voluntary nature of their agency’s service.

“A key driver of the success of our programs is they are with people who also want to be there.”

Another common theme was a suggestion the increased focus on individual responsibilities had come at the expense of a balanced recognition and understanding of the structural causes of disadvantage. One interview with a leader from an agency that recruits and supports volunteers to work with families including those impacted by the trial measures, suggested training those volunteers had become harder because of the shift in priority from structural disadvantage to individual responsibility. Another suggested the rhetoric surrounding the trials made it easier for people not impacted to dismiss the struggles of those who were.

“I think it probably does create a license for people to say ‘yeah – leaner, whatever... doesn’t affect me’.”

¹⁴ *Budget Speech 2014-2015, Second Reading of the Appropriation Bill, No. 1.*

Consistent with earlier comments about the impacts of conditionality, interviewees noted that expectations about participant responsibility did not extend to appropriately individualised responses to their actual needs.

“On the individual level it has been difficult for families, because the condition(s) of receiving the government support are not sensitive to your individual need.”

The other main theme was the impact of Shepparton’s selection on how people think about their community. Each of the interviews referred to the burden carried by a city defined by its problems and having achieved notoriety as a result.

“The narrative that describes Shepparton is one of failure.”

The selection and announcements of the trial sites paid little regard to links between the health of individuals, families and the communities in which they live, which is considered important in building community capacity.¹⁵ Across the interviews, Shepparton’s inclusion in the list of trial sites was consistently referred to as having a negative impact on community perceptions.

“If you tell a community something about themselves enough they start to believe it and Shepparton is no different to any other regional community in Australia.”

The deficit-based promotion of place ignores the principles and benefits of a community development approach.¹⁶ One of the leaders expressed embarrassment about the initial announcement and trepidation each time new data is released.

“Every time another statistic comes out, it just perpetuates the sense of ‘bloody Shepparton, we’re hopeless, we’re really worthless’ and I think the whole nature of the trial has really exacerbated that.”

Ironically, at the time Shepparton was selected as a trial site it was not identified as one of the most disadvantaged communities in Victoria based on the best known model for identifying place-based disadvantage in Australia.¹⁷ Four years after the conditionality trials had commenced, Shepparton had entered the list of the 40 most disadvantaged postcodes in the State of Victoria.¹⁸

In spite of the persistent bad news and the unwelcome national notoriety created by the welfare conditionality trials, the interviews disclosed a sense of optimism. One interview summarised the willingness to tackle the negative stereotyping of the community and all of its members, including those participating in the trials, as follows:

“It would be fantastic to switch that. To actually begin to concentrate on strengths and successes.”

¹⁵ S Lohar, R Price-Robertson, and L Nair, "Applying Community Capacity-Building Approaches to Child Welfare Practice and Policy," in *Information Exchange* (CFCA Paper no. 13, Child Family Community Australia, Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2013), 2.

¹⁶ Mendes, "Community as a ‘Spray-on Solution’: A Case Study of Community Engagement within the Income Management Programme in Australia."

¹⁷ Jesuit Social Services commissioned researcher Tony Vinson to prepare a report on locational disadvantage in 1999, which was updated in 2004. Catholic Social Services joined the project in 2007 with the release of *Dropping off the Edge*, which was also updated in 2015. Shepparton did not appear in the list of most disadvantaged postcodes in Victoria in the 2007 edition of *Dropping off the Edge*.

¹⁸ T Vinson et al., "Dropping Off the Edge 2015: Persistent Communal Disadvantage in Australia," (Richmond, Vic: Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia, 2015), 71.

Is welfare conditionality compatible with not-for-profit missions and values?

All of the interviewees referred to the challenge for non-government welfare service providers in reconciling welfare conditionality with the mission and values of their agencies. None of the interviewees expressed support for welfare policy built around punishment. In one example of that view, it was suggested the punitive approach of conditionality:

“(f)lies in the face of mission, vision, values of the organisation at its core and what we do across the sector.”

Another noted the contrasts between supporting and penalising.

“There are stark inconsistencies between our approach to working with families in a strengths-based way and the whole reform package which actually would have the effect of reducing autonomy and agency.”

