



Partnerships for Local Action &
Community Empowerment

Sharing the power to make change: A guide to shared decision-making

December 2025



Acknowledgement of Country

PLACE acknowledges Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to lands, skies, waters and communities. We pay our deepest respects to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We acknowledge that systemic inequities continue to impact First Nations communities disproportionately, and that these are the result of colonisation, dispossession and historical injustice that persist in current systems.

The work of PLACE is grounded in a belief that those closest to the challenges must be central to the solutions. In this, we recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have long practised community-led, place-based governance and decision-making.

We are committed to walking alongside First Nations communities in a spirit of respect, learning and shared leadership, amplifying their voices, supporting self-determination, and embedding equity in all we do.

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Connect with us

Stronger, more inclusive communities start with community leadership. PLACE exists to support and sustain place-based change, alongside governments, philanthropists, service providers and other stakeholders.

Whether you're leading change in your region, shaping government policy, or supporting social innovation, PLACE is here to work alongside you.

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Cover image: Photography by Tom Psomotragos, Glebe (NSW),
Listening Tour 2025.

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Introducing PLACE

Partnerships for Local Action and Community Empowerment (PLACE) is a national organisation that champions and supports community-led approaches to social and economic challenges.

We are a support system – a hub for shared learning, partnership and policy innovation. Our work is underpinned by a belief that communities know best what matters to them, and that long-term change starts with shared decision-making and strong local leadership.

We exist because top-down, one-size-fits-all approaches have consistently failed to meet the needs of diverse communities. Despite decades of effort, persistent disadvantage remains entrenched in many parts of Australia.

Meanwhile, communities across the country are leading place-based initiatives that demonstrate different approaches built on genuine partnership and local ownership.

What's missing is the infrastructure to connect this work, elevate it in policy discussions, and remove the structural barriers that constrain it.

Purpose of this guide

Shared decision-making is an important element of place-based work, but there is no single way to 'do' shared decision-making, and it can be complex. This guide is the start of a conversation about the practice of shared decision-making and will provide usable steps, principles, examples and a readiness checklist, all of which we'll build upon over time as we continue to engage with communities and other stakeholders.

PLACE is a listening and learning organisation, and we want to know if this shared decision-making guide is relevant for your work in the place-based sector. To share your feedback or any experiences you have with shared decision-making processes, please scan the QR code and fill out our collection form. We'll share aggregated feedback in future iterations of this resource, and make contact if you have a shared decision-making story to share.



Introduction: What is shared decision-making?

Shared decision-making is when communities have real authority – not just input or consultation – over decisions that affect them. This means voting power, control over budgets, and the ability to shape how services are designed and delivered.

Communities are in the best position to understand the social challenges they face and the strengths, services and supports they can draw on to address them. By sharing power, governments, service providers and service commissioners benefit from the support of communities and ensure all decisions reflect local knowledge and priorities.

Shared decision-making is about sharing power between different groups (such as community members, service providers or the government) for the design and delivery of programs or services, with the aim of reaching a shared goal.

Shared decision-making happens on a spectrum, from providing input into decisions being made by others to decision-making being devolved to communities. It will look different in different places and for different groups.

In some situations, shared decision-making might not be desirable or it might be a future goal to work towards. For example, a community may want to help set outcomes and give input into what services look like in their community but not be a formal decision-maker. There is a spectrum of engagement, empowerment and accountability.

Photography by Romy Bullerjahn, Cairns (QLD),
Listening Tour 2025.



Why shared decision-making matters

Communities have told us that shared decision-making is key to delivering meaningful change. It's a way of working that supports community, funders, experts and others to understand each other's perspectives, shape how initiatives are delivered, address what is and isn't working, and provide a forum for identifying where systems may need reform.

On our national Listening Tour in 2025, we heard clearly from communities about the barriers and enablers they experience, many of which relate to shared decision-making (Table 1).

Solutions to complex issues need more than just money, knowledge and services that come from outside a community.

Photography by Jillian Mundy, Brighton (TAS), Listening Tour 2025.



Local knowledge, trusted connections and community ownership are critical to designing locally relevant, engaging and impactful programs. Community resources can only be accessed if the community is empowered through shared decision-making.

Shared decision-making can expand the range of solutions available by drawing on different perspectives, capabilities, and knowledge of a particular issue. It can help to build collective ownership and open up new avenues to address complex challenges.

Shared decision-making is particularly important for socially marginalised groups who face discrimination and inequity and have good reason not to trust current systems and services.

It's important to note that shared decision-making takes effort from all parties: it requires more time and resources than standard ways of working. It can be a good tool for addressing complex challenges, but it doesn't fit every context.

Table 1: Role of shared decision-making in place-based work

What we heard on our Listening Tour	How shared decision-making helps
Trust enables change – built through consistency, transparency and shared risk	Requires clear, transparent processes, authorised decision-makers and mutual accountability. Embedding shared decision-making in governance structures signals long-term commitment and builds trust over time.
Local leadership needs recognition and resourcing	Formalises community authority, giving local leaders real decision rights and influence over funding.
Culture as foundation	Aligns with subsidiarity (decisions made close to community) and Closing the Gap reforms, placing cultural authority at the heart of decision-making.
Compliance over care	Built on relationships and shares the responsibility for outcomes. Making a difference comes first. Accountability is to each other for shared outcomes, not reporting for the sake of compliance.
Fragmented services and siloed systems	Creates a structure for cross-portfolio and cross-sector decisions, reducing duplication and aligning investments.
Lack of consultation	Goes beyond consultation, giving communities real say in what matters to them.

Principles of shared decision-making

Seven key principles are foundational to successful shared decision-making across different contexts: shared power, representation, cultural awareness, relationships and trust, transparency, accountability, and adaptation and continuous learning (Table 2).



Table 2: Key principles of shared decision-making

Principle	Commitment	What it looks like
Shared power	We have agreed to share power equitably when making these decisions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Clear processes to ensure power imbalances are addressed.Joint accountability.Clarity where decision-making may not be able to be shared and why.
Representation	We have involved everyone who needs to have a say, giving special consideration to those who are most likely to be affected by decisions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Equitable, diverse representation.Members have authority from their organisation or group to make decisions.Openness, respect, and valuing of different perspectives and contributions.
Cultural awareness	We have reflected on how we will build awareness of different cultures into our processes and practices and create safe spaces for everyone to participate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Cultural awareness (including protocols and ways of working) and cultural safety are incorporated.
Relationships and trust	We have taken the time to know and understand the perspectives of others, and we trust that we can be open and share when we need to.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Processes and ways of working are built on a foundation of good relationships, trust, impact and shared understanding.Mutual respect for others' expertise and perspectives.Commitment to the principles of shared decision-making, particularly when it is challenging.

