



Stories of Lived Experience

Weave Youth & Community Services **Evaluation Report**

July 2016



The artwork featured in this report is by Linda Jackson.

Linda is an Aboriginal artist originally from Western Australia. She moved to Redfern in the early 1990's.

Photograph by Tristan Stefan Edouard

This Evaluation Report is a tribute to the strength of
our community.

We would like to acknowledge our clients, staff and
extended community who have been a part of Weave
Youth & Community Services for the past 40 years.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shane Brown', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Shane Brown

CEO



Acknowledgments

This work was completed with the assistance of Katie Sharman, Mardi Diles and Siobhan Bryson from Weave Youth & Community Services.

We would like to thank the Weave clients, family and community members who generously shared their time and insights with us. Their stories of lived experience are valuable and we trust that their views are adequately represented in this report. We would also like to express our gratitude to the National Centre for Indigenous Excellence for providing a welcoming environment for participants when they were interviewed.

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Executive summary

Weave Youth & Community Services (Weave) provides casework, counselling, social activities, creative arts and community development projects for young people, women and children in Sydney; with a focus on engaging and providing supports to local Aboriginal people and families.

In 2015, Weave invited ARTD Consultants to contribute to the *Stories of Lived Experience* project. ARTD worked with Weave and Aboriginal community organisations to develop a qualitative evaluation involving interviews with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal clients, community and staff to understand what is most useful about how Weave works; the difference that Weave makes for clients and the community; and how Weave and the sector can improve.

Key findings

Weave provides a community-based model of support: its understanding of the community is trauma-informed, and its positive reputation among individuals and families encourages early interventions.

- Weave grew out of its local community and these roots define Weave's ethos today.
- The continuity of Weave and key staff has built trust and sustained intergenerational connections.
- The service range creates holistic supports for clients and families at all life stages.

Client-centered, therapeutic relationships are at the core of what Weave does: quality staff who care about their work are supported by the organisation to use a range of therapeutic approaches, with a strong focus on narrative therapy principles, to draw on clients' strengths and empower them to make changes in their lives that are meaningful for them.

- Relationships are allowed to grow over time, forming a secure therapeutic base.
- The stories of clients are valued: clients have a voice and mutual respect sustains relationships.
- Staff are persistent and committed, creating shared hope and opportunities.

Weave's work has an impact for clients and communities: clients benefit across a range of developmental domains, and many leave Weave with greater independence, and some as leaders. Clients develop better connections to family and community, and community capacity is built.

As Weave grows and its operating environment changes, **there are some issues that Weave needs to monitor and address:**

- Growing sustainably while keeping Weave's ethos at the core.
- Continuing to support staff effectively, as their work is intense and challenging.
- Continuing to improve the collection and use of data to monitor and measure impacts.
- An ongoing focus on sector and community advocacy.

Lessons from Weave clients, community and staff are relevant for the community services sector broadly, and to services supporting people with their mental health—especially services that work with Aboriginal people and communities.

- Embed and engage community expertise: belong to the community in which you operate.
- Empower individuals with respect, compassion and choice: acknowledge and support the time, resources and commitment that this takes.
- Retaining quality staff matters, as do the qualities of staff within a supportive workplace culture.
- Forge community and corporate partnerships to build the range, quality and sustainability of supports.
- There is a serious role for fun and humour: celebrate successes and share hope.

1. Introduction

1.1 Weave Youth & Community Services

Weave Youth & Community Services (Weave) is a not-for profit organisation that has been working with young people, women, children and families in the City of Sydney and South Sydney areas for 40 years. Weave's vision is to build a strong connected community with opportunities and justice for all, with a focus on supports for local Aboriginal people and families. Anecdotally, Weave's model of support has had much success engaging and empowering Aboriginal people—including generations of family members returning to the service and referring family and friends. In 2014, Weave was accredited under the Australian Service Excellence Standards.

Weave operates from three venues: the Head Office at Waterloo Oval, which is also the centre for many of the youth, arts and community events; the Women and Children's Centre in Waterloo; and the Kool Kids Club at Maroubra Junction, serving the La Perouse and surrounding community. It also has expanded some activities and events into the Marrickville local government area.

Weave works with partners and volunteers to deliver a range of programs. These include information and referral services; tutoring and skills development; casework and counselling, including for mental health, alcohol and other drugs, and concerning domestic violence and homelessness; as well as recreational and leadership opportunities.

Box 1: Weave programs and activities

Weave offers a diverse range of programs to deliver casework and counselling support, as well as social activities, events, creative arts programs and community awareness campaigns. Key activities are listed below.

- Weave Women and Children's Centre, a supportive, holistic drop-in, casework, and group work program for women with children and women experiencing domestic and family violence, and delivering early intervention and parenting programs.
- Speak Out, a program that works with young people aged 12-28 who experience co-existing mental health and substance use issues, which works in tandem with the Weave arts program.
- Streetbeat, a program that assists young Aboriginal people to access supports (including outreach work) to reduce the risk of homelessness and alcohol/ drug use. There is a transport component to this program, getting young people home safely late at night.
- Kool Kids Club, an activities-based educational, skills and social development program working with children aged 7 to 13 years, and the Switch leadership program for 13-19 year olds.

- Specialist Homelessness Service, working with homeless young people in the City of Sydney as part of a consortium with Launchpad Youth Community and Ted Noffs Foundation.

Partnerships with community organisations and corporate sponsors, and sound relationships with government agencies and councils support Weave in the delivery of these programs and activities.

For more information on these, visit www.weave.org.au

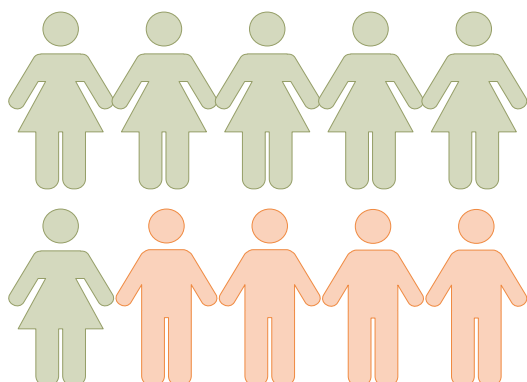
1.1.1 Weave clients, community and operating context

Weave is a relatively small organisation, with about 38 staff, but engages with a large number of clients, family and community members and volunteers at any one time. Weave has a pool of about 100 volunteers who are recently or currently engaged in supporting its services.

Between September 2014 and March 2016, Weave recorded 907 individuals engaged as clients and delivered almost 7000 sessions to these clients. More than a 1,000 intake assessments were also done, which led either to a client being engaged into casework or linked/ referred to other supports. Weave also estimates that each year nearly 2,300 individuals are involved in programs/ activities more broadly.

The majority of Weave clients (66% overall) identify as Aboriginal. This varies somewhat across programs, although no program has less than half of all clients identifying as Aboriginal and some have considerably more. In Kook Kids Club, for example, 80% of young people identify as Aboriginal.

Weave works with people of all ages and at different life stages, although key programs focus on youth and women's services, often young mothers. Unsurprisingly, most clients are aged between 12 and 28 years, and about two-thirds of clients (61%) are female.¹

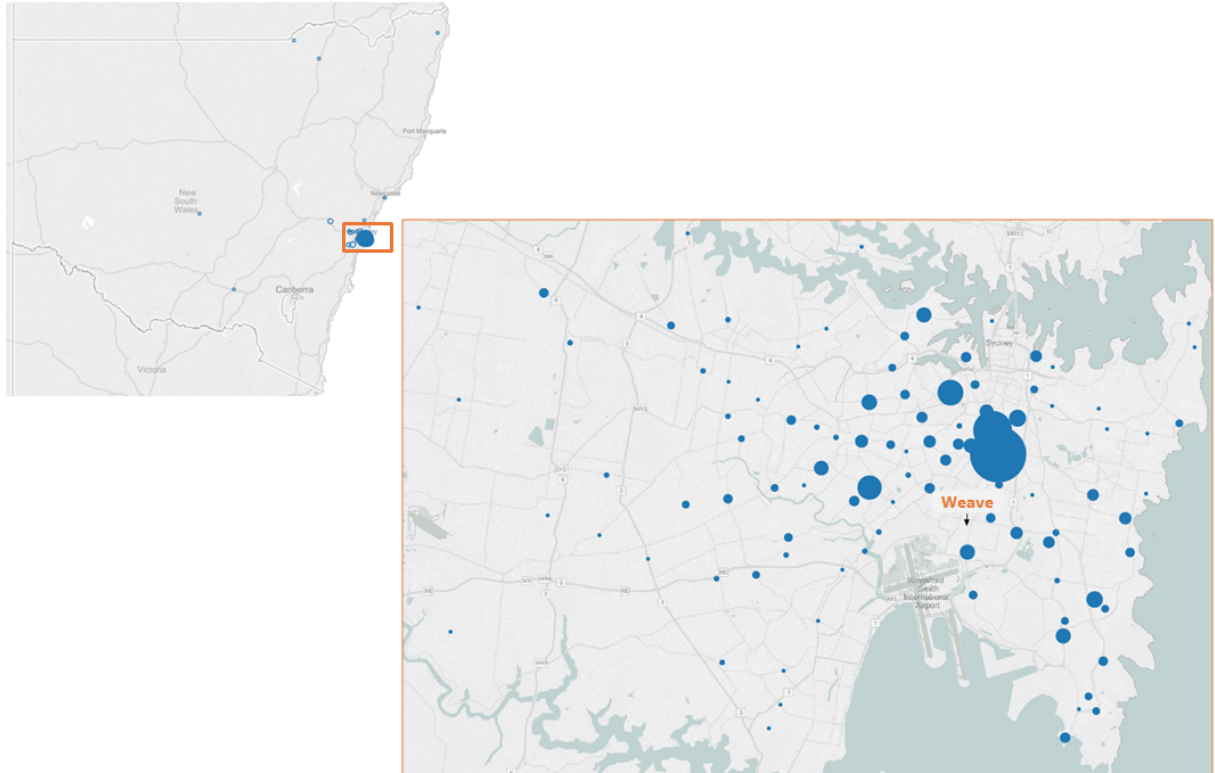


Source: Weave ('REPSummary All' data).

¹ Weave data, 'REPSummary All' data; interviews with clients.

