



EXCELLENCE IN COMMUNITY SERVICES

Discussion Paper | November 2024



QCOSS acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the original inhabitants of Australia and recognises these unique cultures as part of the cultural heritage of all Australians. We pay respect to the Elders of this land; past and present.

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INTRODUCTION

This discussion paper aims to support discussion and reflection about the concept of 'excellence' within community services. The paper is the first step in the development of an Excellence Framework that QCOSS will use to guide our workforce development programs and activities, along with sector development activities and advocacy, across the sector in Queensland. Feedback, including responses to the questions in Part 3 of this document and examples of excellence from individual organisations, is invited from all members of the Queensland community services sector and will inform the QCOSS Excellence Framework.

Given that the Community Service sector in Queensland is large and diverse and experiences an ever-evolving funding and operating environment, the discussion paper does not cover all the ways organisations can achieve excellence or provide specific advice on how to achieve excellence. However, we know that there are some ways in which organisations agree excellence can be achieved. The seven areas of excellence identified in this document were chosen after synthesising the findings of a literature review, as well as feedback gathered during a series of QCOSS town halls held across Queensland in 2024.

The literature review explored organisational factors that are consistent among community and nonprofit organisations in achieving excellence through three distinct lenses – those of research, industry, and funders.

The town halls took place as face-to-face consultations in Brisbane, Logan, Toowoomba, Gympie, Moreton Bay, Gladstone, Rockhampton, Mackay, Mount Isa, Townsville and Cairns in 2024. A total of 262 community sector representatives participated in the town halls. Participating organisations represented a diverse range of service areas, including neighbourhood centres, community development, and services devoted to housing, child, family, and youth, ageing and disability. The town hall discussions were facilitated by QCOSS staff members. Participants were divided into small groups and invited to respond to the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of an excellent or high-performing organisation in the community services sector?
2. What are the enablers of excellence?
3. What are the barriers to excellence?

The small group responses generated larger group discussions, which identified shared ideas and concerns. Notes collected from these workshops were collated and themed by QCOSS staff. The data from the town halls and the literature review helped to identify the seven key areas detailed in this discussion paper. A further review of current research and industry best practice helped to create definitions for each area and provide examples of how excellence can be demonstrated.

STRUCTURE

The Discussion Paper is structured in three parts:

Part 1

provides an overview of 'excellence' in the context of the community services sector.

Part 2

outlines seven areas where an organisation can achieve excellence and how an organisation might demonstrate excellence.

Part 3

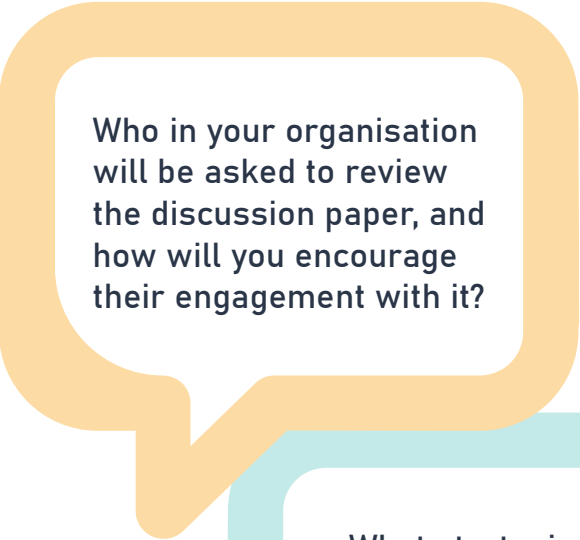
provides questions for organisations to respond to, to ensure we get the QCOSS Excellence Framework right. Suggestions for further reading are also provided.

PROVIDING FEEDBACK, IDEAS AND STORIES OF EXCELLENCE


After reviewing the discussion paper, we invite individuals and organisations to share their feedback with QCOSS on the topics raised by the questions in Part 3. We also invite case studies and stories where organisations are already pursuing and achieving excellence.

The feedback and stories will support the development of the QCOSS Excellence Framework, which will define what excellence in the community services sector means and requires. The Excellence Framework aims to support leaders and teams to start planning how they will achieve excellence within their own contexts. QCOSS also aims to use the framework to guide sector workforce planning and development work for the community services sector in Queensland.