Table 2: Key principles of shared decision-making - continued

Principle	Commitment	What it looks like
Transparency	We have clear processes about what we consider when making decisions, how we make a decision and how that decision is communicated with others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processes and outcomes are clear and transparent. • Decisions are based on evidence, including lived experience and local knowledge. • Relevant information, history, data and evidence are shared, discussed and mutually understood. • Conflicts of interest are declared and managed.
Accountability	We are willing to take responsibility and have mechanisms in place to hold each other to account.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions and investments are aligned to the community agenda. • There are appropriate methods for holding members to account, including actions when things aren't working. • Relational ways of working are used that put care over compliance.
Adaptation and continuous learning	We will regularly pause and reflect on our work and lessons learned, including gathering data and community feedback. We will course-correct as necessary to ensure our actions are meeting the desired community outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mechanisms to evaluate progress, including community input to how outcomes are tracking. • Adapting to the local context and evolving as organisations and objectives mature.



Photography by Scott Calvin, Taree (NSW), Listening Tour 2025.

Shared decision-making in First Nations contexts

Colonisation has disrupted First Nations sovereignty, governance structures and ways of being. Ensuring that First Nations peoples have a legitimate voice in decision-making is a key aspect of reconciliation and self-determination. First Nations people live in many communities across Australia, in both urban and regional areas. It's important to consider what shared decision-making with First Nations peoples looks like in many contexts, not just in communities where the majority of residents are First Nations people.

First Nations governance structures often emphasise sharing decision-making through yarning, consensus building and other culturally grounded practices and protocols. These structures and ways of working should be lifted up, not just when working with Indigenous communities, but also when considering different ways of structuring decision-making that move beyond Western ways of working.

Specific considerations include self-determination, cultural safety, data sovereignty, and Indigenous cultural and intellectual property.

Self-determination is the fundamental right of people to shape their own lives, and includes recognition of culture and group identities (for example, Nation, Clan or Mob). When thinking about shared decision-making, it's important to acknowledge and respect Indigenous governance structures and ways of working, and seek out appropriate Indigenous representation in shared decision-making processes.

Cultural safety is about creating environments where everyone feels that their culture and background is respected, that they are free from harm, and that their identity and needs will not be denied. In practice, it involves learning about cultural protocols and the lasting impacts of colonisation and intergenerational trauma, taking the time to listen, and encouraging cultural expression.

Data sovereignty is the right to govern the collection, ownership and application of data about a community's people, land and resources. It's important to consider how local knowledge and data will be used, who collects it, what is considered important and who has control over this.

Indigenous cultural and intellectual property is a term that encompasses all aspects of Indigenous knowledge and traditional cultural expressions to describe the rights of Indigenous peoples to their cultural heritage and Indigenous knowledge.¹

1. IP Australia, *Respectful use of Indigenous Knowledge*, IP Australia website, n.d., accessed 21 November 2025; Arts Law Centre of Australia, *Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)*, Arts Law website, 2024.

How shared decision-making works

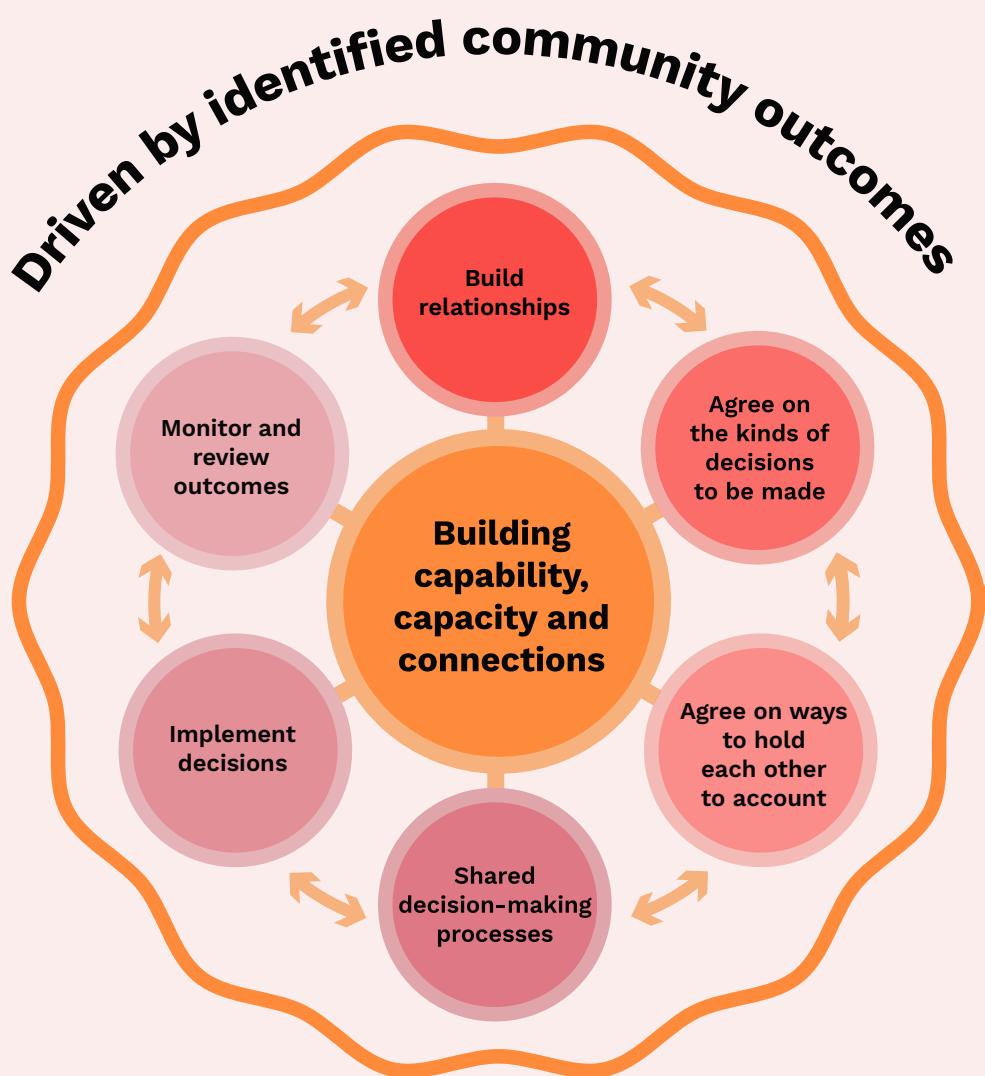
It can help to think of shared decision-making as a journey that consists of some important foundations and a series of steps.