Most clients, including Aboriginal clients, live locally (primarily Redfern and Waterloo) and have lived around the inner Sydney area for much of their lives—but there is also a fair proportion of Aboriginal clients who moved into the area from regional NSW or interstate, and who maintain connections to these communities. Where clients report they live on entry is shown in Figure 1, over the page.

Figure 1. Where Weave clients report they are living on entry to Weave, showing NSW and Sydney metropolitan areas



Source: Weave ('REPSummary All' data). n=879

Assessment data on the issues clients face on entry to Weave show that mental health issues, education/ employment related issues, problems with alcohol and other drugs, and homelessness were most common. It was also common for people to have financial difficulties in meeting their immediate needs. Complex trauma, and the impacts of domestic and family violence are also reported to be commonly experienced by clients.

1.1.2 Sector and reform context

Weave is operating in the context of national and state priorities to improve mental health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and in view of state-based reforms to improve early intervention programs.

- The 2014 *National Review of Mental Health Programmes and Services* highlighted the significant mental health outcomes gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people. The review recommended ways to prioritise and improve mental health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including invigorating culturally responsive and accountable mainstream mental health services and workforce development. The imperative that mental health sector reforms are meaningful to Aboriginal people is also emphasised on the NSW Mental Health Commission report, *Living Well* (2014).
- In 2015, FACS commenced a review of the design and delivery of its targeted early intervention services, which includes some programs delivered by Weave. NGO sector consultations for the review have found that, in the Sydney district, there are strong networks and partnerships but that delivery could improve overall with increased cultural competency, a stronger continuum of services from early childhood through to adolescence, longer term funding, and improved data collection.

1.1.3 The Stories of Lived Experience project

Weave has often been approached by organisations seeking their expertise in working with the local Aboriginal community. Accordingly, they have sought ways to consult with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal service users about their lived experience of therapeutic relationships and service delivery models.

In 2015, Weave received a grant from the Inner West Sydney Partners in Recovery program (IWSPIR) to undertake a project that will contribute to these aims, and improve outcomes for people experiencing severe and persistent mental illness and their carers. The project title is, *Stories of Lived Experience: Evaluating and reflecting on therapeutic relationships and practices that support Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who have complex trauma and persistent mental health experiences*.

A key component of the project is an evaluation (this report). Separately, Weave has developed a film and photography exhibition to share client stories. By sharing their experiences, participants in the project will help to build an understanding of what is most useful about Weave's services, and how Weave and the sector can improve.

1.2 This evaluation

ARTD was commissioned in 2015 by Weave to conduct the evaluation component of the *Stories of Lived Experience* project. ARTD worked with Weave and Aboriginal community partners (see 1.2.5) to develop the evaluation approach and methods,

and gained ethics approval for this work from the Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council (AH&MRC) in 2015 (Reference 1151/15).

1.2.1 Aim

The evaluation aims to articulate the features of Weave's support that make a difference to service users and engages their expert knowledge of their lived experiences, and that of Weave staff, to contribute to mental health sector development and good practice—especially with regards to the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people.

1.2.2 Scope

The evaluation focuses on experiences of intergenerational connection and continuity of care among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal service users (aged 13 years and older) across a spectrum of Weave programs. It also draws on the perspectives of Weave management and casework staff about their organisational and professional practices. Some quantitative data from Weave administrative systems is used to contextualise information about programs and participants.

1.2.3 Evaluation questions

1. What are the key features of Weave's model of support and therapeutic relationships?
2. What attracts individuals and families, especially Aboriginal families, to Weave and keeps them coming back?
3. What are the features of Weave's model of support and therapeutic relationships that best assist clients who have complex trauma and persistent mental health needs? How and why do these features work?
4. What is the significance of Weave's supports that are intergenerational, and which provide continuity of care, for the client group?
5. What differences have Weave's supports made in the lives of clients, and for wider family/ community networks?
6. What are the organisational features of Weave that facilitate its service delivery and ways of working in the community? What successful strategies and partnerships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations/ communities can be identified?
7. What can the mental health sector learn from Weave's ways of working to improve service access and outcomes for clients, including Aboriginal people? What is the relevance of these learnings in the context of a review of early intervention and prevention services?

1.2.4 Methods

This project is primarily a qualitative evaluation designed to capture the stories of clients and community about their experiences, in their own words.

We commenced with a literature scan, a broad consultation with Weave staff, and meetings with Aboriginal community organisations to understand the sector, operating context, and key issues in the community. We then collected more specific information about Weave's model of support, therapeutic relationships, and suggestions for improvement, through a series of interviews, focus groups, and a survey of the Weave Board (see Table 1, over the page, for detail). We worked with Weave to purposively sample clients and community members who had a long-standing and often intergenerational connection to Weave, and we only spoke to clients and community members who Weave assessed as being well, comfortable to be interviewed, and not in crisis.

Table 1. Methods and participants

Method	Participant group	Number of participants
Focus groups and interviews	Clients, family and community members	53
Small group interviews	Leadership Group	5
	Small group staff interview	3
	CEO	1
Survey (open text)	Board	4

To understand the features of Weave that work well for clients, we thematically analysed the qualitative data from all sources. We also analysed aggregate (non-identifiable) data provide by Weave from their administration systems to understand the demographics and characteristics of the client group, risk factors on entry, goals achieved and client satisfaction. The quantitative analysis that we were able to conduct was limited because of the quality and completeness of the data, which can be attributed to the new client data managed system that Weave is in the process of customising. Some of this analysis has been used in section 1.1.1, and supplementary quantitative data was provided to us by Weave in analysed form.

The evidence that we have collected through these methods and community consultations (see section 1.2.5) has provided the evaluation with rich information about the Weave service, its connections to the community, and experiences and outcomes for clients.

No real names are used in this report i.e. pseudonyms are used in the vignettes.

1.2.5 Community partnerships and engagement

This evaluation has been designed and implemented to embed principles for ethical research with Aboriginal people and communities. Accordingly, ARTD and Weave met with representatives from the Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS) Redfern, the Tribal Warrior Association and the South Sydney Aboriginal Corporation Resource Centre to inform and strengthen our approach to working with Aboriginal people. This included input on the focus of the evaluation, interview questions, consultation approaches, and risks to consider and address. We also shared preliminary and draft findings with Weave, and Weave led consultations with Aboriginal community organisations and Aboriginal staff on these findings to collate feedback that has informed this final report.

To ensure that the findings are accessible to participants and the community, this report will be publicly launched at a community event in 2016 to celebrate the *Stories of Lived Experience* project, accompanied by a short summary flyer of the key findings for participants. Hard and online copies of the report will also be available through Weave.

2. A community-based model of support

This section describes the features of Weave’s model of support that make it effective in engaging with the whole community, which means that individuals and families—and especially Aboriginal people who live in the area— sustain their connections to Weave over time. It reflects on the history of Weave and its organisational features, including Weave’s partnerships with other services, which mean that Weave is a well-established and trusted presence in the community today. These features of Weave’s community-based model of support are consistent with early interventions and trauma-informed care that it is sensitive to intergenerational experiences and appropriate to culture.



2.1 Weave grew out of its local community and these roots define Weave's ethos and ways of working today

What does this mean?

Weave was established through a youth interagency in 1976, driven by local parents who were concerned about the safety of their children. There is consistent evidence that an ethos of community empowerment continues to define how Weave operates today.

The organisation grew out of the early 70s and the politics of community development and empowerment were very strong then and have remained the essential ingredient to helping young people and families...We are also really keen to understand the wisdom of those we work with so that we can use that for the service and the wider community. (Staff)

Clients speak about the visible presence of Weave in the community, and the range of opportunities they have to share knowledge and ideas with staff and to participate in activities. Staff listen to the community and appreciate the diversity of experiences among Aboriginal people, and across the community broadly. Weave is described by a number of clients as a 'multicultural' organisation. Accordingly, Weave is seen as inclusive, responsive and relevant to local needs. The openness, brightness and colour of Weave's Head Office in Waterloo is felt by clients and staff alike to embody this welcoming atmosphere.

How is this achieved?

A range of strategies have sustained this community-based, empowerment approach.

Clients and community have a voice

- Clients and community members have opportunities to become actively involved in Weave to shape the kinds of services that are delivered and how they are delivered. This includes leadership positions, and volunteering as peer mentors and youth advocates.
- Community events and celebration days, such as the end of year Wrap Up party, as well as meetings with community elders, are used by Weave to bring people together to share experiences and ideas. Weave's Mad Pride celebrations and Survival Tips campaign also highlight the voice of Aboriginal people in living with and overcoming mental health challenges in a way that is relevant to their community and more broadly.

Staff listen to and value community stories

- Staff, especially caseworkers, are encouraged to spend time in the community 'on the ground' talking with families and local networks. They are given autonomy to do this and feel well-supported by Weave management when working flexibly in this way.
- Staff demonstrate a deep understanding of local history and the cultural significance of past and recent events in the neighbourhood for understanding the community today. Valuing these stories of lived experiences avoids pathologising issues that the community and individuals face, and fosters shared hope.

This ethos has also been formalised in Weave's policy, *How we do what we do*, and is reflected in Weave's Strategic Plan 2015–2018, which aims to maintain a strong and connected community where the community is placed at the centre of decision-making.

Why does this matter?

These ways of working with the whole community are significant because collaboration fosters the good reputation of Weave, which encourages individuals/families to seek help and engage with supports—especially Aboriginal people who are inclined to trust Weave because their work is respected and familiar. For clients who have moved to inner Sydney from regional NSW or interstate, the embeddedness of Weave in the neighbourhood has been critical to helping them build networks, reconnect with kin and make new friends.

Listening to the wisdom of the community also matters for the quality and appropriateness of services, especially in terms of Weave's responsiveness to local issues and needs, the cultural relevance of services and the sensitivity with which they are delivered.

Cultural awareness and knowledge. Understanding how to deal with Aboriginal people, what families are like and how they are complex. All the issues, illnesses, drug and alcohol, sexual assault and domestic violence, etc. Workers need to be experienced in dealing with all these things. (Client)

Finally, this approach means that Weave is well positioned to be adaptive to the community and its needs as these change over time. This is important given the gentrification of the local area at the same time that many long-term local residents continue to experience disadvantage, social exclusion and the intergenerational impacts of trauma. There is evidence that Weave is planning strategically to make the most of this changing context (see Chapter 5).

