

Collaboration Engines

**A Justice and Equity Centre approach to
supporting systemic change**

A report by the University of Technology Sydney
and the Justice and Equity Centre

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**Justice and
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The authors acknowledge Australia's First Nations peoples as the traditional custodians of our collective lands, waterways and Culture. We are grateful for the guidance of elders past and present.



Foreword

At the Justice and Equity Centre, our commitment to being a generous collaborator is a strategic choice. It reflects what we know about how social change happens.

Individual legal and advocacy successes are important – and our expertise as lawyers and policy advocates is an important part of our work. But we recognise that individual ‘wins’ are stepping stones rather than end points.¹

To shift systems, we need to build power in the community so that people affected by injustice can be heard and can lead. When we work in ways that are relational rather than transactional, we build that power.

When Mark Riboldi approached us with the idea of researching how the Justice and Equity Centre approaches collaboration, we were delighted to take up the opportunity.

While we are regularly reviewing the outcomes and impact of our work, it’s all too rare that we have the chance to look closely at *how* we work. It has been exceptionally valuable having external experts speak to the people involved, both within the JEC and amongst our partners and co-collaborators – helping distil the ‘special sauce’ of this collaborative work.

In identifying principles that underpin the JEC’s work with others – as well as calling out the perennial challenges of how we navigate power, conflict and maintaining trust – this research supports us to work intentionally and strategically.

We hope it also provides a useful resource to others looking to drive systems change. As the authors identify, “the way that collaborative spaces are created, held and facilitated contributes towards the outcomes achieved through collaboration”.

Our thanks to Mark, Mich and Rivkah for this valuable research.



Jonathon Hunyor
CEO, Justice and Equity Centre



¹ See Centre for Evaluation Innovation (2021), [Advocacy that Builds Power](#).

Executive summary

Like many organisations across civil society, the Justice and Equity Centre (JEC) works towards “a society that is fair and free from disadvantage, where nobody is left behind”.² More distinctly, particularly for a law and policy-oriented organisation, the JEC’s lead activity for achieving their mission is working in partnerships and alliances, aiming to “build on our reputation as a generous and effective collaborator.”

“There aren’t organisations doing this, and there’s so much that we could do. And so, if you’re doing a good job, keep doing it.”

– JEC collaboration partner

This report explores the *how* of the JEC’s collaborative practice, by examining four key collaborations held and facilitated by the JEC in the areas of disability rights, First Nations justice, and homelessness. The key finding is a series of principles which appear to underpin how JEC team members approach their role in these collaborations:

- 1. We are more than lawyers**
- 2. We are independent, but not neutral**
- 3. We follow through on our commitments**
- 4. We are led by lived experience**

These principles, typically existing in dialogue with each other, guide some of the more practical aspects of holding collaborations, such as providing the secretariat or “backbone”, hosting the required spaces, and creating shared documentation. They also appear to guide JEC team members in successfully navigating some of the recognised challenges of collaboration – enabling action, building trust and negotiating power dynamics.

Generally, the JEC does not work from a fixed ‘playbook’, model or practice guide. Instead, their principles guide decision-making on a case-by-case basis.

Within the JEC’s collaborative practice, we find the idea of *collaboration engines* – spaces which build the relationships and collective power necessary to launch targeted interventions for systemic change.

The purpose of these collaborative spaces is to build relationships around areas of common interest. Doing so helps create the *honeycomb* of civil society power which has historically underpinned large-scale change towards economic and social justice.³

² Justice and Equity Centre Strategic Plan, 2025-2028.

³ Riboldi, M. (2024a). *The Loci of Power and Connection: A framework for exploring the democratic relationships of civil society organisations*. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, 13(2), 244–263.

Introduction

Systemic advocacy by civil society organisations (CSOs) is a crucial democratic activity. CSOs represent various interests across the community, whether through direct community-membership or broader representative claims, and therefore many try to influence political decision-making in order to benefit those interests. From protesting on the streets to lobbying behind closed doors, advocacy by civil society organisations sends important signals to governments as they make public policy decisions.

Within this landscape, the Justice and Equity Centre is a well-established presence in Australia's community law ecosystem, an "independent law and policy centre".⁴ Founded in 1982 as the Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC) with four staff, the JEC today employs around 50 people and has contributed to important legislative and policy reforms in areas such as disability rights, First Nations justice, and homelessness.

The JEC's approach to advocacy generally aligns with their expertise in policy, legislation and legal systems. Working with affected people, communities and organisations, the JEC develops and advocates for policy positions, conducts strategic litigation and participates in state-led inquiries and consultation. At the same time, the JEC's public framing is often critical of government policy and the practices of public bodies like the police.⁵

This report explores how the JEC team attempts to ground that advocacy in strategic partnerships with those directly impacted by public policy. Our focus is therefore on less visible (though no less important) activities which can facilitate successful advocacy, particularly how they hold spaces and coordinate networks within these partnerships.⁶

We do this by examining four of the JEC's key collaborations: the **StreetCare** group of people with lived experience of homelessness; the campaign to **Raise the Age** of criminal responsibility in New South Wales (NSW); the **Family is Culture Advocacy Working Group**, which works to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in out-of-home care; and the **NDIS Systemic Advocacy Working Group**, focused on systemic issues within the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Based on workshops, interviews and ongoing dialogue between researchers and JEC team members, this report aims to highlight some of the practices and principles which make the JEC a respected and sought-after collaborator.⁷

⁴ <https://jec.org.au/>

⁵ What might be described as an 'confrontational insider' approach to advocacy (Clear et al. 2018).

⁶ These 'enabling' activities are thought to supplement 'big ticket' CSO activities like advocacy, service delivery and community development. See Riboldi, M. (2024b). *A typology of civil society organisation activities: A multi-grounded theory approach to what CSOs do*. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 59(2), 197–215.

⁷ See page 28 for more detailed information about our methodology.

Collaboration is common practice for CSOs, particularly those attempting to address social challenges embedded in complex systems. Concepts like *co-design*, *community-led* and *place-based* have become buzzwords. People increasingly recognise the importance of collaboration, yet the *doing* of collaboration is arguably poorly understood – the work is “messy, unfolding and [reliant] on often emergent processes”.⁸

“It's also like the engine room. It's our brains trust.”

– JEC collaboration partner



Members of the NDIS Systemic Advocacy Working Group in May 2025

Successful collaboration is not a passive pursuit. Research often highlights the importance of trust and the need to address power imbalances for successful collaboration. This means that the way that collaborative spaces are created, held and facilitated contributes towards the outcomes achieved through collaboration. In starting this research, we assumed that trust exists within the JEC’s partnerships; our interest is in how it is generated and maintained. Similarly, we assumed the presence of power imbalances; we are interested in how they are navigated.