Shared decision-making as a journey

Shared decision-making will look different depending on the place, participants and identified outcomes,

and will change over time. We've illustrated shared decision-making as a journey with 6 steps that build on and reinforce each other (Figure 1). But rather than being linear, the journey often involves a process of discovery as communities, governments, service providers and funders work together to understand the strengths, insights and knowledge they each bring. As our Wattlestone example illustrates (see pages 15-21), the journey may be repeated multiple times as trust and expertise grows.

Figure 1: The 6 steps of shared decision-making





Photography by Romy Bullerjahn, Cairns (QLD),
Listening Tour 2025

Foundations of shared decision-making

Shared decision-making has 2 main foundations: identifying community outcomes and building capability, capacity and connections.

Identifying community outcomes

Clear, shared community vision and goals will inform all of the steps on the journey: who needs to be involved, the decisions that could be made and the appropriate ways to hold each other to account.

There needs to be agreement on how 'community' is defined – in some instances, it may be everyone who lives in a place, or it could include people who work there or rely on it for services. It could also be a group who may live over a larger area but are united by shared experiences or cultures. Understanding different perspectives will help build a common vision and agreed outcomes that you are all aiming for.

Building capability, capacity and connections

Capability is skills and practices, capacity is resources like time, meeting spaces and money, and connections are the relationships and shared understanding. All participants will grow in capability, capacity and connection at every step of the shared decision-making journey as they learn by doing.

It's also important to periodically reflect on and review progress both individually and as a group. It may be that before proceeding to the next step on your journey, one or more participants need to build capability, capacity or connections. [PLACE's Enable team](#) has specific resources on the skills required for place-based work.

Documenting the shared decision-making journey and processes is important for communities and other partners to keep track of progress, including capability, capacity and connections that need to be developed or enhanced. Building institutional memory is important as people change roles, and as the community's evidence base grows.

How shared decision-making works

Steps in the journey

Let's take a closer look at the 6 steps in the journey of shared decision-making.

Build relationships

Shared decision-making requires collaboration between diverse groups of people. This should include people with lived experience of different parts of the system, including community perspectives, service delivery, funding and reporting. It may also include people with expertise the community does not have, such as in design methods, data and evidence, or subject matter knowledge. There may need to be culturally appropriate processes in place to make sure the people involved are trusted to represent a group.

Relationships grounded in trust, reciprocity and a shared purpose aligned to the identified outcomes require deep listening and may take some time. These relationships will grow during the journey, especially if they are tested by making difficult decisions or resolving differences.

More partners may need to be brought in as initiatives grow.



Doing the work to build relationships and coordinate decisions

Communities have consistently highlighted that fragmented, siloed services are a barrier to change. When seeking to make change and embark on shared decision-making, communities have often done the work of

organising themselves. This work includes identifying who needs to be included, building local connections and relationships, working out what equitable representation looks like, and deciding how the community will come together to make decisions.

Too often, however, when governments get involved, the government agencies haven't done the work to coordinate between different programs, agencies or jurisdictions, and will only represent a narrow subset of services or programs. Sometimes several government representatives will join the shared decision-making group, showing up together but still working separately.

Complex problems need holistic solutions and communities often identify a range of related actions that cut across portfolios. A coordinated approach is essential to driving real change and governments need to match the work that communities have already done to organise for effective change.

Building relationships for shared decision-making doesn't just mean building relationships between groups: it also means building internal relationships and coordinating work between different members of a group. In this step, it's important for each group to reflect on the work they need to do to be able to coordinate and show up ready to develop and deliver holistic solutions.

Agree on the kind of decisions to be made

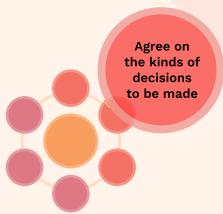
The shared decision-making group will need to agree on the kind of decisions it has the authority to make.

In some cases, there will be rules and hard boundaries to consider, but in other cases it will depend on how flexible people can be. Feasibility will also be a consideration, including available resources, such as community time and effort.

The kinds of decisions include:

- decisions the group can make collectively
- decisions that sit with others that the group will try to influence, such as through recommendations or community engagement with a service
- decisions that the group can't or doesn't want to make, such as decisions with financial or legal consequences.

It's important to consider what changes will be needed to support shared decision-making, particularly if the group is expanding decision-making to an area that was previously held by one party. There may need to be investments into capacity and capability building to redevelop structures, ways of working and authorising rules that support shared decision-making at the scale the group decides on.

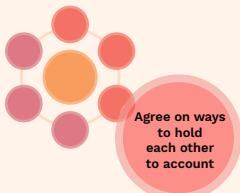


Agree on ways to hold each other to account

The group will need to agree on how to hold each other to account in ways that are proportionate to the decisions, identified outcomes and risks.² The mutual accountability needs to be developed in a way that shares power equitably between all the participants, and is mindful of pre-existing power differences.

The minimum accountability for all decisions is that they are documented with a shared understanding among everybody involved, which may mean representation in different languages or cultural formats. This may be all that is needed for some decisions.

More complex decisions may require governance structures, contracts, dispute resolution processes, independent monitoring and evaluation, or other formal processes. While there are many ways to do this, the principles remain the same – the processes need to share power equitably, and respect different cultures and different community ways of working.



2. Note that communities always bear the risks of poor outcomes. Communities cannot walk away, even when other partners do not deliver the intended results.

How shared decision-making works

Steps in the journey continued

Shared decision-making processes

The processes for shared decision-making set out how the group will work. There are many ways to approach this, including many formal tools and processes for sharing information, working through options, co-designing solutions and coming to agreements. These processes need to be considered and decided on collectively, in ways that respect community and culture.

As a starting point, processes should include:

- **identifying data requirements early, and understanding how information, data and evidence will be gathered, communicated and discussed.** This needs to include both qualitative and quantitative information, and the capability on all sides to understand, interpret and challenge how information becomes shared knowledge. Different approaches to understanding information, data and evidence is a common power difference and source of conflict in shared decision-making.
- **how assumptions, ideas and options will be thought through, tested and prioritised.** This could include methods such as program logic, theory of change, and co-design, as well as consideration of benefits, risks and trade-offs from different perspectives.



