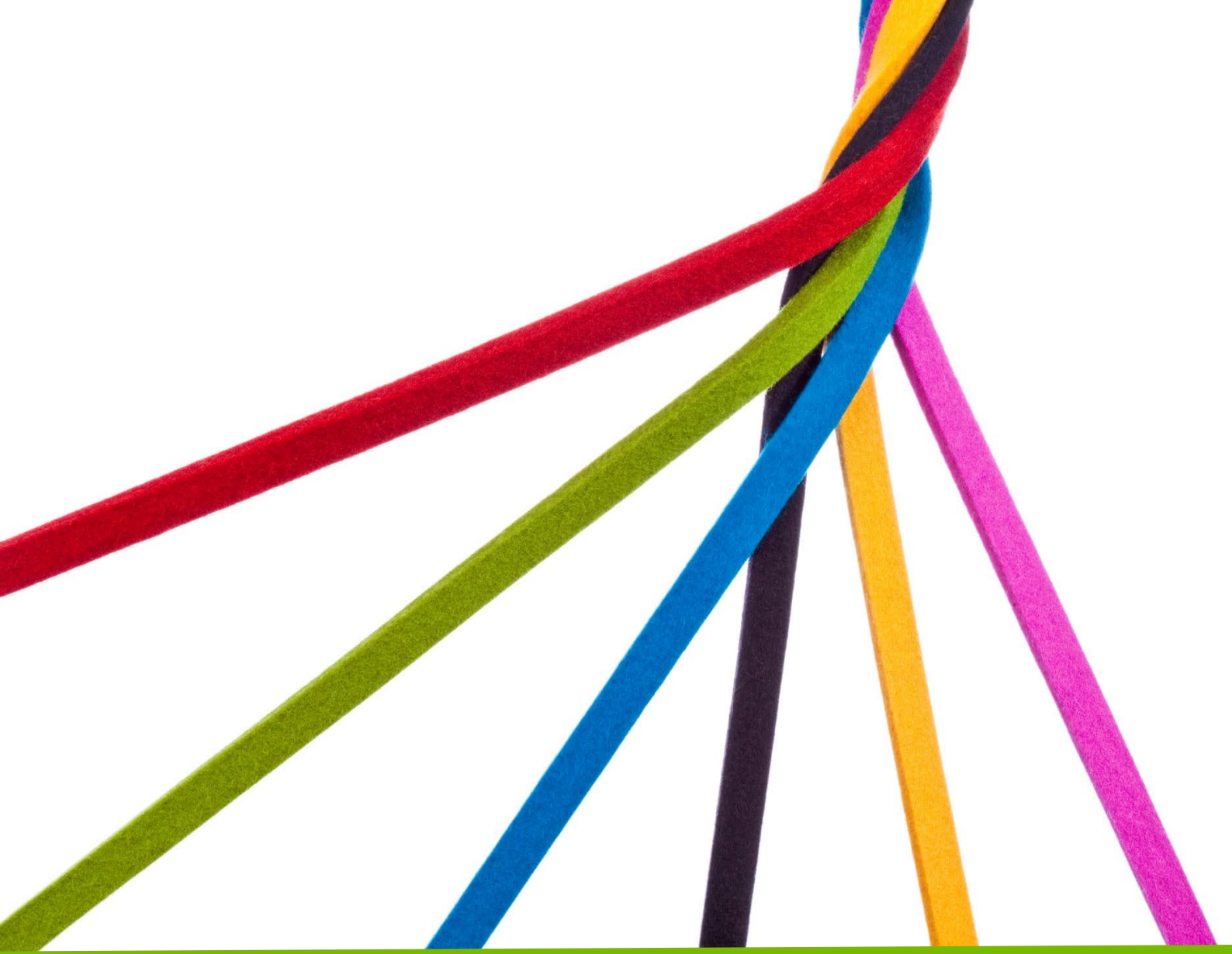


# Strong Foundations Funding Stream Evaluation

ALLEN + CLARKE CONSULTING

*19 December 2025*




**Acknowledgements**

Allen + Clarke Consulting would like to thank all the stakeholders who contributed to Data Generation Cycle 1. We recognise the significant demands on their time and we appreciate the deep contributions that they have made to this evaluation.

**Disclaimer**

All due care and responsibility have been taken in the preparation of this report. This report (including any enclosures and attachments) has been prepared for the exclusive use and benefit of the addressee(s) and solely for the purposes for which it is provided. *Allen + Clarke* accepts no liability or responsibility if this report is used for an alternative purpose from which it is intended, or by any third party. The information contained in this report is confidential and commercially sensitive.

**Use of quotations**

Quotations used in this report have been deidentified. They have not been validated with the relevant stakeholders.

# Contents

**Executive summary** ..... **4**

**1.0 Introduction** ..... **6**
1.1 The Strong Foundations Grant ..... 6
1.2 Background to the evaluation ..... 6

**2.0 Methodology** ..... **7**
2.1 Overview of the approach ..... 7
2.2 Key evaluation questions ..... 8
2.3 Theory of Change + Program Logic ..... 9
2.4 Data sources to inform this report ..... 11
2.5 Limitations ..... 13

**3.0 Implementation** ..... **14**
3.1 Activity delivery ..... 14
3.2 Adaptations ..... 17

**4.0 Effectiveness + efficiency** ..... **19**
4.1 Organisational strength ..... 19
4.2 Impact of the trust-based funding model on organisational strength ..... 46
4.3 Access to justice ..... 58

**5.0 Opportunities** ..... **61**

**Appendix A: Glossary** ..... **62**

**Appendix B: Snapshot of grantees' intended outcomes** ..... **63**

# Executive summary

Access to justice in Victoria is bolstered by the significant work of 51 community legal centres (CLCs) who in 2024/25 alone provided more than 170,000 services to at least 75,000 Victorians. On average, this amounts to the provision of over 260 services per day to people experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. Of the clients serviced by CLCs in 2024/25, over 13% were children or young people, 40% were experiencing or at risk of family violence, over 4% identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and nearly 18% were experiencing or at risk of homelessness.[1] CLCs address a significant need for a large number of Victorians who would otherwise not be able to access legal assistance.

For many years, the Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner (VLSB+C) has supported and nurtured the growth of CLCs, recognising their deep impact and the role that they play in improving access to justice. Building on this longstanding relationship with CLCs, in 2024 the VLSB+C launched its Strong Foundations Grant Program. This novel approach to funding pilots a trust-based model which enables grantees to allocate their funding to align with their strategic organisational goals. This funding contrasts with traditional project-based funding. It seeks to strengthen the capacity and capability of CLCs through the provision of greater stability and certainty.

The first cohort of eight grant recipients received funding in 2024, with the second cohort of five recipients receiving funding in 2025. *Allen + Clarke* has been engaged to evaluate the Strong Foundations Grant Program. Following a co-design process to develop a monitoring and evaluation framework with Cohort 1 and 2 grant recipients (grantees), this report considers preliminary impacts of the Strong Foundation Grants on grantees 18 months after the program's inception. A 3-year Evaluation Report assessing the impact of the Strong Foundations Grants will be delivered in August 2027.

Overall, the evaluation has found that grantees are growing stronger as a direct result of the Strong Foundations Grant (also referred to as 'the Grant' and used interchangeably). In the context of a constrained funding landscape, the flexibility of the funding has been deeply appreciated by grantees. A strong theme amongst grantees was that the funding enabled them to progress towards realising the strategic objectives of their organisation. The financial resilience afforded by the grants has also enabled grantees to use the funding as a catalyst to secure additional funding and to expand their existing services. Grantees were also enabled, in varying degrees, to: expand their workforces, thereby supporting succession planning, improve culture and promote enhanced service delivery; strengthen internal systems including through the use of data to inform decision-making and build an evidence base to promote the impact of the work that they do; and increase advocacy capacity and expand partnerships, collaborations and networks.