⁸ Keast, R. (2016). Shining a Light on the Black Box of Collaboration: Mapping the prerequisites for cross-sector working. In J. Butcher & D. Gilchrist (Eds.), *The Three Sector Solution: Delivering Public Policy in Collaboration with Not-for-Profits and Business* (pp. 157–178). ANU Press. 162.

In general, the report highlights the practices and principles underpinning the JEC's approach to collaboration, drawn from conversations with those involved. Driving the research has been the JEC's desire to better understand their own practice, to enable knowledge sharing and skills development within the organisation, and to articulate to current and potential partners the value the JEC sees in the ways they work.

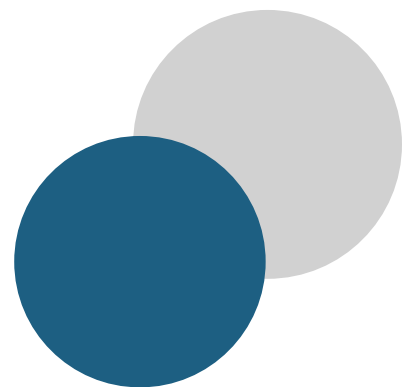
A generous approach to addressing systemic challenges presupposes that everyone involved, from communities through to law makers, is committed to the same outcome. Along the way, different factors may unfortunately derail genuine attempts at reforming systems and creating better conditions for our communities.

Many of those factors are external to CSOs. This includes the ways they are funded, their regulatory environment, as well as crises like extreme weather events and the coronavirus pandemic. Along with political cycles and the 24-hour media landscape, people in organisations can sometimes feel like they are constantly reacting.

By taking this opportunity to look at their own practice, the JEC is conscious of factors they can control – how they work with other people and organisations.

Many of the JEC's collaboration partners that we interviewed described the JEC as a "good ally". This appeared a result of how JEC team members engage with other people and organisations, a distinctly relational outcome compared to what the results of these collaborative activities might be. The Raise the Age campaign, for example, has not yet been successful in achieving its primary policy outcome, yet this has not impacted the desire of those we interviewed to continue working with the JEC on collective endeavours.

If social change occurs when people and organisations work together towards common goals, the connections and relationships between those advocating for reform are essential components for success. By creating and holding spaces where these relationships can be formed and strengthened, which in this report we call collaboration engines, the JEC is doing the groundwork towards creating genuine change alongside the people and communities it works with.



Key JEC collaborations

Family is Culture Advocacy Working Group

The Family is Culture Advocacy Working Group (FICAWG) focusses on Aboriginal-led transformation of the NSW child protection system, guided by the recommendations of a 2019 report by Professor Megan Davis about the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care.⁹ The group involves representatives from AbSec (the peak body for Aboriginal children, families and communities in NSW), the Aboriginal Legal Service NSW/ACT (ALS), as well as researchers from the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at the University of Technology Sydney, and the University of New South Wales Social Policy Research Centre.

The group has been meeting in its current form since 2021 but has its origins in a collaboration between the JEC and ALS from 2017. From 2017 to 2019, a JEC lawyer was seconded part-time to work with the ALS's child protection team while simultaneously developing policy insights around potential areas for reform. The JEC secured seed funding for the project from the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation and the BB & A Miller Foundation, the latter of which continues to partially support the JEC's role in the FICAWG. Part of the JEC's role within the FICAWG is to serve as the group's secretariat – coordinating and facilitating fortnightly meetings, preparing agendas, taking minutes, fielding enquiries and arranging meetings with politicians and other external stakeholders. The JEC also provides legal and policy advocacy expertise, such as drafting submissions, interpreting legislation and case law, and advising on potential strategies and tactics for advancing the group's reform priorities.

Each year, the group has coordinated a joint ALS / AbSec “community monitoring and reporting” publication, providing an independent perspective on the NSW Government's progress towards implementing the Family is Culture Report's recommendations. JEC Principal Solicitor Jonathan Hall Spence describes this as an “important truth telling tool”. Other outcomes have included working with government to pass important legislative reforms in the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Amendment (Family is Culture) Act 2022; and setting up a process to replace a problematic family assessment casework tool with one that government will co-design with AbSec and the ALS.

Hall Spence describes the role of the JEC in the group as doing “whatever we need to do to help move things along,” which involves “supporting collaboration between the four organisations”. Because AbSec and the ALS are “accountable to community and represent community,” Hall Spence sees the role of the JEC being to “support them and execute their vision in any way we can.” Lucy Kelley, who also supports the FICAWG, wants the JEC to be seen “as a generous collaborator and ally, rather than a ‘we’ll do it for you’ kind of player.” This involves “recognising and resourcing leadership where it exists already.”

⁹ Davis, M. (2019). *Family Is Culture—Review Report*. Independent Review of Aboriginal Children and Young People in OOHC.

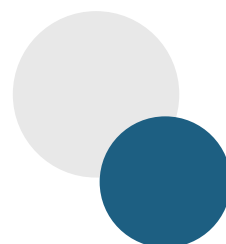
NDIS Systemic Advocacy Working Group

The NDIS Systemic Advocacy Working Group (NSAWG) focusses on systemic advocacy around the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), aiming to provide a space for coordination, collaboration and access to legal and policy expertise. Key members are national peak disability organisations such as Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, Children and Young People with Disability Australia, Every Australian Counts, Disability Advocacy Network Australia, First Peoples Disability Network, and Inclusion Australia. Legal organisations such as National Legal Aid also participate.

The group formed in 2021, based on an identified need for a forum for disability-oriented organisations to coordinate and engage around systemic issues with the NDIS. The NDIS reforms from 2013-2020 meant that many disability organisations only received funding for individual advocacy, and those which did have systemic advocacy resources were stretched across various areas of need beyond the NDIS. The JEC's role convening and supporting the NSAWG was funded between 2021 and 2025 initially by an anonymous funder, with the Paul Ramsay Foundation joining as a co-funder from 2023. These funds covered JEC team members' time, an Independent Chair who is a person with lived experience of disability, as well as logistics that enable annual meetings in person.

JEC team members act as convenor and secretariat to the NSAWG, providing advice, assistance and support to the Chair and other members, including organising meetings, taking minutes, assisting to identify legal and policy issues, as well as facilitating an annual evaluation and planning session. They also provide legal expertise, including "rapid legal analysis" of proposed legislative and policy changes, drafting policy submissions, and examining key NDIS court and tribunal cases. During major legislative reform processes in 2024 and 2026, the JEC supported NSAWG members to secure significant outcomes, including commitments from government to consult with the disability community, the adoption of a more holistic approach to funding disability support needs and the inclusion of important safeguards to protect NDIS participants from reductions in funding.