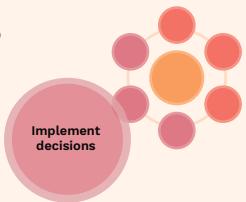
• **ensuring enough time and space for all voices to be heard and valued, individual and group reflection, and collaborative problem-solving.** Most shared decision-processes will allow for a number of meetings and discussions to account for this, and participants should be empowered to revisit previous discussions based on their reflections.

• **how agreements will be made, and how disagreement and conflict will be resolved.** Shared decision-making usually involves consensus, which means finding an outcome that everybody can agree on even if it may not be their preferred option.

• **clear roles and responsibilities.** In many cases, shared decision-making requires a dedicated facilitator to manage the process and avoid power imbalances or perceptions of bias among participants.

Implement decisions

In implementing decisions, the group will need to follow agreed roles and responsibilities and draw on the capability, capacity and connections of group members. As well as any formal reporting agreed upon, it's critical to have diverse feedback loops to the shared decision-making group to oversee implementation. This may lead to new decisions that weren't anticipated. This can often be the riskiest part of shared decision-making, and it's important not to take it for granted.



Monitor and review outcomes

The group will need to monitor and review outcomes using the agreed ways to hold each other to account. It's important to balance commitments to existing agreements with flexibility to consider new information. Many shared decisions are complex and may take years to shift outcomes, so patience and persistence is important. It's equally important to listen to the community, especially if expectations are not being met or if a decision results in unintended consequences.

At this step, the group should also review the capability, capacity and connections of all parties involved. This could lead to increasing the ambition for the kinds of decisions that can be made based on the lessons learned.



Tracking progress over time – establishing a baseline

An important aspect of monitoring progress is being able to track it over time against key objectives and desired outcomes. Gathering data to develop a baseline is an essential component of this process.

How shared decision-making works

Evolving shared decision-making over time – maturing the model

Shared decision-making is a journey with many possible destinations. It can start small, from a co-design process, and grow to address more complex issues as the group learns through each decision-making cycle.

Decision-making may start with deciding on focus areas or priorities, and then expand into decisions on program or service delivery, funding allocation or program budgets. The scope may also be expanded to include a broader remit or more sectors.

As models mature, capability builds and the group targets more complex issues, there will be a greater need for stronger, formal structures that outline clear roles and responsibilities, accountabilities, how decisions are shared and where they are not. Additional groups may also need to be brought into the shared decision-making structure.

Options to expand or formalise structures include:

- formalised agreements that set out how a group will work together, such as a memorandum of understanding or terms of reference
- formalising ways to hold each other to account, including independent monitoring, evaluation and reporting, or dispute resolution mechanisms in contracts and agreements
- establishing working groups to develop recommendations on a particular issue, or oversee operational implementation
- shared processes to guide how funding will be allocated, services selected and progress monitored, such as relational contracting or collaborative commissioning
- independent facilitators and/or backbone teams to support organising meetings, recording decisions and monitoring progress.

Photography by Harry Kielly, St Georges Basin (NSW), PLACE Listening Tour 2025.



Wattlestone's journey of shared decision-making

Wattlestone, a fictional regional town in PLACE's Listening Tour report,³ provides an example of a possible shared decision-making journey where capability, capacity and connections are built over time. The journey is not without challenges.

Wattlestone has a diverse community with many strengths, but also pockets of persistent intergenerational unemployment and youth disengagement. Government agencies have designed multiple government-funded programs, and selected providers through national tenders and grants processes with no input from community.

This has led to fragmented services that use sanctions to force participation. Outcomes in Wattlestone have remained stagnant or are getting worse for some people. Local leaders, including a community alliance, the local council, and service providers, agree to a new approach that places community voice at the centre of decision-making.

Wattlestone's journey of shared decision-making had 3 phases: starting small to build trust and shared purpose; growing ambition by formalising its model; and maturing the model to include collaborative commissioning.

3. PLACE, *Pride in Place: 2025 Community Roadshow and Listening Tour report*, PLACE, 2025.



Photography by Morgan Roberts, Lismore (NSW), Listening Tour 2025.

Wattlestone's journey of shared decision-making

Phase 1: Starting small – building trust and shared purpose

Identified community outcomes: First Nations and community leaders form a leadership group and bring people together to discuss how to improve youth transitions from school to employment or further education. This is an issue that has been discussed in Wattlestone for some years and presents opportunities for community-led solutions that don't need to rely on outside decision-makers or resources.

Relationship building: School leaders, council representatives, youth, businesses and employment services workers join the leadership group and agree to work together to improve outcomes for young people. From the start, there is an understanding that young people from Wattlestone with diverse experiences need to be at the centre of shared decision-making. This takes time and energy to build trust and ensure young people are confident that their perspectives will be listened to and respected in the group.

Decisions shared: The group agrees to co-design a youth mentoring pilot that engages young people in years 10 to 12 and supports them with guidance, exposes them to further education opportunities, and provides a part-time job. Youth participants help to define the outcomes that will be measured.

Ways to hold each other to account: The group agrees to ways of working that include rotating facilitation, shared meeting notes, and agreed actions and responsibilities. Outcomes will be tracked through a shared dashboard. The group agrees to conduct a review of the pilot after 6 months.

Processes for shared decision-making: The group spends a number of sessions discussing quantitative and qualitative data, including young people's lived experiences, coming to a shared understanding of the issues. They explore assumptions and ideas for the mentoring pilot, and test options with different stakeholders and from different perspectives. After 6 meetings, the design of the mentoring pilot is agreed by consensus.

Implement decisions: The pilot begins with support from a part-time council staff member, use of some council facilities, and volunteers from the community, the high school and businesses. The group continues to meet to hear feedback from participants, workers and volunteers, and to oversee implementation.

Challenge point: Implementation challenges include insufficient in-kind resources, high unmet demand for mentors, and different volunteer assumptions and expectations. There are attendance issues at school and work. The group meets regularly to work through and resolve these challenges as they arise, through discussion and consensus on a path forward.

Monitor and review outcomes: Through the regular implementation discussions and the 6-month review, the group determines that the pilot is a success, with young people increasing their connections, confidence and capability.

The group also reflects on and documents what they have learned through their shared decision-making journey.