The following recommendations are intended for the VLSB+C to further enhance and promote the impact of the Strong Foundations Grant Program.

[1] Federation of Community Legal Centres, Annual Report, 2024-2025. https://www.fclc.org.au/annual_reports.

**Recommendation 1: Continue delivering the Strong Foundations Grant Program**

Evidence indicates that the Strong Foundations Grant Program is achieving its objectives and that the trust-based model is strengthening organisations and systems. This evaluation recommends its continued delivery.

**Recommendation 2: Take steps to support the sustainability of impacts for grantees and the sector**

This should include:

(a) Considering extending the grant period beyond 5 years, and/or considering whether grantees should be eligible to re-apply for consecutive Strong Foundations Grants

(b) Advocating for the merit of trust-based funding to support sustainability and ongoing grant funding of this nature.

**Recommendation 3: Consider embedding more opportunities for collaboration and capability building both amongst grantees and with the wider sector**

Several grantees have built significant capability as a result of the Strong Foundations Grant. Opportunities should be explored to share the knowledge gained from this funding both with other grantees and with the community legal sector more broadly, to support capability building. Opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, and mentoring should also be considered.

# 1.0 Introduction

## 1.1 The Strong Foundations Grant

Established in 2007, the Victorian Legal Services Board & Commissioner (VLSB+C) initiated the Grants Program to distribute funds aimed at enhancing access to justice, legal services, and legal education. The program facilitates various projects within Victoria's legal sector.

The Grants Program plays a pivotal role in fostering innovation and improving access to justice in Victoria. The Strong Foundations Grants, launched in 2024 are a component of the revised Grants Program Strategy, and aim to provide grantees with stability and flexibility to maximise their strategic impact. The funding stream operates on a trust-based funding model which enables grantees to allocate their funding to a broad range of activities, rather than program or project specific funding. This contrasts with other grants delivered by the VLSB+C and other funders, which are often required to be associated with a specific, isolated project or activity. The funding model enables grantees to focus on their strategic objectives and strengthen their capacity and capability to achieve their goals. As of December 2025, 13 organisations have received funding (grantees).

## 1.2 Background to the evaluation

*Allen + Clarke* has been engaged by the VLSB+C to evaluate the Strong Foundations Grants.

The evaluation aims are:

1. to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the Strong Foundations Grants funding model,
2. to assess the impact of the Strong Foundations Grants on grantees, and
3. to identify opportunities for improvement.

### 1.2.1 Scope of this report

This evaluation report details emerging insights into the impact of the Strong Foundations Grant, 18 months after its inception. This report focuses on emerging findings on the short-term impacts of the funding, enablers and barriers, and recommendations to improve ongoing implementation. A 3-year Evaluation Report assessing the impact of the Strong Foundations Grant, and the trust-based funding model, will be delivered in August 2027.

# 2.0 Methodology

## 2.1 Overview of the approach

The overarching methodology of the evaluation utilises a practical participatory approach, based on co-design, with a sequential mixed methods design, and a focus on qualitative data (see **Figure 1**). At the outset of the evaluation, the VLSB+C, Cohort 1 grantees, and *Allen + Clarke* co-designed the key evaluation questions (KEQs) (see **section 2.2**), the Program Logic and Theory of Change (ToC) (see **section 2.3**) and the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework.

To answer the KEQs, and to inform this report, *Allen + Clarke* collected data from a variety of sources (see **section 2.4**). The evaluation draws from both qualitative and quantitative data to support triangulation of findings.

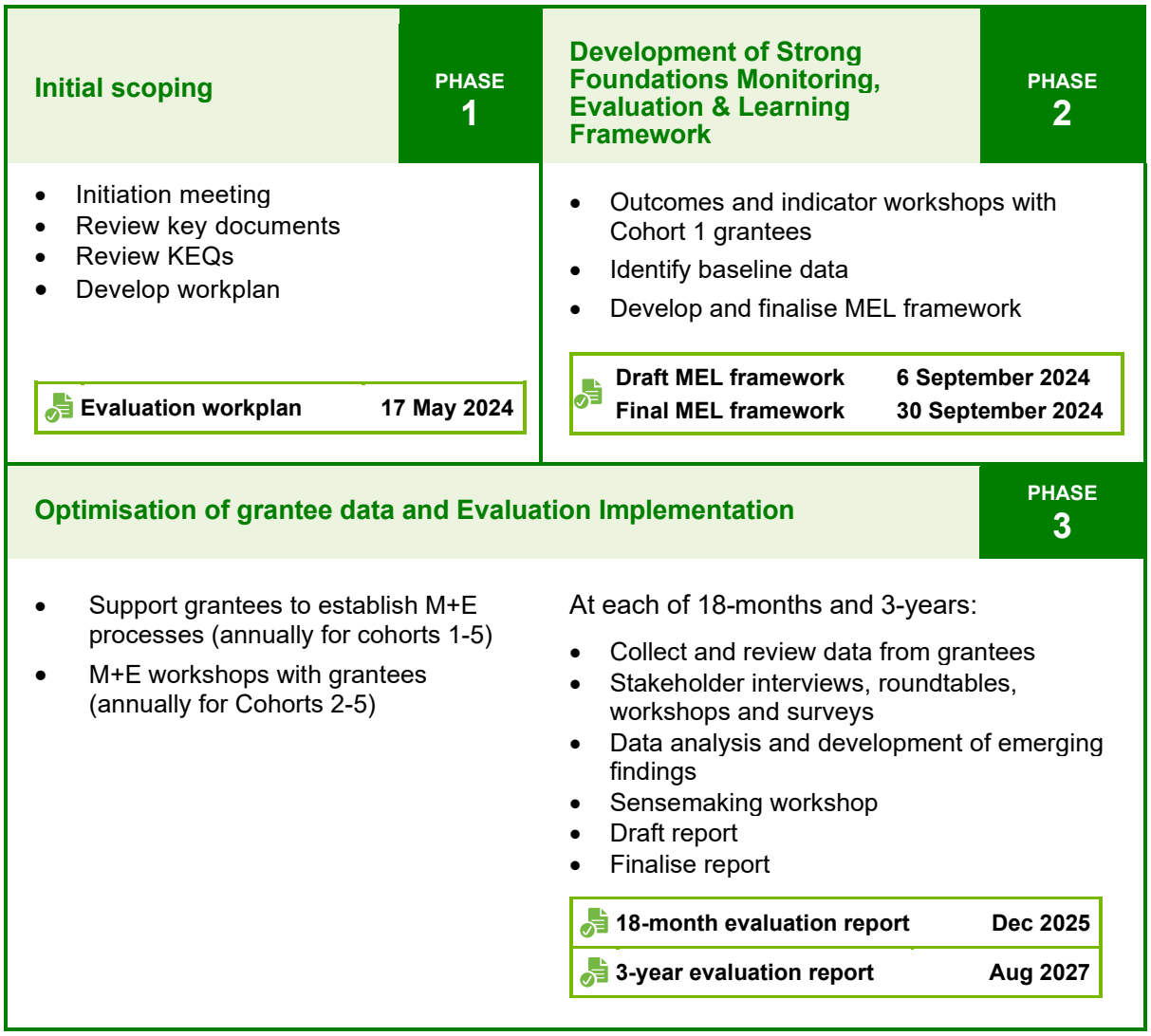



**Figure 1: Overarching evaluation methodology**

## 2.2 Key evaluation questions

This report addresses the following Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs).