The consultation period will end Friday 31 January 2025, which is when QCOSS will use the feedback and stories to finalise the Excellence Framework.



Who in your organisation will be asked to review the discussion paper, and how will you encourage their engagement with it?



What strategies will promote discussions around the seven areas of excellence?



Who will be responsible for providing feedback and stories to QCOSS following the discussions in your organisation?

PART 1: WHAT IS EXCELLENCE?

There is no single definition of excellence, and there are many different views on what it is and how to attain it. Excellence is described as good, truth, beauty, justice, love, and hope in the book “The Principle of Excellence: A Framework for Social Ethics”.¹ This is a thought-provoking perspective for leaders and teams working in community services. It suggests that excellence may be a characteristic or quality that people appreciate and admire as it takes an investment of time, courage and commitment to achieve ‘excellence’.^{2,3,4,5} For First Nations people excellence often encompasses a deep connection to culture, community, and the land. It’s about honouring traditions, maintaining spiritual and cultural practices, and ensuring the wellbeing of the community. Excellence is connected to personal growth while preserving heritage and identity.^{6,7}

A range of research suggests that our values and beliefs underpin what we think excellence is in the workplace.⁸ For example, the characteristics and principles of transparency, accountability, strategy, evaluation, visionary leadership, innovation and continuous improvement are associated with excellence.^{9,10,11} These characteristics develop over time, and require people within the workplace to work together in a relational way to be, and do, their best. They require intentionally being committed to demonstrating excellence.

In the context of community organisations, excellence is connected to the investment required to achieve the organisation’s purpose in an efficient and effective way. This requires collective responsibility and action, the ability to overcome challenges and barriers, and regular monitoring and reflection to continually improve.^{12,13} It also involves a process and a disciplined effort over time to achieve goals and objectives.¹⁴

Excellence has also been described as the ability to positively transform both people and organisations.¹⁵ It requires leaders to understand stakeholder needs while strategically adapting to changing environments to improve the lives of individuals, communities, and systems.

Achieving excellence requires leaders to create adaptive cultures that utilise data, learning, and feedback to act resourcefully, and build partnerships and alliances.^{16,17} Some view excellence as the willingness to take risks and disrupt current thinking and practice to develop novel solutions that challenge existing systems and organisations to create social value and promote community development.¹⁸

In summary, excellence is the combination of collective action, sustained commitment, adaptive leadership, and continuous learning which leads to social change and wellbeing for individuals, organisations, and communities.

PART 2: SEVEN AREAS OF EXCELLENCE

These seven areas of excellence were selected after reviewing the literature and evaluating feedback from stakeholders attending the 2024 QCOSS town halls.



1. Governance and Leadership

Creating and implementing policies and practices that maintain positive and effective relationships to meet organisational expectations and performance outcomes.



2. Human Rights Respecting

Aligning services with human rights principles, ensuring equitable treatment and justice for all people, and involving service users in decisions that affect them, while being accountable for the impact of services.



3. Evidence-Based Practice

Balancing proven practices with community-specific adaptations, using research and data to understand and address problems, and continuously improving through context-specific learning and outcome measurement.



4. First Nations Perspectives and Self-Determination

Including and respecting the perspectives of First Nations People and communities in service design and evaluation, with services being designed and led by First Nations Community Controlled Organisations where there is over-representation of First Nations Peoples in the service user group.



5. Workforce Planning and Development

Effective workforce planning and development that ensures the right team with the right skills and experience, an inclusive workplace, employee wellbeing, and meaningful work.



6. Collaboration

Having a systems view of solving problems and working with other stakeholders to share perspectives, resources, and responsibilities to achieve shared goals.



7. Resourcing and Sustainability

Taking strategic action to foster economic, environmental, and social wellbeing; long-term success; and positive community impact.