2.2 Continuity of Weave and key staff has built trust and sustained intergenerational connections

What does this mean?

It is common for multiple members of a family to be Weave clients and/or to have a connection to Weave through its social activities and community events. In some families we interviewed, all members were receiving Weave services. This reflects the extent to which the community views Weave as reliable and transparent—and as remaining neutral if there are tensions within the community or between/ within families—and how clients see staff as fair, dependable and consistent.

They have won the support of the community through honesty, empathy. They always do the right thing. They say they are going to bring the kids home at x time, and they do. (Client)

Also, it is significant for clients and the community that the core casework and counselling services continue to be delivered from familiar Waterloo and Redfern sites, where generations of families have visited and feel safe.

I feel like Weave, “the girls centre”, has grown as I have. It served me when I was a kid, now I’m an adult I have three children, and I got custody of my brother when I was younger...and they were there for me. They had the resources, and the loving feeling was there for me, always....I don’t like going to places that aren’t familiar. And that place is like, not home but definitely a second one...It’s freaky because now my kids get to grow up in the same place that I have been, you know? (Client)

Relatedly, almost all clients commented on the longevity of staff—especially leadership and management staff—and feel that this is both an essential and a distinguishing feature of Weave compared to other services. There are staff who have been at Weave for 10 years or more, and staff who are now in leadership roles who first started at Weave in the 1980s. Some newer staff spoke about their commitment to the community as growing only stronger overtime, despite the challenging intensity of their work, because they would get to know new generations of families, and ‘walk alongside them for the long haul’.

How is this achieved?

Weave is simply a part of everyday life for many young people and families

Weave was having a BBQ down at the skate part and I met them, got involved—kids would be down there all the time. (Client)

Weave is a second home, kind of like family. (Client)

Weave's visible, long-term presence creates a kind of seamlessness between being part of the community generally, attending Weave events/ activities, and being a direct client of Weave. Given this, there is no stigma attached to seeking or accepting help from Weave, and a high proportion of referrals are self-referrals or referrals made by family/ friends. Some features of the way Weave works contribute to making it easy for people to sustain connections with Weave over time.

- Community outreach creates many soft entry points, like meeting a caseworker at a social event or getting to know Weave volunteers on the Street Beat bus.
- Drop-ins are welcomed; women stop by the Women and Children's Centre for a cup of tea or to use the computers; and for young people it is easy to drop into the youth service that is next to the popular skate park.

Staff are motivated and supported to stay long-term

...the legacy of what Weave has created so far, the supportive work culture and strong values and philosophy underpinning the work, is perhaps what motivates staff to stay long term. (Staff)

Their workers are way more up to scratch: they are not just textbook workers because they have been around longer...just more understanding. (Client)

Staff retention—especially among leadership and management—is critical to sustaining intergenerational connections to community, and Weave's workplace culture and quality systems that motivate staff to stay are central to this.

- Staff report that their professional judgement is trusted by colleagues, and they are encouraged to try new things, *'if you have an idea, it is listened to and acted on'*.
- Staff feel supported by each other, both personally and professionally, especially when their caseload is intense or if there has been a crisis in the community. This is done through informal and formal debriefs, as well as systems for peer reviews and clinical supervision.
- Professional development and continuous improvement are emphasised, with a training budget attached to all programs.

Why does this matter?

The trust that Weave has built up over generations through its reliable community presence, promotes prevention and early intervention at all ages because people are already embedded in a support network prior to crisis. It also means that people at high risk or in crisis can be identified quickly at the right time, and are more likely to accept these familiar supports when needed.

Continuity of care is also significant for addressing complex intergenerational issues and providing trauma-informed care. Clients say that they do not need to repeatedly 'explain themselves' or constantly re-tell their stories because Weave staff are already aware of contextual and risk factors in the community, and are familiar with many features of Aboriginal culture, such as kin arrangements. Again, this makes supports more culturally appropriate, which is associated with stronger engagement with services.

2.3 The service range creates holistic supports for clients and their families at all life stages

What does this mean?

Weave offers a range of diverse services and opportunities, alongside core casework and counselling and more structured programs such as tutoring. These include social activities and excursions, a community garden, an arts program, a healing group, and creative and physical expression workshops. Weave also makes and then supports referrals to other services, such as for housing, medical or legal issues—including specialist Aboriginal supports.

I've been with Weave now for 15 years...at that time, the help I was looking for was accommodation, stability, to go back to school, to do programs you know like healing groups, counselling, recreational sports and stuff, just to get myself active and to do stuff....I just had the clothes on my back. [Today] I just go down there and use the computers...or at an event they will ask if I can volunteer. (Client)

The Kool Kids Club is another example. Educational outreach, life skills and connections to community are built through after school and holiday activities like surfing, short film projects, music and cooking. This program is integrated with the Switch leadership and mentoring program, where the older Kool Kids are encouraged to take on a mentoring role and support their peers to transition into high school.

This service range means that Weave is relevant to the holistic needs of clients and their families: their creative, intellectual and spiritual development, as well as therapeutic or remedial supports. It also means that clients and their families create their own journeys through Weave: they can engage flexibly, in multiple activities at the same time, or in different ways and intensities as their needs change, capacities develop and interests evolve.

How is this achieved?

Working creatively to form community and corporate partnerships

Weave has been able to create this diverse service offering through the hard work and creativity of staff, drawing on ideas and inspiration from clients and the community. Some strategies that help to make this possible include

- making use of a large pool of volunteers to support program delivery, including as tutors and mentors, the Street Beat bus team, and helpers during excursions, workshops and social activities.
- forging partnerships with local businesses and organisations that can provide resources to support activities and events. For example, the Kool Kids Club has received donations from the Bendigo Bank in Clovelly, and partners that make facilities/ resources available include All Sports Fitness & Wellbeing Centre, Centennial Park, Surfing NSW and the Sydney Kings.
- working with community organisations, other youth groups, government agencies, housing providers, the City of Sydney Council and nearby schools to find spaces to run activities and resources to support these. Some community groups that Weave has worked with include Stand Up, the National Indigenous Centre for Excellence (NICE), the Sydney Story Factory and Commune.
- having staff dedicated to partnerships and marketing to pursue these relationships and opportunities strategically, and with vigour.

Knitting services together to create a supportive experience

As eclectic as the range of services and activities is, it is not merely ad hoc. Weave works with clients and the community in a way that provides a coherent, integrated experience. This is enabled by small teams that share good communication within a collegial working environment and the longevity of many staff, which helps to retain knowledge of the activities that clients and families have been involved with. The integrated service response is also due to more formalised features of Weave's model of support.

- Collaborative casework, where clients are allocated a primary worker but there are clear expectations and policies around communication with the wider support team and keeping up to date with the other activities in a client's life.
- Partnerships and practice agreements between teams and programs across the organisation about how to share information and support clients.
- Referrals to external services that are supported by caseworkers, so that clients do not feel they have been 'referred on' but continue to experience Weave as the core of their support network: *At Weave, if they don't offer that support, they are really good at connecting you to other services while still staying connected to you.* (Client)

Why does this matter?

The service range creates many soft entry points and holistic supports that are relevant across generations, which in turn facilitates early interventions. For clients, the mix of activities also promotes curiosity and creates choices for them to explore

skills and interests. Opportunities for clients to try new ways of doing and thinking are consistent with narrative therapy because it expands horizons: clients can become authors in new stories about themselves, their strengths and capacities, and the quality of their connections to others.

The expressive and celebratory nature of social activities also means that Weave is widely seen as *'fun'*, and as having a *'young vibe'*. Not only does this contribute to removing stigma around help-seeking and engaging with supports, but this positivity builds hope and resilience, as well as opportunities to share stories of success.

2.4 Stories of Weave's connections to community

Graham's long standing connection to Weave

Graham⁺ is an Aboriginal elder who has lived around inner Sydney, along with family throughout his life. While Graham has never been a direct client of Weave, he's had a consistent connection to the service since the early 1980s when his brother and children received support for a range of challenges, including homelessness, mental health and drug use issues. He has known Weave CEO and Operations Manager for decades now, and some other workers for many years.

These days, Graham goes to Weave's community events and celebration days. He has observed how inclusive Weave's activities are: *'they are not black or white'*, but everyone including police are welcomed. He has also observed how the younger kids respect Weave staff—a respect that he thinks staff have worked hard to earn—as well as the genuine concern and compassion of staff towards clients and their families.

Graham laughed when he said that he may have a somewhat *'starry eyed view'* of Weave, but then again he has never heard or seen anything that would make him see it otherwise.

Kylie, a grandmother, and her daughter, Teresa, have felt at home at Weave for decades

Kylie and Teresa⁺ are grandmother and mother in the same family who have lived in the community for over 30 years. Kylie became connected to Weave 30 years ago when she worked as a public servant and met the CEO. She had heard of Weave from other Aboriginal families who spoke well of the organisation, and thought it was a great idea for youth and teenagers. Kylie got her own family involved in Weave programs, and also joined Weave's cultural and art programs, the healing program and became a mentor. Weave has invited Kylie to youth camps, to share stories with the young people. Teresa also had a role as a youth mentor and finds opportunities to get involved with the next generation both fulfilling and important.

As an elder in the community, Kylie appreciates the good name that Weave brings to Redfern. She feels that the programs Weave provides also draw in members from other communities, and gives local residents a sense of pride to combat the negative portrayal of the local area in the media.

They're really great at communicating in the community and asking what the community really needs and wants, and they always cater perfectly to our needs and bettering this community. I just think Weave has been a beautiful gift to this community.

Kylie and Teresa also love the 'home-like' environment of Weave—how people can freely walk in and sit at the computer or have tea without feeling that they are being monitored. This sense of inclusion is a unique experience for Kylie and Teresa: they have experienced exclusion and negative bias from other services for being from the "wrong" family or community. They also enjoy the way that the community has a say in Weave. For example, when they and others asked for driving lessons for young people, Weave began a driving program. Kylie knows that Weave understands the importance of community, and supports the grandmothers in the area to keep their families together.