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Implementation** | KEQ 1: | **To what extent have organisations' activities been delivered as intended or adapted as needed?** |
| **Effectiveness + Efficiency** | KEQ 2: | **To what extent have organisations become stronger in the following areas as a result of the Strong Foundations Grant[2]:**<br>• **Leadership**<br>• **Financial resilience**<br>• **Service capacity**<br>• **Efficiency**<br>• **Workforce stability**<br>• **Learning capability**<br>• **Advocacy capacity**<br>• **Strategy** |
| | KEQ 3: | **To what extent are outcomes under KEQ 2 attributable to the trust-based funding model?** |
| | KEQ 4: | **To what extent have outcomes under KEQ 2 contributed to improved access to justice?** |
| **Learning** | KEQ 5: | **What factors, if any, have hindered or enabled the success of the Strong Foundations funding model in achieving its stated goals and objectives**?<br>This KEQ is focused primarily on understanding factors which influenced the impact of the trust-based funding model and Strong Foundation Grant more broadly, rather than the factors influencing the goals and objectives of individual grantees |
| | KEQ 6: | **What factors, if any, have hindered or enabled the success of the organisations in achieving their strategic objectives and intended outcomes?**<br>This KEQ is focused primarily on the factors which influenced the impact on the individual organisations' strategic objectives and outcomes, as aligned to their work, rather than the factors influencing the objectives and outcomes of the overarching funding model. |
| | KEQ 7: | **What are the opportunities to improve the funding model (or grant program)?**<br>This KEQ is focused on generating insights to create recommendations and embed learnings based on the findings attributable to the grant and trust-based funding. |

**Table 1: KEQs**

[2] Note that the domains outlined in KEQ2 were only considered if applicable to the grantee.

# 2.3 Theory of Change + Program Logic

## 2.3.1 Theory of Change

The below Theory of Change was developed in collaboration with the first cohort of grantees and the VLSB+C to articulate the intended change resulting from the grants. This evaluation tests the extent to which the grant funding is working towards achieving this change.

**If** the VLSB+C provide organisations with trust-based funding that provides the space, agility and opportunity to enhance their capacity, capability, and strategic effectiveness, **then** they will become stronger and more effective, **thereby** contributing to improved access to justice for all Victorians.



**Figure 2: Theory of Change**

## 2.3.2 Program Logic

Two workshops have been held with the first cohort of grantees. During these workshops, each grantee developed an individual Program Logic. These Program Logics were used to develop an overarching Program Logic (see **Figure 3** below). The overarching Program Logic encapsulates the grant program as a whole and each grantee will not be expected to achieve the same outputs and outcomes. This aligns with the overall approach of the grant funding round to centre on trust-based funding and outcomes.

| SITUATION | GOALS | | OBJECTIVES | INPUTS | ACTIVITIES | OUTPUTS | SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES | MID-TERM OUTCOMES | IMPACTS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| There is increased legal need but an unequal distribution of access to justice across Victoria.<br>Community does not have sufficient capability to address or prevent legal problems.<br>The current funding paradigm undermines the effectiveness of organisations working to improve access to justice in Victoria. They are dependent upon a patchwork of insufficient, short-term funding which causes cycles of precarity and limits stability. Most funding is tied to very specific outputs, which limits flexibility to enhance capacity, capability, and strategic effectiveness.<br>This leads to:<br>1. Difficulty for organisations in achieving their objectives.<br>2. A lack of accessible legal services.<br>3. Reduced provision of holistic and diversionary responses.<br>4. Missed opportunities to create fairer laws and processes.<br>The **Strong Foundations Funding Stream** aims to address these issues by providing organisations with trust-based funding to enhance their:<br>**1. leadership,**<br>**2. financial resilience,**<br>**3. service capacity,**<br>**4. efficiency,**<br>**5. workforce stability,**<br>**6. learning capability,**<br>**7. advocacy capacity, and**<br>**8. strategy.** | **Leadership** | Organisations will have effective governance and leadership. | To Increase executive capacity to focus on effective governance and strategic leadership activities | Executive time and expertise | Strategic planning and engagement | • Strategic Plan<br>• Progress reports | Executives and leadership had improved capacity to work on strategic planning and organisational core activities. | Organisations gained effective governance and leadership | Funded organisations became more effective at achieving their strategic objectives and enhancing services.<br>This resulted in:<br>• An increase in accessible legal services:<br>• More people experiencing disadvantage accessing legal support when needed.<br>• Increased provision of holistic and diversionary responses<br>• Fairer laws and processes |
| | **Financial resilience** | Organisations will be financially resilient. | • To provide stable flexible funding for organisations to invest strategically.<br>• To increase organisations' ability to attract/diversify funding sources. | VLSB+C grant funding | • Apply for funding<br>• Direct grant funding towards strategic initiatives<br>• Identify new funding opportunities<br>• Build/strengthen funder relationships | • Grant Applications<br>• Application results<br>• Funding strategy | • Organisations were able to invest strategically in capacity to deliver services.<br>• Organisations had attracted/diversified funding sources | Organisations became more financially resilient. | |
| | **Service capacity & quality** | Organisations will have expanded service capacity and/or improved service quality. | Organisations will have the ability to trial and implement strategic initiatives to expand service capacity and / or enhance service quality. | • Staff<br>• Lived experience advocates<br>• Partner organisations<br>• Offices | • Recruitment<br>• Align service planning with strategic objectives<br>• Community engagement<br>• Implement new or improved services<br>• Create well designed resources for clients<br>• Provide legal service<br>• Trial holistic &/or early intervention models | • MOUs<br>• Referral pathways<br>• Program plans<br>• Leases | • Enhanced service quality<br>• New or improved initiatives<br>• Expanded service delivery<br>• Organisations had greater reach to serve more people who need it most | Organisations gained expanded service capacity and / or enhanced service quality. | |
| | **Efficiency** | Organisations will be more efficient. | Organisations will have the ability to enhance internal processes and systems to create efficiencies for staff and clients. | • Staff<br>• Designers<br>• IT specialists<br>• Partner organisations | • Develop project plans<br>• Design systems<br>• Conduct consultations<br>• Develop or improve referral pathways &/or triage processes<br>• Integrated approach | • New website<br>• New phone service<br>• New referral pathways<br>• New triage/processes<br>• Digital tools | • Organisations provided more efficient, targeted services to more people who need it most in a timely way<br>• Efficiencies freed staff to work on organisational priorities. | Organisations became more efficient. | |
| | **Workforce stability** | Organisations will have an enhanced and stable workforce. | Organisations will have increased capacity to invest in new roles, processes and development/support for personnel, and the ability to retain quality staff. | • Staff<br>• Recruitment processes | • Recruit staff/volunteer<br>• Provide training<br>• Conduct consultations<br>• Write policies<br>• Improve processes | • Training materials and participation outputs.<br>• Policies developed.<br>• People and Culture framework developed / refined. | • Organisations had greater staff retention<br>• Improved organisational culture<br>• Fewer OHS issues<br>• Increased staff wellbeing | Organisations gained an enhanced and stable workforce. | |
| | **Learning capability** | Organisations will have improved data and learning capability. | Organisations will have improved capacity to collect and utilise data to learn from and demonstrate effectiveness. | • Staff<br>• Consultants | • Review and refresh existing MEL framework<br>• Optimise data collection processes<br>• Upskill staff<br>• Share learnings regularly | • MEL framework<br>• Staff training materials | • MEL understood to be everyone's work.<br>• Organisations used relevant data/learnings to track progress and inform decision making, building an evidence base of what works | Organisations gained improved learning and evaluation capability. | |
| | **Advocacy capacity** | Organisations will have strengthened advocacy capacity. | Organisations will have the ability to invest time & resources in strategic advocacy. | • Staff expertise<br>• Service data<br>• People with lived experience | • Conduct research<br>• Conduct consultations and workshops<br>• Engage with media<br>• Publish reports/articles<br>• Conduct meetings<br>• Deliver social media campaigns | • Advocacy Strategy<br>• Communications Plan<br>• Briefings<br>• Reports<br>• Digital materials<br>• Media releases/articles | • Organisations gaining authoritative voice and influence government/sector policy and practice.<br>• Staff increasingly called on by decision makers for advice/input | Organisations gained strengthened advocacy capability. | |
| | **Strategy** | Organisations will be effective and achieve their strategic objectives | Organisations will have improved ability to achieve their strategic objectives. | • Executive leadership<br>• Staff | • Develop / refine strategic plan<br>• Align internal communications with organisational strategy<br>• Report on monitoring of progress towards strategic objectives<br>• Design and implement program/service plans in line with strategic objectives | • Internal engagement with strategic plans<br>• Structured internal monitoring & reporting on progress towards strategic objectives | Organisations made progress towards or realised one or more of their strategic objectives. | Organisations became more effective and made progress towards / achieved their strategic goals | |

