

How do place-based services evolve in a world of virtual, physical and hybrid service delivery?

HOW DO PLACE-BASED SERVICES EVOLVE IN A WORLD OF VIRTUAL, PHYSICAL AND HYBRID SERVICE DELIVERY?

A research report prepared by the Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW for
ANZSOG



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Abbreviations

ANZSOG	Australian and New Zealand School of Government
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-government organisation
NSW DPC	NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet
PBI	Place-based initiative
QR-codes	A machine-readable matrix barcode
SMS	Short message service, or text message

Executive summary

The purpose of this study, commissioned and funded by ANZSOG and co-sponsored by the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet (NSW DPC), was to identify the emerging considerations for government in designing and delivering hybrid (i.e. virtual and face-to-face) services and hybrid place-based initiatives (PBIs) – specifically those relating to social services. This draws on recent experience of finding new ways of working in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The objectives of the research were to:

- Examine the effect of virtual and hybrid modes of service delivery on stakeholder groups within government, industry and community, including service providers and their clients/customers.
- Identify features of place-based service delivery that promote community capability and wellbeing; economic development; collaborative governance; and help-seeking and service access amongst vulnerable populations.
- Identify the policy settings and resources that will support the ongoing transformation of place-based service delivery.

The study included a rapid evidence review, a Delphi exercise and deliberative panels. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the objectives of the research were refined at each stage in consultation with ANZSOG and NSW DPC. The analysis identified common principles for designing hybrid services and hybrid PBIs.

Prior understanding of place-based and hybrid services

- There is no clear or agreed definition of PBI. Practice highlights different conceptions of 'place', and diversity in the focus, nature and type of initiative. However, there is agreement that PBIs address both people and place in a specific location.
- Many human service PBIs focus on integrating or joining up different services and often involve an element of community development/empowerment and co-design.
- Service provision and communication from governments to communities is increasingly conducted online, and further increased due to COVID-19. After the initial COVID-19 restrictions, many services became hybrid.
- Virtual components of services have the potential to provide access to clients who otherwise would have missed out, but could undermine the sense of place and community when accessed remotely. This may cause a tension when implementing online components in PBIs.

Findings from this study

- This study confirmed COVID-19 has been a significant accelerator for increasing the range of services and initiatives delivered in hybrid form. The increasing use of online service components is coexisting with a greater focus on 'place' and locality.

- While governments supported and enabled service providers to innovate and shift towards hybrid service delivery in the early response to the pandemic, the response has largely been ad hoc. Innovation should continue to be encouraged, supported by a robust evidence base.
- There is some value in hybrid PBIs over face-to-face or online only; these components can be complementary rather than adversary.
- The benefits of hybrid PBIs for service users include increasing access, flexibility, connection to other users and consumer choice. Virtual services can facilitate access to people previously excluded from services and provide new ways of engaging service users.
- The benefits for service providers include increasing reach, increasing efficiency, providing staff with greater flexibility, and providing staff with greater support remotely. Hybrid PBIs can also create new opportunities to connect service users and providers.
- However, the use of virtual components can also be a barrier to service access and delivery due to access to and cost of technology, familiarity with and usability of technology, concerns of data security and governance, additional costs, and ease at which consumers can disengage with online services. Many of these barriers can be overcome by investing in digital infrastructure and providing training.
- Other barriers to implementing hybrid services and hybrid PBIs include how trust between services and clients, and consequently governments and communities, is established and maintained, and concerns about the design, integration, implementation and resourcing of services. In particular, any virtual component needs to be carefully designed to maintain engagement with the client and also be integrated with other components of service delivery.
- Finally, participants in this study recognised clients must always be able to access a human being, be it virtually or face-to-face.

Implications for government

Given the inevitable growth of virtual and hybrid services in the context of PBIs, it is important that future government initiatives consider how virtual services can be included in the design and how they are integrated and interact with face-to-face components. Implications for government include considerations for commissioning services and considerations when providing services – summarised in the infographic on the following page. Further, given the minimal evidence-base, there is a need to evaluate current and emerging forms of hybrid PBIs to understand both the short and long-term outcomes and inform future policy development.

The remainder of the report describes the research that informs these findings, including the research objectives (Section 1), the research methodology and the collaborative research process (Section 2), and key findings from the rapid evidence review, Delphi, and deliberative panels (Sections 3–5). Section 6 concludes and identifies future research opportunities.

Considerations when commissioning, designing and implementing hybrid place-based initiatives

Commissioning

- Identify need for a different approach – *Why is hybrid design better than face-to-face or online?*
- Consult community and service providers – *Will stakeholders engage in a hybrid approach?*
- Incorporate mechanisms to encourage innovation (through requests for tender and contracts) – *What will hybrid design do differently? How will this be facilitated and encouraged?*
- Where outsourced – *How will contracts enable and encourage innovation and overcome the complexity of managing multiple modes of service provision?*
- Where delivered internally – *What mechanisms and authority are needed to encourage innovation?*
- Recognising additional up-front investment and ongoing costs of delivering multi-modal forms of service delivery – *What resources and time are needed to establish and maintain the service?*

Design

- Agree on co-governance arrangements for both design, engagement, oversight and safeguards, recognising added complexity of hybrid initiatives
- Define and ensure common understanding of scope (place, virtual, hybrid), objective including target population (outcomes to be achieved for who), key stakeholders (government, service providers, community), and resources available
- Incorporate good design principles, including where existing services transition to hybrid form – *How will individual face-to-face and virtual components will be integrated?*
- Consider equity issues in terms of access to technology to mitigates unequal access
- Include support for service providers who are hesitant or reluctant to use new technologies
- Co-design components of the service with end users to ensure they are accessible and engaging – especially virtual components. Co-design success criteria, as well as the monitoring and evaluation plan, to ensure appropriate data collected, including inputs, outcomes and costs

Implementation

- Ensure the technical infrastructure is in place to reliably provide hybrid services
- Ensure governance of service includes key stakeholders
- Ensure service is accessible and access is monitored to ensure barriers to access are minimised and the service responds to changing context and/or community needs
- Ensure adequate safeguards are in place, including privacy, data protection, system security, and an accessible complaints process
- Provide different points of contact and an in-person option for consumers who do not wish to or cannot access the online option
- Continue to test assumptions about who will benefit, who will facilitate, and who will resist hybrid service delivery – including service providers and community members
- Ensure data collected to inform evaluation process and service responds to emerging finds

Enabling innovation

- Provide flexibility in contracting
- Share experiences through a funded and supported community of practice between government, service providers, community representatives and researchers, to enable knowledge transfer
- Undertake robust evaluations on the implementation, reach, process, outcomes and cost effectiveness of services – with comparisons of alternatives where possible

-
- Test emerging innovations in new contexts

1 Objectives and scope of the research

This section presents the original research objectives of the study and our original understanding of place-based services.

1.1 Research objectives

The objectives of the research are to:

- Examine the short- and long-term effects that virtual and hybrid modes of service delivery may have on stakeholder groups within government, industry and community, as well as service provider organisations and their clients/customers.
- Assess traditional and emerging models of place-based service delivery and identify features of these models that promote community capability and wellbeing; economic development; collaborative governance; and help-seeking and service access amongst vulnerable populations.
- Identify the policy settings and resources that will support the ongoing transformation of place-based service delivery including privacy and security requirements; digital inclusion frameworks; organisational work practices; and a data collection and monitoring system that will enable service managers to assess if community goals are being achieved.