Building capability, capacity and connections: All group members not only increased their own skills, but also had a greater understanding of the strengths other members brought to the group. The commitment to the shared vision was strengthened by working through disagreements and challenges, as was the strength of the relationships that form the basis of the group. This increase in capability and connection make group members prepared to commit more resources and increase the ambition for the next phase.

The group uses its findings to engage potential funders and to expand the potential of the program.

“We didn't start with control over funding – but we had control over the design. That mattered.” — Local youth participant



Photography by Jillian Mundy, Burnie (TAS),
Listening Tour 2025.

Wattlestone's journey of shared decision-making

Phase 2: Growing ambition – formalising the model

Identified community outcomes: The group decides to expand the outcomes to include overall family wellbeing, including early childhood. This expansion reflects community concern, government data, and feedback from participants in the youth mentoring pilot as an area of additional need in Wattlestone.

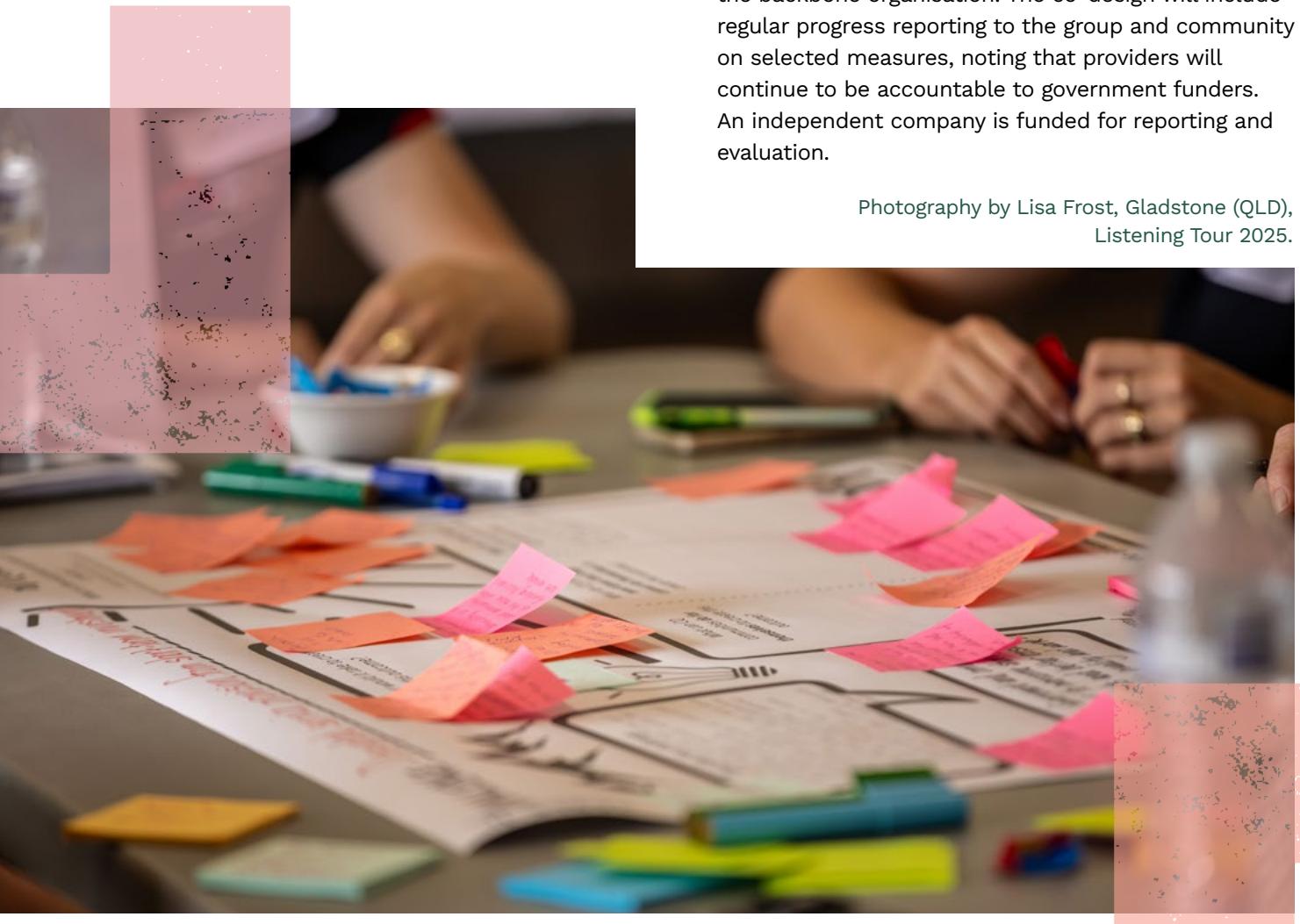
Relationship building: The group invites new members based on the success of phase 1, including local health services, early education and family support providers, state and federal government departments and a philanthropic funder. It takes some time to build new relationships and share the group's ways of working with new members.

The philanthropist provides 3-year funding for a backbone community organisation to support the group and ensure continued community engagement as the scope of decisions increases.

Decisions shared: Government funders have worked together to develop a flexible approach to funding and how they participate in shared decision-making so that only one government representative is needed. They have worked together to enable service providers to use existing funding to develop and implement new family support initiatives, with the group responsible for co-designing services, support and measures of success.

Ways to hold each other to account: The group formalises its governance with terms of reference, decision rules, dispute resolution processes and an independent facilitator, with a secretariat provided by the backbone organisation. The co-design will include regular progress reporting to the group and community on selected measures, noting that providers will continue to be accountable to government funders. An independent company is funded for reporting and evaluation.

Photography by Lisa Frost, Gladstone (QLD), Listening Tour 2025.



Processes for shared decision-making: The group formalises the model used in phase 1, dedicating sessions to arriving at a shared understanding through data and lived experience, exploring assumptions and ideas, and testing options, all overseen by the independent facilitator.

Challenge point: Setting a timeframe for co-design is challenging, as government and providers want to keep to a firm project schedule, while the community leaders want more flexibility to enable trust to be built with community members who have had poor experiences with government providers in the past.

While a provisional schedule is agreed, the backbone organisation extends this multiple times during the co-design to test ideas and potential solutions with the community. This challenges government partners, who are concerned at how long the process is taking, and this becomes a consistent focus of discussions in the group.

When the community finishes the co-design process, it's clear that government agencies haven't developed a flexible funding model that can respond to the complex related areas of action. They aren't ready.