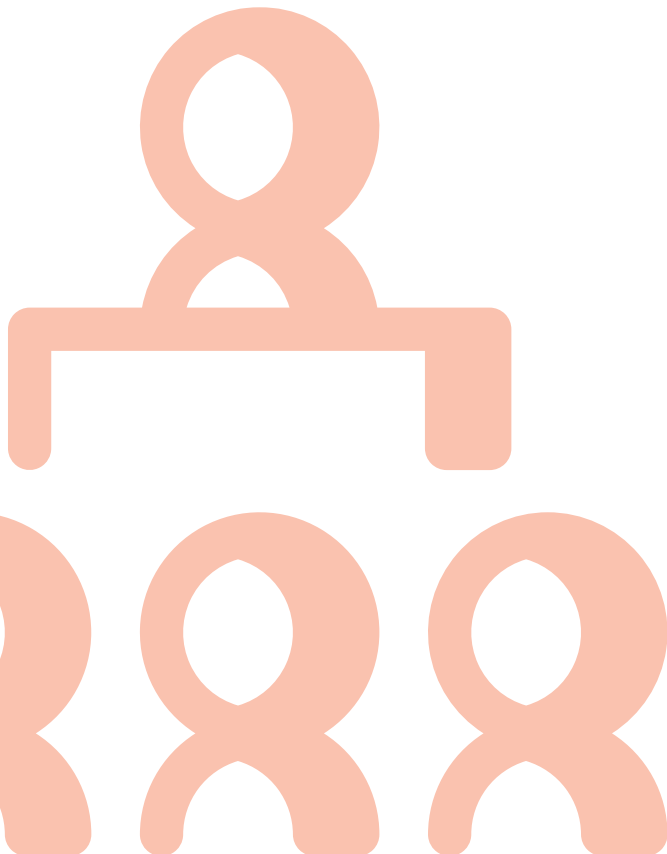
1. Governance and Leadership

Governance is the way in which leaders and managers create and implement policies and practices throughout an organisation, and how they manage and lead the workforce and the services provided by the organisation. It concerns *who* (your organisation) provides *what* (programs and services), and *how well* your organisation does it (performance and outcomes).

The Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) states that good governance “is about relationships. It concerns the relationships of the people involved with an organisation, both between each other and with the organisation itself, and the ways that the expectations of these relationships are understood and met.”¹⁹

How might excellence be demonstrated?

1. Directors and leaders demonstrating integrity, accountability, and transparency.^{20,21}
2. All directors / board members having a level of financial literacy that enables them to effectively monitor the organisation’s financial health and performance.^{22,23,24}
3. Driving social, cultural, and environmental impact and sustainability by applying systems thinking and critically reflecting to find solutions that address the causes of social issues.²⁵
4. Designing programs and services by engaging and understanding the communities that the organisation works with and for.²⁶
5. Creating safe and trustworthy services that enable a range of stakeholders to provide input into the design and evaluation of services and be involved in decision-making processes.²⁷
6. Fostering an inclusive workplace where people feel able to share ideas and use innovation to improve services and outcomes, and supporting, promoting, and resourcing diversity and inclusion workplace practices.^{28,29}
7. Regularly evaluating the organisation’s leadership, services and resourcing. Using a range of data to share accomplishments, lessons learned, and future directions.



2. Human Rights Respecting

Human-rights respecting involves aligning programs and practices with established human rights principles and laws, such as those outlined in the Queensland Human Rights Act.³⁰ This requires organisations to ensure that community service beneficiaries have access to services that do not unjustifiably limit their rights.

Respecting human rights in community services can take many forms, including actively fostering a culture within the organisation and the broader sector that promotes and protects the rights of all individuals. This means ensuring dignity, equality, and inclusion for all, while creating an environment that challenges discrimination, upholds ethical standards, and empowers individuals to fully participate in decision-making and opportunities.³¹

How might excellence be demonstrated?