Sheetal Balakrishnan and Erin Turner Manners are two of the JEC solicitors who have worked together supporting the NSAWG since 2022 and believe this continuity has been important for its success. As Balakrishnan notes, "especially because the sector is one which has changed a lot. There aren't very many who are the original attendees." Turner Manners observes that the relationships between the JEC and the organisations in the group are "mutually beneficial". The JEC's broader strategic litigation and disability advocacy work is "constantly informed by [disability organisations'] priorities and then, equally, they benefit from being able to tap into our legal expertise."



Raise the Age NSW

The Raise the Age NSW coalition is organised as an advocacy campaign focused on a specific legislative outcome – raising the age of criminal responsibility, the age from which children can be charged with criminal offences, from 10 to 14. The JEC heads the NSW state wing of a national movement, coordinating a lead group of organisations: the Aboriginal Legal Service NSW/ACT, Just Reinvest NSW, Community Legal Centres NSW, Youth Action, NSW Council of Social Services (NCOSS), NSW Council for Civil Liberties, Change the Record, Australian Services Union NSW/ACT, NSW Teachers Federation, Amnesty International Australia, ANTaR and the Justice Reform Initiative. Beneath this curated lead group sit over 180 organisations who have signed on to support and participate in the campaign.¹⁰

Campaigns to ‘raise the age’ have existed at a national and state level for over a decade. In 2019, the JEC agreed to take on coordinating the NSW campaign and in 2022 secured funding from the Paul Ramsay Foundation to support the work. In 2023, the JEC hired an experienced campaigner, Emily Mayo, to coordinate the campaign. Raise the Age NSW membership is structured two ways: (1) a Lead Group of 13 organisations including justice and rights organisations, trade unions, and Aboriginal controlled organisations that make strategic decisions about the campaign’s direction; and (2) a Partner Network, currently over 180 in number, who support the campaign and take part in campaign actions. Spokespeople are drawn from the Lead Group and Partner Network. The campaign’s foundational ‘Structure and Purpose Document’ notes that Mayo does “the work of coordinating, advising and leading and supporting the participants”.

In building a collective campaign for change, Mayo has focused on maintaining an engaged lead group and active partner network, pursuing a strategy that combines *insider* and *outsider* approaches.¹¹ This includes “building establishing relationships with key champions in NSW Parliament; developing a media partnership that has delivered a pro-bono advertising campaign proven to change hearts and minds; and having the voices of lived experience heard widely in public debates and centred in parliamentary inquiries.” A key aim has been to shift public discourse around youth justice, the outcome of which can be seen in recent significant NSW Government investment in diversion and therapeutic pathways for children who come into contact with the criminal justice system.



¹⁰ Details of campaign participants can be found online at the [Raise the Age NSW website](#)

¹¹ See, for example, Clear, A., Paull, M., & Holloway, D. (2018). [Nonprofit Advocacy Tactics: Thinking Inside The Box?](#) *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 29(4), 857–869.

StreetCare

The StreetCare initiative is a consumer advisory committee involving JEC team members supporting a group of twelve *advocates*: people with lived experience of homelessness and housing insecurity. The advocates provide advice to governments, researchers and other organisations that are developing policies in these areas. They also inform the advocacy of the JEC's Homeless Persons' Legal Service (HPLS).

Founded in 2009 with a small grant from NSW Government agency Homes NSW, StreetCare is one of the JEC's longest running strategic partnerships. Since 2021, after advocacy from the JEC around the value of StreetCare and the true costs involved in its operations, Homes NSW have fully funded the initiative's costs, and in 2025 began funding a second group of advocates. Prior to this, the JEC absorbed the real additional costs of running StreetCare, namely JEC project officers and remuneration for advocates' time and expenses.

JEC team members support StreetCare advocates to engage in public advocacy via the media, to meet with and brief politicians, as well as to participate in research projects, policy forums and other consultation mechanisms. Meetings are held in person at the JEC offices. Outcomes have included influencing the NSW Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic for rough sleepers, delivering trauma informed practice training for community lawyers and Homes NSW staff, and exposing how 'Alcohol-Free Zones' in Sydney led to the unfair over-policing of people who are homeless or live in public housing.

Charmaine Jones, the JEC's Project Manager for StreetCare, describes the JEC's role as providing "backbone support" to the group. This includes organising various logistics, such as arranging meetings, liaising with funders, brokering relationships and recruiting new advocates when necessary. It also includes elements of "pastoral care", "calling my guys up, see how they're travelling", "making sure that they're safe, supported, comfortable in what they're doing – confident enough to come back to the next meeting."



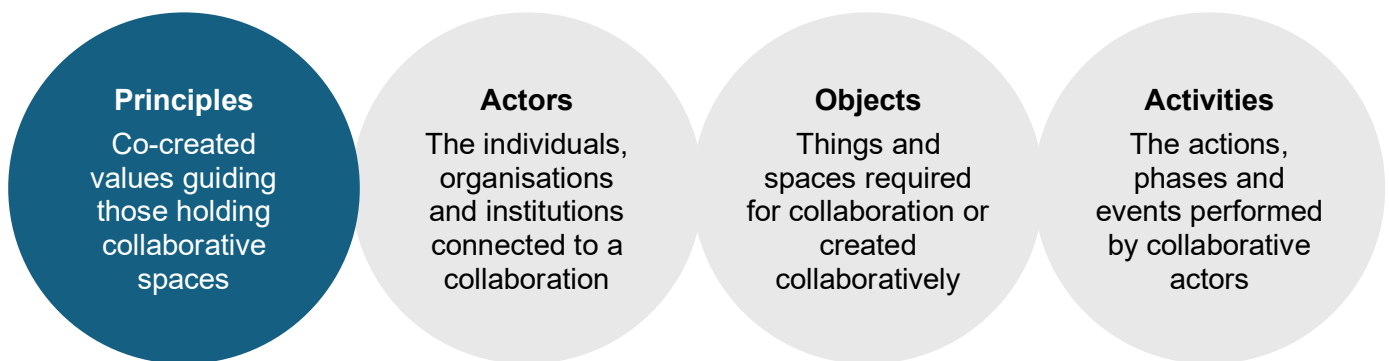
StreetCare members and JEC staff at NSW Parliament with MP Jenny Leong in November 2022

Aspects of collaboration

What goes into a JEC collaboration and why is it important?

In our research, we identified four interconnected elements that are common factors across all collaborations to varying degrees – collaboration actors, objects, activities and principles. Figure 1 highlights collaboration principles as holding a distinct role within these elements. We suggest that the principles underpinning a collaboration (spoken or unspoken, formal or informal) guide how people and organisations approach the other, more quantifiable, elements.