One interviewee from an agency working closely with the statutory child protection system, acknowledged that *“superficially the logic of welfare conditionality is actually compatible”* with the statutory system. The discussion that followed stressed the superficiality of the comparison. A statutory system has the advantage of being able to receive and test evidence, directly involving those whose freedoms might be impacted by an eventual determination. In contrast conditionality is predominantly administrative and tends to apply standard rules regardless of individual wishes and capacity. Compulsory participants can seek judicial review but rarely do.

The strong views opposing welfare conditionality expressed by interviewees were consistent with views expressed by national not-for-profit leaders.¹⁹ Those views were tempered by the reality that the programs would be delivered regardless of opposition. As senior representatives of local service agencies, most of the interviewees described the difficult balance to be struck in assisting their clients to engage with reform measures and weighing whether to be part of the infrastructure for delivering the measures.

According to the interviewees, providers that chose to participate in the delivery of welfare reform activities had considered the need to provide a buffer between the policy and participants in arriving at a decision. One interviewee expressed the view that gaps would have been filled by commercial operators with less concern for participants' wellbeing.

“If it's not us with the values trying to figure out ways to help things work, we run the risk of those that are bean counters doing it and we know that when it comes to the consumer, business does what business must do.”

Those who were not part of delivering the reform measures were also realistic about the requirements their clients had to comply with. Where practical to do so, several interviewees who were strongly opposed to the reform measures noted the efforts their agencies had gone to in supporting service users to meet their obligations.

“We will facilitate their compliance where we can so that they aren't punished because they're caught up in a program we wouldn't ordinarily support.”

¹⁹ For example J Falzon, "Resistance and Hope," in *Resistance and Hope Speech to Progress 2015 Conference* (Melbourne2015).

Conclusion

There is no coordinated approach to the ongoing evaluation of welfare conditionality in Australia, or of the place-based welfare reform measures undertaken in ten communities, including Shepparton, since 2011. Where evaluations or program reviews exist, they relate to specific activities and provide little opportunity to analyse local impacts individually or comparatively.

Shepparton community providers have been proactive in their attempts to engage with the reform measures, to ensure local needs are prioritised. Those efforts have included the commissioning of a best practice model for the evaluation of place-based Income Management, released in July 2013²⁰ and research into community worker perceptions of the Income Management regime.²¹

The interviews undertaken to inform this paper sought to capture welfare service provider's experiences of local impacts across the conditionality trial measures. The views were both consistent and predominantly negative, confirming:

- The people most likely to have been impacted were already the most vulnerable.
- Welfare conditionality has mostly made participants' lives more difficult and where positives have been achieved, they were not attributable to the reforms.
- Shepparton as a community has not benefitted by being singled out on the basis of elevated levels of disadvantage and has been afforded limited opportunities to describe local needs and design appropriate solutions.
- The rationale for and impact of welfare conditionality is incompatible with the vision and values of many not-for-profit welfare service providers.

This is a small and limited study. It is however consistent with others that raise concerns about the effectiveness of welfare conditionality and call for more and better investigation.

²⁰ Mendes, Waugh, and Flynn, "The Place-Based Income Management Trial in Shepparton: A Best Practice Model for Evaluation."

²¹ Banks and Tennant, "Community Worker Perspectives of the Income Management Regime in Shepparton."

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Attachment A:

Interview Questions:

‘Place-based Welfare Conditionality in Australia: experiences from the regional city of Shepparton.’

1. What is your organisation’s understanding and experience of place-based welfare conditionality in Shepparton?
2. Do you think there are any particular groups more affected by the reforms than others and if so, which groups and why?
3. Have any clients of your organisation’s services been impacted by the reform measures and conditionality trials and if so, have the impacts been positive, negative, or mixed?
4. What are the broader impacts for the Shepparton Community?
5. Could you describe the compatibility of welfare reform and conditionality with your organisation’s mission and values?

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Any information or quote used in this paper will be checked with you for accuracy in advance. Quotes will not identify you or your organisation, although with your permission I will appropriately acknowledge your involvement, in accompanying references.

David Tennant
CEO FamilyCare
January 2018

Attachment B:

Interview Participants

Nicholas Haney

Director of Operations
CatholicCare Sandhurst

Andrew Holloway

Regional Manager, Northern Victoria
Save the Children Australia

Patrice Jackson

Director Hume
Berry Street Victoria

Melinda Lawley

Chief Executive Officer
The Bridge Youth Service

Rebecca Lorrains

Chief Executive Officer
Primary Care Connect