Kool Kids Club provides many opportunities for Mary's grandchildren, and Mary has found support for herself at Weave

Mary⁺ is the carer for her grandchildren. All of her grandchildren have been involved with the Kool Kids Club, which they knew about through the school they attend. The children have done activities with the Kool Kids Club such as surfing, dancing, swimming, learning guitar and art; and one of Mary's grandchildren is a Switch leader, which he described as 'pretty good'. Mary really appreciates the Kool Kids Club as she said there are many things that she can't do with the children, such as swimming and footy, but they can do these things through Weave and so are not deprived of opportunity.

Mary also approached Weave for support for herself as she was having trouble adjusting to parenting, 'I haven't been a mother for a long time', and she felt she could talk to them and that they listened, 'sometimes you just need to talk things out.' Mary has accessed counselling, which was organised through Weave.

Mary described the Kool Kids Club as doing an excellent job, and said the workers have won the trust of the community through honesty and empathy; she said that the Kool Kids Club is an 'essential service' in the community. Mary's grandchildren also spoke very positively of the Kool Kids Club, saying that the workers have taught them that there is always someone to help them if needed; and they have provided lots of opportunities for them to do things.

3. Client-centred therapeutic relationships

This section describes the quality of relationships between Weave clients and staff and the strategies that staff use to build and sustain these connections to individuals and families. It highlights the importance of strengths-based assessments, narrative therapy, and everyday interactions that are trauma-informed to appropriately support clients with complex and multiple needs, and to empower clients to make decisions about their own lives. It also reflects on the hard work and persistence of Weave staff, and how this engenders hope and creates opportunities for individuals and the wider community.



3.1 Relationships are allowed to grow over time, and this forms a secure base for therapeutic alliances

What does this mean?

A defining feature of Weave's casework and counselling approach is the time that is allowed for relationships with clients to develop organically, rather than made to fit within a time-limited assessment and subsequent case plan. Clients value and respond positively to this approach.

I have been linked into other services before....I didn't feel comfortable, they didn't support me with what I needed, they were not interested in getting to know me. They were straight in there, in the deep end with the nitty gritty right away. But it takes time to express things. You won't want pressure, need to take your time and make up your own mind about what you do and when. (Client)

Weave are hands-on. You don't just sit in the corner and fill out a generic assessment form that says "think about five things you want us to do and five things you can do for yourself", and that's that: go away and do them five things! You can tell that they care. (Client)

Clients are given time to feel comfortable and safe, and they feel respected as staff get to know their stories while bonds of trust gradually form. The relationships that develop as a result of this are seen by both staff and clients as authentic.

How is this achieved?

Individual relationships build on Weave's embeddedness in the community

Individual relationships between clients and their caseworker/ counsellor build on the strong foundation laid by Weave's community-based approach: often, clients and staff are already familiar to each other, and clients who self-refer or are referred by family/ friends generally start with a positive regard for the service. Staff also bring with them knowledge of issues in the wider community that inform their interactions with all clients.

Having an understanding of complex trauma. And be aware of over-reaction to small issues that could be because of other things happening in their life. (Staff)

Formal systems support staff to take their time to foster relationships

There are also formalised ways of working that foster this one-on-one relationship-building.

- Weekly intake meetings between staff are used to discuss and allocate caseloads, which is important so that workers have a mix of mix of intensity and complexity within their standard full-time caseload of 15 clients, including three high intensity clients with whom they are expected to spend at least six hours a week.
- A minimum set of data is recorded about the client, after which assessment takes a strengths-based, narrative approach that focuses on inquiry into the experiences of the client, their capacities and existing networks/ connections to others. Caseworkers feel that their professional judgement as to how long this assessment process should take is respected by other staff and management.
- Additional information about clients is gathered and updated incrementally as relationships grow and clients increasingly trust staff and share their thoughts and feelings.

The personal qualities of staff are key to quality relationships

To be effective, these ways of working also require certain personal qualities and attitudes of staff. Informality and warmth were often remarked on by clients as important qualities.

Where Kool Kids and Weave in general have good rapport with the Aboriginal community is that they're laid back. They are not 'in your face' kind of people, they just gradually....Aboriginal kids are so shy and laid back so when you first meet them they won't speak to you. So you need patience. (Client)

They are down to earth, on our level, not stuck up. (Client)

Why does this matter?

There is evidence that satisfaction with relationships is associated with sustained commitment to those relationships over time, so it is important for long-term client engagement with Weave that this interpersonal relationship with caseworkers/ counsellors is allowed the time to develop meaningfully. It is also critical in the context of providing trauma-informed care that clients feel and are safe, and because it may take time for clients to reveal trauma it is necessary that time is allowed for staff to learn about potential triggers.

Gradually developing and updating assessment also means that the subsequent case plan (which is also regularly revised) is as accurate, relevant and realistic as it can be, based on the best possible understanding of the client's needs, interests and aspirations. This matters for the appropriateness and quality of the services, and the motivation of clients to achieve outcomes that matter in their lives.

3.2 The stories of clients are valued: clients have a voice, and mutual respect sustains relationships

What does this mean?

If you treat people like welfare cases, they will become welfare cases: our approach is that you are expert in your own life, or you can seek out your expert. (Staff)

Weave takes seriously the expertise of clients about their own lives, and works with clients to help them realise the kind of life that they value for themselves. This narrative therapy starts in the assessment and relationship-building phase, but continues throughout counselling and casework relationships, and even in less formal supports.

[They will] listen and try to understand Aboriginal people, rather than forcing your voice on them. (Client)

I needed emotional support and physical support: for someone to hear my story. (Client)

Staff empower clients to feel safe and supported to speak their voice so that their strengths and interests are built into client-centred case plans, such that they become the author in new narratives about themselves and their relations to family, community and culture. Just like client assessments, casework is also driven by the pace of clients so that they have control over their journey.

Weave is good—they ask your permission and preference, and let you make choices about how and when you want support. (Client)

Yet clients also recognise the value of the wisdom and experience that staff bring to the table as professionals, whose judgement they respect. Consistent with a strengths-based approach, clients often spoke highly of a certain ‘tough love’ from staff, such as workers beeping the car horn outside their house until they got out of bed to go to a court appointment.

They get a good wear and tear out of you...They get you out there...Make sure you go to your appointments. (Client)

In other words, valuing the experiences of clients is more than ‘just being nice’ but also about recognising the potential of clients to do their best, and the mutual respect that goes with having high expectations about the capacities of others.

How is this achieved?

The flexible casework model allows case planning to evolve along with clients' stories

This narrative approach to working with clients is formalised in Weave's policy *How we do what we do* with respect to how case plans are developed and continuously revised.

- The duration and intensity of casework is responsive to the dynamic nature of clients' situations. While external factors can impact on the length of particular casework 'episodes', Weave's approach is not to predefine a time or intensity targets for the casework relationship as a whole, but to allow staff to use their judgement, within broad guidelines, about appropriate contact in times of relative crisis or stability in each client's life.
- Cases are not closed if a client disengages, but are temporarily suspended allowing clients to return to participation when ready. There is also a focus on graduating clients from casework and 'moving on' towards independence, rather than 'closing the door' behind them.

Staff are aware of power in relationships and treat clients as equals

Weave staff are aware of the imbalances of power that can exist in traditional caseworker relationships and are proactive about addressing this in everyday interactions with clients, as well as in specific casework or counselling sessions. Empowering clients is implicit in client-centered casework. This involves not intimidating clients through unnecessarily formal interactions, giving clients genuine choices about their options, and supporting them to make decisions and to talk to experts in the community (including family and friends) to assist in their decision-making.

It's about how they talk to you. It's not like they are 'up there' and you are 'down here', and they are trying to 'fix' your problem, they want to help you with it. (Client)

It does feel like a family. Compared to other places that I've been that are really clinical, feel like us versus them with that power imbalance, at Weave it feels like everyone is on the same level. They treat you like an equal. (Client)

They don't say, 'You have to do what I say', they advise you on alternative options. They have a good system set up where people can chat with one another. (Client)

Clients also spoke about the importance of confidentiality in their relationships with staff, especially because it is common for family and friends to also be known to staff either as clients or as community members. Confidentiality is a critical part of sharing stories safely—for emotional and physical safety—and there was a strong message

from clients that staff '*never blabbed*' but had always guarded what was said in confidence.

Why does this matter?

Firstly, witnessing the stories of others and valuing these, matters in terms of social justice—recognising the experiences of injustice, discrimination, exclusion and disadvantage, and the reality of these in the lives of clients, families and the community. This is consistent with a trauma-informed approach.

Yet the strengths-based focus of Weave's narrative therapy also balances a witnessing of the past with an appreciation of the strengths, resilience and capacities of clients today, and the resources they can draw on within themselves, their family and the community. This recovery-orientation helps to sustain relationships of mutual respect that are robust enough to withstand the ups and downs of clients' journeys.

Finally, there is evidence that this approach to casework and counselling, wrapped around with social and community activities, makes a difference for clients: building their skills, capacities and connections to family and community. Outcomes are detailed in Chapter 4.

3.3 Staff are persistent and committed, creating shared hope and opportunities for clients and families

What does this mean?

One of the strongest messages from clients and their families was about the hard work and dedication of staff, especially in the face of difficult situations and addressing long-term disadvantage. All clients who we interviewed spoke very highly of staff personally, as being '*good people*', '*fantastic*', '*caring*' and '*compassionate*'.

Clients saw this commitment of staff not only in providing direct services and practical supports—although emergency and other material assistance was greatly valued, especially when setting up a new home or travelling long distances for funerals—but also in the form of new opportunities or second chances when things didn't go so well. It was a powerful experience for clients to see that Weave considers they are worth investing in and fighting for.

Weave, they go above and beyond. (Client)

They are so, 'nothing is ever a problem'. (Client)

They put up with lots of shit, clients will swear at them but they will never walk away from someone who is 'too hard'. (Client)

Crucially, this dedication to clients and their futures creates a shared sense of hope.

They see the best in me. (Client)

Ever since I was a kid, they still opened their doors up [to me]. (Client)

How is this achieved?

Offering a range of services and supporting clients to use these towards independence

Although clients and families often connect with Weave over generations, the nature of these connections evolves over time and many people who were once clients are now in leadership, mentoring or volunteer positions at Weave. The range of services (as described in 2.3) plays a key role in making these new opportunities genuinely and readily available to clients, as does the effectiveness of Weave's partnerships with other organisations and government agencies. This means that the therapeutic practice of listening to client stories of lived experiences is tied to actual services and programs through which clients can start to create new stories.