1.2 Prior understanding of place-based initiatives

Place-based initiatives (PBIs) seek to address problems of families and communities by focusing on the social and physical environment of a geographical community and providing better integrated, and more accessible service systems to those living in the community. Place-based services aim to address issues that exist at the community level such as social isolation, gaps and overlaps in service provision and social inequity. These services are typically anchored to communities through physical infrastructure from which services are offered directly to clients.

PBIs can involve improving efforts to target and join up services in a particular community, but often go further than this, attempting to engage the community and key stakeholders in a 'collective impact' endeavour, adopting a community development approach that focuses on improving conditions for the whole community. Using a collective impact approach, a range of community stakeholders, including local policy makers, service providers, community leaders and community members, work together to identify a common agenda that meets a particular need for the community and how it may best be met. Implementation is often supported by a backbone of key stakeholders who coordinate activities, and data collection and analysis to monitor progress.

All existing models of place-based services are predicated on the assumption of physical communities and physical service provision, often based in areas of where service needs are high and where service delivery and coordination are lacking. COVID-19 has accelerated changes within human services, particularly the use of digital technologies in service delivery, which have

the potential to be disrupters of traditional service models, including place-based services. Indeed, the speed and scale of these changes mean that there is an as-yet-emerging evidence base for the effectiveness of these services and in particular the development of hybrid models of service delivery, as the publication of peer-reviewed research and strongly designed evaluations will take time. Nevertheless, practitioners and service stakeholders are reporting promising innovations and successful adaptations of existing practice which have been adopted during the pandemic, many of which have the potential for becoming embedded in service models over the long-term. Following a year of rapid service redesign, experimentation, and adaptation to maintain the safe delivery of human services within the context of COVID-19 disruptions, there is a need for purposeful consideration of the challenges and opportunities presented by these changes, to sustain and improve place-based service delivery, especially those groups and communities that have been historically excluded from high quality services, and those at high risk of poor outcomes.

As noted in Section 2.1 below, through a process of discovery, the research objectives were refined in response to the emerging evidence in discussion with the funder.

2 Methodology

The research has been a collaborative process with ANZSOG and NSW DPC, facilitated by regular meetings to discuss methods, identify stakeholders, refine the research instruments, and discuss the progress of the project, timelines and deliverables. This approach, described in Section 2.1 below, was integral to the success of the project.

The research used three key methods to address the research objectives, delivered sequentially with each method informing the next:

- A rapid evidence review was used to identify what was already known in the literature (Section 2.2)
- An online Delphi exercise was used to integrate the knowledge and opinions of different experts to better understand the issue and help improve policy and practice (Section 2.3)
- Deliberative panels were used to reflect on the insights gained from the Delphi and distil key insights for governments (Section 2.4).

The data from each method were combined to address the research objectives (Section 2.5). This methodology was approved by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee (approved 15 October 2021, UNSW HC210779).

Throughout the remainder of the report, we have tried to use the three terms – virtual, hybrid, place-based – very specifically, to refer, respectively to only virtual services or virtual components (virtual); to services that combine or blend virtual and face-to-face components (hybrid); and to services that are focussed on enhancing both place and person in joined up service delivery (place-based). The research findings can be used by governments who wish to design and deliver both hybrid services, as well as hybrid PBIs.

2.1 The collaborative research process

The collaborative relationship between the research team and the ANZSOG team, including NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC), has been critical to the project's success. This includes refining and adapting the research focus, research instruments and methods in the light of the data analysis; identifying and recruiting key stakeholders to participate in the study; supporting the practical implementation of the project; and in knowledge translation and dissemination of the findings.

Meetings held between ANZSOG and the research team through July–September 2021, discussed the potential policy domains for this project, appreciating the differences between health, education, policing, infrastructure services, social services (e.g. family and child welfare), and others. We noted that health services were the most advanced in relation to PBIs, and there was a desire to explore social services and infrastructure (rather than health). This led to the rapid evidence review focusing on social services.

The project commenced with a clear focus on place-based initiatives (PBI), which we described in our proposal as:

Place-based services seek to address problems of families and communities by focusing on the social and physical environment of a geographical community and providing better integrated, and more accessible service systems to those living in the community. Place-based services aim to address issues that exist at the community level such as social isolation, gaps and overlaps in service provision and social inequity. These services are typically anchored to communities through physical infrastructure from which services are offered directly to clients.

The ANSZOG program noted that: “Governments increasingly recognise the importance of ‘place making’ as part of their urban design and planning and ‘place-based approaches’ as critical to sustainable social interventions” (Request for Tender, June 2021).

The methodology – a literature review, a Delphi exercise, and deliberative panels – was designed to focus on PBIs and the challenges to assess how PBIs (by default grounded in specific geographical locations) could be developed and enhanced with virtual components (by default not grounded in place).

It became apparent from participants in Round 1 of the Delphi, and through discussion with ANZSOG and NSW DPC, that there was no shared understanding of PBIs. For example, although most participants selected people and place as targets of PBIs, the descriptions tended to focus on people rather than place. The rapid evidence review also found few published studies on PBIs outside health that have introduced a virtual component alongside face-to-face service delivery. However, we also knew from Round 1 and through discussions across our networks that in response to COVID-19, many services had shifted to virtual and hybrid forms of delivery. Consequently, the project began to focus more on hybrid services, irrespective of whether place-based or not. This enabled a richer analysis of hybrid delivery, but also revealed that the central starting premise – of hybrid place-based services – was a concept that very few had grappled with to date.

As shown in this report, our findings navigate across virtual services, hybrid services generally, and hybrid place-based interventions. Whilst we have endeavoured to retain a central interest in hybrid PBIs (in line with the original research objective), the fact that it was hard to keep this focus, especially without prioritising a focus on health services (who are most advanced when it comes to virtual, hybrid, and place-based), is revealing.

This project provides useful insights for future co-production of research which focuses on key policy issues and learning for government. The frequent interactions ensured that the research remained focused on the policy priorities and on the considerations of the key audiences for the findings. This way of working is resource intensive for both parties, and requires more meetings and other communication than would normally be the case in similar projects. Nevertheless, this project demonstrates that this approach can result in higher quality and more relevant outputs, more effective knowledge translation and better identification of future research.

2.2 Rapid evidence review

A rapid evidence review was undertaken examining the changing experiences of virtual, physical and hybrid service delivery; the study focused on social care (child and family services), with reference to key outcomes including safer, healthier and more inclusive communities. The review included innovations and attempted enhancements facilitated by changing technologies, and unplanned changes brought about by COVID-19 and the responses of different agencies and services.

The review included:

- Evidence searches across multiple academic and information databases, as well as specialist libraries or information sites (e.g. Australian Institute of Family Studies, AHURI, and SPRC publications and resources)
- Evidence searches conducted through direct contact and liaison with team member networks (e.g. with HUE, Virtual RPA and place-based service providers)
- Screening and selection of evidence according to pre-determined inclusion/exclusion criteria
- Information and data extraction using a template
- A thematic synthesis of results to identify core components and activities, barriers and facilitating factors to developing hybrid services.

The review focused on literature produced in the last three years, given the rapid development of these initiatives, particularly in response to the pandemic.

Types of evidence that were included in the review include:

- Peer reviewed literature focusing on innovations in place-based, hybrid and online service provision in human services, family services or community services, and including broader service domains which include one or more of these three domains
- Reports of service innovations, in particular government services, which have been developed in response to COVID-19
- Recent evaluations of place-based and hybrid services.