**Assumptions**
Personnel are recruited to lead and undertake the work | Ongoing and increased legal demand | Stable core funding

**External Factors**
Cost of living pressures | Capacity to recruit | Changes to legislation/change in government | Connection and collaboration with wider service sector
Climate disasters or pandemics | Significant funding changes/destabilisation

**Figure 3: Strong Foundations Grant Program Logic**

## 2.4 Data sources to inform this report

A range of primary and secondary data were collected between May 2024 – October 2025 to inform this report. Data were collected from grantees, the VLSB+C, and grantee champions via data collection tools, grantee applications and progress reports, interviews, and workshops.

**Figure 4** below describes these data sources.

| Data sources informing 18-month report | |
|---|---|
|  | **Grantee applications + progress reports**<br>Reviewed **13 grantee applications** across Cohort 1 + 2 grantees, and **8 progress reports** for Cohort 1 grantees. |
|  | **Baseline + follow up data collection tools**<br>Baseline + follow up survey for Cohort 1 grantees (**n=7**). This tool was tailored to each grantee to capture data relevant to their key activities as they related to the evaluation KEQs. CEOs were asked to complete this tool in collaboration with senior staff. |
|  | **Bi-Monthly Mini Survey**<br>Bi-Monthly Mini Survey to each grantee from December 2024 – October 2025, with **44 responses** received. The Bi-Monthly Mini Survey aims to capture perceptions-based, critical reflections from grantees as they implement their work. These are intended to collect perceptions data. CEOs were asked to complete this. |
|  | **Bi-Annual Assessment Tool**<br>Bi-Annual Assessment Tool to each grantee in May, and September 2025, with **24 total responses** received across May and September. The Bi-Annual Assessment Tool has been adapted from the Organisational Mapping Tool (OMT) developed by the Ford Foundation. The OMT is a peer-reviewed tool which provides clear markers of organisational development + strength. CEOs were asked to complete this. |
|  | **Stakeholder Consultation**<br>A total of 17 organisations participated in the evaluation across 17 small group interviews.<br>Stakeholder organisations who participated within the interviews include:<br>• Cohort 1 grantees (**n=8**)<br>• Cohort 2 grantees (**n=5**)<br>• Grantee champions[3] (**n=3**)<br>• VLSB+C as funder (**n=1**) |
|  | **Workshop + roundtable data**<br>Workshop outputs were analysed from **5 workshops** and **1 roundtable** attended by grantees and the VLSB+C. |

**Figure 4: Evaluation data sources**

[3] Grantee champions were identified by grantees as individuals from external organisations who could speak to the impact that the grant funding had on their work.

### 2.4.1 Reading the graphs in this report

The graphs in this report were developed using Cohort 1 grantee responses to the Bi-Annual Assessment tool, and Bi-Monthly Mini Surveys (see **Figure 4**).

Responses to the Bi-Annual Assessment Tool from Initial time points (May, June 2025) were compared to subsequent responses at Midline (September, October 2025). Likert scale response options for the Bi-Annual Assessment Tool include – minimal, basic, moderate, strong or not applicable/not enough information to respond.

Similarly, responses to the Bi-Monthly Mini Survey were analysed. The first (designated as their *initial* response) and last responses (designated as their *midline* response) from each responding grantee were analysed and compared overall. Likert scale response options for the survey include – strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree.

It is too early to assess Cohort 2 grantee responses to the Bi-Annual Assessment Tool and Bi-Monthly Mini Survey. Cohort 2 grantee data, alongside Cohort 1 grantee data, will be analysed in the 3-year Evaluation Report

## 2.5 Limitations

This report outlines preliminary findings from the first 18 months of the Strong Foundations Grant Program. These findings and themes are emerging and may evolve through the next phase of the evaluation as more data is collected. The following limitations should be taken into account when considering this methodology and the data sources:

- **Single respondent per organisation may not be representative**: In general, the Bi-Monthly Mini Survey, Bi-Annual Assessment Tool, and Baseline and Follow-Up Data Collection Tools have been completed by a single individual at each grantee (although it is possible that they have consulted other staff in preparing their responses). Relying on one individual to speak on behalf of an entire organisation introduces potential bias. The views of a single staff member may reflect their personal experience or position rather than the collective perspective of the organisation. This reduces the representativeness and reliability of comparisons across organisations. However, given the intention of the grants is to support leadership and organisational strength, it was determined that this was the best approach to data collection.
- **Incomplete data sets**: Not all grantees submitted responses to each round of data collection. The Bi-Monthly Mini Survey was completed to varying degrees by grantees, with the number of responses per organisation ranging from a high of six to a low of one. This has impacted the completeness and utility of some data sets. Some responses to the Bi-Monthly Mini Survey from grantees were either absent, inconsistent or incomplete. In order to conduct an initial analysis of responses to the Bi-Monthly Mini Survey, it was determined that each response was recorded according to a time interval eg T0, T1, T2 etc. Accordingly, *Initial* is defined as the first entry (T0) and *Midline* is defined as the last recorded survey entry according to the time interval. It is noted that this time interval varies for grantees.
- **Use of bi-monthly survey data to construct initial and midline measures**: Because of the incompleteness described above, trend analysis of the Bi-Monthly Mini Survey results was not possible, and these have instead been analysed using initial and midline measures. Initial and midline findings were generated using the earliest survey completed between May–June and the latest survey completed between September–October. Because organisations completed these monthly surveys at different times, the resulting baseline and midline data are drawn from non-uniform time points. This reduces comparability across organisations and introduces temporal inconsistencies that may affect trend interpretation. One organisation only submitted one response. The response was submitted in October 2025 and has been counted in the midline data. For this reason, the total number of responses in the initial and midline data are different.
- **Small number of grantees:** The number of grantees participating in the Strong Foundations Grant Program will increase over the life of the evaluation, as grant rounds are completed and cohorts onboarded. This report is informed by data collected primarily from the 8 grantees comprising Cohort 1, with some data (in particular interviews) also drawn from Cohort 2. The number of respondents for each data collection method is therefore small, limiting the depth and breadth of insights that can be drawn and the generalisability of results to the broader sector.