The independent facilitator uses the dispute resolution process to negotiate a way forward that includes clear actions, timeframes and responsibilities, and a more frequent checking-in process across the groups.

Implement decisions: The providers deliver the new family supports and services within their existing funding and contracts with government. This requires changes to current services, with adaptations to the co-designed model required as unforeseen issues arise. The working group oversees this work closely, and at times delays the implementation to communicate and consult with the community to ensure fidelity to the co-designed model.

Monitor and review outcomes: The reporting partner delivers regular reporting and an evaluation report. The new model is shown to be meeting community expectations and providing better support for families with children of all ages, especially 0 to 5 years. The evaluation also notes that the project took longer than anticipated and required additional resources from all partners to accommodate the impact of the complex shared decision-making on funding, contract accountability and community expectations. The overall return on this investment is positive for both immediate outcomes and longer-term opportunities for families, children and the wider Wattlestone community.

Building capability, capacity and connections: All partners increase their capability during this phase, as well as their understanding of where they need to improve practices, processes and expectations. For government and providers, this includes committing to flexibility up front and reflecting this in contracts and with authorising bodies. For the community, this includes developing efficient ways to seek community views on new proposals, while respecting the time taken for diverse participants to come to a shared understanding.

[*We moved from consultation to real influence. We could say “no” to things that didn’t fit our goals.’ — Community Elder*

Wattlestone's journey of shared decision-making

Phase 3: Maturing the model – collaborative commissioning

Identified community outcomes: Following the success of improving family support services, the Wattlestone community is keen to be more involved in decisions that impact them. They seek to develop a whole-of-community wellbeing strategy, supported by systemic reform and holistic integrated services.

Relationship building: More partners are added to the decision-making group, including more government departments and service providers. With the expanded focus and increased complexity of decision-making, the backbone organisation formalises its governance with a community board that includes dedicated First Nations roles. Government and providers demonstrate their trust in the community by changing their usual project management and contractual approaches.

Decisions shared: To develop and deliver the wellbeing strategy, the group agrees to set community priorities and design services, supports and community-led actions to achieve them. The group also agrees to a collaborative commissioning process to select and fund providers and set performance expectations, rather than traditional government contracts.

Ways to hold each other to account: The government funders and philanthropist agree to pool funding and establish a commissioning body with an independent board. Formal relational contracts between the commissioner, government and philanthropist recognise the complexity of the outcomes being sought and that funding, key performance indicators and the sequence of actions are likely to change over time. This relational model is reflected in the funding arrangements between the commissioner and providers.

The community is represented on the governance of the commissioning body overseeing implementation. This approach provides the flexibility to achieve long-term outcomes and recognises the risks of not being agile and adaptable. Governance builds in the role of community, with the funding model also supporting the community backbone organisation to do this work. This reflects the trust built up since Wattlestone began its journey.

Challenge point: Some community members believe that – in formalising its governance and entering into complex agreements with funders, commissioners and providers – the backbone organisation has now become part of ‘the system’ and no longer represents the community. The community board of the backbone organisation resolves this by holding a series of community briefing sessions on how the agreements hold the commissioners and funders accountable to deliver the community’s vision, and ensure the community has shared power over service implementation and outcome monitoring.

Processes for shared decision-making: Decisions are broken into 3 clear stages, with different leads for each stage. Co-design of the wellbeing strategy and outcomes measurement is led by the backbone organisation, with input and direction from across the community over a period of months. The design of services, supports and community actions is led by the original shared decision-making group. The commissioning, selection and contracting of providers is led by the commissioning body, which has included identified community roles within its decision-making and governance structures. These processes are structured, with flexibility built in to ensure this more formal approach does not create power imbalances.

Implement decisions: The selected service providers deliver services and supports, which are overseen by the commissioning body. The providers and commissioner work closely with the backbone organisation on implementation and adaptation to ensure community needs and outcomes remain at the forefront.

Monitor and review outcomes: In addition to the reporting and measurement included in the agreements and contracts and shared with the community, an independent evaluation partner monitors both process and outcomes and reports to all partners.

Building capability, capacity and connections: During this phase, all partners learn how to balance complex formal agreements, which include significant funding, service and performance complexity, with genuine community empowerment and engagement. These lessons need to be constantly relearned as contexts change, including community expectations, personnel changes, and factors outside people's control, like natural disasters or pandemics. Constant learning and evolution is a critical part of shared decision-making.

 We're not just delivering programs – we're shaping the system.
— Backbone organisation lead

Photography by Josef Ruckli, Inala (QLD), Listening Tour 2025.



Putting it into practice: Case studies

The Resilient Millgrove initiative in Victoria and the Maranguka initiative in New South Wales illustrate how shared decision-making works in practice.

Resilient Millgrove

Millgrove is a small town in the Yarra Valley, north-east of Melbourne on Wurundjeri country, with a population of 1,666 people in 2021. For many years, the volunteer-led Millgrove Residents Action Group (MRAG) has used shared decision-making to develop and implement community plans with the entire Millgrove community. The scope includes agreeing on the community's vision, goals and aspirations, deciding on focus areas and determining key actions. In 2019, the community identified the need for a dedicated community resilience plan as Millgrove is at risk from fires, storms and floods.

MRAG realised that, despite its strengths, Millgrove could benefit from expertise and resources outside the community, so they partnered with the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience and the Minderoo Foundation. Bringing in expertise gave MRAG frameworks and evidence to approach its resilience planning, but also required ongoing community engagement to ensure a shared understanding across the Millgrove community.

The shared decision-making process to develop the Community Resilience Plan took over 14 months and included:

- gathering, sharing and discussing information to come to a shared understanding. This included listening to different interests and concerns, mapping strengths and worries, highlighting knowledge gaps, and a community survey
- brainstorming projects, mapping potential impact, and taking them directly to the community to vote on the top 3 projects

- exploring community connections to put ideas into action across 6 different environments: social, cultural, economic, natural, built, and health and safety
- prioritising community-endorsed projects and implementing them along with partners.

The Millgrove Community Resilience Plan was published in 2023 and was included in the 2025 Millgrove Community Plan.⁴ Actions already taken from the resilience plan include installing 2 community defibrillators, increasing community awareness and emergency preparedness, installing solar and batteries on its community centre to act as a community resilience and recovery hub, and an annual light show.

MRAG has strong relationships with all levels of government, funders, business and other partners, but has not entered into ongoing partnerships beyond the resilience plan. Instead, it retains community control over the process and brings in partners on specific issues when needed.

