



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

David Tennant – CEO
FamilyCare
Shepparton, Victoria, Australia



Conditionality in Australia (the sixty second version...)

- Australia's welfare system has always imposed 'conditions' to access and retain support
- About two decades ago, conditionality changed
- 'New' conditionality seeks to alter behaviour, is paternalistic and applies punishment if the rules are not followed
- The practical focus is moving people from welfare to work
- Some conditions apply nationally, many more apply in a complex web of place-specific rules

Targeted welfare conditionality in Australia

- The highest profile and most controversial program of welfare reforms was the Northern Territory Intervention launched in mid-2016
- The Intervention required an exemption from the Racial Discrimination Act, which was reinstated in 2010
- The Intervention provided a basis for a series of place-based welfare reform trials announced in May 2011 under the title, 'Building Australia's Future Workforce'

Shepparton. Fruit. Vegetables. Milk.



... and Welfare Conditionality

Community Leaders' views of Shepparton's Welfare Conditionality measures

- There was no local consultation before the selection of the place-based trial sites
- Very limited engagement since to check on the impacts of the reform measures
- Reflects a broader issue with co-opting terms like place-based to imply local buy-in that does not exist
- Mendes describes this approach to community as a 'spray on solution'

Collecting local views

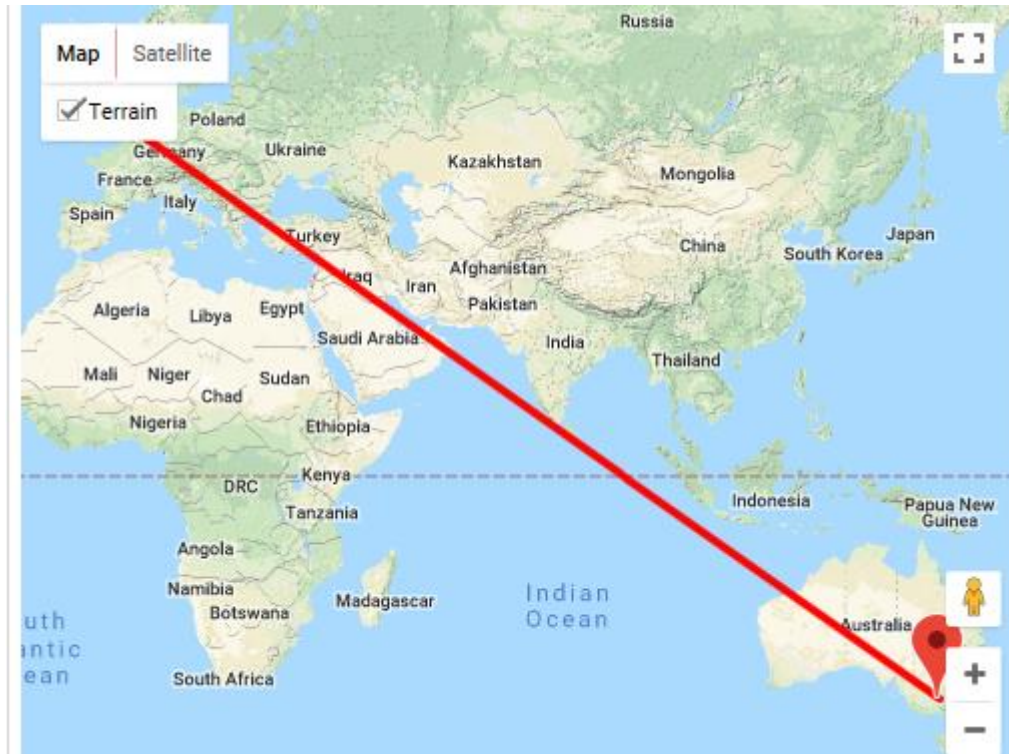
- Leaders from five community agencies with service activities in Shepparton agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews



- The questions that guided the interviews:
 - Who was impacted?
 - Were the impacts positive, negative, or mixed?
 - What effects have the trials had on Shepparton?
 - Is Welfare Conditionality compatible with the mission and values of your organisation?



And with a lack of interest from policy makers in Australia, I thought it might be useful to bring a summary of the responses 16,800km to share



Who was impacted by the trials?

- The trials focused on defined groups of benefit recipients:
 - vulnerable young people
 - jobless families
 - long-term unemployed
- The interviews noted an overlap between participants and groups experiencing significant poverty
- Particularly pronounced for single parents
- Overrepresentation of humanitarian refugees and Aboriginal families
- Common thread – the most vulnerable members of the Shepparton Community were the most likely to be required to participate

Were the impacts for participants positive, negative, or mixed?