Figure 1. Four Aspects of Collaboration



We return to the principles guiding the JEC’s collaborative practice in the next section of the report. First, however, we present various practical aspects of collaboration which participants highlighted as being important to the work they did with the JEC.

In some ways these aspects, including safe meeting spaces and dedicated facilitation, are well recognised elements of successful collaborative practice. The JEC’s approach to these combines intentionality and reflexivity, successfully so according to their collaborators we talked to for this report.

Generally, the JEC do not work from a fixed ‘playbook’, model or practice guide. Instead, their principles guide decision-making on a case-by-case basis.

This is consistent with field building literature which suggests that effective spaces for collaboration are likely to require “adaptive infrastructure”, acting as a “connective tissue” to support collaboration activities, through the provision of tangible assistance, information and financial resources.¹²

¹² Farnham, L., Nothmann, E., Tamaki, Z., & Daniels, C. (2020, March). *Field Building for Population-Level Change—How funders and practitioners can increase the odds of success*. The Bridgespan Group.

In general, JEC team members approach the spaces and objects in their collaborations with a good deal of intentionality. On the surface, a meeting just needs a location and an agenda, but an effective meeting or collaboration appears to require more effort:

“A lot of work often goes into setting up the meetings so that people come with the right frame set and ready to focus on, ‘OK, this is the situation. It’s no one’s fault. We’re all in this together. Let’s focus on solutions and how we can move forward’.”

– JEC team member

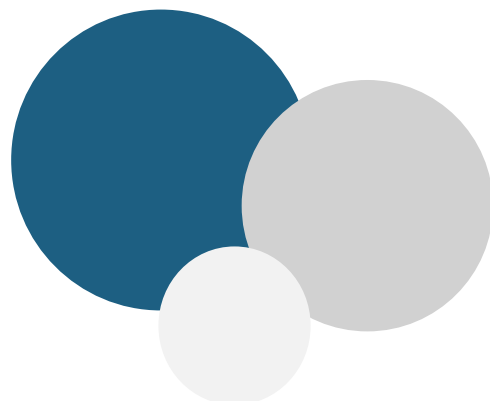
Holding Physical Spaces

JEC team members largely take responsibility for creating and holding the spaces in which their key collaborations occur. An important location here is the physical JEC office in central Sydney, where a sizeable meeting room adjoins a large common area and kitchen space. Distinct from the other key collaborations, all the core StreetCare meetings are held in person at the JEC offices. Interestingly, the StreetCare advocates we interviewed felt a degree of ownership over where they met as a “StreetCare space”, as though the JEC itself existed separately somewhere else.

Even though regular meetings of the other collaborations are held online, and communication in between meetings might be by phone, email or some other digital tool, all JEC’s key collaborations have an annual strategic planning session, often held in person, with food provided. Participants see connecting in real life like this as an important part of the effectiveness of the collaboration:

“So being invited into that space down at JEC’s office space was great, and there was always an opportunity to have a meal together. I mean, I think it’s just such an important thing. People sort of stop and they relax when they can have a bit of a meal and talk a bit outside of work.”

– JEC collaboration partner



Creating Documentation

All JEC key collaborations are supported by various kinds of documentation. The JEC has an overarching *Lived Experience Framework*, which predominantly relates to the “lived experience advocates” such as those in the StreetCare project, guiding how JEC team members engage with these collaboration partners. The framework also has principles that appear to flow across to other JEC collaborations, including JEC providing “administrative backbone support”, reimbursing out-of-pocket expenses, and working in a “safe and respectful manner that is person-centred and trauma-informed”.

“Having a set purpose and agreed mechanism by which we work sets you out on a good path.”

– JEC team member

The NDIS Systemic Advocacy Working Group has a detailed ‘terms of reference’ document, which is revisited annually. StreetCare has detailed governance documents in which engaged advocates are asked to acknowledge their “rights, roles and responsibilities... as a StreetCare member”. In comparison, documentation for the Raise the Age Campaign and Family is Culture Advocacy Working Group is less formal. Raise the Age has a short statement of goals and agreed principles for working together, which are revisited semi-regularly as part of the strategic planning process. The Family is Culture Advocacy Working Group has a written statement of short, medium and long-term goals which is revisited annually. When this collaboration was only PIAC and the ALS there was a formal and detailed secondment agreement, retainer for legal services, project plan and partnership agreement, but these either ended or fell out of use by the time the collaboration developed into its modern iteration in 2021.

Providing a Backbone

As noted earlier, JEC tends to provide the administrative backbone and secretariat in their key collaborations, which is appreciated by their partners. The role of a skilled, independent facilitator or convener of the collaboration is regarded as fundamental to the resilience, consistency and ongoing effectiveness of the group.

“It's quite nice to have somebody that's just like keeping things chugging along, and then you just turn up and sort of talk about what's going on.”

– JEC collaboration partner



A Family is Culture report supported by the JEC

Different JEC team members talk about this role in different ways, reflecting the individual personalities of the team members and of the collaborations themselves. There is no preferred term for this role – different JEC team members use “facilitator”, “coordinator” or “backbone”, depending on the context. Rather than imposing set roles on groups from the outset, the functions required by a group are generated internally over time.

One advantage of the *backbone* metaphor is in the impression of providing a stable basis within which a group can operate.¹³ Given the variety of different pressures faced by JEC collaboration partners, having the JEC offer this stability as a kind of service within a group appears to be highly valued by the people and organisations with whom the JEC works. Also important is that while a backbone provides a strong foundation (to use another metaphor), it doesn’t necessarily imply *leadership* in terms of directing group activity:

“JEC provides the sort of secretariat, and the coordination, but they don’t set the agenda.”

– JEC collaboration partner

Offering Strategic Expertise

The JEC’s collaborators also appreciate JEC team members’ ability to simplify oft-complicated and jargon-ridden legislation, policy and other legal documents into plainer and more understandable terms, including an analysis of the potential impact on the organisations and the people they represent. This can lead to advising on what the next steps might be in response to challenges organisations face, whether through legal or other forms of advocacy:

“I think what it is about the JEC that’s enabled us to have success is I think we bring both substantive expertise to the group, in the legal and strategy space, but also we help facilitate the process.”

– JEC team member



Raise the Age NSW campaign collateral

¹³ This use of “backbone” is analogous though distinct from the idea of an on-the-ground backbone organisation within Collective Impact literature.

Particularly with the NDIS Systemic Advocacy and Family is Culture Advocacy groups, suggestions about possible avenues for advocacy around an issue are typically offered as possible courses of action rather than strong recommendations for action. The Raise the Age campaign appears different, with the campaign coordinator appearing to more actively direct the campaign's advocacy strategy and tactics.