The rapid evidence review, including detailed methodology, is presented in a separate report (Smyth et al., 2021). The rapid evidence review summarises key lessons, knowledge gaps, debates, and indicative priority topics for Australian policy and practice in implementing place-based services in a world of virtual, physical and hybrid service delivery in social services. The paper also identifies the strength of the evidence in this area, given the speed at which virtual services have been developed in response to the pandemic.

The rapid evidence review provided the basis of the discussion paper used to inform the Delphi.

2.3 Delphi exercise

The purpose of the Delphi exercise was to refine and focus the discussion paper for the deliberative panel. The Delphi exercise was conducted online via a survey to allow participants sufficient time to review research findings and consult with colleagues, which is often very important for participation.

Potential participants were identified in consultation with ANZSOG and NSW DPC, through our own research networks, and from the rapid evidence review. This included representatives of government, academia, service provision and other key stakeholders, both in Australia and New Zealand, and other countries. Participants were invited to participate in two rounds of the study. The online questionnaire was hosted on the Qualtrics survey platform. Potential participants were sent a survey link via email and invited to participate – participation was voluntary. After the consent page of the survey, participants were presented with a short discussion paper before being provided with a brief survey (with both multiple choice and open-ended questions) taking 20-30 minutes to complete. Participants from Round One were also invited to participate in Round Two unless they opted out of further contact.

Round 1 of the Delphi was developed using the findings of the rapid evidence review. As the literature review did not identify any hybrid PBIs, Round One was designed to be exploratory. It examined the type of PBI (place or person), what it was used for, respondent's experiences with the approach, and some of the benefits and challenges they faced introducing virtual components into the initiative. The survey opened on 6 December 2021 and invitations were sent to 75 stakeholders. Two reminders were sent, and the survey was closed mid-January. Twenty-four responses were received, with 19 viable responses included in the final sample for analysis (approx. 27 per cent response rate). A workshop was held between the research team, ANZSOG and NSW DPC to discuss the findings and inform the development of Round Two.

Round 2 of the Delphi was developed using the findings of Round 1 and the workshop with ANZSOG and NSW DPC. Round Two sought to further refine how, when and for whom hybrid PBIs are useful. The survey focussed on the transition from face-to-face to virtual or hybrid initiatives. The survey opened on 15 March 2022 and closed on 31 March 2022. Invitations were sent to 77 stakeholders. Most had been invited to participate in Round One, but some additional stakeholders were added. Twenty-one responses were received, with 16 viable responses included in the final sample for analysis (approx. 21 per cent response rate).

The findings of each round of the Delphi were presented to and discussed with ANZSOG and NSW DPC to refine the line of inquiry and priorities for the subsequent steps. The findings are summarised in Section 5 of this report and formed the basis of discussions at the deliberative panels.

2.4 Deliberative panels

A deliberative panel is a form of facilitated dialogue which for this project was designed to consider key principles of hybrid service design and delivery, with a particular focus on place-based service design and delivery. The panels explored the design and delivery of place-based initiatives and

services (online and hybrid forms), and the current and potential role of different stakeholders in developing place-based services. The panel participants were selected jointly by the research team, ANZSOG and NSW DPC.

The research team invited key stakeholders (N=33) who had participated in the Delphi, or who had since been identified by NSW DPC or ANZSOG as key practitioners. Two two-hour panels were held online using Microsoft Teams (29 April 2022, 2 May 2022) involving a total of 18 participants. The deliberative panel considered the following areas:

1. Designing hybrid services

What are the key design principles for successful hybrid services, including consideration of best practices with regard to:

- Establishing services (e.g. driven by need, top-down initiative vs bottom-up)
- Governance arrangements and leadership
- Engagement of end-users

2. Delivering hybrid services

Practical lessons in successful hybrid service delivery, including:

- What works well on the ground; and what doesn't work well on the ground?
- What are the tips and tricks if you were designing and/or delivering a hybrid service today? (What would you do differently, given what you know now?)
- What are the essential ingredients for effective hybrid service delivery?

3. Innovations

- What have you seen or heard about that is truly innovative in hybrid service design and/or delivery?
- Have we maximised the potential benefits of hybrid, or is there more to learn/be done?
- For place-based services – where services aim to impact on place as well as person and aim to build social capital, community capability and wellbeing – can hybrid models be developed and delivered in the context of place-based services? How can hybrid delivery have a positive impact on place, and build community cohesion? Examples may include:
 - Local community engagement virtually alongside face-to-face
 - Online ecosystems
 - Communities of practice (online)

Each panel was also attended by the research team in an observation capacity. ANZSOG and NSW DPC also participated. This allowed the project sponsor to hear first-hand the experiences of participants and also contribute to the discussion. Each panel was audio recorded and detailed notes were taken by two of the research team.

2.5 Analysis and reporting

Analysis was conducted at each stage of the project using thematic analysis against the research objectives. This allowed each stage of the research to be refined to ensure it continued to meet the needs of the funder. This report presents a summary of the findings from the rapid evidence review and the Delphi, and analysis of the deliberative panel discussion, to respond to the objectives of the study.

- Section 3 reports the high-level findings of the rapid evidence review
- Section 4 presents the high-level findings of the Delphi and outcome of discussion of those findings with ANZSOG and NSW DPC
- Section 5 presents the analysis from the deliberative panels
- Section 6 provides key learnings from the study to inform future practice and identifies opportunity for further research.

3 Key findings from the rapid evidence review

The rapid evidence review explored the changing experiences of virtual, physical and hybrid service delivery of place-based initiatives, focusing on social care. The review sought to identify innovations and attempted enhancements facilitated by changing technologies, and unplanned changes brought about by COVID-19 and the responses of different agencies and services. The review did not identify examples of virtual or hybrid PBIs. However, the review identified an emerging body of literature on service adaptations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key findings:

- Although there is a vast body of literature on place-based, area-based or community-based initiatives, and some literature on virtual service delivery in the child and family services sector, the review did not find a crossover between the two.
- The limited use of technology in child and family services to date is partly attributable to a long-held belief that technology-based service delivery is substandard compared with in-person services, although this perception is changing.
- Most of the limited literature on the use of technology in child and family services describes online programs and phone or videoconferencing service delivery options. There was little evidence of hybrid service delivery and how the two modes of service delivery interact.
- The review identified an emerging body of literature on service adaptations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This involved offering clients online or phone-based consultations/check-ins when face-to-face consultations were not an option to ensure continuity of service and support.
- The sudden shift to online/remote service delivery options due to the COVID-19 pandemic proved challenging for many practitioners in the child and family sector due to limited prior experience with these modes of service delivery, problems with technology, and Internet access for clients.
- The pre-COVID-19 literature on the use of technology in the delivery of child/family interventions generally emphasises the benefits of technology for increasing access to services for populations in rural/remote regions.
- The review includes examples of remote/online/hybrid service delivery in the child and family service sector, including social work practice; parenting programs, family and relationship services; and domestic and family violence services.
- The review includes examples of remote/online/hybrid service delivery in the allied health and health service sector, including services for people with autism spectrum disorder; speech and language services; general health services; mental health services; youth opioid treatment services; and youth sexual health services.

- Some of the literature reviewed addressed the service access and health equity implications of shifting to remote/online/hybrid modes of service delivery.

The full rapid evidence review is available as a separate report (Smyth et al., 2021).

4 Key findings from the Delphi

This section presents the framing and findings for each round of the Delphi exercise.

4.1 Framing for Delphi Round One

Delphi participants were provided with information about the objective of the study, the purpose of the Delphi as part of the study, and how the Delphi process works. Participants were provided an explanation of key terms, specifically 'place-based initiatives', 'place' and 'virtual services'.