Celebrating successes and remembering the little things

Celebrating individual successes and sharing stories of recovery is also essential to creating shared hope, such as through Weave's Mad Pride event. This builds on and further strengthens the community-based model of support. But sometimes, just simple things like keeping in touch with clients who are no longer receiving direct services, are also powerful.

One of the biggest things is that they call up just to check in on me. (Client)

Why does this matter?

Building shared hope is important for individual resilience and recovery, and for building the capacity of the community. It matters for ensuring Weave continues as a hub of activities and relationships that support journeys towards empowerment, not dependence, for individuals and the community. This sentiment is best described in the words of clients who have grown through the opportunities made available by Weave, and are now creating and leading new opportunities for others in the community.

Peer mentoring the next generation, boys and girls, has taught me how to guide the next generation because every generation has its heroes and leaders, and we need to look after them. (Client)

Last year [with a Weave worker], I also spoke at an event with youth, City of Sydney and the health department. It is about giving back now. It's important to have a voice out there, 'of the places where we live, we are the voice of the next generation— if we don't have a voice we will never be able to say what we want, what needs to happen. (Client)

3.4 Stories of supportive relationships

Lisa and her adult children have always felt comfortable with the friendly staff at Weave

Lisa⁺ is a single mother with adult children. Lisa described herself as 'the working poor'.

Lisa knew about Weave through community networks and she approached Weave after falling on hard times, both in her relationship and in her work. She joined the art group at Weave and was grateful that through this group she was getting connected into the community. Weave also supported Lisa to do courses to help her move into a different career.

Lisa's children have also been supported by Weave and Lisa feels safe knowing that Weave is the organisation providing this support. Weave caseworkers have helped Lisa's children access housing, supported them to enrol in TAFE and helped with Centrelink. Lisa's children described Weave staff as friendly, and persistent, 'nothing is ever a problem'. They liked that Weave staff give them the confidence and skills to help themselves. One of Lisa's children said 'it was easy' going to Weave as they had gone there with their mother when they were younger so felt comfortable there.

Lisa is so appreciative of Weave and said they really helped her when she needed it.

Katie's sisters have witnessed the value of her relationship with her Weave worker

Katie⁺ is a young Aboriginal woman who got in touch with Weave through another local community service. At the time, Katie was in a rough place—she was in an unsafe relationship, disconnected from her family and community, and having issues with housing. Katie's sisters said that they felt very afraid for her: they loved her and wanted to support her, but they felt ill-equipped to deal with the court and doctor's appointments that Katie needed to attend.

Katie soon began meeting with her Weave counsellor, and over time trust built-up between them. Katie felt that she could tell her counsellor anything, and that her counsellor was a trustworthy friend and support to get her through these hard times.

Katie sat down and spoke to [counsellor] about her life, and she was shocked about how much Katie had been through. Katie doesn't speak to many people, but she spoke to [counsellor]. (Katie's sister)

There were many aspects to Katie's relationship with her Weave counsellor, who also played a broader caseworker role for Katie. She could talk to her and share hard experiences, she could have fun with her on beach or movie days, and she could get the practical support that

she needed. Katie's counsellor came with her to court, and spoke to the lawyer on Katie's behalf. She helped her and her sister understand what doctors had advised, visited Katie when she was in hospital, and encouraged the family so that they could go visit the solicitor when they needed. Katie's sisters said that they love the way that Katie and her counsellor have a strong relationship, and that Katie now has someone to look up to in her life going forward.

Weave has played a huge role in James' transition from youth into adulthood

James⁺ is a young Aboriginal man, now in his thirties, who first became involved with Weave when he was a teenager. He had been spending much of his time with friends at the skate park in Waterloo, rather than going to school, and gradually some of the Weave staff became familiar to him—especially the CEO and Operations Manager who are often out and about talking to people in the neighbourhood.

One of the first things that Weave did for James and his friends was find them all bicycles, which James said gave them something to do for fun rather than, *'being little menaces'*. Over time, James became increasingly involved in activities at the youth centre and when he got a bit older Weave helped him to find a job.

Reflecting back, James said that he didn't fully appreciate what Weave staff had done for him at the time but these days he is very grateful for their persistence with him during his youth—even when he and his friends created trouble.

When we wanted to go do crime, one of the workers there would step out and say *'Listen, is it really worth it? If you really want something, ask for it – we'll give it to you.'*

James feels comfortable at Weave today and says they're part of his family. He acknowledges that he has not always "repaid" the kind gestures of staff with respect or thanks, and so he really values their non-judgemental commitment to always welcoming him back when help is needed.

The quality of Belinda's relationship with staff has sustained her connection to Weave for years

Belinda⁺ and her partner, Damien⁺, have been involved with Weave throughout their lives and their children who are in primary school will probably get involved with Weave activities soon.

Belinda met the Weave Operations Manager many years ago (at the time, the Operations Manager was a caseworker) and she recalls how their first encounter took place during a dispute with a relative. Belinda felt that the caseworker handled this event really well, and so she maintained a relationship with the caseworker and over time started accessing Weave services more and more often.

Belinda recognises that she can be difficult to work with sometimes—she says that her loud voice and passion can be overwhelming—but she feels like she can still be herself at Weave because the staff understand her personality. As well as helping her through rough times, Belinda also sees Weave's assistance as having changed her life in a very positive way.

[Staff's name] changed my life. I've got two beautiful kids now. I'm clean and I'm a better person.

Belinda describes how Weave has played a huge role in getting her life on track and improving her wellbeing. Even at times when Belinda feels she has made mistakes, Weave welcomed her back with *'arms wide open'*. Now, she feels more confident and able to talk to others more easily. Belinda also said that she used to be rough and aggressive towards other people, but that has changed too: these days, she sees herself as an open person with a warm heart.

4. Impacts for service users and families

This section describes the impacts that Weave's support has had on the lives of clients and their families. It explores the development of practical skills and capacities in clients, as well as personal growth in their confidence and resilience, their interpersonal skills and connections to family and community. It also reflects on the sustainability of these impacts over the longer term, and that clients can become leaders and mentors in the community. It then provides stories of clients to best reflect these impacts in a narrative form.



4.1 Clients benefit across domains in their lives, and many leave Weave with greater independence and as leaders

Outcomes for Weave clients appear strong and sustained from the available evidence.

Now I am more independent, I don't rely on Weave. I even referred people to Weave, and seen them get great outcomes. (Client)

Now that I'm a lot stronger, they've built me up so that now if something was to happen I've got a lot of outreach programs, I would know what to do. So say a catastrophe happened and there was no more Weave, I know me and my family would be okay. (Client)

Data on goals for clients shows that these were 'fully' or 'significantly' achieved on average across all categories² and for 82% of clients who completed action plans. Achievement ratings were highest for improving mental health, increasing access to services generally and to culturally appropriate services, and keeping children safe. About ten per cent of clients were recorded as making some progress or not achieving their goals, highlighting the challenges that Weave encounters when working with clients with multiple and complex risk factors, and that change in the context of intergenerational trauma can be slow.

Timely, practical assistance to meet the basic needs of clients creates safety and stability in their lives

There was consistent evidence from interviews that clients benefited from timely practical assistance, which was often the first step in casework relationships. Many clients spoke about help to get into emergency accommodation followed by community or social housing, and Weave often helped them settle into homes with furniture, whitegoods and other basics—this was especially important for women caring for children.

Also in terms of practicality around housing, Weave made things happen quickly for me. I was at a point near giving up, and they made it easy for me, like people cared about me and my situation. (Client)

² There were 16 categories, covering: safe, secure affordable accommodation; divert from criminal justice system; improve family functioning, emotional wellbeing, independent living skills, mental health, physical health, understanding of one's issues; increase access to services, to culturally appropriate services, to educational and vocational opportunities, and societal connectedness; reduce harmful substance use, involvement in crime, and risk behaviour; and keeping self and children safe. (Source: Weav, 'REPAActionPlan All' data)

Assistance with setting up Centrelink payments, getting IDs and clothing (especially if a client had just been released from custody) was also critical. Addressing practical issues and material needs was important for creating the safety and stability upon which casework or counselling could take place.

As soon as [NAME] had a stable roof over their head, just in the past six months they're getting driving lessons and applied to do nursing at TAFE, and they've gotten in. So just having a roof over their head meant they could move forward. (Client)

Learning new skills boosts client's efficacy and capacity for self-advocacy

A key principle of Weave—that clients grow towards independence—is realised for clients who develop skills and capacities for greater efficacy and self-advocacy.

Without the support of Weave I wouldn't have the tools I have today to live a day to day life. (Client)

I feel like I know how to manage a house. I can do it on my own. Yes, I wrote a lot of stuff down about the things that the services taught me, and I just look through my notes now to help me get through things. (Client)

Clients spoke about being able to navigate Centrelink and the social housing system better, including managing the paperwork. Some clients said they have been supported to phone services/ agencies to arrange their own supports or appointments, and that they learnt how to do this effectively by listening to how their caseworkers had done this for them on previous occasions. One client spoke about how she is now able to 'make my case' over the phone to agencies. Some clients also described how their caseworkers modelled budgeting and how to maintain a household, and that their situations have since become more stable.

Some young people said they know they can talk to Weave staff if things are not safe or happy at home, and they trust that this will help their situation.

Increased confidence and coping skills helps clients to feel healthier and happier

An increase in confidence was one of the most commonly reported area of clients' lives where Weave has had an impact, and this confidence contributes to gains in other areas—such as trying new skills and building relationships.

The Kool Kids Club was widely seen as effective in improving the confidence and coping skills of young people by encouraging them to engage in activities outside their comfort zone, and trying new things like music and sports.

My son went from this kid who had gone through so much stuff and had grown up too fast, to this kid where Weave and Kool Kids would say, 'Your son is go good and had natural leadership potential'. He got nominated for a leadership award and he loved it.
(Client)

Clients also spoke about the benefits of one-on-one and group work, such as counselling or mental health retreats/ camps, in terms of providing them with positive support and increased coping skills. Mindfulness, breathing techniques, art therapy, naming emotions and anger management techniques were identified as areas where clients had developed their skills, and they said that doing these things has improved their wellbeing and quality of life.