# 3.0 Implementation

This section addresses KEQ 1 To what extent have organisations' activities been delivered as intended or adapted as needed?

## 3.1 Activity delivery

Overall, the Strong Foundations Grant supports a range of grantee activities. Each organisation has undertaken to deliver several activities based on their strategic priorities, including the needs of their catchment, and internal areas for development. A snapshot of how each grantee intended to use their Strong Foundations Grant is provided in **Appendix B**.

Overall, most grantees have focused on activities which fall into the categories of increasing their workforce, strengthening internal systems and processes, and expanding their external impact. The outcomes of these activities are discussed in detail in **section 4.0**.

**Increasing workforce**

A key aim for several grantees has been to expand their workforce. Several grantees have been using their funding to hire staff to deliver in specific areas of focus, such as housing justice, or to support overarching strategic functions such as partnerships and advocacy. Some staff hired under the Strong Foundations Grant have been of a non-legal background. These staff have expertise in other functions such as human resources and communications. For one grantee, the Strong Foundations Grant has been used to extend the contract of a pre-established member of staff. Cohort 1 grantees who elected to hire staff have completed the onboarding process for new staff. However, some Cohort 2 grantees who anticipated expanding their workforce have not yet hired their funded FTE.

**Strengthening internal systems**

The majority of grantees have undertaken some activities to strengthen their internal systems. As a core component of the grant guidelines, grantees have been utilising the Strong Foundations Grant to support their strategic goals. For several grantees, this encompasses establishing new frameworks and policies to support internal processes. For example, a grantee developed an internal framework to support staff wellbeing and performance. Another grantee has developed a framework to assess the strength of their partnerships.

Several grantees have been using the Strong Foundations Grant to improve their data collection and utilisation capabilities, including through undertaking evaluation of their work (see **section 4.0**). These grantees have invested in gathering evidence to support their advocacy and workforce models, developing and maintaining data dashboards, and using data to support service delivery.

**Expanding external impact**

In conjunction with strengthening internal systems, grantees have been using the Strong Foundations Grant to expand their external impact. Some grantees have been utilising the

funding to further their advocacy in key areas aligned to their strategic priorities (see **section 4.1.7** for further information on advocacy).

Knowledge sharing was a core activity for some grantees, delivered across the legal and non-legal sectors. Forums for this knowledge sharing included through the Federation of Community Legal Centres, and broader community organisations. Similarly, developing partnerships and engaging with key stakeholders has been a consistent theme for grantees. This has included working in partnerships to deliver services, establishing new networks via subject matter working groups, and sector collaborations. One grantee established a new site for their organisation because of evidence of legal need in the area.

**CASE STUDY:**

## LACW – strategic litigation 2025



The Strong Foundations Grant has supported grantees to undertake strategic litigation and targeted case work. The Law and Advocacy Centre for Women (LACW) has utilised the Strong Foundations Grant to hire a Director of Policy and Strategic Advocacy. The role has been instrumental in achieving outcomes related to strategic advocacy.

In September 2025, LACW sought and was granted leave to intervene as amicus curiae in an appeal challenging the common law position that unless the circumstances are shown to be 'exceptional', family hardship (including hardship to dependent children) is disregarded as a sentencing consideration. Although the appeal was ultimately dismissed by the majority, the Hon. Justice Walker delivered a powerful dissent in relation to the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic), on the basis of arguments advanced by the appellant and by LACW. This will form the basis of further advocacy in relation to the need to consider the impact of parental incarceration on children.

In addition, LACW's capacity to undertake casework related to specific issues that impact women in the justice system has been greatly enhanced. Examples include bail applications and sentencing appeals run on behalf of pregnant women who were facing the prospect of having to give birth in prison. To support this case work, the Director of Policy and Strategic Advocacy has undertaken substantial legal research and connected with a key organisation in the United Kingdom with experience in the area.

In one of these matters, a pregnant Aboriginal woman with a history of anxiety, severe depression, an intellectual disability and complex post-traumatic stress disorder was seeking bail for criminal charges for alleged offences. LACW Counsel were successful in this matter, and she received bail. This result is in part due to the extensive research undertaken by the Director of Policy and Strategic Advocacy. The judgment relating to this litigation can be found here: **Re Jones (Bail Application) [2025] VSC 618 (30 September 2025)**.

In another case, LACW represented a young single mother, who had been sentenced in the County Court for Commonwealth fraud offences. At the time she was sentenced, her daughter was an infant, and she was 3 months' pregnant. Despite her powerful mitigating circumstances, she was sentenced to a term of imprisonment with an immediate term to serve of 8 months.

LACW acted for this young mother in an appeal against her sentence, and was successful in securing her earlier release. This enabled her to give birth in the community with the support of her family and in control of her own pregnancy and postnatal care. Her daughter will have an opportunity to bond with her baby sibling.

LACW have also received funding from the **Victorian Law Foundation** to deliver a toolkit for representing pregnant women and mothers who are incarcerated or at risk of imprisonment.

## 3.2 Adaptations

There is evidence to suggest that grantees have adapted their activities as required. Reflecting the time elapsed since receiving funding, adaptations were substantially more common in Cohort 1 grantees than Cohort 2 grantees. Adaptations have varied in scale, with some grantees adapting their approach slightly, to others shifting their focus to meet new opportunities.

**Maximising strategic impact**

Some grantees altered their planned activities to maximise their strategic impact. To align with their goals, grantees adapted their plans to seize new opportunities or reinforce their activities which were already creating an impact. For example, one grantee increased the level of seniority for a funded role. This adaptation was seen as beneficial by both the grantee and broader stakeholders and reinforced the impact the employee was already having on the strength and capability of the grantee organisation:

> *We have benefited from employing an experienced and senior member of staff in the [funded role]. She is now part of the Senior Management Team. This role has had a much greater positive impact on the organisation than was originally envisaged in the grant application process, where we pitched the role at a less experienced level. This has required additional resources but to much greater benefit.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

Another grantee pivoted from their intended activities for the grant to seize an opportunity which aligned with their strategic direction:

> *Six months ago, [grantee] was invited to explore the development of a legal support service embedded within … a new State government housing initiative for people at risk of family violence-related homelessness. Strong Foundations funding has allowed us to embrace this opportunity and engage in critical early design work to ensure it evolved in a way that's compatible with our distinct model. We have since committed to ongoing service delivery as part of this initiative.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Follow up data collection tool)***

This grantee similarly altered the timing of each funded activity to make efficient and effective use of their available resources:

> *Initially, we'd envisaged progressing all proposed activities in this funding stream simultaneously. However, to assist in focusing our activities and maximising available resources, we've decided to 'stagger' each of the three core streams of activity under the SF grant (building the evidence base, strengthening the service model and creating a workforce pipeline) over the five-year period.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

Another grantee undertook a slight shift in their funded activity to align with an identified need of their local community:

> *Our work in climate justice has continued with the commencement of a [funded role] in October 2024 and a pivot of disaster recovery focused collaborations to identifying community-led priorities building climate justice resilience.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Follow up data collection tool)***

Grantees reflected that their adaptations had reinforced the work they were delivering, strengthening their approach. Grantees consistently reflected that the flexibility of the grant had been key in supporting adaptations to their activities (For information on the flexibility of the grant see **section 4.2**).

# 4.0 Effectiveness + efficiency

This section considers the effectiveness and efficiency of the Strong Foundations Grant through consideration of three key evaluation questions: To what extent have organisations become stronger in relation to leadership, financial resilience, service capacity, efficiency, workforce stability, learning capability, advocacy capacity and strategy? (KEQ2); To what extent are outcomes under KEQ2 attributable to the trust-based funding model? (KEQ3) and to what extent have outcomes under KEQ2 contributed to improved access to justice? (KEQ4).