1. Ensuring policies and procedures respect human rights.
2. Recognising and respecting service users/beneficiaries' diverse cultural backgrounds, values and beliefs, and integrating this understanding into service delivery.
3. Encouraging service users/beneficiaries to take an active role in decision-making, supporting their lives.³²
4. Listening without judgment and working with clients in a codesign process to design and deliver services that fit their needs and preferences.
5. Being adaptable, allowing service users/beneficiaries to shape and modify the support they receive as their needs evolve.³³
6. Using service users/beneficiaries' feedback to improve services, ensuring they feel heard and valued.³⁴
7. Building the capacity of communities, equipping them with the skills, knowledge, and resources to advocate for their rights.
8. Challenging systemic issues that contribute to human rights limitations within communities.³⁵



3. Evidence-Based Practice

Evidence Based Practice (EBP) is a process of providing a service or program utilising the best available research, along with a service user's unique values and circumstances.³⁶ It requires a balance between adhering to proven practice and adapting to the unique needs of the person or community that the organisation is working with.

EBP requires an organisation to draw on current research to understand why a problem exists and how an approach works to solve the problem, for whom and when. Whilst learning from research and case studies is an important facet of EBP, learning what works in an organisation's own context, for a specific community, is also essential. This requires developing effective processes for collecting and using data, along with systems for measuring and reporting outcomes, and longer-term impact. In summary, organisations looking to develop excellence in EBP should draw on available evidence and build their own evidence base.

How might excellence be demonstrated?

1. Delivering interventions and programs that are supported by high-quality research evidence, while adapting programs to the local context, considering cultural, social, and economic factors.³⁷
2. Developing an efficient system for measuring outcomes and using data to improve service quality through regular reviews and evaluations.
3. Developing a culture of ongoing education where staff are trained to understand and apply the latest research findings to their work.
4. Working with people with relevant lived experience, other organisations, academic institutions, and experts to encourage and support innovation within the framework of evidence-based practice.
5. Maintaining transparency in how decisions are made and how evidence is used, with clear documentation and communication to stakeholders.³⁸
6. Ensuring adequate resources are dedicated to maintaining the quality and effectiveness of evidence-based practices.
7. Remaining focused on the well-being of clients, ensuring that practices are not only effective but also ethical and respect human rights.

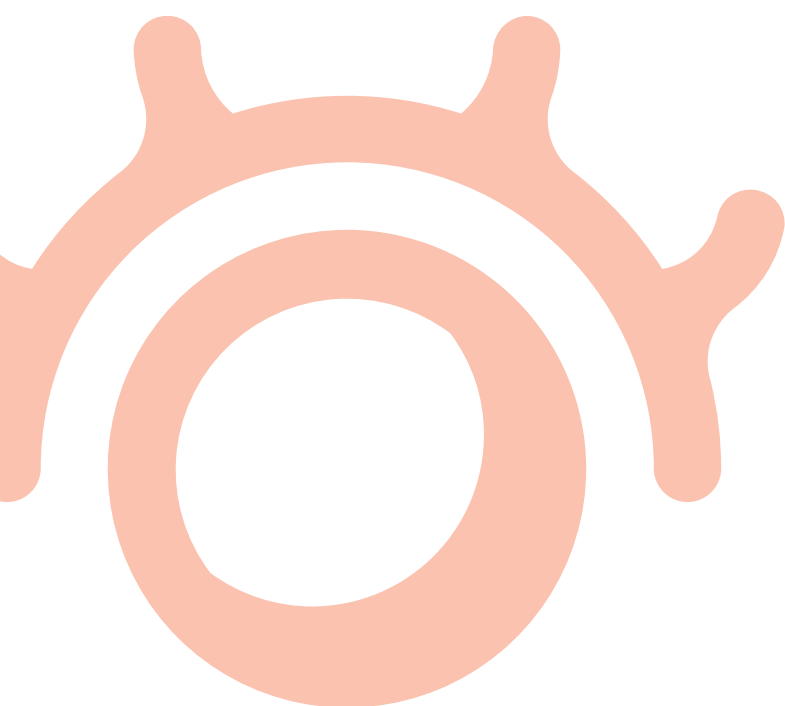
4. First Nations' Perspectives and Self-Determination

Community organisations should consider how First Nations People (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders) are represented in their organisation, how their voices are heard, how they are included in decisions, and how to include First Nations people and perspectives in the design and evaluation of community service projects and programs.³⁹ The principle of self-determination is vital. Self-determination is an internationally recognised right and allows First Nations People to collectively determine their own pathway, within and outside of existing organisations and communities.⁴⁰

Excellence requires organisations to move beyond consultation to codesigning with First Nations peoples and First Nations Community Controlled Organisations (FNCCOs). It requires building cultural capability throughout the organisation and using a trauma informed and collaborative approach when designing, delivering and evaluating services.⁴¹

How might excellence be demonstrated?