I've done emotion coaching...it opened my eyes. It's about teaching your children how to identify their feelings, to let them know its okay to feel things, like anger, and know how to talk about it and deal with it...I use techniques that I have learnt through Weave with the kids so they know their feelings are valid, and to work through it. (Client)

I feel like I can deal with day to day life better. A few years ago I needed someone else to help me....I was anxious even to approach people, like to get a coffee—but I don't feel that way now. The counselling has taught me not to be so afraid of anything.
(Client)

Weave has taught me to self-soothe and enabled me to manage my anxiety in a difficult situation. (Client)

In times of crisis, clients were also supported by staff to remain safe, and a number of clients said that they are healthier, physically and emotionally, because of the mental health, drug and alcohol support from Weave.

I'm clean and I'm a better person. I've got a heart now. Before I was cold and it was about the heroin. (Client)

I'm fitter and healthier now than I was before I came to Weave. My head is clearer.
(Client)

Better connections to family and community fosters a more positive sense of identity

Weave has an impact on the quality of connections that clients have to their families and communities, which is enabled by the community-based model of support in which clients receive individual assistance: Weave is able to make timely, relevant and culturally sensitive connections for people to build or re-build their networks to family and friends.

Weave worked with me to help me talk to mum and dad, they came with me to talk to my family because I wanted that. (Client)

Parents, especially mothers in programs at the Women and Children's Centre, spoke about Weave staff modelling ways of showing respect; and learning about how to deal with emotions, and passing on those skills to their children so they are better able to deal with their emotions. Many mothers said that they are now better parents because of what they learnt, and clients and families reported supportive home environments.

I was very insecure as a mother back in the early days and seeing the changes in my kids from Kool Kids, and them reminding me that I am doing such a good job has helped me become more confident, and I'm prouder because I'm noticing my kids grow up. (Client)

Improved parenting is likely to promote positive developmental outcomes for children, and so can be seen as an effective prevention and early intervention strategy.

Social activities like art and gardening groups were reported by clients as opportunities to build friendships, help people find common interests, and reduce isolation. Clients feel a sense of belonging to the whole community through being connected with Weave, including renewed pride in their local area from participating in activities that promote positive messages about the strength and resilience of community members.

4.2 Stories of success, strength and empowerment

Anna's journey from interstate to Sydney and finding connections at Weave

Anna⁺ moved to Sydney from interstate a few years ago and at that time had no family and few networks in Sydney, and was not connected to the mental health services that she needed. A friend suggested that Anna get in touch with Weave because she'd heard they offer good counselling, so Anna contacted them. Anna had been attending counselling for a couple of weeks when she became homeless so she contacted Weave right away and they got her a place in a refuge that night.

Anna said she immediately felt comfortable with the staff and support at Weave.

They treat you like an equal. From the moment that you walk in there is always someone there who is happy to say 'Hi'. I remember noticing how different it was, even at the very start, at the reception.

As Anna's caseworker continued to assist her with housing and other practical matters, she became increasingly involved with other activities—especially some of the social programs like the Veg Head group, which gardens on the Weave rooftop. Last year, Anna took up an opportunity to do a creative arts workshop organised by Weave. She said that this '*opened up a new world for me*' and she enjoyed the workshop so much that she has continued developing these artistic skills in her own time, and now contributes her art to Weave.

Recently, Anna also became a youth advocate for Weave. She now has the confidence to run workshops with young children and support their wellbeing and mental health issues. As this

role forms part of an outreach course with TAFE, Anna will receive a certificate recognising her skills and experience.

Sophie's exciting future as a proud Aboriginal woman, university student and mother

Sophie⁺ is an Aboriginal woman in her early twenties who lives in inner west Sydney. She is also a mother to a young daughter, and a bright new university student.

Sophie's life was in crisis a couple of years ago but she'd seen the support her sister had received from Weave so she decided to go out of her comfort zone and ask for help herself. This was not easy for Sophie, but she found the courage because she felt the need 'for someone to hear my story'.

Today Sophie continues to regularly see her counsellor at Weave's youth centre in Waterloo, which is made easier because Weave's nearby Women and Children's Centre provides a crèche for her daughter. Sophie also does a parenting program at the Women and Children's Centre, and she said that Weave went out of their way to offer her a one-on-one support because the group parenting program clashes with her university timetable. The location and convenience of Weave is really important to Sophie, not only because it helps her fit appointments into her busy schedule, but also because it means she sees her friends and family around the service. Her younger brother and nephew hang around the skate park at the youth centre, for example, and her mother and sisters sometimes meet in the evening at the OzHarvest bus.

Sophie explained that the support from Weave has made a big difference in her emotions—coping with and expressing her thoughts and feelings. Rather than panicking and calling her caseworker as soon as she feels stressed, she now writes or draws her feelings and then sits with them for a while. This helps her feel calm. Sophie said learning to control her feelings has made her a better parent.

Simon has been supported by his caseworker to live a healthier and more rewarding life

Simon⁺ is a young Aboriginal man who became involved with Weave after learning about the service from his sister, who was linked to Weave by their aunty. When Simon was younger, he struggled to find safe housing and used drugs, which he said he had a problem with. Through Weave, Simon was able to find a safe place to live, and counselling from Weave workers helped him to develop healthier habits, and he no longer uses drugs.

Simon also recalls how Weave supported him through his severe anxiety, enabling him to live what he described as a fuller and freer life. Previously he had found everyday social interactions, such as buying a cup of coffee or chatting to people on the street, fearful and overwhelming; but through the skills he was taught by his counsellor he can now manage his anxiety. He has also grown his interpersonal skills and is more confident and discerning with his friendships, and says that he is able to talk honestly with his parents about issues in the home.

I feel now I can deal with day to day life a lot easier. A few years ago I needed someone with me to work with me...It seems like simple stuff, but it's pretty huge.

Now Simon voluntarily gives back to the community in the ways that Weave initially supported him. He is a Weave Youth Advocate, and worked on the 'Survival Tips' social media campaign to help strengthen the mental health and skills of the local community.

Simon wants to work further with youth, local elders and other community members to support positive growth in his local area.

Cathy's growing confidence as a parent as she sees her children flourish

Cathy⁺ is a single mother with four children. She and her children met the Kool Kids Club workers while hanging out at the local park, and soon after Cathy's son joined the program. Through the Kool Kids Club, Cathy's son has done activities like surfing and woodwork—'*fun things*'. The main thing he is doing at the moment is the Switch leadership program. Cathy described Switch as a great opportunity for an 11 year old to learn responsibility and '*to take care of the young ones and teach them what they've experienced along the way and how it's helped them.*'

Cathy has seen lots of positive changes in her son after starting the Switch program. She described him as a child who had to '*grow up too fast*' and now can have fun again with the other children while also exploring his natural leadership potential, '*my son loves the idea of being a leader*'. Cathy's daughter is also involved with the Kool Kids Club and Cathy said she has seen her change from a girl who was very shy and never did anything without her brother to someone who is independent: Cathy described watching her daughter dance at a Weave function, and said she would never have performed publicly in the past.

Although Cathy hasn't been directly involved with Weave, one of the workers helped her find things that she needed and told her about the local Neighbourhood Centre. Cathy described this worker as '*like part of the family, she's just always there for me.*' Weave always '*goes that extra bit*' to support people, she said, and Cathy is more confident to ask for help.

Cathy explained how she used to be very insecure as a mother but seeing the changes in her children through their involvement in the Kool Kids Club, together with support from Weave workers, is reminding her she is doing a good job. She is now more confident as a mother and is proud of her children:

They've made me feel like a better person, like I'm doing alright. I'm a single mum, but I'm doing the best I can.

5. Learnings for Weave and the sector

This section provides insights for Weave about how to continuously improve its services, with suggestions from the community. It also reflects on some of the challenges that Weave and its staff face to meet demand for services, and sustain a high quality service, in the context of local and sector-wide issues. Finally, it presents some lessons for the community and health service sectors—especially services that work with Aboriginal people and communities.

5.1 Suggestions and ideas from clients and the community

On the whole, clients' and community members' suggestions about how Weave could improve came from the position that Weave was already doing a good job, and so 'the more the better!' Some clients and community members did not have any suggestions to make, and no one wanted to see any big changes in how Weave operates.

Suggestions for improvement were around needing more staff, and explaining or adding new services—these suggestions are described below.

More staff to meet demand and ensuring smooth transitions to new workers

Feedback about relationships with staff was overwhelmingly positive, and just a few clients described some issues they had encountered.

There was some growing concern about waiting lists for particular programs; and also a feeling that it is harder now than it used to be to get an appointment with a caseworker or counsellor. Although this was frustrating, clients expressed these views in the context of understanding just how busy and hard-working staff are already. One client said that perhaps employing more staff, including with after-hours contact, would be helpful.

Many more clients than workers and you shouldn't be waiting to talk to someone for ages if there is a problem. Would be good to have someone around late at night or early in the morning in case you need to talk to them about something. (Client)

Another issue raised by just a couple of clients was feeling that they were not supported enough through the transition to a new caseworker. One client spoke about how she was incredibly close to her first caseworker and felt that suddenly this relationship ended, and that she did not connect well to her new caseworker who

she spoke to for the first time over the phone. This client temporarily disengaged from Weave as a result of that experience, although she has since come back. Another client said that she would have liked to have had a couple of joint sessions between her new and old caseworker, *'to help hand over a bit'*, but it worked out okay in the end. Given that the quality of the therapeutic relationships is key to the effectiveness of Weave's approach, it is important that attention is always given to this issue.

One client recommended that Weave could have more Aboriginal staff as this can make people feel more comfortable to begin with, but also qualified this by saying that the current staff, including the current Aboriginal staff, *'are doing a fantastic job.'*

Expanding current services and activities

Supports for young people

Clients and community members were keen to see an expansion of many of the popular programs for young people, especially in the Redfern/ Waterloo area. Some families had children who were involved in the Kool Kids Club over the years but they had since moved out of the Maroubra area, and so their youngest children could not attend. This was disappointing and they had not found other quality services or activities to fill that gap.