## 4.1 Organisational strength

This evaluation considers organisational strength against eight domains (see **Figure 5** below). However, each organisation has different aims and ambitions for their Strong Foundations Grant. Accordingly, each grantee is focused on – and anticipates strengthening – in one or more (but not all) of the domains. An indication of the domains each grantee is focused on is provided in **Appendix B**.




**Figure 5: Organisational Strength**

The evaluation has focused on assessing to what extent organisations have become stronger in domains of focus, as well as whether they have experienced unanticipated strengthening in other domains. It is important to note that grantees are using the Strong Foundations Grant to build from a position of existing strength. The Selection Criteria for the Program include indicators of organisational capability, including strong leadership and quality staff, relationships with key stakeholders, fiscal responsibility, and a clearly defined strategy. The data below relating to organisational strength should be viewed within this context.

Overall, there is emerging evidence from data collected for this evaluation that grantees are growing stronger to varying degrees in all eight domains as a result of the Strong Foundations Grant. In their domains of focus, grantees have demonstrated progress towards the short-term outcomes in the Program Logic. In some domains, such as Strategy and Service Capacity, this has been substantially realised. In others, such as Efficiency and Financial Resilience, early progress is clear but the full impacts of investments in improved capability, systems and ways of working have not yet been fully realised.

Additionally, there is some evidence that suggests the Strong Foundations Grant has strengthened grantees in domains which were not the central focus of their funded activities. These spillover effects illustrate the potential for wide reaching impacts of the Strong Foundations Grant. Further time and evidence are required to understand the breadth of impact on domains of organisational strength.

The snapshot below provides a summary of the impact that the Strong Foundations Grant has had on the organisational strength of grantees in the first 18 months of the program. The evaluative findings on each domain of organisational strength are explored in more detail in this report.

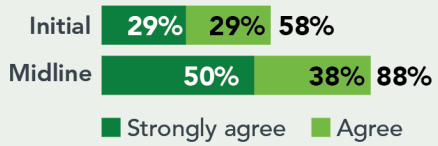
## LEADERSHIP

The evaluation has found evidence that the Strong Foundations Grant is strengthening grantees' capability across:

- Governance
- Partnerships and collaboration
- Organisational structure
- Succession planning

All Cohort 1 respondents reported being able to explore new or improved initiatives as a result of the grant.

**Q1:** I have had more time to work on strategic planning and organisational core activities




*Source: Bi-monthly Mini Survey. Cohort 1 grantees.*

## FINANCIAL RESILIENCE

The Strong Foundations Grant Program is contributing to an increase in grantees' financial resilience. As a result of the grant, grantees are:

- Securing funding, and feeling more confident in their ability to secure funding
- Better able to articulate their value and capability to funders
- Producing better grant applications

Many grantees are concerned about sustaining impacts of the funding after the funding period ends.

**4 out of 7**

grantees have secured additional funding which was partly or wholly attributable to the Strong Foundations Grant.

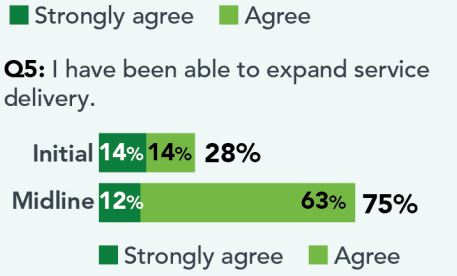
*Source: Baseline data tool, Cohort 1 (7 out of 8 grantees reported on this data point.)*

## SERVICE CAPACITY

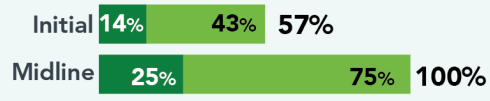
Overall, there is evidence that the Strong Foundations Grant is enabling grantees to:

- Reach more clients, either overall or in target priority cohorts including CALD and First Nations communities
- Improve quality and timeliness of service delivery, including better intake and multidisciplinary practice.

The impact on service capacity and quality varies across grantees depending on their focus and activities under the grant.




**Q6:** I have been able to explore our organisation reaching more people who need it most



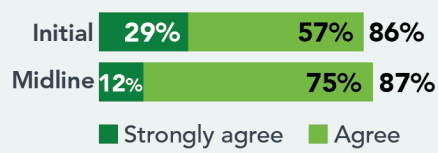

*Source: Bi-monthly Mini Survey. Cohort 1 grantees.*

## EFFICIENCY

Evidence on the extent to which the Strong Foundations Grant is boosting efficiency is mixed. A high proportion of grantees agree that the grant has produced efficiencies by enabling staff to work on organisational priorities.

A large proportion of grantees are investing in new systems – including better ways of working and data systems which they expect to increase efficiencies. These systems are at varying stages of implementation and their impact is still maturing. have not yet been realised.

**Q7:** I have noticed that efficiencies have allowed staff to work organisational priorities




*Source: Bi-monthly Mini Survey. Cohort 1 grantees.*

## WORKFORCE STABILITY

The evaluation has found evidence that the Strong Foundations Grant is strengthening grantees' capability in:

- Enabling grantees to recruit into technical positions such as human resources, and data and learning
- Allowing them to offer longer-term contracts, providing greater certainty – although this does not yet seem to have improved retention overall
- Contributing to improved workforce culture and morale
- Enabling grantees to invest in human resources frameworks and functions

> *"Increased resourcing through this grant has enabled us to restructure our case management team to recognise seniority and improve staff retention and job security. We were facing a funding cliff in relation to some of our funding for this work, and the availability of funds through this grant has given us confidence to transition to ongoing contracts where this may not have been possible in the past."*
>
> - ***Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

## LEARNING CAPABILITY

Improving learning capability is a focus for around half of all grantees. The evaluation has found evidence that the Strong Foundations Grant is strengthening many grantees' capacity and capability to manage and use data to inform decision-making, and build a stronger evidence base for what works.

Several grantees are investing in improved information and data systems. Evidence suggests this has not yet improved organisational performance; this may change as new systems are implemented.

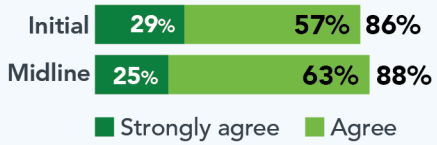
> *"We've learned that data is not just useful—it's essential. Reliable, accessible data is not just for reporting on funding cycles, but essential to running our day-to-day services in efficient and effective ways."*
>
> - ***Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

## ADVOCACY CAPACITY

While fewer than 1/3 of Cohort 1 grantees anticipated improved advocacy capacity as a result of the Strong Foundations grant, over 85% in each Bi-Monthly Mini Survey reported strengthening in this area. This has variously been achieved through:

- Onboarding highly credible and skilled advocacy staff
- Broader and deeper partnerships
- A higher profile and stronger relationships with decision-makers
- More consumer engagement

**Q9:** I have strengthened the organisation's advocacy capacity

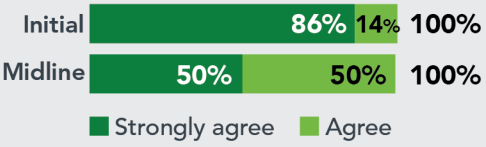



*Source: Bi-monthly Mini Survey. Cohort 1 grantees.*

## STRATEGY

All Cohort 1 grantees agreed that they had been able to progress towards or realise one or more of their strategic objectives as a result of the Strong Foundations Grant. Grantees reported having more time for senior staff to focus on strategic planning and priorities, and identify organisational gaps.