- The term 'place-based initiative' can be used to describe a range of different types of interventions. Wilks et al. (2015) describe five types of place-based initiatives:
 - Major focus on place in order to impact place
 - Major focus on place in order to impact person
 - Major focus on person in order to impact place
 - Major focus on person in order to impact person
 - Simultaneous major focus on place and person in order to impact both
- The geography of 'place' in the context of PBIs is highly variable and can range from small areas such as city blocks or villages through to larger areas such as one or more towns or local government area.
- 'Virtual services' can include any service which is not provided face-to-face between the service provider and the client. This could include services^{1*} provided via:
 - Zoom or similar technology
 - Online chat rooms
 - Email/WhatsApp or SMS groups
 - Mobile phone apps
 - Services or advice provided by algorithms (bots or other digital devices).

4.2 Key findings from Delphi Round One

The key findings from Delphi Round One are summarised as follows.

- There was **no clear consensus** on the definition or components that fall under the umbrella term 'place-based initiative' (PBI). Initiatives can include top-down/bottom-up demand, be focussed on impact of place and/or person, focus on a variety of places, and be conducted face-to-face and/or online (in terms of both client and providers). As such, we recognise **PBIs can be different things in different contexts**.
- When asked to **define** PBIs, most participants selected **a major focus on both place and person in order to impact both**. However, in **descriptions** of PBIs, participants tended to

¹ Services exclude the provision of information alone and population services such as Centrelink.

focus on people rather than place. Most participants tended to define people in terms of locational disadvantage, vulnerability, or as hard to reach (noting that each of these terms is contested). Consideration is given to how the impacts of hybrid initiatives can be understood given disparity in virtual technology in **populations with unmet need**.

- Of the domains in which PBIs can be categorised, most participants ticked multiple options, which suggests there is no one clear intended focus or measure for PBIs. Rather, **domains overlap in the development and delivery of PBIs**. This correlates with most responses which said PBIs involve multiple and coordinated agencies and services.
- When participants described PBIs, there was **diversity** in whether PBIs are driven by top-down factors (i.e. by policy-makers) or bottom-up (in response to community demand/action).
- **Multiple types of online services exist** targeting a range of issues, and consequently look different depending on what kind of service is being provided. COVID-19 has driven many of the changes towards virtual and hybrid service delivery, and practice is evolving. Many services had to transition rapidly with little guidance as to how to do this, and there was a clear demand for implementation guidelines. There was also a **lack of evidence on the transition points** between face-to-face and online service development and delivery.
- ‘Hybrid’ can describe a service, a component of the service, or the range of services available to a particular community. There is **value in both face-to-face and online services**, which can vary by person, at the point they use a service, and be used independently or combined.

4.3 Framing for Delphi Round Two

The research team, in discussion with ANZSOG and NSW DPC, identified several questions from Round One of the Delphi that guided the design and analysis of Round Two of the Delphi. PBIs are generally understood to be varied, but broadly include initiatives designed to both activate a geographical area (place) and/or coordinate and co-locate wrap-around services for people (people) in a particular location. Given the dominance of the latter, Round Two of the Delphi also asked: *how can PBIs that focus on particular geographical locations be translated for non-specific populations?*

Recognising diversity in both PBIs and hybrid services, Round Two of the Delphi sought to refine participants’ views on the challenges and opportunities of developing and implementing hybrid and virtual services in the context of place-based initiatives and to:

- Identify what successful hybrid PBIs look like and the design principles to successful implementation.
- Identify the enablers and barriers of transforming a PBI into an effective hybrid PBI.

Participants in Round Two were provided with a copy of the key findings of Round One (presented in Section 5.2) and asked the following key questions:

- Principles for PBIs identified in Round One point to the importance of relationship building between community members, and between services and/or agencies, as well as an overall

connection of people and place. Therefore, how can hybrid PBIs facilitate or enable the translation of these principles in practice, given PBIs are conventionally understood to be conducted face-to-face?

- More specifically, while definitions of PBIs point to the significant role of community engagement and capacity-building in leadership, what challenges exist in practice that may impede bottom-up driven initiatives?
- Given the significant role of the pandemic in the shift to hybrid or online PBIs over the last two years – and the speed of adaption required in response – other drivers may be obscured. Given barriers and challenges in practice, how, when and why should PBIs include both face-to-face and virtual components?
- Recognising the need for choice and the requirement to keep both, what elements benefit from face-to-face compared with online services?

4.4 Key findings from Delphi Round Two

The key findings from Round Two are summarised as follows:

- Across different sectors (health, education, community services, infrastructure, economic development, law and justice and disaster management), participants saw **value in hybrid PBIs over face-to-face or online only**. Participants specifically noted the benefits of hybrid PBIs for **service users** as **increasing flexibility, consumer choice and access**. Benefits for **service providers** were seen in terms of **decreasing labour management and costs**. Participants noted that hybrid PBIs bring new opportunities for connection between service users and providers. Where face-to-face was prioritised over hybrid, participants specified the individualised nature of the service to user (evident in education, community services, law and justice, and disaster management) but also noted that online only PBIs had benefits when planning or administration aspects related to service provision.
- When asked to rank the **drivers of hybrid PBI** development and/or delivery, participants prioritised **evidence of an unmet need or service gap**. However, **external factors, such as COVID-19** also ranked highly. Participants, using the open text box 'Other', identified key drivers such as leadership, funding, costs, and learning from how community already engage. There was **less priority placed on technological opportunities and developments** to drive hybrid PBIs.
- Principles that underpin successful hybrid PBIs were recognised by participants. They included their **co-designed** nature, where the PBI **meets the desired outcomes and context**, and the **needs of the people** it is intended to impact; where virtual service delivery is considered **business as usual** rather than a temporary state; and where there is a **clear chain of measures and decisions** related to the PBI.
- **Enablers** of successful hybrid PBIs were identified by participants, including **sustainability and scaled-up funding, efficiency, and balance of face-to-face and online components**, where the service user has **already successfully engaged online**, where **access to technology and technology literacy** is developed, and **workforce capacity building and skills** are developed.

- **Barriers** to overcome for successful hybrid PBIs were identified by participants as a **lack of technological capacity, privacy concerns, unclear regulations, the inflexibility of government contracts, and assumptions about need of target communities, and negative attitudes and misinformation among staff**. Successful hybrid PBIs were not possible if there was an insistence on quick wins over careful planning and implementation.
- When asked to rank the challenges previously identified through Round One of the Delphi, participants prioritised **building trust as the greatest challenge to overcome**, but equally second was **increasing digital literacy, providing digital infrastructure, and ensuring acceptability and accessibility**. Participants also nominated building non-digital infrastructure to support online services and identified existing barriers in physical infrastructure, such as open plan offices, as other challenges to overcome.
- A series of questions asked participants to specify when a transition from face-to-face to hybrid would be either helpful or harmful to both service users and providers.
 - For service users, participants thought it would be:
 - Helpful to service users **when providing one-to-one service, maintaining contact** and when providing information to clients, further specifying that **co-design, cultural safety, trust, client choice and light touch interactions were required**.
 - Harmful to service users **when providing group services**, and when **entering or leaving** a service, with participants citing the need for human connection or assessment, and lack of readiness and flexibility, which can contribute to harm.
 - For service providers, participants thought a transition would be:
 - Helpful for service providers when **referring between agencies, providing information** to clients and **maintaining contact**, with participants specifying time and resource efficiencies, and that quality and reach should all be maintained.
 - Harmful for service providers when **entering or leaving** a service and **maintaining contact**, with participants citing that when there is a lack of IT infrastructure and provider satisfaction in providing that service, and when productivity assumptions are incorrectly built into pricing, which can contribute to harms.