Parents also suggested that activities for young people should be provided more often over the weekends, after school and during school holidays.

That way the kids are kept busy and safe, and engaged in the community. Otherwise kids fall through the cracks. (Community member)

One parent suggested that Weave do more work with The Settlement and the National Centre for Indigenous Excellence to create a structured program of activities for young people outside of school hours, or that these organisation work together to ensure that their existing schedules do not clash with each other or have too many gaps.

Supports for women

There were also a number of suggestions around boosting the services on offer through the Women and Children's Centre, especially restoring a counsellor position, because there are many women who struggle with trauma related to violence and sexual assault.

Relatedly, some clients said that the Centre should provide more opportunities for women to just get together and relax, to share stories over a cup of tea or craft activities, and link this with therapeutic workshops around trauma. A couple of clients said that in the past they feel that the Centre did offer more of these informal supports, but recently these have been less available.

[The Women and Children's Centre has become] more formal, not corporate, but just formal. It's not like the love has gone or anything, but something in the dynamic has changed. (Client)

More support with legal issues was also identified as a gap for some women in the context of domestic violence, as is access to accommodation options.

We don't have women's co-op housing like we used to have—we need to have that to stabilise children.' (Client)

Supports to make existing services as accessible as possible

Transport to programs

A small number of clients said that it was important for Weave to maintain and build on the transport provided to clients, especially for young people, to get them to and from activities and events.

Childcare services

Clients also suggested that Weave could keep improving the accessibility of its programs by providing more childcare and crèche options. Mothers with young children explained how they struggle to get to their appointments at Weave or other services, like GPs.

They should have more childcare, definitely. It is so hard to do things as a single parent. The lack of childcare—it means that women don't turn up, so it can look like they don't want services, but they do. (Client)

One mother explained how she has tried to use the computers at the Women and Children's Centre but found it difficult to focus while also keeping an eye on her infant, and felt that a crèche—something she only needs for 15 minutes, and that she would prefer to be able to access without having to pre-book—would have made a big difference.

On-site health and specialist mental health services

A small number of clients and community members felt that Weave could have a role in more directly providing some health services, such as having a GP and/or

psychiatrist on site once a week or once a month. It was felt that people would be more willing and able to go to these services, for example because some clients do not feel comfortable using other local medical services.

Some new kinds of activities and services

Supports for men, especially men with children

A couple of clients said that it would be great if Weave provided more direct services to men in the community, such as support groups where men can talk about the stressors in their lives—especially men with children. One client suggested that Weave run some camps for fathers and their children.

Another client described how she was speaking to a single father who is the primary carer for his children and was really struggling with this role, but she did not suggest he contact Weave because she had always thought of Weave as being a service for women and children only. Reflecting on this, she is not sure whether that was the right decision, but feels that if these kinds of supports are not available then they should be, and if they are available then they are not well communicated.

Supports for women who do not have custody of their children

An issue raised by one client was a service gap for mothers who have had their children removed by Family and Community Services NSW. She said that, after losing custody of her children, she could not receive the same kind of supports through the Women and Children's Centre as she did when she had custody of her children.

14 years I've been with Weave and for the first time I'm not able to work with them now because I'm a single woman...they can't help me with nothing now because I haven't got my kids right next to me. I really think they should and really need to make a single women's service...because you need more help with this service if you get your kids taken by DOCS than if you have your kids right next to you. (Client)

Specialist drug and alcohol supports

One client said that Weave tends to focus more on mental health supports, but less specifically on support for drug and alcohol issues. While he said that the healing circles and bush camps through Weave have been positive experiences, he had not connected well with referrals to external drug and alcohol supports, and would like to see Weave do more of this, 'not AA but another kind of meeting.'

Support for gambling-related harm

A number of clients spoke about financial stressors in their lives, and one client in particular spoke about the troubles that gambling can cause. She commented that there are pokies in every pub in the neighbourhood but there are no local supports for gambling harm, and that this should be addressed.

5.2 Issues for Weave to continue to monitor and address

In our discussions with Weave staff and in feedback from Weave Board members, some current and emerging challenges were raised in relation to how Weave operates, and how this relates to the issues in the sector or the local area. It is encouraging that many of the issues outlined below are consistent with those identified in Weave's Strategic Plan 2015–2018.

Growing sustainably while keeping Weave's ethos at the core

Weave leadership and management staff often reflected on the challenge of growing sustainably: continuing to meet demand, find new opportunities, while maintaining service quality and integrity to Weave's community empowerment ethos. Currently, the extensive network of volunteers, community partners and corporate sponsors makes it possible for Weave to deliver the diverse range of services that it does.

Although it is clear that the range of services that Weave provides is a great strength and clients value this, a number of staff and Weave Board members expressed concern around the risk of becoming *'spread too thinly'*. While Weave aims to be a one stop shop—and for many clients achieves this through a combination of direct services, social activities and referrals—there is also the view that it is neither possible nor appropriate for Weave to try to be *'everything for everyone'*. A view expressed by staff and some Board members is that Weave should focus on its *'unique service delivery'*, avoid duplication, and consolidate some activities. For Weave to make strategic decisions about its service offerings it will be important that Weave continues to authentically involve clients and the community in understanding these needs and making these decisions.

The important role of partnerships

Partnerships play a vital role in Weave achieving a diverse range of services and activities that appeal to its clients, especially young people. Weave should build on the success of these existing relationships with community organisations and corporate sponsors, and research indicates that some of these partnerships would

benefit from clearer roles, agendas and responsibilities.³ Forging new partnerships is also needed to grow sustainably, although doing so is not without challenges.

...how can Weave provide a strong perhaps unique service and also work in partnership with others? (Board member)

It was suggested that there may be scope to expand the reach of Weave by partnering with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations in different geographical areas to deliver Weave services (especially well-developed programs that might be 'repeatable'), and/or to build the capacity of these organisations to tailor Weave's approach to their context. Involving Weave clients as advocates may be helpful for communicating the ethos of Weave to other organisations or communities. There is also an important role for volunteers in making partnerships work, and also for these partnerships to be a source of volunteers for Weave into the future.

Continuing to look creatively for funding opportunities, as well as generating consistent revenue streams to ensure the reliability of funds, is also seen as a critical consideration for Weave as it grows—especially given the 'crowded' and competitive not-for-profit sector, and the unpredictability of grant funding. Continuing to tell the stories of success and demonstrating outcomes will play an important role in achieving these funding goals, as well as supporting private donations.

Increase opportunity for general giving/ donations by increasingly demonstrating the positive impact over time. (Board member)

Issues for Weave around measuring and demonstrating impact are described on page 34.

Continuing to support staff effectively as their work is intense and challenging

Staff are very positive about working at Weave and get great personal and professional satisfaction from working there, which contributes to staff retention. Given the commitment of staff and their dedication to clients, however, it was common for them to feel stressed—especially because the complexity of issues that clients face means that progress towards goals can be slow and the journey can be full of ups and downs. Generally, this stress is counterbalanced with support from other staff, and job satisfaction:

I sometimes feel stressed, but I know I am doing good things. (Staff)

³ Synthesised partner interview quotes, Social Impact Hub, 2015 provided by Weave.

It does appear that at times the volume and intensity of work can be a real challenge.

It can be stressful, you can feel like you haven't made a dent, the 'to do' list never ends—feel like you can't support staff sometimes as there is too much crisis, and you can feel anxious. (Staff)

Additionally, some staff felt a factor which contributes to the intensity of their work is historical expectations from clients about how much support they should get (based on their past experiences, or the support they have observed family/ friends receive), and the challenge of negotiating with clients the process of moving towards greater independence. When busy, it is also tempting for staff to do things for clients because it is quicker (such as booking an appointment) than supporting the client to do this themselves.

It is therefore important that Weave focuses on maintaining a supportive workplace culture and continues to monitor the workload and wellbeing of staff, especially as the demand for services continues to grow. Weave should also keep building on formal supports for staff, such as debriefs and internal and external supervision.

It has also been suggested that Weave formalises a cultural advisory role, or similar, so that new staff and non-Aboriginal staff can continue to develop their skills in this area, and to provide another avenue for staying connected to current issues in the local community.

Improving the collection and use of data to monitor and measure impacts

The current systems and practices for collecting, storing and reporting data are not reliably providing Weave with accurate information about the characteristics of clients and their outcomes. The system is, however, still quite new and in the process of being customized to better account for the complexities of clients' cases and needs. This investment of time and effort by Weave is encouraging.

In addition to systems, it is important that practices for collecting and recording intake and assessment information are also strengthened so that, when the new system is operational, the data that is entered is as complete as possible. This may be challenging to achieve given the gradual nature of Weave's assessment process and the priority on building relationships through narrative inquiry—and in no way should this focus be lessened. Accordingly, practice guidance for workers on how to achieve minimum data collection without compromising the development of client relationships is likely to be helpful. This should accompany guidance and clear expectations around updating data about clients as soon as additional information comes to light during casework.

Weave's approach to graduating clients from the service without a hard 'exit' may also contribute to issues with the completeness of data on goals achieved, and other satisfaction and outcomes data. Yet it is important for quality assurance and continual improvement that Weave achieves a systematic approach to reporting on the satisfaction and short to medium term outcomes of its work with clients. Again, improved systems alongside practice guidance that reiterates to staff the value of collecting and recording these data is likely to be helpful for these purposes, and should also assist Weave in its strategic and advocacy goals.

I would be interested to see more around specific outcomes and a longitudinal study of Weave service users. (Board member)

Finally—because it is always difficult to capture the sustained and cumulative impacts of work with clients within administrative monitoring systems—it is important that Weave continues to conducting or commission qualitative, narrative projects (like this evaluation). This will ensure that Weave strengthens the evidence base around their impacts for individuals and the community.

[Weave could provide...] Proof statements through their community activity, there are great stories to tell. (Board member)

An ongoing focus on sector and community advocacy

Delivering Weave supports in the context of service gaps is a significant challenge that staff reflect on, and which many clients also perceive. The limited availability of social housing stock and affordable private rentals in the area; waitlists for specialist mental health, drug and alcohol services and the lack of alternatives for people who have had negative experiences in particular services; the lack of supports for people, especially young people, transitioning from custody; were just some of the many gaps discussed by staff and clients alike.