Bridging Formal Meetings

The JEC's key collaborations tend to be scaffolded by regularly scheduled meetings, for example quarterly for the NDIS Systemic Advocacy Working Group and fortnightly for the Family is Culture Advocacy Working Group. As noted earlier, JEC team members put considerable effort into making sure that these regular meetings are productive and valued by the JEC's collaborators. Often, this preparation involves JEC team members connecting with individual collaborators in between the meetings.

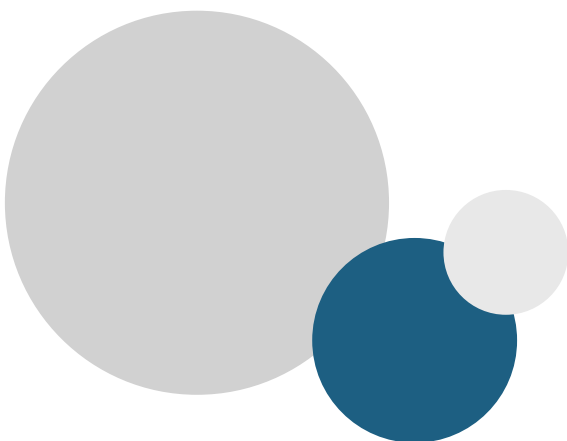
“...if you just ask people to come back meeting after meeting, without any engagement in between, what will happen is that you'll get the stalwarts that'll come back meeting after meeting, and they'll get rusted in place. And then the other people who get brought in will either get scared off or will just not feel included.”

– JEC team member

The JEC's collaboration partners value the importance of this approach to managing a network or collaboration, which has connections to relational or movement organising practices:

“I think the only way to keep these sorts of alliances going is through that real networking and people management and troubleshooting when it happens.”

– JEC collaboration partner



Flexibility and Adaptability

While the JEC's collaborative practice is disciplined, it is not rigid. As one JEC team member noted about their role: "I think it's like you are kind of choreographing everything and dancing at the same time."

Fast shifting policy landscapes can require collaborations to react quickly at times, particularly when it comes to a campaign-oriented group like the Raise the Age coalition. When time-sensitive political opportunities arise, JEC team members need to facilitate swift decision-making, balancing the need to ensure partners are onside and have the opportunity to contribute with externally imposed timeframes. Maintaining solidarity is an over-riding consideration.

The JEC's other key collaborations also embrace adaptability. The Family is Culture Advocacy Working Group has evolved from a research and practice-oriented collaboration between the JEC and Aboriginal Legal Service (NSW/ACT) into a more broad-based space for reforming the child protection system. StreetCare's activities shift based on what advocates are prepared to engage with, while the priorities of the NDIS Strategic Advocacy Working Group frequently shift based on changes in the political and policy landscape.



Members of the Family is Culture Advocacy Working Group at the AbSec Conference in 2024

Collaboration principles

In this report, we suggest that the principles or values which underpin a collaboration play an important role in determining *how* the various aspects of a collaboration are performed and received. That is, whether spoken or unspoken, formal or informal, those leading or coordinating collaborations have a series of principles which underpin, at least from their point of view, how actors from their organisation behave, how objects are created and recreated, and how activities are undertaken and performed.

The principles listed below have emerged from the research process, particularly through discussion with JEC team members and collaboration partners. We suggest that these principles encompass the JEC's approach to collaboration. We also suggest that, like in rights-based frameworks, rather than being absolutes, these principles exist 'in dialogue', with each other. That is, their implementation is negotiated in practice between JEC team members and collaborators. Some of these 'negotiations' can be seen in the following section.

Principle 1. We are more than lawyers

Many JEC team members are practising lawyers, others have legal training, and much of the identity of the organisation intersects with legal interventions, including through courts and tribunals. Yet it would be a mistake to characterise the JEC primarily as a legal organisation, particularly when it comes to their collaborative practice. The organisation employs a variety of other professionals, including policy and communications specialists. The team members leading StreetCare and Raise the Age, for example, have backgrounds in community development and political organising respectively.

“...we deliberately see ourselves as supporting the work of others. We will support them to execute their vision here in any way we can. We're not looking to drive an agenda, we're looking to support someone else's priorities.”

– JEC team member

Most importantly, this principle extends into how JEC team members perform their roles in collaborative partnerships. The most obvious of these is the secretariat and facilitation role that the JEC formally takes on in these collaborations. It also extends to how JEC team members respond to ideas and requests raised within the collaborative spaces. Of course, not every request is feasible, but JEC team members' first instinct appears to be seeing what can be done to enable ideas and support what their partners are trying to do, rather than triaging whether the proposed activity is a legal task or has a legal element before they commit to action.

Principle 2. We are independent, but not neutral

Some people see independence and neutrality as synonymous ideas, but in practice they are very different. Independence relates to a distinct separation between parties, distinguished from organisations that might be structurally intertwined (interdependent) or reliant (dependent) on each other, for example through funding or governance relationships. Neutrality, on the other hand, implies not taking a position or a 'side' in relation to an issue. Neutrality can be an important principle for many legal institutions, such as courts and tribunals. However, the JEC has clear values which guide their practice, in particular their commitment to social justice and self-determination for Australia's First Nations peoples. These place the JEC on the side of their selected collaboration partners, even though they are independent of them in terms of funding, governance and even the position they hold within the broader CSO landscape.

“They are, from a sector perspective, the perfect kind of organisation to bring this together, because they're in this space, but they're also independent, they're trusted, they've got that breadth of connections.”

– JEC collaboration partner

The JEC's independence from their collaboration partners is a valued strength, particularly in terms of funding. Crucially, the JEC is seen as not having competing interests with their collaboration partners, which actually adds value within collaborative spaces; for example, when negotiating different positions. Similarly, in advocacy forums, the JEC's independent presence can add strength in diversity alongside lived experience advocates or organisations.

Principle 3. We follow through on our commitments

There is something deceptively simple about doing what you say you'll do, but this principle is easier said than done. People (and organisations) who want to help and are enthusiastic can often put their hands up to take on tasks before considering whether they have the resources possible to deliver on the outcome, or even whether the task is achievable at all. The JEC has ongoing strategic discussions about what resources they have and what they might be able to commit to their partnerships. Committing to outcomes and then delivering on them appears to generate significant amounts of trust.

“...consistently showing up and consistently showing up in the right way, which is being patient, respectful, taking the time to really understand the priorities of our partners and show that we are not looking to pull them into our agenda, but rather looking to support their agenda.”