1. Engaging and partnering with First Nations Peoples and First Nations Community Controlled Organisations to design, implement and evaluate programs and services.
2. Ensuring staff and volunteers are continuously developing cultural capability through investing in training developed and delivered by First Nations organisations.
3. Developing a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)⁴² that supports tangible and substantive benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, increasing employment and economic equity and supporting First Nations self-determination.
4. Nurturing and enhancing the capabilities that support First Nations leadership of projects, programs and evaluations.
5. Fostering equitable and collaborative relationships, maintaining regular culturally appropriate communication and conflict resolution protocols.
6. Using evaluation methodologies that are culturally relevant and resonate with First Nations ways of knowing and being. This may involve integrating traditional knowledge and practices into the evaluation process.
7. Formalising First Nations knowledge ownership and sovereignty, ensuring communities own the data and knowledge generated through programs and evaluation.



5. Workforce Planning and Development

Workforce planning and development is essential for community service organisations to operate effectively and efficiently as it ensures they have the right people, with the right skills, in the right numbers. It involves a strategic approach to managing staff and volunteers, who are key to delivering services to the community. Workforce planning takes into account the structure of the workforce and helping the workforce feel supported and skilled by providing mentoring, supervision, and training to build their capability.

Workforce planning requires a focus on long-term sustainability through succession planning and prioritising the health and wellbeing of the team. It involves supporting employees and volunteers by engaging them in meaningful work and fostering a sense of shared purpose creates a stronger, more motivated workforce. When people feel their contributions are recognised and they belong to a community, their engagement and job satisfaction increase, leading to a more resilient organisation.

How might excellence be demonstrated?

1. Actively supporting flexible work arrangements and an inclusive workplace.^{43,44}
2. Supporting and engaging team members to share their ideas and perspectives about decisions that affect them, and actively involve employees in decision-making.^{45,46}
3. Leaders using self-awareness, transparency, integrity, and regular communication to guide their team and build a positive workplace culture.⁴⁷
4. Leaders intentionally connecting and celebrating individuals and teams to foster trust and connectedness to others in the workplace.⁴⁸
5. Providing personal and professional development for teams to develop a trauma-informed workforce and policies and strategies protecting employees from discrimination, bullying, and workplace hazards such as vicarious trauma.^{49,50}
6. Designing and implementing strategies that focus on people's safety, and mental and emotional wellbeing, so individuals and teams can manage stress, feel safe, and adapt to change.
7. Supporting team members to reflect on their practice, understand expectations, feel supported and maintain open communication with their supervisors.
8. The CEO and executive team actively champion Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) strategies to develop a culture of respect and care.^{51,52}
9. Providing employees who do remote work with the same level of support, information and feedback as other employees who are office-based.⁵³



6. Collaboration

Collaboration is when two or more individuals, groups, or organisations work together towards achieving a common goal. It involves sharing knowledge, resources, and responsibilities to achieve objectives that would be difficult or impossible to accomplish independently. Collaboration includes partnering with beneficiaries and funders to improve the effectiveness of services or projects.

It requires leadership and commitment to bring together human and financial resources to benefit organisations, communities, and society.⁵⁴ Genuine and effective collaboration requires resources and approaches that value diverse perspectives, working in culturally safe ways, and centring the voices of the lived and living experiences of those impacted by services.

How might excellence be demonstrated?