As these systemic issues limit the effectiveness with which Weave can work with and refer clients, there is a view among staff, Board members and clients that it is important for Weave to continue and to expand its advocacy role in the community and to government. It was suggested, for example, that campaigns like Survival Tips should become a 'movement' around mental health awareness across communities, and that Weave looks to ways to formalise an advisory role to government on local issues and the experiences of Aboriginal people in inner Sydney. This work may also help to promote the name of Weave, which is well-known locally but felt by some as not being as effectively marketed or branded more widely as it could be.

The importance of advocacy was also reiterated by staff and community members in view of changing demographics and gentrification in the local area, which provides

opportunities for Weave to tap into new resources and energies of people who would like to see more positive changes in the neighborhood. At the same time, a community member said that in the future Weave might need to think about ways to advocate broadly on social issues in the community, such as to current residents around tenant rights.

Finally, the impacts of discrimination and stigma continue to be experienced by clients and the local community. There is a strong view that the role that Weave plays in combating this by sharing stories about the strength and resilience of people, particularly Aboriginal people in the area, is positive, makes a difference, and should continue.

5.3 Lessons for the sector

This section outlines some lessons that can be taken from the experiences and insights that Weave clients, community and staff have shared. These lessons are relevant to the not-for-profit community services sector and to human services delivered by government agencies, especially services that aim to support people with their mental health and that work with Aboriginal people and communities.

Embed and engage community expertise

Lesson 1: A community-based service needs to belong to the community in which it operates, rather than operate as a silo within a community.

Some services may already have historical roots in a community, and provide resources on which to build and embed greater connections; other services may not. It is important to seek and engage community leaders as well as community members more broadly. Having a visible, welcoming presence 'on the ground', providing outreach, and holding social events can help to engage everyday community members with a service. Also, the atmosphere created by the physical space of the service environment and offices should not be underestimated for its impact on how welcome people feel, and for communicating messages about the openness and inclusiveness of a service. These considerations should help a service to engage with a community in an inclusive way that is receptive to the diversity of voices and minimises the risk of capture by a more narrow set of established, often louder, voices.

It takes time to listen to and embed the wisdom of a community into how a service operates and delivers supports. This involves taking seriously what the community understands about its own needs and capacities. Having genuine opportunities for community members to be involved in sharing their stories and contributing to

decision-making processes is essential; as are systems that support staff to work flexibly so that community engagement becomes part of their everyday professional practice, and a workplace culture that encourages and rewards this work.

Operating in this way should help to build the trust and respect of community members over time, and so sustain their engagement and facilitate earlier interventions. It is also relevant to delivering services that are appropriate to local needs, adaptive to changing needs, attuned to culture, and sensitive to collective and individual traumas.

This approach involves an appreciation of how intergenerational connections to a service can be a great strength. It is evident to the evaluation—and this view is supported by interviews with staff and clients—that the longevity of connections need not signal dependence on a service, but rather can reflect the embedding of community expertise; providing staff and clients with social networks and a wealth of local knowledge on which to draw when making decisions about supports.

Empower individuals with respect, compassion and choice

Lesson 2: Therapeutic relationships that lead to independence take time to develop, and resources and commitment to sustain.

Patience is paramount when building relationships based on trust and respect in which clients feel safe and are safe to share their stories. It is likely that a community-based service that is already familiar to clients, their family and friends will have a head-start in the early stages of building a relationship, and will be more culturally appropriate and trauma-informed from the get-go.

Workplace systems and culture should enable staff to take the time needed to build these relationships. This involves intake, assessment and casework/ counselling approaches that facilitate client-centered narrative inquiry: that is, approaches that support the individual to share their lived experiences in a way and at a pace that they feel comfortable, and which gives the individual control—with guidance from the service/ staff—over creating the kind of life that is meaningful to them.

It is important that a service offers meaningful choices to clients so that there is a real opportunity to create a new narrative(s) for them. A diverse range of relevant, interesting and appealing programs/ activities, with supported referrals, can enable clients to explore their interests and skills in creative ways. These programs/ activities should include opportunities for leadership, advocacy and volunteering through which clients can express their independence and capacity to give back to the community. Providing a diverse service offering to clients may require stronger

partnerships with other local organisations and providers, and good referral pathways.

Strengths-based approaches fit well with narrative therapy and also contribute to clients' growth towards independence. Relationships that focus on engaging with the resilience, skills, and capacities that clients bring to the table are more robust to withstanding the ups and downs of clients' journeys: staff can demonstrate respect by acknowledging the potential in their clients to be their best and by encouraging clients, when ready, to do more things on their own. This also engenders respect of clients towards staff and their professional judgement.

Throughout interactions with clients, communicating clearly with warmth and informality is vital. This demonstrates an awareness of the power dynamics that can emerge between clients and staff, and signals to clients their equality in these relationships. That clients trust that their confidentiality is kept is also of great importance for their safety and sustained engagement, especially in services that work closely with the community and multiple members of families, which may be more common in Aboriginal communities.

Quality staff matter, as do the qualities of staff

Lesson 3: Within a supportive workplace culture, the professional and personal attributes of staff are critical to ensuring long-term commitment to client-centered narrative therapy that is trauma-informed.

Staff require a sophisticated understanding of how to deliver trauma-informed care in order to work safely and appropriately with clients and the community. This means supplementing formal training with a solid contextual understanding of local history, such as the impacts of long-term financial disadvantage, and current events like emerging patterns of violence or drug/ alcohol use. This is because such context may impact on the issues that people present with, and how they experience services. When working with Aboriginal people, this also includes understanding the context of colonization, features of family/ kin relationships, cultural load and cultural understandings, and appreciating the intergenerational impacts of discrimination and social exclusion.

Training in client-centered narrative therapy, coupled with guidance, supervision and systems to support this approach in practice, is equally important. This is because a narrative approach can demand more flexible ways of working to support clients. Practical knowledge of how to do strengths-based assessments and how to incorporate these strengths into casework is also needed so that clients are supported to leverage-off their lived experiences towards empowerment.

A collegial workplace culture where staff are trusted and respected by other staff and management, and are given autonomy to exercise professional judgement, is important for working flexibly, the quality of this work, and for the wellbeing of staff. Good connections and communication between staff also provide for a more coherent, integrated service experience for clients.

Personal attributes that drive the persistence of staff are valuable, and engender hope among clients. Commitment to clients and the community is often sustained by staff with a genuine passion for their role and who are motivated by social justice. Creativity is also a great asset in staff as this can energise relationships with clients and encourage clients' self-expression.

If committed and well-skilled staff feel supported and are retained in a service, this also strengthens the connectedness of that service to the lives of individuals, families and the community over time. These connections are likely to promote the positive reputation of a service as being reliable and consistent, and may stimulate self-referrals and referrals by family/ friends.

Forge and sustain community and corporate partnerships

Lesson 4: Partnerships not only improve the service range to enhance opportunities for clients, but are increasingly important to secure and maintain funding.

A community-based service can benefit greatly from making use of resources that local councils, businesses, and other youth or community services can provide, and from providing value back to these organisations.

These partnerships are not only a source of funding and donations, but can make better quality resources and facilities available to clients and community. Clients might also make connections to these organisations that continue beyond a particular program, and in doing so expand their circle of friends and support networks. For example, partnerships can be both a source of opportunities for clients to volunteer and give back to their communities, and a source of external volunteers to support program delivery.

Partnering with the right organisations that clients and the community see as interesting and relevant to them will also boost the appeal of programs, especially to young people.

The marketing and branding around programs delivered in partnership is a very important consideration, and investing in a clear branding/ vision with dedicated staff to manage these relationships can pay off. Secure partnerships should also be

supported by clear expectations, defined roles/ responsibilities and a shared understanding of why relationships are mutually beneficial for partners, and of good to the community at large.

Take fun seriously—celebrate successes and share hope

Lesson 5: There is a vital role for celebrations, social events and informal ways of sharing stories about client successes, or the success of community activities.

Bringing people together in a positive and relaxed environment can strengthen social and family networks and encourage pride in the community. There is a role for humour in these events for creating hope and healing. Celebrations can be a powerful counterbalance to mournful occasions, such as funerals, that otherwise bring people together; and there is therapeutic value for clients or community members who are socially isolated.

Such events are also an opportunity for a service to communicate its vision and ethos. If done in a way that is appealing and in touch with the interests of the community, then this can contribute to reducing stigma around seeking and accepting assistance. Celebrations are also great soft-entry points for new clients, or for people who are interested in becoming involved in other social activities that services have on offer.

It is important that clients and community members have a lead role in the inception, direction and delivery of celebrations and events. This helps to make events relevant and culturally appropriate, but also creates meaningful leadership and/or volunteering opportunities that build individual and community capacity.

5.4 Concluding remarks

This evaluation of Weave, which has drawn primarily on in-depth interviews with clients, community members and staff, highlights critical features of Weave's community-based model of support and quality relationships that together make a difference for individuals and the community. While aspects of Weave history and operating context are unique—as is the case for any service—there are rich insights that are relevant to a wide range of services, particularly those in the mental health sector, as well as insights about how to engage and empower Aboriginal people and communities.

Becky's path from crisis to healing to community leadership

Becky* is an Aboriginal woman from regional NSW who first became involved with Weave 15 years ago after being referred by Juvenile Justice as a teenager. At that time, she wanted help to make changes in her life. She needed immediate assistance with housing, clothing, identification and getting back into school, but Becky recognised that she also '*needed to be active, to be involved in things*', and accordingly she sought counselling, healing groups, and some recreational opportunities through Weave.

Over the years, Becky has been involved with Weave on and off and in different ways, depending on her circumstances. When times were tough as an adult, Weave supported her with a referral to rehabilitation. But Weave has also been there in the good times. About seven years ago, Weave identified an opportunity for Becky to do Youth Challenge Australia, which involved two months working on community development projects in the Pacific. Becky said, '*it was an amazing experience...a life experience that turned my life around.*' She still keeps in touch with friends she met there.

These days Becky volunteers for Weave in various ways, including speaking at community events to share her experiences, and sometimes she drops in to the Weave to use the computers. She also works in childcare, and loves her job. Becky's life is stable and independent: '*Without the support of Weave I wouldn't have the tools I have today to live a day to day life.*'

Appendix 1. List of references

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