– JEC team member

These commitments don't need to be large. Circulating the agenda for meetings in advance, and circulating minutes and notes soon after a meeting are small scale commitments that JEC team members make in their collaborations. They also put their hands up to analyse legislation, write the first drafts of documents like policy submissions or organise meetings with politicians. The JEC doesn't promise to achieve systemic change. Instead, they commit to supporting community-led agendas for change.

Principle 4. We are led by lived experience

The confidence of some lawyers in their own expertise is the punchline of many jokes, and knowledge of how the legal system operates and how to navigate it is certainly a skill which makes lawyers and legal organisations valued collaborators. At the same time, legal skills are only one of many valuable forms of expertise. In the policy areas in which the JEC works, an integral form of expertise comes from the people and communities who come up against systemic barriers in their day to day lives. JEC team members benefit from genuinely engaging with people and communities that have lived experience of systemic disadvantage and discrimination and see it as essential to effective and meaningful advocacy.

“I think it's really important that organisations see the potentially strategic difference between being the spokesperson and letting others speak.”

– JEC team member

The JEC attempts to build this principle into the governance of their strategic partnerships which, for the most part, position the JEC as coordinators, facilitators or secretariats – as well as expert advisers – without necessarily being leaders, spokespeople or decision-makers. The NDIS Strategic Advocacy Working Group is the clearest example of this, where JEC team members support a recruited Chair, who is themselves a person with a disability. Besides the value which this principle brings to their collaborative partnerships, valuing other forms of expertise, and foregrounding lived experience, brings reciprocal benefits to JEC team members and the organisation as a whole, for example in terms of personal development and organisational legitimacy.

Getting ahead of challenges

Literature around collaborative practice highlights various challenges which can impact whether a collaboration is regarded as successful. This includes the importance and challenge of building trust, negotiating power dynamics and enabling action. The previous sections, which outlined practical aspects of the JEC's collaborative practice as well as the principles which appear to underpin them, touched on a variety of these factors.

In this section, we discuss these themes more explicitly, connecting them to the theorised 'supporting' activities of civil society organisations – holding spaces, coordinating networks and providing resources.¹⁴ This connects how the JEC's principles and actions manifest into the fuel to run collaboration engines, the broad aim of which is to provide a staging ground for systemic advocacy and other systems reform activities.

Building and Maintaining Trust

Trust is one of those ubiquitous qualities in collaboration, that is often referenced in a somewhat nebulous way. Everyone agrees that it is important, but people are not so quick on pinpointing how it is built and maintained, besides pointing to 'relationality'. In this project, we have attempted to go beyond this by identifying how and where trust is built, asking participants to identify where trust resides in the collaborations.

Trust has both individual and institutional forms. That is, the JEC's collaboration partners express trust both in the individual JEC team members they interact with as well as trust in the JEC as an organisation. This trust has both relational and transactional aspects.

“I don't think there's one working group meeting that I've missed in the last four years. One, because I find it the most interesting and rewarding and informative sessions, but also because that trust is there.”

– JEC collaboration partner

Trust clearly manifests in the spaces that the JEC creates and holds, whether this is the physical space of the meeting and common room at the JEC offices, or the virtual spaces that punctuate the periodic in-person gatherings. Participants talk about JEC-held spaces as being “safe”, which intersects with ideas around discretion and confidentiality. While online meetings are convenient, it appears that in-person meetings are a real glue for relational connections, typically providing avenues for interpersonal interactions between the work, including connecting around food.

The way that JEC team members operate within the network helps to generate trust, in both relational and transactional ways. For example, JEC team members following through on

¹⁴ Riboldi, M. (2024b). [A typology of civil society organisation activities](#).

what they say they are going to do and continuing to show up and prepare agendas is largely transactional, however people value the consistency with which these tasks are completed, which contributes to the sense of trust. An important relational aspect of the FICAWG is protecting time for collective debriefing and sharing experiences. As Lucy Kelley notes, “we’re not always trying to push productivity – we see and respect the value in creating time for this as something our partners need and often don’t find elsewhere.”

“A lot of the trust comes in around the discretion that we have with it... it’s usually, someone or multiple people have been at a meeting with government or have had an interaction with the Minister or Dep Sec or whatever. And it’s gone awfully and they feel they’ve just been completely mistreated and silenced and ignored. And the first... sometimes the first half an hour of the working group... will be a complete rant about that whole experience.”

– JEC collaboration partner

Interestingly, participants within one collaboration identified significantly more importance in trusting the JEC than in trusting their fellow collaborators. In a hub and spokes model, for example, having trust in the hub, the person holding the collaboration, is more important than individual trust across other network partners. Besides the consistency of the JEC at the centre of these collaborative spaces, this can also be facilitated through one-to-one interactions between JEC team members and collaboration partners between larger group meetings.

“And you know, it’s about making sure that they’re safe, supported, comfortable in what they’re doing, confident enough to come back to the next meeting.”

– JEC team member

The resources that the JEC dedicates to their collaborative spaces also contribute to building trust. These resources have a financial dimension, of which the JEC is cognisant, attempting to secure external funding to cover the full costs of JEC team participation in the collaborative spaces. However, the JEC also commits their own resources to ensuring that the collaborations work and are resourced to the degree that they need to be to operate, even if an external funder hasn’t committed to fully funding the work. This commitment clearly signals to collaboration partners that the JEC is invested in the collaboration and on the side of their collaboration partners.

“To have a place where you can sort of very openly admit the barriers that you’re experiencing and the frustrations of that, and to have really like supportive, constructive, at times commiserating, conversations about that and know that that’s not going to go anywhere. It’s not going to go, you know, out to anyone else or, you know, is a really foundational thing.”

– JEC collaboration partner

Managing Power

Collaboration inevitably involves negotiating power dynamics between actors. Those involved have varying degrees of access to institutional power and represent diverse groups with wildly different connections to, interests in and experiences of whatever issue the collaboration has formed around. In Australia, for instance, First Nations advocacy spaces involving non-Indigenous people and organisations demand significant self-reflection on the part of those potential allies, with a view to avoiding the perpetuation of damaging colonial dynamics.¹⁵

In our research, we asked participants to consider power relations by asking whether they thought decision-making power was centralised or decentralised within their collaborative spaces.¹⁶ As non-decision-making forums, StreetCare, Family is Culture and the NDIS Systemic Advocacy working groups might be expected to feel more decentralised, whereas the campaigning nature of Raise the Age, i.e. aiming towards a particular policy outcome, might be more centralised.

Power imbalances can form around different forms of expertise, different levels of resourcing, as well as within the personalities of different individuals. All these need to be managed.

“It is extremely important because it is very, very difficult when you are an organisation that spends all of your time advocating for systems change towards like, in one direction, to then have to turn around to the people you’re supposed to be partnering with and advocate internally as well.”

