

Community Legal Centres Australia

# Impact strategy 2024–2027

February 2024



Community Legal Centres  
Australia

# Acknowledgement of Country

Community Legal Centres Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the unceded land and waters on and by which we work and live, and recognises their continuing connection to land, water, community, and culture. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise that this always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

## Our purpose

Community Legal Centres Australia provides leadership, support, and a national voice for community legal services across Australia. We do this to strengthen the community legal sector's effectiveness in upholding the rights of people and communities experiencing disadvantage, discrimination, and violence, and to help grow the sector's influence in law reform.

## Who we work for

We provide leadership, support, and a national voice for the more than 160 community legal services in our membership network.

Most of these services are community legal centres. Our membership also includes Family Violence Prevention Legal Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services. These services operate in metropolitan, regional, remote, and very remote communities across Australia and work to address the legal and related needs of this country's most socially and economically disadvantaged and marginalised people.

We also support and collaborate closely with the state and territory community legal sector peak bodies across Australia. Structurally, these bodies constitute the formal membership of our organisation.

## Note on language

The terms **community legal services**, **community legal sector** and **centres**, include all services in our membership network: community legal centres, Family Violence Prevention Legal Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services.

We use the term **community legal centres** when we are referring specifically to the community legal centres in our membership. We value all centres and services in our network and do our best to represent all their interests. Depending on the context, it is sometimes more appropriate for Family Violence Prevention Legal Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services to be represented by their specialist peaks, the National Forum of Family Violence Prevention Legal Services and National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services.

The term **people experiencing disadvantage** includes people experiencing financial and other forms of disadvantage, discrimination, domestic, family, or sexual violence, or who are otherwise marginalised from the mainstream.

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# Community Legal Centres Australia Theory of Change

## Issue

Community legal services have limited resources and influence, and cohesion across our sector could be improved. This makes it more challenging to achieve our collective goal of upholding the legal and human rights of people experiencing disadvantage.

## We work to

**Demonstrate the value of community legal services** by gathering, reporting, and promoting quantitative and qualitative evidence to demonstrate centres' impact

**Advocate for increased funding** from Commonwealth and state Attorney-General's Departments and pursue strategies for diversified government and non-government funding for the sector

**Support and amplify community legal services' law reform and policy work** by advocating on national issues and supporting peaks and centres advocacy efforts

**Provide capacity building and technical support**, including accreditation, insurances, governance, risk management and information and data technology frameworks and reporting

**Facilitate network building** by providing networking opportunities and supporting partnerships and collaborations between centres

## ...deliver these short to medium-term outcomes

**Governments recognise our crucial role in protecting the legal, social, and economic rights of people experiencing disadvantage**  
Policy makers seek centres' data, stories, and expertise, on access to justice issues

**Increased funding for centres to deliver services and do advocacy work**  
– Increased NLAP funding  
– Clearer and more flexible funding mechanisms  
– Diversified funding sources, including from government and outside government

**Governments deliver reforms that improve access to justice for people experiencing disadvantage**  
Legal and policy issues our sector identifies are put on the national agenda and decision makers recognise the impact of unjust laws and support reforms we recommend

**Improved organisational capacity**  
– More centres meet accreditation standards  
– The sector has a skilled and supported workforce, with effective leadership and access to the tools and systems strong, modern organisations need

**Increased collaboration and sense of community across the sector**  
Centres share information, expertise and resources to support each other, and form effective partnerships and collaborations

## ...and lasting impact

### Trusted and valued sector

Policy makers regularly seek our sector's expertise, data and stories on justice issues relating to people experiencing disadvantage and act on our reform recommendations

### Sustainable sector

Community legal services are consistently funded at levels which enable them to deliver high quality services, meet demand and do advocacy work

### Influential sector

Our sector has a consistent, significant and positive influence on government decisions to change unjust laws and policies

### Strong and effective sector

Centres consistently meet national quality standards and demonstrate outcomes delivered for people experiencing disadvantage

### Cohesive sector

Centres with different strengths support each other to deliver innovative, high-quality and effective supports to people experiencing disadvantage

# Our impact priorities for 2024–2027

While the theory of change outlines our overarching impact goals, we will focus our efforts on achieving the following four impact priorities for the next three years.