- Conditionality made life more challenging for people already in crisis
 - *They have just been rejected on so many levels to me it's just another form of rejection; another form of saying 'you're not good enough.'*
- The removal of choice was problematic
 - *There was resentment. Anything you are told to do I think you resent.*
- Removing choice was particularly problematic for refugees, ignoring past trauma

- Providers involved in trial activities sought to interpret rather than strictly applying compliance rules
 - ***What benefit was dobbing them in to Centrelink and having their benefits cut, other than seeing them come in for all of our other services?***
- The interviews consistently noted the measures were insensitive to participant needs
 - ***The Government's portrayal of this being a mutually beneficial arrangement is not right. It is beneficial for the Government and our clients are basically going along with it.***



- There were some positives; for example people who were able to volunteer for income management
- Bonus payments of \$250 every six months for income management volunteers were withdrawn in mid-2017 and participation numbers have fallen since
- Overall, most impacts were negative, with the improvements not attributable to conditionality

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

How have the trials impacted Shepparton?

- Several interviewees commented on the way welfare conditionality seeks to underline differences...
- From the distinctive lime green Basics Card for Income Management participants



- To the labeling of people as what a former Commonwealth Treasurer described as ‘lifers or leaners’



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

- A number of interviews referred to a more obvious divide between the ‘haves and have nots’ since the trials commenced

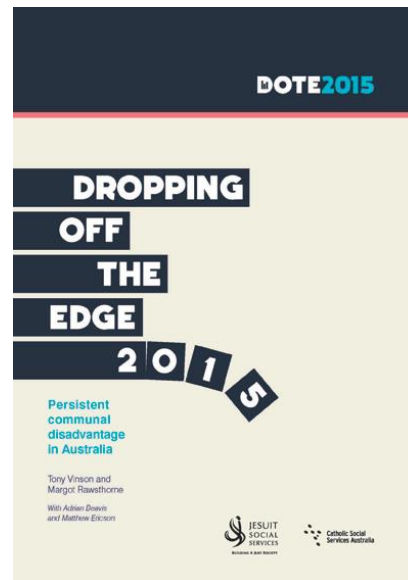


- Even within service user groups, the interviews noted that additional unhelpful and unhealthy distinctions had emerged because of the trials
- For example, one interview reflected on parents of young children not wanting to attend an activity if parents required to be there because of a mandatory participation plan would also be attending

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

- There were numerous comments about the negative impact on perceptions of Shepparton both inside and outside of the community
 - ***The narrative that describes Shepparton is one of failure.***
- The deficit-based focus encourages the opposite of a community development approach
 - ***Every time a new statistic comes out, it just perpetuates the sense of ‘bloody Shepparton, we’re hopeless, we’re really worthless’ and I think the whole nature of the trial has really exacerbated that.***

- Ironically, Shepparton was not identified as one of the most disadvantaged communities in Victoria prior to the trial's commencement



- The most recent report in 2015 put Shepparton in the list of 40 most disadvantaged postcodes in Victoria



- In spite of the negative stereotyping there was considerable optimism amongst the interviewees
- All wanted to tell a different story about Shepparton and its residents, including those required to participate in the conditionality trials

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

Is Welfare Conditionality compatible with not-for-profit missions and values?

- All interviewees noted the punitive approach of conditionality was inconsistent with the values their agencies promote
 - *there are stark inconsistencies between our approach to working with families in a strengths-based way and the whole reform package which actually would have the effect of reducing autonomy and agency.*
- One interview indicated that conditionality is ‘superficially compatible’ with the statutory child protection system
- The comparison breaks down when considering a judicial approach to weighing and potentially reducing rights and freedoms



- Interviewees considered the value of refusing to engage with the support services around conditionality and those that agreed to become providers were aware of the alternatives
 - ***if it's not us with the values trying to figure out ways to help things work, we run the risk of those that are bean counters doing it and we know that when it comes to the consumer, business does what business must do.***
- All interviewees wanted to help people meet their obligations wherever possible
 - ***we will facilitate their compliance where we can so that they aren't punished because they are caught up in a program we wouldn't ordinarily support.***

The study was small and limited but the messages were clear and consistent

- The people most likely to have been impacted were already the most vulnerable
- Conditionality has most made participants' lives more difficult and positives are not attributable to the reforms
- Shepparton has not benefitted from the 'disadvantaged' label and has been given limited opportunity to express local needs
- The rationale and impact of conditionality is incompatible with the vision and values of not-for-profit welfare service provision