These inconsistencies are understandable given the overall lack of definition in PBIs and to which function that they should be put.

- Finally, we asked participants a series of open text questions about **maintaining relationships** – between people and place, within community, and between other agencies. Responses included considerations of **continuity, trust, communication with community, community development, and localised target and content**.
 - The relationship between people and place facilitated by hybrid PBIs was seen as community building, and required real-time evaluation and development of an online ecosystem.

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- Building relationships with the community requires developing community hubs that are inclusive and prioritise safety, are co-designed, and harness existing infrastructure like social media.
 - Maintaining relationships with other agencies requires that time efficiencies and flexibility be built into the service, and that these relationships are governed by clear structures, MoUs and referral pathways. Hybrid PBIs were seen as collaborative and co-designed initiatives that build on service priorities and responsiveness.

5 Findings from deliberative panels

Two deliberative panels (2 hours each, held via zoom) were conducted with the primary goal of facilitating thoughtful, considered dialogue about how governments can better design and deliver place-based hybrid service delivery. Panel participants came from diverse areas, including both government and non-government organisations, with a diversity of experiences with PBIs, virtual service delivery and hybrid service delivery. Panel members came from a range of service delivery areas (including social welfare, health, infrastructure, law enforcement, education, aged care, and disability). There were seven participants in the first panel (Friday 29 April), and 11 participants in the second panel (Monday 2 May), excluding the research team members.

This section presents the findings from the deliberative panels. This starts with general reflections and insights, and is followed by findings in relation to:

- designing hybrid services
- delivering hybrid services
- hybrid place-based services
- messages to government.

5.1 General reflections and insights

The panel discussions veered between virtual, hybrid and PBIs. For example, some discussions were clearly about designing virtual components (such as the need for data privacy oversight); other discussions focused on hybrid services (such as when do you deliver a virtual component within the context of a face-to-face service, and questions about whether there are some services that must always be face-to-face); and discussions about introducing virtual elements to PBIs (although less time was spent discussing this last point).

While this means that the panel discussions were not exclusively hybrid place-based (and the insights could be applied in virtual, hybrid and/or place-based), this also tells an important story for government about typologies and definitions. The tendency to gravitate towards virtual design and delivery issues (understandable in the context of COVID) needs to be tempered with a focus on considering all elements – in this case, combining face-to-face with virtual (and ideally in the context of a PBI that is seeking to change community outcomes). It seems hard to hold all these elements simultaneously when considering government design and delivery of services.

One strategy that may assist government is establishing a shared language – a lexicon of service delivery modalities (face-to-face, virtual, hybrid, place-based). In one panel it was noted that we do not yet have the right language (the example given was the term ‘telehealth’ which is not appropriate for non-health services). Language needs to shift to ensure commonality across sectors when working at the place-based multi-agency level. There was also recognition that defining ‘place-based’ is difficult, and that the term has come to mean different things to funders, communities, researchers and service providers. The term ‘hybrid’ was used synonymously with ‘blended’ (but this may not be a shared understanding). Indeed, even the term ‘virtual’ can cover

many different types of virtual technology (phone, zoom, email, algorithm-driven, web-based) and whether the interaction is with a real person or a 'bot'.

5.2 Designing hybrid services

The pandemic has forced many services to rapidly pivot to virtual delivery (whether place-based or not), without much consideration of how services were designed, especially with reference to designing hybrid or blended services. One panellist noted “we have been doing, now we are designing”.

A number of features of program design for hybrid service delivery were discussed in the panels. These included:

- Applying community development principles
- Clearly specifying the objectives and the intended outcomes of the service
- Appreciating differences between end-users (for example, Prensky's (2011) so-called 'digital natives' and 'digital immigrants' was raised, although much greater nuance in understanding the spectrum and diversity of end-users beyond this simple categorisation is required)
- Identifying needs for hybrid services
- Costing and allocating appropriate resources
- Incorporating continual feedback between end-users and program/service design.

It became clear in the panel discussion that the good design principles for any service delivered by government were also required for hybrid services.

There were however some additional specific considerations. The overarching governance demands may be higher, especially with regard to privacy, data protections, and complaints mechanisms (three areas raised in the panel but it is possible that there are more). Taking the governance arrangements from face-to-face service delivery and thinking through the applicability to virtual and hybrid services, plus any additional aspects not covered, is important. There are also some significant clinical and corporate governance issues to be addressed in service design. One specific example is the issue of third-party apps, data security, and technical feasibility. For example, one panellist described the complexity of importing “live chats” from a third-party app into a client's medical records.

Although considerations of equity and equitable access are crucial to any face-to-face government service delivery, there was a sense that for hybrid designs, governments needed to consider more fully the equity-related issues around technology (both hardware, software, and internet connectivity).

There was a strong sense in the panels that outcomes needed to be clearly specified: in particular, that the rationale for hybrid services should clearly lead to better outcomes than traditional face-to-

face services. Clearly specifying the benefit (whether it is convenience, accessibility, resources, etc.) was fundamental to program design. Related to clearly identifying the benefits, was the suggestion that current service delivery blockages could be the impetus for implementing hybrid services. A simple example was given in one of the panels: that of “queueing” to order food or drink in a bar. Since COVID, a number of food and drink venues have introduced table ordering via an app, thereby removing the need to queue at the bar. This hybrid service (online ordering, in-person delivery) was perceived as beneficial in eliminating queues. To take this one step further, the occurrence of queues or waiting lists in government service delivery could identify an opportunity to consider a hybrid option.

When (the timepoint) a virtual component is introduced to a face-to-face service (thus becoming hybrid) was discussed (see also the Delphi results on this point), it was notable that there was not agreement on when, in a sequence of interactions with customers/clients, is the best point to introduce a virtual component. It seemed to vary by service type, population type but perhaps most centrally, by the experiences of the panellists thus far. Some panellists, for example, had successfully managed virtual service delivery from the initial point of contact with the consumer/end users; others had not had success with this approach. What we do not know is whether there are key variables that differentiate these program designs.

In the panels, there were examples given of highly successful use of virtual services (noting that these were not hybrid, nor place-based). One example was in the ability of virtual services to provide anonymity and hence encourage greater attendance and participation (in this case with reference to foster care information sessions, where people may have been reluctant to attend a face-to-face information session due to concerns about anonymity).

One risk highlighted by panellists was in making assumptions – assumptions about the transferability of face-to-face service to an online environment; assumptions about who is likely to benefit; assumptions about clients needing more support for online and being less familiar with technology than practitioners; and assumptions about rapport building. In relation to this last point, panellists had different perceptions about rapport building with users of virtual services, where some felt that relationships needed to start face-to-face then move on-line, whereas other panellists had facilitated rapport and relationship building with initial contact being virtual. However, there was consensus that services should include the option of interacting with a human being, whether virtually or face-to-face.

Panellists noted the need for an ‘innovation pipeline’, but more information, dialogue and analysis would be required to establish what the pipeline might look like. Panellists identified features that need resolution in order to specify the pipeline, including: government paying attention to language and definitions; providing clear examples of what is being done (case studies); telling the story of existing innovations; and building the evidence-base about community outcomes. Perhaps most importantly, government need to identify and document the innovation pipeline for hybrid (place-based) service delivery.