**Q8:** I have been able to progress towards/realise one or more of our strategic objectives




*Source: Bi-monthly Mini Survey. Cohort 1 grantees.*

### 4.1.1 Leadership

Preliminary evidence to date from Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 grant recipients indicates that the Strong Foundation grants have strengthened leadership capabilities as they have enabled:

- leaders to devote more time to strategic and core activities
- expansion of partnerships, collaborations and networks to guide their organisations
- improved governance for greater accountability
- succession planning to develop the next pipeline of leaders
- exploration of new and improved initiatives

These early indications of the effectiveness of the Strong Foundation grants are expanded on below.

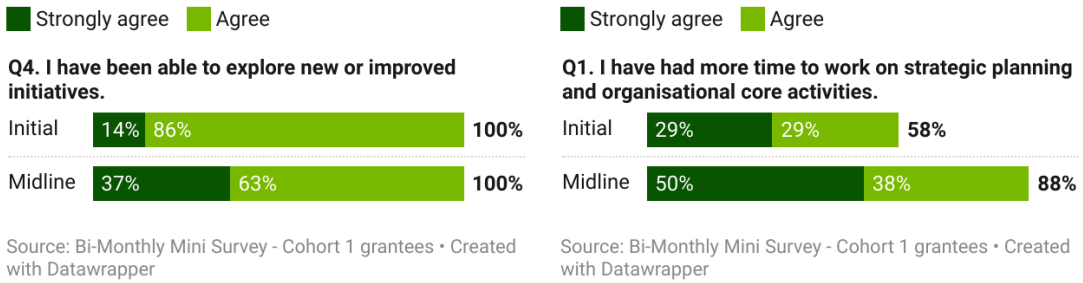



**Figure 6: Cohort 1 grantee responses to time to work on strategic and core activities + new and improved initiatives**

**100 % of Cohort 1 grantees** strongly agreed/agreed that the Strong Foundations Grant has enabled them to explore new or improved initiatives at both Initial and Midline responses to the Bi-Monthly Mini Survey. Respondents also reported a significant uplift in the time they have had to work on strategic planning and core activities, with 58% of Initial responses agreeing/strongly agreeing that they had more time, increasing to 88% at Midline (see **Figure 6**).




**Figure 7: Cohort 1 responses to organisational strength in partnerships, organisational structure + governance questions**

Grantees from Cohort 1 surveyed responded with an increase in the strength of organisational structure and governance between Initial to Midline. Additional comments highlighted that functions such as Human Resources, Finance and Information Technology have benefited from the Strong Foundation grants. It appears that over time, survey respondents have increased their awareness of these areas for improvement, hence the survey results. Responses to the Bi-Annual Assessment Tool also indicate that the proportion of respondents who consider their organisation's performance in relation to partnerships and collaboration to be 'strong' increased by 20% from Initial to Midline, up to 83% of grantees (see **Figure 7**).

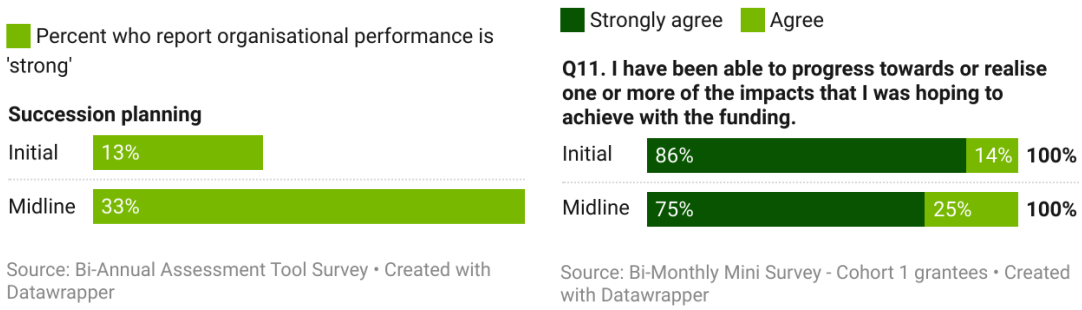



**Figure 8: Cohort 1 responses to organisational strength in succession planning + progress towards impacts questions**

100% of Cohort 1 grantees responded at both Initial and Midline in the Bi-Monthly Mini Survey that they were able to progress towards or realise one or more of the impacts of the funding that they were hoping to achieve (see **Figure 8**). Many of the impacts achieved were the creation of new senior positions to build capacity for their respective organisations, including succession planning. This is reflected in the responses to the Bi-Annual Assessment Tool (see **Figure 8**).

## Early findings and outcomes

**Leaders have more space and time to focus on priorities.** The creation of new senior and technical roles in areas of core business operations has given CEOs and other senior leaders more time and space to work on areas of strategic focus for their organisations. Leaders of CLCs also described flow on benefits for their leadership from having the right people focusing on the right work in their organisations. This uplift in capability has meant that leaders feel better supported in their roles and have access to high quality advice and insights to support their decision making and planning.

> *Ultimately, I feel a lot more confident to be able to do the job well because I have the right expertise around me to inform me and help me make the decisions that I need to make.* ***– Cohort 2 grantee (Interview)***

> *I was doing all the policy work before, so I've really been allowed to step back from that a lot, so not only has that freed up my time, but it's also greatly enhanced our presence and what we're able to do in [funded area].* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

> *This role… has also allowed me to dedicate more time to ensuring the long-term sustainability of the organisation, while providing valuable support in achieving this goal.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Bi-Monthly Mini Survey)***

**Improved governance for greater accountability**. A number of new positions have been created at grantee organisations to improve governance.

> *I have wanted to achieve [data dashboards] for so long but I have not had time to actually build [them and] examine the data. The [funded role] is meeting with every single manager and she's going to design a data dashboard that's just for them and their teams. Managers will have a significantly enhanced experience in terms of managing the program.* ***– Cohort 2 grantee (Interview)***

Another example is that a Business Analyst position has been created at a Cohort 2 grantee. This role has been created to enable greater insight into operational activities and improved governance.

**Succession planning to develop the pipeline of leaders.** A number of new senior positions have been created and recruited to and this is building internal capability for grantees as well as developing a pipeline of leaders. For example, a Director of Policy and Strategic Advocacy and a Director of Engagement have been appointed to two grantees respectively.

> *As part of the senior leadership team, she's helping drive our culture in a very positive way. She's supporting me to … do all the things that you want to do but never find the time or motivation to do.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Interview)***

**Exploration of new and improved initiatives.** There was overwhelming evidence that the Strong Foundations Grant funding has enabled the commencement of a wide variety of new projects and activities, requiring visible and strong leadership for success. These varied across areas such as a human resources, financial sustainability and improving leadership capabilities, including strategic thinking and planning.

Other examples included:

- Commencing a significant new partnership (Cohort 1 grantee).
- Developing a Digital Strategy (Cohort 2 grantee) to ensure staff and volunteers have access to the right technology so that all data remains secure.
- Establishing a new role with an expert in climate change (Cohort 1 grantee) to engage the community, local leaders, insurance, risk management and state and federal governments to protect vulnerable communities prone to climate change related disasters such as flooding and bushfires.