1. Having a strategic and proactive mindset within the organisation which involves people actively searching and creating partnerships and alliances.⁵⁵
2. Adopting a systems approach, whereby plans and actions actively and transparently engage and collaborate with external stakeholders.
3. Building trust between people working together using participatory processes. This includes giving everyone a chance to speak, participate, and listen to diverse views and perspectives. Collaborators learn, reflect, and adjust together.⁵⁶
4. Using collaboration to support cooperation between stakeholders and going beyond sharing information to mutual obligations involving the use of organisational resources or coordination of services.⁵⁷
5. Supporting and inducting new members to a network, alliance or group. Providing information about the group's purpose and ways of working, including how decisions are made and disagreements resolved. Ensuring decision-making processes are transparent and inclusive.⁵⁸
6. When working with government, business, and community stakeholders, working collaboratively together to make decisions and implement policies and programs at the local level, using local collaborative governance principles that include a shared ownership of the process, co-creating solutions, and ensuring all voices are heard and considered.^{59,60,61}
7. When facilitating co-creation, co-design, or co-production, the collaborative approach centres on participants' needs, lived experience, expertise, and knowledge. Emphasising teamwork, power-sharing, reciprocity, and mutual learning to guide and contextualise stakeholder interactions and communication.^{62,63,64,65}

7. Resourcing and Sustainability

Becoming sustainable means taking a multifaceted approach to balance the economic, environmental, and social needs of an organisation and the wider community. Excellence requires strategic planning, strong financial management, diverse funding streams, sustainable and ethical supply chains, reducing environmental impacts, and innovative partnerships to resource the organisation.

Ultimately, community services should aim to resource their organisations so they can provide employment and create a supportive work environment, train and develop their workforce, maintain essential services for the community, and communicate their impact.

How might excellence be demonstrated?

1. Improving operational efficiency while being transparent and accountable for the way finances are spent and managed.
2. Setting realistic expectations for operational costs, investing in administrative infrastructure, and ensuring accurate reporting.⁶⁶
3. Being resourceful and working collaboratively with other organisations to share and optimise resources.
4. Fostering a philanthropic culture and driving fundraising success, while building the team's capabilities to source grants, donations, and volunteers.^{67,68,69}
5. Identifying and developing new ideas and opportunities for generating income and new resources.^{70,71,72}
6. Organising, planning, and implementing marketing strategies that raise awareness, increase support, and drive engagement.^{73,74}
7. Using the organisation's resources efficiently, reducing waste and pollution, and protecting natural ecosystems – for example, by using renewable energy, recycling, and conserving water.^{75,76}
8. Monitoring, measuring, and reporting social impact to engage, and build trust with supporters and service participants.⁷⁷



PART 3: DISCUSSION AND FEEDBACK

We hope this discussion paper supports you to reflect on excellence, discuss the characteristics of excellence in your organisation, and provide feedback to help develop the QCOSS Excellence Framework to guide our work with the sector as we strive towards excellence.

Our invitation to you is to discuss the questions below, and then provide your thoughts and ideas with us by Friday, 31 January 2025.

We are particularly keen to hear your stories of excellence and what has enabled you to achieve this. We are excited to continue these conversations – your diverse perspectives and experiences will help us collectively learn more about excellence in community services.

You can give feedback by:

- ✓ Completing [this online survey](#), which asks the questions to the right. You do not have to answer every question if you would like to provide feedback on only some.



- ✓ Meeting with our team via Teams, phone or in-person to discuss the questions below, email: research@qcross.org.au

Defining excellence

1. What does excellence mean to people in our organisation?

Benefits of excellence

2. How does striving for excellence benefit our organisation, communities, the sector and systems in which we operate?

Demonstrating excellence

3. Which of the seven areas outlined in this discussion paper, is an area of excellence for your organisation? Do you have a specific example or story to share about achieving excellence?
4. What are the things that enable your organisation to achieve excellence?
5. Thinking about your organisation, and other organisations you work with, are there any additional characteristics of an excellent or high-performing organisation in the community sector that we would add to this list?
6. What are the barriers stopping your organisation from achieving excellence? Do you have a specific example of this?
7. What opportunities and actions would help us, as a sector, achieve excellence?

FURTHER READING

These are some suggestions for further reading, to help support and expand your discussions and reflections.

Internet resources

- Australian Institute of Family Services. (2017). *Collective impact: Evidence and implications for practice*. Australian Institute of Family Services. <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/practice-guides/collective-impact-evidence-and-implications-practice>
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