## Impact Priority 1: Funding for community legal centres increases by 50% – Distribution is fairer and faster

### What?

By end 2027, community legal centres will experience:

- A 50% increase in Commonwealth funding as compared to 2022-23, including via:
  - the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department (National Legal Assistance Partnership Agreement and other legal assistance funding streams)
  - new or increased funding from at least two Commonwealth Departments beyond the Attorney-General's Department, such as Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water; Employment and Workplace Relations; Health and Aged Care; Home Affairs; and Social Services (which share responsibility for generating and responding to legal need, and so should share responsibility for funding community legal services).
- A National Legal Assistance Partnership Agreement for 2025 – 2030 that sets out clearer criteria and processes for the distribution of funding to community legal centres which are more closely connected with legal need in communities.

### Why?

It is well documented that there is a vast amount of unmet legal need in Australia. Most funding for community legal centres comes from the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department through the National Legal Assistance Partnership Agreement (NLAP). This funding is inadequate to meet demand for community legal centres' services.

Current funding mechanisms don't deliver enough funding to centres in communities with persistent and complex legal needs, or that experience the greatest costs in serving their communities (e.g., centres servicing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, or with extremely large catchment areas including in rural, regional, remote, and very remote locations).

To ensure community legal centres are resourced and equipped to meet current, and emerging legal needs, it is important to diversify the available funding sources beyond the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department to other Commonwealth Government departments and private funding sources.

Community Legal Centres Australia has a role to play in advising the Commonwealth Attorney-General and Attorney-General's Department on funding matters and in encouraging departments beyond the Attorney-General's Department to meet their legal assistance responsibilities.

# Impact Priority 2: Centres can better access, manage and use data to benefit their communities and the sector

## What?

By end 2027 centres will have improved:

- Access to a comprehensive national dataset, which Community Legal Centres Australia owns and manages on the sector's behalf
- Capacity in data collection, management (including mitigation of cyber risks), reporting, and utilisation
- Expertise to use organisational-level and sector-wide data to:
  - inform their practice
  - articulate the impact of their work supporting clients and people experiencing disadvantage.

In addition:

- A 50% increase in the number of centres publicly reporting on their impact (outcomes, not outputs) as compared to 2022-23
- The Commonwealth Government will recognise the community legal sector as having a crucial role in protecting the rights of people experiencing disadvantage.

## Why?

Community legal services have multiple reporting obligations, increasing amounts of data to manage, and an increasing need to measure outcomes designed to inform their practice and explain their impact at an individual, organisational, and sector-wide level.

Many centres are under-resourced in this area. As the custodians of the national datasets, Community Legal Centres Australia has a role to play in helping the sector improve its understanding, utilisation and reporting of relevant and useful data.

Community Legal Centres Australia is already driving sector data transformation so that centres are better positioned to collect and provide data. While we will not be the provider of tools and technology, we will support organisations to make this transition.

# Impact Priority 3: Community legal centres influence national law and policy reform to better protect people's and communities' rights

## What?

By 2027, governments will support, and fund, Community Legal Centres Australia, and our networks, to deliver our trusted and valued expertise on issues relevant to the people and communities' we work with, including:

- Access to justice in rural, regional, remote, and very remote communities
- Administrative decision-making
- Anti-discrimination protections
- Civil and political rights (particularly protest rights)
- Climate justice
- Elder abuse and older persons rights
- Employment law, including migrant workers' rights
- Family law and family violence
- Financial rights, including credit and consumer rights
- Human rights
- Immigration law
- Poverty and justice
- Refugee and asylum seekers' rights
- Social security

Governments' support for our movement's policy expertise should include:

- Additional funding sufficient to establish or expand community legal peak sector bodies in every state and territory, each with dedicated policy, law reform, and communications capacity
- Funding for secretariat support for the community legal sector's national policy networks
- An express guarantee of centres' right to engage in policy and law reform work with government funds and additional funding via NLAP 2025-2030 to resource this work.