– JEC collaboration partner

¹⁵ Land, C. (2015). Introduction. In *Decolonizing solidarity: Dilemmas and Directions for Supporters of Indigenous Struggles* (pp. 1–37). Zed Press.

¹⁶ Riboldi (2024a). *The Loci of Power and Connection*.

The JEC hosts the online and majority of offline gatherings of the collaborations examined, implying a potential level of control. However, this is balanced through the service of the JEC hosting the groups themselves, along with the more relational aspects of the groups. The importance of space is particularly true of the StreetCare group, which meets regularly in person at the JEC office. Participants expressed a sense of ownership over the space that they met in, feeling that it was distinct from the JEC, which to these StreetCare advocates existed in a different part of the building.

“...you never get the feeling that JEC is driving its own kind of agenda through the meetings or kind of trying to push us into a certain direction... I don't have any other partnerships that operate this way.”

– JEC collaboration partner

Interestingly, the JEC team members working on StreetCare exercise power through a ‘gatekeeper’ or vetting function, occasionally rejecting approaches from researchers or policy makers to consult with the group. This occurs when JEC team members perceive that the approach comes from an extractive place and does not sufficiently respect the lives and interests of the StreetCare advocates. This function can also apply to admitting new members into the JEC’s collaborative spaces, or on rare occasions asking members to leave. The rare instances of this we heard about appeared to involve a large amount of discussion and attempts to find consensus across the JEC team and collaboration partners, a sign of decentralised decision-making.

“...it's being very deliberate in putting the power to the side, and leaning into the dialogue, but also amplifying where informal power is not being respected in that room.”

– JEC collaboration partner

As noted above, the desired outcome of a collaboration may impact the degree of centralisation and the corresponding perception of control or leadership. The FICAWG, for example, is a space collecting those interested in broad improvements to a complex system, within which the JEC’s ‘leadership’ role appears clearly understood. As one participant noted, “JEC provides the secretariat, and the coordination, but they don’t set the agenda.” In the NDIS Systemic Advocacy Working Group, the dedicated lived experience Chair role also helps diffuse perceptions of power over the group the JEC might hold via its network coordination role.

“Expertise is offered as a gift rather than something that is exercised. It's there to be used and deployed in the way that is seen to be fit for purpose.”

– JEC team member

Questions of institutional and individual identity can help shape and manage power within collaborations. For the FICAWG and Raise the Age Campaign, the fact that the JEC are not an Indigenous organisation, and that the JEC team members dedicated to the collaboration are non-Indigenous, likely helps with positionality from a power relations point of view. Compared to organisations like the ALS and AbSec – Aboriginal-controlled organisations directly representing and supporting First Nations peoples – the JEC simply does not have the cultural authority to make claims or decisions on behalf or ahead of those organisations. This requires a principled commitment from the organisation and JEC team members themselves to respect that authority, and the general right of First Nations peoples to self-determination. Once that commitment is made, power relations around decision-making likely become relatively straight forward.

At the same time, JEC team members may need to carefully navigate conflict or differences of perspective between Aboriginal-controlled organisations. This requires attention to their role as facilitators, as well as the principle of independence.

“And I guess it's not about giving them power, but recognising the power that those voices already have, and amplifying it through the tools that they have at their disposal.”

– JEC collaboration partner

Enabling Action

One of the challenges that can emerge when working in groups, particularly with decentralised or collaborative structures, can be moving people from coordination to collective action. The relational aims and successes of collaboration, such as ‘moving at the speed of trust’ and taking the time to build consensus, can operate in tension with the need to be decisive and take advantage of windows of opportunities when they open.

Social movement literature distinguishes between *organising* and *mobilising* as activities and even phases of a strategic campaign,¹⁷ with organising seen as a relational activity that attempts to *build* power, whereas mobilising is a more transactional activity which seeks to send power and resources in a particular direction. Rather than being antithetical to each other, the prevailing view is that both kinds of activity are required to achieve impact.

Thus, while the purpose of many of the JEC's collaborative spaces appears relational, there is also a desire from participants to move towards action with impact.

¹⁷ Han, H. (2014). *How organizations develop activists: Civic associations and leadership in the 21st century*. Oxford University Press.

“The group does its advocacy jointly, but also each individual organisation is doing their individual advocacy work in their respective spheres. In the collaboration, people come together, test ideas, test strategies, raise barriers, and as a group we sort of work through that. And often the role JEC is playing is sort of suggesting creative ways to develop strategies for the advocacy.”

– JEC team member

Three of the four JEC strategic partnerships discussed in this report align more with the underlying principles of organising – building relationships and power around collective interests – with the Family is Culture and NDIS Systemic Advocacy groups most closely resembling a quintessential *collaboration engine*. Group members engage in joint activities, but these are not the main purpose of the JEC holding the spaces and collective action is not what participants perceive as their primary value.

For StreetCare, collective action results from factors outside the group, with policy makers desiring access to the expertise of the StreetCare advocates. In all three instances, collective action is on an opt-in basis. There is no obligation for the partners to engage in or endorse any collective advocacy to stay part of the collaboration. JEC team members offer suggestions, make strategic recommendations and support their partners’ decisions. Collaboration engines enable collective action without committing people to it.

“I mean, they [JEC] are active participants, they're very good strategically. They're very good at facilitating spaces for us to share ideas and kind of pulling together the threads of those ideas. They're very good at kind of being very proactive.”

– JEC collaboration partner

The Raise the Age group is distinctly a collective advocacy project. While campaign coordinator Emily Mayo brings political organising skills to how the campaign is run and built, its primary purpose is to build power in coalition and mobilise collective action towards a particular policy reform: shifting the legislated age of criminal responsibility as part of reforming the NSW Government’s approach to youth justice.

A commitment to action towards this goal is a condition of coalition entry, albeit strategic considerations might necessitate different partners taking more or less prominent roles in different campaign activities. The campaign’s various stakeholders, including funders and affected communities, have an expectation of action. Regular events such as elections, budget cycles and changes in political decision-makers impact strategic direction.



Leaders from Raise the Age NSW partner organisations participate in a collaborative campaign video

Making swift decisions to take advantage of windows of opportunity has risks for coalition stability. There is an inevitable tension with the more typical consensus-based decision-making that supports collaboration and recognises the differing capacities of campaign members to respond. In practice, this can mean that political opportunities are ‘missed’ or allowed to pass because the group cannot move quickly enough; and/or that relationships are strained if decisions are felt to have been rushed.

“I think the way that JEC explains the legal terms in a really digestible format, so that we can actually progress our advocacy work, I think that's really useful. When I was thinking about this and preparing for this today, I was thinking, what kind of works in terms of this collaboration? And I think that it's that JEC are the brains to our brawn! And together we can make a formidable force.”

