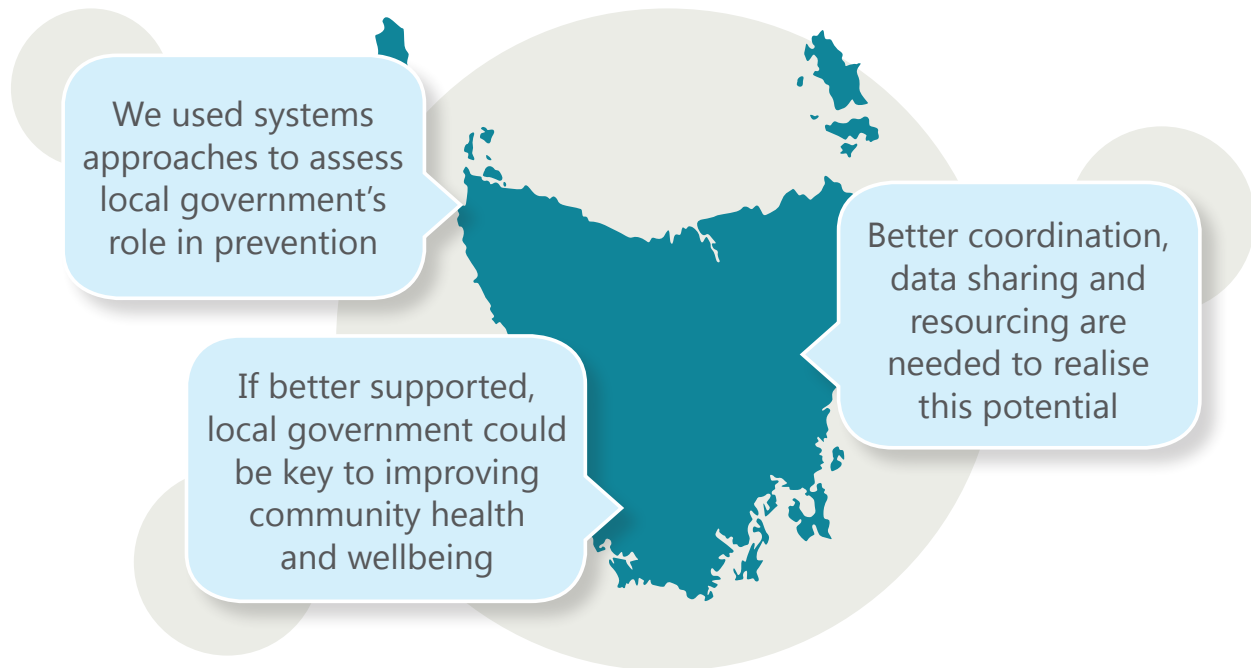




# Using systems thinking to drive community changes for better health



## Key messages

- Tasmanians fare worse than Australian mainland residents across numerous health characteristics, including having a higher prevalence of selected chronic health conditions.
- Local government's roles have evolved from 'roads, rates, and rubbish' to a broader focus on supporting communities to be healthy, safe, inclusive, and socially connected.
- Local government has the potential to do more to improve health and wellbeing outcomes in Tasmania, and the greatest gains could be made by addressing spatial inequalities faced by the sector – that is, the differences in health and wellbeing outcomes or other social and economic indicators between different geographic areas.
- A shared system goal of *equitable wellbeing*, supported by improved access to data and shared indicators to inform decision making are key to reduce inequalities.
- This research highlights the importance of understanding context-specific factors that impact local government's roles in community health and wellbeing and demonstrates how systems thinking methodologies can help uncover these factors at macro and micro scales.

**The project:** A systems perspective on place-based approaches to community health and wellbeing.

**Project lead:** Dr Michelle Morgan

**Project start:** October 2019 **Project end:** March 2024

## Why is this issue important?

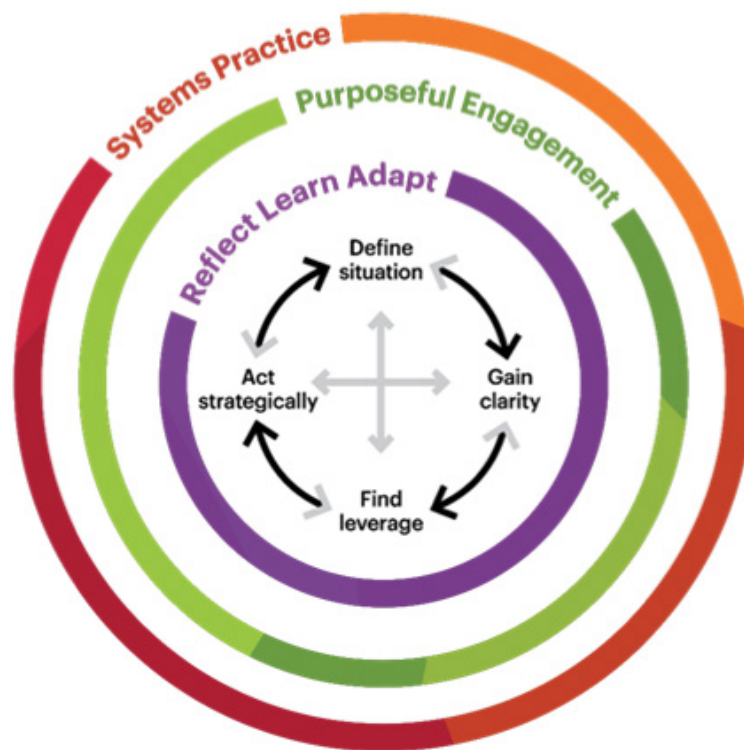
Local governments are crucial in facilitating and driving preventive health decisions and measures to support communities in their jurisdictions. The health and wellbeing of their communities is increasingly identified as a key area of focus for local government bodies. Yet, in the Australian state of Tasmania, the sector's role in that regard has been unclear.