5.3 Delivering hybrid services

Key to successful hybrid service delivery seems to be the integration of the virtual and face-to-face elements. Put simply, panellists were of the view that they need to “talk to each other”. Too often they are separate parts that are not mutually reinforcing and responsive to each other.

In the delivery of the virtual component within a face-face service, the panels discussed several features and issues associated with virtual service delivery.² The points raised included concern for socialising the virtual component with end-users (and with practitioners) and providing appropriate training and support for end-users, as well as for staff. Using a coach or ‘buddy’ system has been positive. The level of confidence and competence of staff with the virtual components is key.

Confidentiality, and policies and procedures around confidentiality and data, were important in delivering successful virtual components within a hybrid service. A central concern raised in the panels was around “trust” and how to facilitate access and safety for the end-users in hybrid service delivery.

There was no consensus about when (in the workflow or interactions with clients) virtual services could or should be used. For some it was at entry to the service, for others it was once the client/customer had been engaged face-to-face. It seems that the differences may reside in the type and nature of services being offered. For perfunctory services (such as purchasing public transport tickets or other mostly transactional services) virtual at the start seems acceptable and efficient. For help-seeking services, face-to-face to build trust and rapport seems to precede the virtual component. Importantly, however, this was not universal – with some help-seeking services engaging virtually at the first point of contact. It seems there are no hard and fast rules, and it comes down to careful design and engagement with end users. All panellists reinforced the need for ongoing review, evaluation, reflective practice, and willingness to rapidly change to another system as required by the client or customer base. This also linked to the importance of the ability to modify the virtual platform easily, quickly and readily.

Panellists agreed that first experiences matter – deciding how to deliver that first contact seems crucial to successful implementation.

A number of reflections about the virtual component were noted in the discussions. These included: having back-ups/back stop, and the ability to talk to a human; offering multiple channels for the virtual component with cost/benefit in mind; using human-centred design; ensuring there are engagement techniques built into the design and delivery of the virtual component; and using a platform that already exists (e.g. Facebook). A point that was multiply reinforced was the need to continually adapt the virtual component, not to have to restart the design process if it was wrong, but build in scope to engage alternatively as required. This kind of flexibility, deftness and agility is often lacking in government services. It was noted that although virtual services are often more accessible, they are less able to engage clients/users than face-to-face services, and it is easier for clients to discontinue engagement. Thus, the front end of the service (the user interface) is

² We suspect that these are not necessarily different from the large literature on delivery virtual services alone.

fundamentally important and must be easy for the user to navigate and progress through the service.

The potential for virtual elements to enhance face-to-face components was noted. Technology can become a way of getting support when clients/customers need it – with the virtual component providing access to an extensive network of professionals to assist. The key is how to integrate that with the face-to-face component. This requires deep design thinking (and practical considerations, such as software data sharing). That panellists were enthusiastic about virtual elements was taken as given. One example was digital story telling: storytelling as an invitation to engagement, then using the story materials across multiple platforms and alternative forms. The subsequent collection of digital stories was then used with various audiences (e.g. a movie night in person; shown in partnerships with schools, etc.). Panellists realised these kinds of benefits for the client-base, for the provider, for government, and for the broader community may be hard to achieve without resources, creative design thinking, and effective implementation.

5.4 Hybrid place-based initiatives

As noted above, the focus in the panels was not exclusively on PBIs. Indeed, in one of the panels it was noted that many Australians (and likely Australian governments) do not have a strong sense of place. Our First Nations and the traditional owners of the lands have much to teach us about place, country, land and this is a largely untapped resource in the design of PBIs by governments.

Some panellists reported on specific hybrid initiatives within the context of PBIs, and some more general comments on place-based programs were instructive.

Given that PBIs by design seek to provide holistic care across sectors, and break down silos between different services (health, social justice, legal, infrastructure and so on), the issue of a ‘common language’ for virtual components was raised. In addition, the idea of ‘virtual communities’ may hold promise for how to enhance a sense of community (and social capital), aligning with the primary objectives of place-based services. Panellists noted that the use of existing software (which users were already familiar and engaged with) was much more effective in creating and supporting virtual communities. Compellingly, one panellist argued that the introduction of hybrid engagement to a PBI had facilitated better place-based services. One example given was a group session with clients regarding financial literacy about Afterpay services, delivered with a youth worker in the room with the clients while the financial literacy expert joined virtually. To quote: “actually taking ‘place’ out of it helped a lot – getting more practitioners and greater client learning”. Other panellists concurred, noting that a hybrid PBI model has significant utility, where managers (who are not located on site/in place) can use virtual technology to better connect and get an appreciation of what practitioners are doing on the ground, allowing for more contextual information. In these ways, the introduction of virtual elements into existing PBIs increased the value of the PBI.

Panellists also noted that the pivot to virtual services when combined with face-to-face, more generally allowed a new array of voices in the program design and delivery. A virtual ‘community of practice’ amongst those delivering PBI which had to introduce virtual components resulted in sharp learning curves but also mutual problem solving. Continuing to make use of communities of

practice and other structures which facilitate insights and learning from doing would be a useful ongoing government initiative to support the design and implementation of hybrid PBIs.

Given PBIs are about community and impacting on place and people simultaneously, thinking carefully about how to empower community within these hybrid initiatives is fundamental.

Physical design considerations were raised as an issue, but were not discussed in detail. Given PBIs focus on physical services, the physicality associated with hybrid services requires creative, thoughtful planning.

Despite a number of positive experiences by panellists of hybrid PBIs (as detailed above), there were also several areas of concern. It is clear that there remain some large gaps in both knowledge and experience. The ones that were raised in the panels included a concern for how the values and organisational culture can be imbued into the virtual components. With face-to-face services, the values and organisational culture is simply 'there'. How is this achieved with the virtual components? Another area of concern was the 'evidence-base' for effectiveness of blended/hybrid services. To date, there is evidence for virtual service delivery (and of course evidence for face-to-face service delivery) but for NGOs that rely on governments knowing that they deliver evidence-based care, how can this be done now. How can we build the evidence base on the efficacy, effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of hybrid PBIs?

5.5 Messages to government

While all panel deliberations contained lessons for government, the two panels closed by inviting panellists to give "one piece of advice to government". These are listed below, clustered under four themes: hybrid/blended services, virtual components, hybrid PBIs, and other messages.

Hybrid/blended services: bringing virtual together with face-to-face

Panellists said:

- Build on the good ideas and experiences that have been gained already – tap into existing expertise (NGOs have a lot of experience now). Most good ideas are iterations of what already exists. Don't reinvent from the ground up, use iterations of good ideas to adapt and grow. [This requires governments to know about what is occurring on the ground]
- Be intentional and deliberate in designing and delivering hybrid services: provide analysis of which components are best delivered virtually and which face-to-face; don't default to virtual for ease.
- Balance the technology input with the human services input – the key to good hybrid programs is the purposeful combinations which bring the two modalities together in ways that make sense for end-users, for communities, and for governments.
- Be clear about what you are aiming for and the expected impacts. A longer-term perspective is needed to get it right. Don't necessarily aim for perfection, but focus on continually improving, and adapting.