We will also work with the community legal sector to develop a national law reform policy platform by 2025 which recognises the sector's law and policy priorities and identifies gaps where Community Legal Centres Australia can lead the sector's national advocacy efforts. We will work with the sector to deliver on this policy platform.

## Why?

Centres around Australia have significant expertise and insights into the way that specific laws and policies impact on people experiencing disadvantage, discrimination, and violence, and what needs to change for the benefit of the people and communities they serve, and the wider community.

Centres will increasingly have data to support these insights (See Impact Priority 2 on Data). However, individual centres and state and territory sector peaks do not always have the resources to bring these issues to national attention. Community Legal Centres Australia can bring a national voice to these issues and use its relationships with the Commonwealth Government (and other networks) to ensure that community legal services have significant influence in law and policy reform where it is needed.

## Impact Priority 4: Centres are better connected and work more collaboratively with each other

### What?

By 2027, centres will have opportunities to learn from or collaborate with at least one other centre, including through national networks, national conference, and national advocacy events. These opportunities will support centres to:

- increase their capacity for, and expertise in, policy and law reform work, and their level of influence with decision-makers
- improve their service delivery, so they can better meet people's and communities' needs
- to share information about new ways of working to benefit people and communities
- provide professional development opportunities, and personal supports to sector workers.

### Why?

There is significant expertise sitting within individual centres. Some are more resourced than others, some are more specialised than others, some have developed approaches from which others could benefit. Most community legal services have at least some overlapping interests, but insufficient time and opportunities to share expertise or develop partnerships with others, for the benefit of all their clients. Community Legal Centres Australia is well-placed to provide those opportunities and support centres to develop collaborations and partnerships within and outside of our sector, which could assist them in delivering for their clients.

Community Legal Centres Australia's role in bringing the sector together includes convening the national conference and the facilitation of national networks, which connect centres with each other, and facilitate peer support and learning exchange.



# Our organisational priorities in the next three years

Over the next three years we will build our organisational capacity in four areas so we can deliver the short-medium term outcomes in our theory of change and achieve our impact priorities.

## Organisational Priority 1: Build stronger, broader and more effective relationships with Federal government stakeholders

### What?

We will invest greater resources into:

- **Strength:** strengthening our influence with the Commonwealth Attorney-General and Attorney-General's Department, as our primary funder, the architect of the National Legal Assistance Partnership Agreement and our sector's key avenue into the Commonwealth Government
- **Scope:** broadening the scope of our relationships with, and influence on, Ministers other than the Commonwealth Attorney-General whose portfolios are relevant to our sector's service delivery and advocacy
- **Message:** ensuring that the messages we take to our government partners are based on the experiences, stories, data and needs shared with us by our members and identify the mutual interests of the sector and government.

### Why?

Building stronger and broader relationships with the Commonwealth Government and parliament and telling evidence-based stories of client need, and how community legal services can help solve government problems, is fundamental to achieving both Impact Priority 1 and Impact Priority 3.

Maximising influence on the National Legal Assistance Partnership review and policy initiatives relevant to the sector requires the strengthening of our influence with the Attorney-General and Attorney-General's Department. Diversifying government funding sources beyond NLAP and influencing a broader progressive law reform and policy agenda, requires building strong relationships across the Commonwealth Government and parliament.

The stories and needs of people and communities our members share with us, through our inclusive engagement processes, form the basis of the strategies we use with, and the positions we take to, these decision-makers.