Policies and plans to improve health and wellbeing often use traditional approaches that are linear and address the obvious symptoms of complex situations. However well-intended, these approaches often don't work – or make things worse – because they fail to understand the connected, interrelated and underlying causes of the situation.

Systems thinking is an approach that helps us see the big picture of a situation, such as chronic disease, and its underlying causes to more effectively intervene. It offers tools and practices that help engage with the complexity and shift the system to a more desirable state.

Guided by the [Systems Change Framework](#), this PhD project was designed to demonstrate how systems thinking provides a useful theoretical framework, perspective, methods, and tools that can be used in diverse and integrative ways to better understand and intervene in complex situations.

### System Change Framework



Source: The Framework was developed in partnership by The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre and the Tasmania Department of Health, June 2018.

## What did we do?

Two approaches based on systems thinking were used to address this question. These were guided by systems complexity theories and methods, responded to gaps in both systematic and thematic literature reviews, and also informed by the researcher's senior health policy role in the Tasmanian Government public service. First, to determine key forces and patterns that affect place-based approaches to community health and wellbeing in Tasmania and gauge where opportunities for better outcomes might exist, two methods of data collection were used with local government personnel in Tasmania: an online survey that encompassed questions to enable social network analysis with 135 respondents and semi-structured interviews with 10 survey respondents. Second, to consider how a place-based systems approach might be implemented to address context-specific factors that affect health and wellbeing outcomes in practice, a participatory systemic inquiry of mixed systems methods was tested with 19 stakeholders in the West Coast local government area in Tasmania.

## What we found

With responses from 28 of Tasmania's 29 local governments, the resounding collective view was that preventive health is prioritised. However, participants called for more diverse sources of funding, more collaboration, a mandate for community health and wellbeing in state legislation, and greater collective effort to build systems thinking capacity.

There was a sense among participants that council roles had evolved from 'roads, rates, and rubbish' to a greater focus on supporting communities to be healthy, safe, inclusive, and socially connected. Participants reported wanting better access to local level health and wellbeing data including socioeconomic indicators, as well as analysis and interpretation to help councils and communities gain a deeper understanding of their local contexts, monitor trends and patterns across municipalities, and make more informed decisions.

Workshop participants also offered broad support for the systems approach tested and considered it effective for increasing systems thinking capacity, collaboratively revealing systemic issues, and identifying opportunities to address those issues. However, participants identified they would need a lot of support for the systems approach to be feasible in practice, such as having access to an appropriately skilled facilitator, and capacity and relationship building opportunities.

## Why does it matter?

These findings indicate a readiness from the local government sector to be a key player in responding to the place-based health needs of their communities. If sufficiently supported, local government could be the game changers in curbing the prevalence of chronic disease in our communities.

Recommendations from the project to strengthen the preventive health system and to advance local government roles in approaches to community health and wellbeing included:

- Improved intersectoral coordination, leadership and governance
- Improved access to community-level research and data
- Funding models that meet the context-specific needs of local governments
- Development of a statewide wellbeing framework.

## What did we produce?

### Publications

The following publications were produced as part of this PhD project. For a complete list of resources produced as a result of this ongoing research, visit the project page on our website, [Using systems thinking to drive community changes for better health](#).

- Morgan MJ, Stratford E, Rowbotham S, Harpur S. How can local government be better supported to collaborate for community health and wellbeing? *Australian Journal of Public Administration*. 2024. In press.
- Morgan MJ, Stratford E, Rowbotham S, Harpur S. [Local government's roles in community health and wellbeing in Australia: Insights from Tasmania](#). *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*. 2023. doi.org/10.1002/hpja.831
- Morgan MJ, Stratford E, Harpur S, Rowbotham S, Chamberlain D. [Inter-municipal cooperation and local government perspectives on community health and wellbeing](#). *Australian Journal of Public Administration*. 2023. 00, 1–21. doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12597
- Morgan MJ, Stratford E, Harpur S, Rowbotham S. [A systems thinking approach for community health and wellbeing](#). *Systemic Practice and Action Research*. 2023. doi.org/10.1007/s11213-023-09644-0
- Morgan, MJ. [COVID-19: A systems perspective on opportunities for better health outcomes](#). *Geographical Research*. 2022. 60(4), 637–650. doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12561



The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre  
Systems and solutions for better health

The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre



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### Our funding partners



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