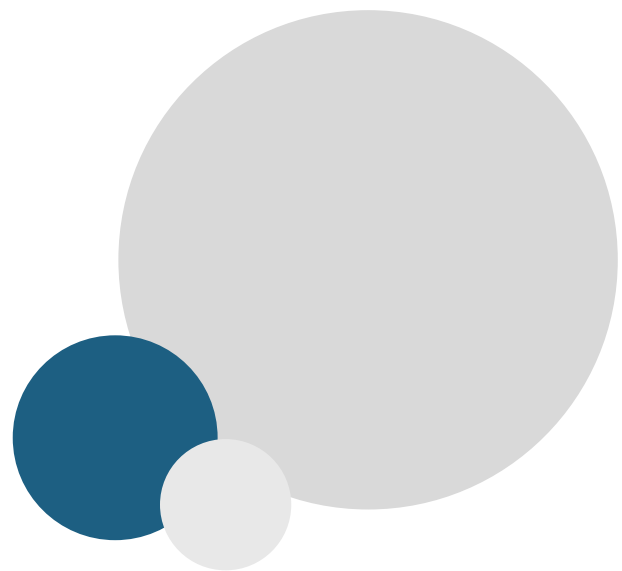
– JEC collaboration partner

Raise the Age has a steering group that is a subset of the wider campaign, which Mayo coordinates, yet our interviews suggest that the high amount of trust participants have in Mayo’s abilities can also lead to a lack of engagement around campaign strategy. These challenges need to be actively managed.

Communication is clearly a determining factor when it comes to the success of collaborations themselves, any resulting actions, and resolving inevitable tensions that need to be addressed. This tends towards the relational side of communication where JEC team members can become conduits for frustration that collaboration partners might feel towards other people in the collaboration, or the JEC itself.

Tension rose in the Family is Culture group, for example, when the leadership of one organisation took a particular action without informing the other organisation. The people in the FICAWG weren't those involved in the decision-making however they were affected by the actions. As holders of the space JEC team members need to resolve or otherwise absorb these tensions as they arise in order to ensure the collaboration's longevity.

Similar dynamics exist within the Raise the Age Campaign. Conversely, across all of the JEC's collaborative spaces, relationships now exist between organisations which did not previously, creating various opportunities and connections for collective activities such as systemic advocacy.



Reflection

This project had a variety of aims. JEC leadership wanted to explore some of their collaborative practice, with a view to articulating to key stakeholders, including potential funders and the broader JEC team, the value they saw in their focus on partnerships and alliances. While some research aims to produce generalisable findings across a wider sector or population, our aim was to look for what was common across four of the JEC's key collaborations.

Starting out, we thought we might find a model or framework for how the JEC approaches collaboration. Instead, we found a series of principles. Just as these principles appear to underpin how JEC team members approach their role holding and facilitating collaborative spaces, they can also serve to start conversations with team members, funders and potential collaborators around starting new projects or reviewing existing endeavours.

What value then might this work have beyond the JEC?

The final line of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*,¹⁸ the culmination of a series of dialogues amongst Australia's First Nations peoples across 2016-17, is "We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future." This invitation is a call-to-action for established civil society organisations, such as the JEC, to reexamine how they approach their commitment to social justice. It asks them to consider their relationship with the people and communities who feel the brunt of the systemic harms the JEC says they are committed to addressing. It prefigures movements as partnerships, as a series of dialogues where different groups commit different expertise and resources towards common goals.

We can find commonalities between the experiences of other communities in Australia. For example, the phrase 'nothing about us without us' is increasingly synonymous with policy development relating to the rights of people with disability and First Nations communities. The activism of these communities for their voices to be heard is part invitation, part wake-up call, a quintessentially collective demand for the recalibration of systems of power.

If we want our c-words to be meaningful – words like *collaboration*, *co-design*, *community-led*, even *consultation* – our organisations and institutions need to reimagine how their power and resources can be better directed towards the interests of those who have been traditionally shut out of rooms where decisions are made.

The JEC approach to their key collaborations, as discussed in this report, models a potential response to this challenge, which other organisations may find useful in reflecting on their own approach. Built around a series of decentring principles, and practicing a kind of service-leadership, the JEC commits its resources towards supporting the goals and aspirations of the communities they are working with.

¹⁸ <https://ulurustatement.org/>

Appendix: Methodology note

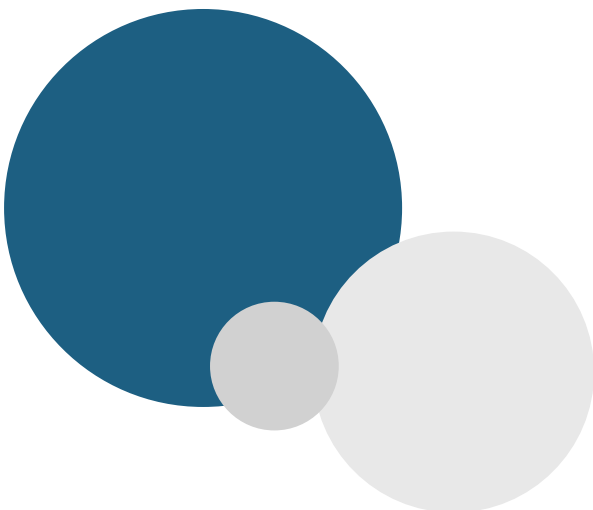
Consistent with principles around participant action research, the driving force for this research has been to support the aspirations of the Justice and Equity Centre. Generating broader knowledge and insights (and potentially peer reviewed journal articles) is an added extra.

Early in the project we developed a Memorandum of Understanding between the JEC and UTS and agreed on a series of principles to guide the collaboration.

The core data for the project came from 20 semi-structured interviews with various JEC team members, JEC funders and JEC collaboration partners, nestled within a UTS Human Research Ethics Committee approved project: Participative Collaboration – learning from how the Justice and Equity Centre holds spaces and coordinate networks (ETH25-10805).

Our approach to these interviews was informed by a literature review and analysis of key JEC documents, a survey of key JEC team members followed by group discussion workshops, as well as observation and participation in JEC events, such as their 2025 strategic planning day. Similarly, the analysis has been informed through participation in various JEC discussions and strategy sessions, as well as presenting interim findings at conferences hosted by the Centre for Deliberative Democracy at the University of Canberra, the International Society of Third Sector Researchers at the University of Lisbon, and running a civil society-facing workshop with the University College London Policy Lab in the UK.

This report represents a landmark moment in an ongoing, evolving and reciprocal relationship between the researchers and JEC team members.





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