- Provide government incentives for blended/hybrid work (and certainly not disincentives such as lower funding to an NGO).
- Look for opportunities to scale up programs that have been successfully delivered in a hybrid way.
- At the same time as scale-up opportunities, notice that “one size does not fit all”. One way is to check assumptions at each point (e.g. assumption of end-user’s ease of access to virtual; assumption of connectivity; assumption of funder-preference, etc.).
- In the enthusiasm for virtual service delivery, it is important to think about the face-to-face components to ensure the services is truly hybrid; i.e. are not being subsumed by the virtual elements. This means retaining face-to-face when appropriate. The advice to government: “don’t throw baby out with bathwater”.
- Fund and support continuous evaluation. Evaluation that focuses on hybrid and which service delivery components, within what service sectors, can and do work virtually as compared to face-to-face. In addition, evaluate ‘service reach’ (in some cases hybrid may have increased reach, in other cases hybrid may have decreased reach).

Virtual components

For the virtual components, panellists suggested:

- Make it as simple and as easy to use as possible, with fewest clicks and easiest entry.
- This can mean using existing software (such as Facebook) with which end-users are familiar.
- Don’t over-complicate or over-engineer it.
- Ensure that there is always a “local real person”, alongside a virtual component – they need a human backstop. And the human backstop needs to know more than the bot/machine. For PBI, local knowledge (by a human) is vital.
- Provide continual checks that the virtual component is working for end-users, and check user experience throughout.
- Remember that virtual components are not “a blanket solution”.
- Finally, make using it “a delight”. If it isn’t a delight, why would people bother?

Hybrid place-based initiatives

In relation to hybrid PBIs, panellists said:

- Reminding governments that hybrid PBIs are a “smarter way to work to deliver better services”, the advice to governments is to have clear objectives for a hybrid PBI, work out how multiple services across sectors can work together, coordinate across portfolios, and understand the

ecosystems in every place. Governments need to think explicitly about how to empower communities and the broader ecosystem.

- Every PBI needs to strengthen people's sense of place, therefore every program should be funded to strengthen the sense of place.
- Hybrid PBIs can bring new elements to place. "I would say PBIs are initiatives that are born from the community or place, so that the community themselves decide what it is they want to achieve and work within their community to develop solutions and achieve their goal. From a hybrid service delivery perspective, I imagine the virtual piece being outside, away from, or at least not embedded in, the community". In other words, one piece of advice to government was to tap into the expertise outside the place/community to bring expertise to the place.
- Invest in proper evaluation to identify key elements of hybrid PBIs that work across different settings.

Other messages to government

Finally, in other messages to government, panellists said:

- Don't hang back. The momentum is here now. As one panellist said: "We need government to support some of the great work happening in blended/hybrid models now". And from another "get on with it".
- In addition to a desire for government to act, at the same time panellists noted that government can slow things down. Indeed, one piece of advice was to "get out of the way". During the pandemic, permission was given for services to innovate (rapidly), and while now a more deliberate thoughtful approach is being advocated in the design and delivery of hybrid services, at the same time the authority by government to innovate should continue.
- When hybrid place-based services work well, they are focussed on solving real problems faced by front line workers – keeping this attention to making a difference is crucial. This may also mean "thinking small".
- There are a number of high-level policy aspects that can hinder or facilitate hybrid service models. One of these is internet and data issues. Public-private partnerships with telco's could support implementation of hybrid services.

6 Conclusions

6.1 General considerations for government for the transition to hybrid service provision

The use of virtual services has been developing for many years, especially in the healthcare sector where e-health, for example, has been extensively evaluated for effectiveness and efficacy (Eslami Andargoli, 2021). Developments pre COVID-19 outside health have included online helpdesks in utility provisions, to device tracking by security services, and from moving hardcopy form filling at government support desks to secure online forms.

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged in late-2019 and started to significantly affect Australia in mid-March 2020. In the health domain, expansion of existing eHealth models, together with mounting evidence that 'virtual' health services yield highly effective impacts, created impetus for further evolutions in other sectors. Other service sectors, including a range of social and community services, also transitioned to virtual services in response to COVID-19. Further, new services to trace the mobility of people and COVID-19 outbreaks were facilitated by the extensive uptake of QR-codes and an increase in the development and use of apps by governments.

The COVID-19 pandemic required most services to either shift to virtual delivery or be suspended. Inevitably this was done in a piecemeal fashion without prior planning or preparation. Nevertheless, this created new opportunities to innovate and develop new ways of supporting clients.

Not only was there a virtual need to be filled, but existing technologies became more mainstream and considered part of critical infrastructure – including online meeting platforms, video-calling, online product ordering, QR-codes, and delivery systems. Place remained important during the pandemic, and in some ways became more significant as localised health orders were put in place and people were confined to their homes and immediate surroundings.

Governments and NGOs in many cases responded quickly to these new challenges and opportunities. However, to date it is not clear what types of governance arrangements, hardware and software requirements would enable optimal service delivery and how successful or cost-effective different options are. These challenges emerge in a context where simultaneously 'real human' contact is craved by many, and where sense of place and community for many still drives matters of access, equity, and fulfilling a range of service needs.

Add to this the notion of 'hybrid', which has become increasingly important in the current phase of the pandemic, where face-to-face services are resuming and the new challenge facing governments is how to integrate virtual and face-to-face services to offer hybrid services and initiatives focused on people and place. With time to reflect and plan for the future, policy makers and service providers are now asking: Which virtual services should be retained? How do virtual components integrate with face-to-face components? What are the best arrangements for enhancing the effectiveness of hybrid service delivery? What are effective ways of engaging communities in the development and implementation of hybrid services in the future? What governance arrangements should be developed to ensure equity of access, confidentiality and security?

Further, placing the concept, design and delivery of hybrid services (combined virtual and face-to-face delivery) into place-based services brings another set of questions and challenges. If place-based services are driven by geography, and virtual services are not, how can the outcomes from PBIs (such as increases in community cohesion and social capital) be built into hybrid PBIs?

The original assumption underlying the project was that there is a tension between PBIs and virtual services because, by definition, virtual services are not dependent on place and can be accessed anywhere. However, the findings from this project indicate that virtual components can be complementary to face-to-face services and programs, and hybrid services can not only substitute face-to-face services, but can improve service delivery in some ways. Hybrid services can indeed provide services in places where otherwise services would not be available or would be severely limited.

Although there was much innovation and creativity during the pandemic, there is now a need to step back so that more research and evaluation can be conducted to assess what works, for whom, and under what conditions hybrid services are suited (and within them, what aspects of services are more suited to virtual or face-to-face delivery). There is a need to continue to encourage innovation post pandemic and ensure service providers can have autonomy to adapt services. A key challenge for government, therefore, is to find ways of maintaining innovation while at the same time learning from these developments about the essential aspects of successful implementation, governance and sustainability of hybrid services and initiatives, and using this knowledge to develop new services and PBIs.

It should be recognised that the context for hybrid services and hybrid PBIs is still evolving and changing rapidly. At the beginning of the pandemic there was still significant resistance to virtual modes of service provision by many practitioners and some clients. While people now seem to be more used to virtual services and some actually prefer it, the digital divide is still an issue for some groups and needs to be addressed. Some practitioners and service providers continue to require support and training to engage with virtual and hybrid modes of service provision.

Hybrid services, and hybrid PBIs, offer many opportunities for government and service providers to increase service reach, engaging previously hard to reach groups and geographic areas, and providing opportunities for greater flexibility in services for both clients and the service workforce. Hybrid service delivery, through both face-to-face and their online components, have the potential also to improve interagency collaboration. However, barriers still exist. In particular, whether trust between services and clients can be built and maintained virtually, and the importance of face-to-face services in building personal connections or observing visual cues that are often key when delivering particular services. There is still debate about what hybrid means and what PBI means – in particular, whether the focus is on person or place.

6.2 Designing hybrid services

This study identified several principles for consideration when designing hybrid services.