‘Our community has proven capability of setting and achieving goals.’ — Jan Burney, Project Coordinator, Millgrove Residents Action Group

4. Millgrove Residents Action Group (MRAG), *A Resilient Millgrove: The project to help this town become fire and flood resilient*, MRAG, 2023; MRAG, *Millgrove Community Plan 2025–2030*, MRAG, November 2024.



Photography by Ernesto Arriagada, Millgrove (VIC), Listening Tour 2025.

Putting it into practice: Case studies

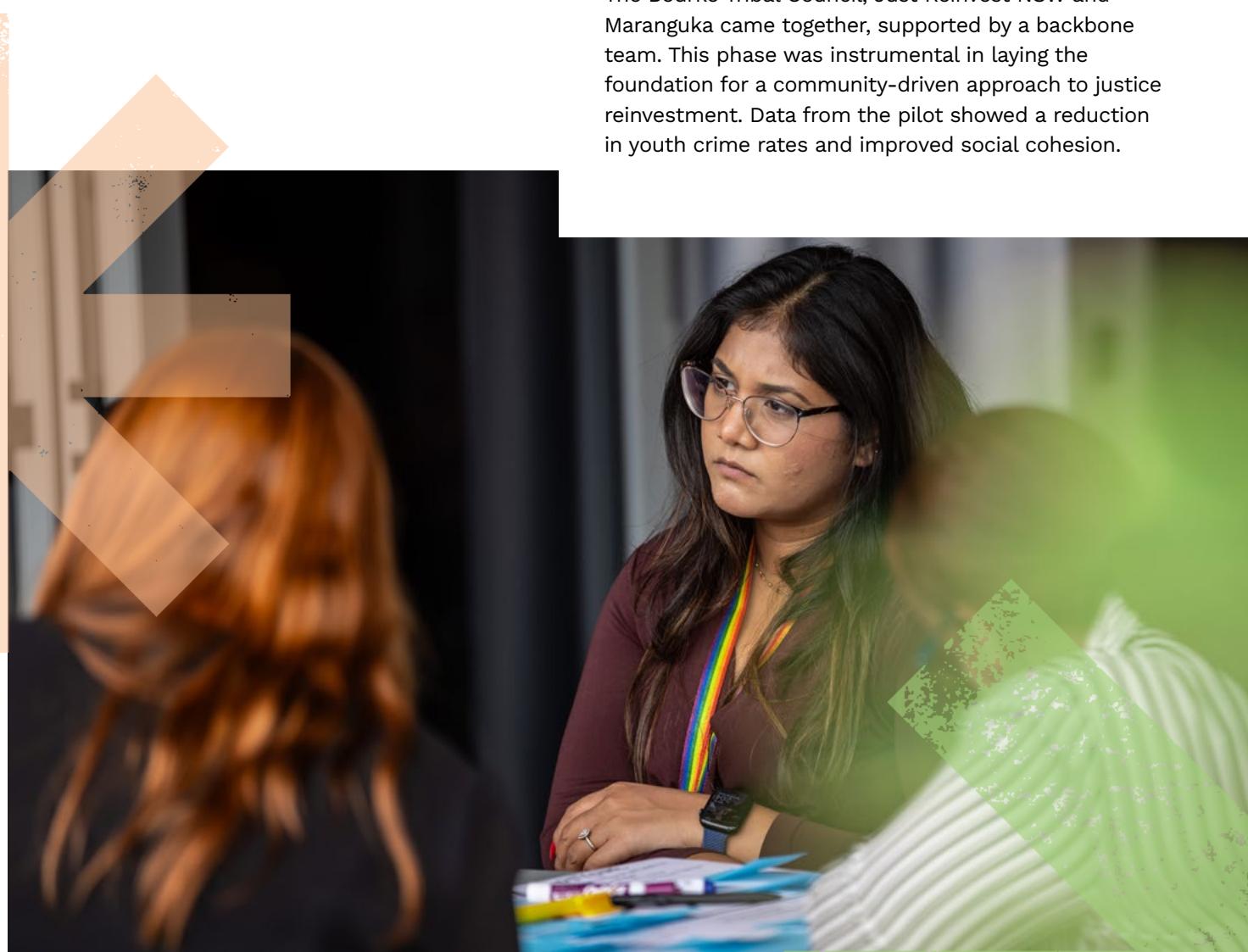
Maranguka initiative

The Maranguka initiative in Bourke, New South Wales, is a community-led initiative aiming to improve social outcomes for Aboriginal families and address systemic inequities in Aboriginal communities through justice reinvestment. By shifting the focus from punitive measures to community-led solutions, Maranguka has redefined power dynamics, strengthened trust, and fostered alignment between community, government and non-government stakeholders. Maranguka's culturally anchored shared decision-making structure has achieved significant social outcomes while driving systemic change.

Building the shared decision-making model

The call for shared decision-making grew from community: the Bourke Tribal Council, which has representation from 24 tribal groups, saw a need for a new culturally grounded and community-led approach to justice and justice reinvestment. The existing top-down approach was failing the community, with high crime and juvenile detention rates. In 2012, the Bourke Tribal Council approached Just Reinvest NSW to partner on a pilot project, with philanthropy providing funding towards the initiative.

The early governance structure of the project was simple and centred on community leadership. The Bourke Tribal Council, Just Reinvest NSW and Maranguka came together, supported by a backbone team. This phase was instrumental in laying the foundation for a community-driven approach to justice reinvestment. Data from the pilot showed a reduction in youth crime rates and improved social cohesion.



Photography by Lisa Frost, Gladstone (QLD), Listening Tour 2025.

In 2015, the governance structure became more formalised to address emerging complexities and scale up collaborative efforts. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed between the Bourke Tribal Council, Just Reinvest NSW and other stakeholders, including government agencies, non-government organisations (NGOs) and local service providers. The MOU set out how the parties would collaborate, established accountability mechanisms to track progress and uphold commitments, and reiterated that all decisions would be guided by local priorities and cultural values.

Additional working groups were added to the governance structure to allow for representation from government agencies, NGOs and the community, as well as specialised subgroups focused on key areas such as health, justice and education.

This updated structure supported the group to bring in new partners, increase their scope beyond justice reinvestment, and better coordinate related services that were being delivered in the community. The updated structure also retained and strengthened the Bourke Tribal Council's role in decision-making and its cultural authority, and supported self-determination. The MOU introduced formal mechanisms for holding members to account, proportionate to the increased scope.