## Organisational Priority 2: Invest in data expertise

### What?

Leading the sector through a transition to a different data future requires Community Legal Centres Australia to invest in a range of resources, including:

- **Expert advice to inform the change process:** Specialist expertise in data systems design and change management to inform our approach to data strategy development and advise on how to support community legal centres through the data transition process
- **Capacity to support the sector to engage in the change process:** Additional communications and relationship engagement resources to support the sector, and in particular the Information, Communications and Data Technology Advisory Group and the state/territory peaks, to engage in discussions about the data future and the shared implementation of strategies to achieve that future
- **Capacity to provide ongoing support to the sector on data system transitions, data analysis and data reporting:** Specialist expertise designed to support state and territory sector peaks or individual centres understand how to better analyse and report their data to tell clear and robust stories of need and impact.

### Why?

To achieve Impact Priority 2, Community Legal Centres Australia needs to lead an inclusive and expert national process, in partnership with the state and territory sector peaks, to support the development of:

- a vision of what the sector's data future could look like
- a practical plan for implementing that future
- systems that support individual centres and state and territory peaks and associations to implement that plan on the ground.

## Organisational Priority 3: Increase our advocacy effectiveness

### What?

In addition to building stronger relationships across Government (Organisational Priority 1) and strengthening the sector's capacity to tell robust and compelling data-driven stories (Organisational Priority 2), Community Legal Centres Australia seeks to strengthen the effectiveness of its advocacy work by:

- **Clarifying where and how we can make the biggest difference:** we will conduct a comprehensive review of existing advocacy efforts in the sector (and update it biennially), to better identify the issues on which Community Legal Centres Australia can have the most impact and how it can best use its influence (e.g., whether that is by amplifying the advocacy of centres or state/territory peaks, or by conducting its own advocacy)
- **Increasing collaboration:** we will identify partners within and outside the sector with whom we might partner for greater influence (e.g., better supporting the work of the sector's national networks)
- **Increasing reach:** we will expand our avenues for telling stories about the issues that impact community legal centres and their clients, to reinforce our role as a trusted national voice.

### Why?

To achieve Impact Priority 3, we need to ensure that our limited advocacy resources are placed where they have the most influence on how decision-makers act at a national level on the issues of greatest importance to our communities. Sometimes our efforts are best placed behind closed doors, sometimes they are better used in collaboration with other advocates, sometimes drawing national media attention to an issue is the best strategy, and sometimes we are better off letting others take the lead. Our goal is to be more strategic about when to use which strategy to the best effect.

# Organisational Priority 4: Facilitate stronger sector networks and collaborations

## What?

Community Legal Centres Australia will dedicate additional resources to identifying and supporting opportunities for greater collaboration amongst our members including in the following areas:

- Existing networks and events:
  - identify and support existing sector networks or events which address a sector need and would benefit from greater support
  - ensure the National Conference is sufficiently resourced to maximise engagement, learning, networking, and collaboration opportunities
- **New networks and events:** identify opportunities to support new sector, or cross-sector, networks, events and collaborative opportunities in areas of identified interest or need
- **Bespoke facilitation:** offer to facilitate bespoke collaborations between individual centres for whom there may be mutual benefit.

## Why?

To achieve Impact Priority 4, we need to dedicate additional resources to facilitate strategic information sharing and collaborations between centres.

Often these opportunities arise in the context of participation in general networks and events. To this end, some existing networks function extremely well without the need for any further assistance. However, several existing networks need greater attention and support to more effectively engage and support centres which would most benefit from the opportunities they provide. Further, there may be additional areas of interest or need which are not yet the subject of any networking opportunities.

Sometimes a more tailored approach is required to support impactful collaboration. Indeed, often, those centres that would most benefit from a collaboration are the least likely to have the resources to 'reach out' for that assistance or participate in events. To this end Community Legal Centres Australia can take a more active approach to facilitating strategic relationships.