Considerations for commissioning

Participants in this study identified how innovation was enabled in response to the COVID-19 pandemic through the commissioning process, and identified the importance of having flexibility in contracts, supported by additional resources, to innovate. The approach used during the pandemic has the potential to be continued post-pandemic, offering flexibility to innovate and develop new practice. Rather than occur in isolation, government can facilitate knowledge sharing and translation by establishing and resourcing an innovation pipeline. Considerations for commissioning therefore include:

- Enabling organisations to innovate and adapt services to the particular context of the initiative or service. This may be facilitated by:
 - Focusing on outcomes (outcomes commissioning) rather than over specifying the mode of service delivery or PBIs.
 - Encouraging the consideration of hybrid services in tender requirements, requiring providers to articulate the rationale for doing so and how online and face-to-face services will be integrated. Clearly specifying the anticipated benefits is fundamental to program design. Benefits may relate to accessibility, reach, quality of service provision, efficiency of service provision, and/or improved outcomes.
 - Including mechanisms to monitor and evaluate outcomes that encourage innovation while satisfying probity requirements. This will ensure that hybrid services meet their objectives and provide better value in terms of costs, outcomes and/or access than would otherwise have been the case.
- Building the evidence base of hybrid PBIs by identifying and documenting the ‘innovation pipeline’ for the transition to hybrid service delivery. This could include providing clear definitions, providing case examples, and building a robust evidence base for effective hybrid services, as well as effective modes of transition for PBIs to hybrid PBIs.
- Establishing a community of practice including service providers, researchers and government involved in in different PBIs. This should be supported by a database of new and promising practices and case studies and contacts for the project team; rapid evidence reviews of new developments in hybrid PBIs; and workshops focused on specific aspects of hybrid service design, development and implementation.
- Providing resources and incentives to establish virtual components of services where appropriate, recognising the additional upfront investment in supporting online delivery for both the service provider and clients.
- Encouraging hybrid initiatives to be co-designed with community stakeholders who could be involved in collaboratively defining objectives and outcomes, participating in governance groups, and potentially taking some control of the initiative. This approach is likely to engage and empower communities, and lead to the better design, development and governance of the initiatives.
- In the absence of an agreed definition, ensuring each initiative or service clearly documents what is meant by PBI and the rationale for the PBI and hybrid approach.

Consideration for service provision

- Participants in this study identified several considerations when designing and implementing hybrid services, recognising that hybrid services are not simply a combination of face-to-face and virtual services, but an integration of different modes of delivery and organisation. Different forms of hybrid PBIs exist, for example:
 - Where either the same service is offered both face-to-face and virtually, or parts of a service are provided face-to-face and others virtually
 - Where face-to-face practitioners are supported virtually by experts or peers, particularly in remote locations
 - Where service providers, irrespective of how services are delivered, coordinate services virtually through virtual meetings of managers and funders.

While recognising all good design principles for services are also required for hybrid services, this section identifies some additional specific considerations.

- Hybrid PBIs should be tailored to the specific context of the service or the initiative, considering a range of factors including the geographical location of both clients and the workforce, workforce availability, training and infrastructure, scale, and types of services provided.
- The overarching governance demands may be higher, especially regarding privacy, data protection, and complaint mechanisms given services may be accessed and provided in different ways.
- Governance arrangements may vary for face-to-face service delivery and virtual delivery, made more complex due to the interaction between the two. Considerations include privacy and data protection issues, the use of third-party apps, data security, and technical challenges of virtual service delivery.
- Services and initiatives should be flexible and be able to allow for continuing improvement and to respond to feedback. This is critical given evidence of good practice is still emerging.
- Similarly, the virtual component of a PBI can be delivered in any part of the initiative, including initial access, intake and assessment, service delivery, service exit, or following up either by the client or service provider.
- All assumptions about the transition to hybrid delivery need to be tested empirically including:
 - Who is likely to benefit from virtual services compared to face-to-face services (clients, service providers, government)
 - Who is likely to resist the introduction of hybrid services (clients, service providers, government)
 - How the relationship and rapport between clients, services and government will be affected.
- Careful consideration needs to be given to how to engage and support practitioners and clients who may be wary of virtual and hybrid services and how to address their concerns.

Participants had different views about whether trust can be established and maintained in a virtual context, and whether the process of establishing trust is reliant on face-to-face contact – particularly in the context of PBIs – including in the co-design of services. There is little understanding to date about how trust can be sustained in the context of hybrid services. To increase trust in hybrid PBIs, evidence from this study indicates their design should:

- Improve the operation and outcomes of the PBI compared to business as usual, with any virtual components being integrated into other components of the initiative.
- Be simple, easy to navigate, and user tested. Although digital services are more accessible for some people, it is easier for people to drop out of or fail to engage with virtual services than face-to-face services. The front end (user interface) of online services must be clear and accessible.
- Include options for virtual users to revert back to interacting with a human being, be it face-to-face or virtually.

Virtual services offer the possibility of engaging virtual communities who are not necessarily place-based in the traditional geographic sense but who may share particular issues or concerns. Participants highlighted the value of virtual services delivered remotely, particularly in rural and remote parts of Australia where access to services is low. While the focus remains on enhancing community, social cohesion and place whilst also providing services to people, bringing in services and supports from ‘outside’ can enrich the PBIs and extend the application of PBIs to meet specific community needs.

6.3 Building the evidence base

For governments to further the evidence-based development of hybrid services and hybrid PBIs, there is an urgent need to document and evaluate hybrid services that have emerged in response to COVID-19 to inform future practice. In addition, given our current understanding relates to the short-term experience of hybrid PBIs, more evidence is needed to understand the medium and long-term implications of transitioning to hybrid forms of service delivery. Specifically, government should consider:

- Providing a lexicon of terminology to facilitate documentation, dialogue and the development of an evidence-base for hybrid service development and hybrid PBIs
- Resourcing services providers to document hybrid forms of services that have evolved during the pandemic – recognising face-to-face services shifted mainly to virtual service delivery during the pandemic, but some elements of services may have reverted to being delivered face-to-face. Documenting service delivery processes, and learning from changes occurring at different stages of the pandemic, will provide greater insights into where and how hybrid services are best used. Documenting services will also enable their evaluation.
- Commissioning evaluations to understand the drivers of hybrid services, optimal governance arrangements, when hybrid services and initiatives are more effective than either virtual or face-to-face services alone, their cost-effectiveness, as well as how barriers and challenges have been addressed.

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- Collating and sharing information about where hybrid services are being developed or implemented, including the results of any evaluations, to facilitate sharing of practice. This may include improving understanding of what services benefit from hybrid delivery, what components of services are better delivered virtually or face-to-face, and how best to integrate virtual and face-to-face to benefit both consumers, service providers, and government.

Future research and evaluation should specifically consider a range of issues including:

- What hybrid services are best suited to, such as service type, aspect of a service (intake, service, exit), populations than others
- The best way of integrating face-to-face and virtual services in hybrid services, and minimising disruptions to the service users and service providers
- How hybrid services can be developed to be culturally safe (for First Nations communities) and culturally responsive (for multicultural communities)
- How the digital divide can be mitigated in the design and implementation of hybrid PBIs
- The optimal methods for addressing issues such as confidentiality, data sharing and storage, data security and ownership in the context of hybrid initiatives
- How hybrid services affect trust and how trust can be facilitated in the context of hybrid services and initiatives
- The optimal governance arrangements for virtual and hybrid services focused on place
- The costs and benefits of hybrid services and initiatives.

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