Community driving positive change

The perspectives shared by key individuals involved in or observing the Maranguka initiative illustrate profound changes in governance, community dynamics and institutional behaviour. These changes reflect both operational and systemic transformations, highlighting the potential to restore autonomy, build trust and drive systemic change, particularly for the Aboriginal community in Bourke, where historical marginalisation and top-down decision-making had undermined local agency.

‘Through this strategy, Bourke is clawing back autonomy that has been stripped away over time, and delivering results that leave no doubt that increased investment (including justice reinvestment) into community-driven solutions is the only way forward if we are to effectively address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage.

‘Like any major program of change, the type of transformation that Bourke is undergoing presents a lot of hard work and a continuing struggle to have your voices heard, your strengths and achievements recognised, and your right to determine your own futures respected.

‘I want to congratulate your community for embracing this challenge, and for leading the way in making a success of this country’s first Justice Reinvestment project. It is through shared struggle that we can grow stronger together.’

— June Oscar AO, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Maranguka Education, Employment and Training Community Summit* [speech], Australian Human Rights Commission, Bourke, 28 May 2019.

Future work on shared decision-making

This guide is the start of a conversation about the practice of shared decision-making. We'll refine the guide and develop other resources as we continue to engage with communities and other stakeholders. Shared decision-making is already happening in communities across Australia and PLACE will continue to support, enable and amplify the good practices communities are using to drive change.



Tools and future resources

To support communities, we've compiled a checklist for shared decision-making, and we plan to develop other resources.

Checklist for shared decision-making

We've developed a shared decision-making checklist to accompany this guide and help you assess the strengths and barriers to shared decision-making in your local context.

It's important to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses in your shared decision-making group to be able to adapt your approach. It's not necessary to have strengths in every area before you start down the path of shared decision-making, but it's valuable to consider strengths and barriers when agreeing on the kind of decisions the group will make and where efforts may need to be focused.

The checklist can be used at the start of the journey to assess your readiness for shared decision-making, as well as when reviewing your group's scope and progress.

Developing shared decision-making checklist

Purpose

To assess your readiness to start, or move to more complex shared decision-making and consider strengths and areas for improvement.

Scoring

- 3 = Yes:** Strong shared decision-making capability
- 2 = Somewhat:** Developing shared decision-making capability
- 1 = No or Not Yet:** Barrier to shared decision-making

1. Foundations and readiness

Guiding question	Reflection	Score 3 / 2 / 1
Have we clearly defined the shared purpose and community outcomes?	Write your answer and reflections	
Are the right people at the table, including those with lived experience and decision-making authority? What skills are needed in the group?		
Is there a commitment to subsidiarity, transparency and mutual accountability?		
Have we got the data to understand the problem? Do we know where we're starting from?		
How are we learning from what's been done before?		
		Total /15

Developing shared decision-making checklist

2. Relationship building

Guiding question	Reflection	Score
	Write your answer and reflections	3 / 2 / 1
How strong is the trust across partners? Has this been tested?		
Are there mechanisms for ongoing engagement, reflection and feedback?		
Have we acknowledged and addressed power imbalances?		
Is everyone involved contributing positively?		
		Total /12

3. Defining the kinds of decisions

Guiding question	Reflection	Score
	Write your answer and reflections	3 / 2 / 1
Have we mapped the authorising environment (what can and can't be shared and decided)?		
Have we agreed on decisions the group can make?		
Have we agreed on decisions the group can influence?		
Have we agreed on decisions the group cannot or does not want to make?		
		Total /12

4. Accountability and governance

Guiding question	Reflection	Score
	Write your answer and reflections	3 / 2 / 1
Have we agreed on how we'll hold each other to account (e.g. minutes, contracts, evaluation)?		
Are there clear governance structures or plans to develop them?		
Have we developed dispute resolution and conflict management processes?		
Have each of the parties changed how they work as needed to ensure they are effective and able to engage in decision making?		
		Total /12

5. Designing the shared decision-making process

Guiding question	Reflection	Score
	Write your answer and reflections	3 / 2 / 1
Have we agreed on how information will be shared and communicated?		
Have we built in enough time for reflection and considering different perspectives?		
Have we agreed on how decisions will be made (e.g. consensus, majority)?		
Have we agreed on how options will be tested and refined?		
Have we agreed on how diverse voices will be heard and valued?		
		Total /15

Developing shared decision-making checklist

6. Implementation

Guiding question	Reflection	Score
	Write your answer and reflections	3 / 2 / 1
Are we clear on who is responsible for implementing decisions?		
Have we resourced backbone support and coordination roles?		
Have we ensured appropriate feedback loops to oversee implementation?		
Are there culturally safe and inclusive practices in place?		
		Total /12

7. Monitoring, learning and adapting

Guiding question	Reflection	Score
	Write your answer and reflections	3 / 2 / 1
Are we tracking progress against shared outcomes?		
Do we have mechanisms for reviewing and adapting our shared decision-making model over time?		
Are we building and maintaining capability, capacity and connections across all partners?		
		Total /9

8. Embedding first nations perspectives

Guiding question	Reflection	Score
	Write your answer and reflections	3 / 2 / 1
Have we embedded cultural authority and respected Indigenous governance?		
Are we supporting data sovereignty?		
Have we embedded cultural safety?		
		Total /9

Your results

Add up the total of each section, and consider where you have strengths, barriers and areas for improvement. A section score over half (e.g. 5/9) indicates an area of strength, while a section score under half indicates a barrier or area for improvement.

Next steps:

- **Map it:** Review and reflect on the areas you've identified as barriers or weaknesses. Also reflect on the areas where you have strengths: what were these strengths built on? Could you leverage these to address barriers or weaknesses?
- **Reflect:** If there are barriers or areas for improvement in many sections, pause and reflect: is shared decision-making possible at the moment, or a goal to work towards? Do you need to start small, identifying one decision area to pilot shared decision-making (e.g. funding priorities, partner selection, evaluation).
- **Refine it:** Develop a plan for how to address the identified barriers or weaknesses, including considering processes, ways of working, and whether the right people are included.
- **Build it:** Invest in capability so confidence and credibility can support progress (e.g. through more inclusive representation, or developing accountability mechanisms).
- **Monitor it:** Hold regular joint reflection sessions with your partners to review how shared decision-making feels in practice.

Sharing the power to make change: A guide to shared decision-making

December 2025