> *We've learned that initiatives and special projects require strong, visible leadership to stay on track and avoid being deprioritised. Dedicated leadership ensures that strategic work remains integrated, resourced, and aligned with [our] long-term goals.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

> *Seeing all of our work through a climate lens has provided new perspectives and connections. Having an expert on climate in role means that we're not guessing how our sector needs to evolve, and we're building from a range of climate experience from other sectors.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Bi-Annual Assessment Tool)***

**Expansion of partnerships, collaborations and networks to guide their organization.** Many grantees are using funding to strengthen partnerships. For example, one Cohort 2 grantee has used the funding to develop a partnership register to help identify their key partners.

> *Certainly from the partnership perspective, it's been a pleasant surprise... [We] cannot resolve access to justice without partners. [We've] been able to centralise all the partners that we have had.* ***– Cohort 2 grantee (Progress Report and Sensemaking Session – 22 October 2025)***

Other examples include:

- There are at least 11 new or strengthened climate justice collaborations between a Cohort 1 grantee and other organisations, resulting in an emerging network/consortium forming as a result of the Strong Foundations Grant.

- A Cohort 1 grantee has commenced a Health Justice Partnership with the University of Melbourne's Law School to attract and retain lawyers in community legal services.

> *Our Climate Justice Lead has built strong networks with organisations, communities and media ahead of scheduled updates to national risk registers that will identify part of our catchment is in the top two high-risk areas in Australia for Climate Disasters. The expertise and resourcing have centred [our organisation] as a leading voice, enabling communities to lead their own response to climate adaptation.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Bi-Monthly Mini Survey)***

### 4.1.2 Financial resilience

There is emerging evidence from the data collected for this evaluation that the Strong Foundations Grant Program is contributing to an increase in grantees' financial resilience. Cohort 1 grantees reported across several data sources that their capacity to explore and raise funds has increased. The percentage of Cohort 1 grantees describing their organisation's fundraising capacity as strong increased 100% (from 25% to 50%) between May/June 2025 and September/October 2025. This mirrors the results of the Bi-Monthly Mini Surveys, in which the proportion of grantees describing their ability to attract or explore diversification of funding sources has more than trebled (see **Figure 9**)

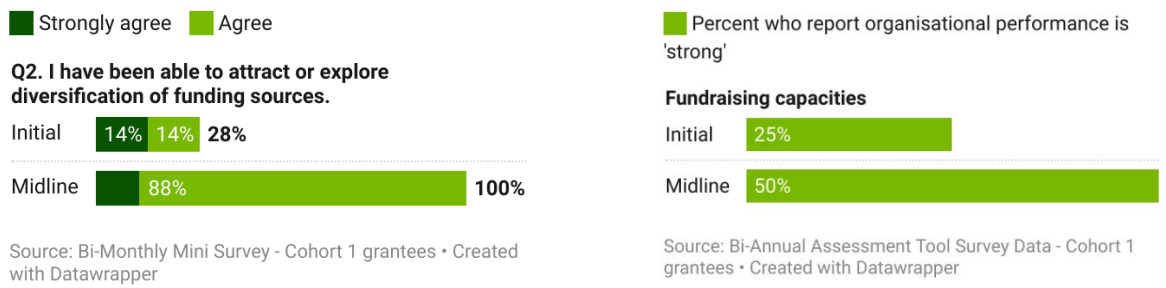



**Figure** 9: **Cohort 1 responses to fundraising capacity questions**

## Early findings and outcomes

Grantees described a number of ways in which the Strong Foundations Grant has increased their capacity to explore and attract funding.

**The grant is already helping grantees to secure other funding.** Four out of seven Cohort 1 grantees which provided follow-up responses to the data collection tool indicated that they had secured funding which was partly or wholly attributable to their Strong Foundations Grant.

Others expressed confidence that their increased fundraising capability and capacity would soon yield positive results.

> *Not long after we got the grant, [local government council], without any kind of expression of interest process, offered us a grant to run a peer education program that we'd run in other local government areas, [in] family violence [and] peer education, which was terrific to be able to get that better buy-in from community. It was… a gesture of trust and goodwill by council that was really important, particularly at the beginning of the process.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

> *This funding has been transformative, enabling us to expand our work and explore new opportunities for support and investment. A prime example is that, with the additional resources, we successfully scoped a new project and secured funding for it. Without the Strong Foundations Grant, achieving this result would not have been possible. We are now in the process of setting up the project to ensure its outcomes and impact are measured from the outset.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Bi-Monthly Mini Survey)***

**Helping grantees to articulate their value and capability.** Several considered that the grant has helped them to strengthen the evidence base underpinning their funding applications by enabling them to invest in improved data, monitoring and evaluation functions. Relatedly, the Grant has allowed some grantees to begin implementing new initiatives, providing 'proof of concept' for future funding bids. For some, by enabling them to invest in their core infrastructure and ways of working, the Grant has enabled them to maximise the value of other funding and to approach their existing funding arrangements more strategically.

> *We have completed [activity] that just really distils the evidence base behind the way we're working. I think funders find that very compelling, particularly government funders, so that's a useful component of the model that will, without doubt, assist funding].* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Interview)***

> *Another by-product of this funding has been scaffolding additional funding from other funders in a data-driven, sustainable and strategic way.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

**Improving quality of grant applications.** Onboarding highly-skilled staff, positioned grantees to improve the quality of their grant applications and funding pitches. Lastly, at least two grantees indicated that receiving a Strong Foundations Grant is a vote of confidence from VLSB+C, which signals to other potential funders that their organisation is capable and credible.

> *A compelling example of the impact [of the Grant] is how the Director of Engagement & Impact was able to explore a new area and establish a partnership. This engagement led to the development of a case for support and an invitation to submit a funding application (outcome still pending). This opportunity would not have arisen without the existence of this role***– *Cohort 1 grantee (Follow up data collection tool)***

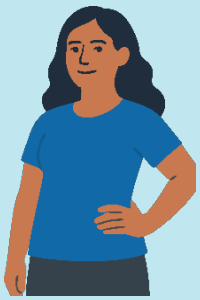
**Concerns about sustainability.** Despite this confidence, several grantees in both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 expressed concerns about the sustainability of the Strong Foundations Grant, particularly where funding is being used to support specific roles. These grantees were concerned that they would be unable to extend the contracts of these staff members, who were now seen as integral to the functioning of their organisation. At least one grantee noted that the Strong Foundations Grant Program supports roles and initiatives which are traditionally difficult to fund – and that while this is a strength, it complicates the prospect of securing follow-on funding from other sources.

However, several grantees expressed optimism that the work they are currently undertaking will enable them to demonstrate the value of these roles and activities in ways which will be compelling and evidence-based. Others expressed an intention to absorb as Business as Usual (BAU) the costs associated with the roles and work currently funded through Strong Foundations, as their organisation scales and matures.

> *No doubt having a presence and being a trusted service and having more resourcing to get in front of government more makes a difference. Going forward, I think that [the] strengthened financial base is something that we'll just build on and… [will have] an exponential impact because the bigger you get, the more you can improve and the more capacity you have to work on the business as well as doing the client- facing work.* **– *Cohort 1 grantee (Interview)***

**CASE STUDY:**

**Northern CLC - Wallan office 2025**



The Strong Foundations Grant has supported grantees reach people experiencing vulnerability, including victim survivors of family violence. The Strong Foundations Grant supported Northern Community Legal Centre (Northern CLC) to establish a new satellite office in Wallan to provide additional services to the Micthell Shire region.

A client of the office, Belinda*, a mother of two young children, experiencing domestic violence was referred to Northern CLC by her maternal child nurse. As her husband tracked her movements, Belinda met with a lawyer during her child's kindergarten drop-off which was next door to Northern CLC's Wallan office. Belinda's husband blocked access to Centrelink parenting payments by withholding tax information and had also nominated her to VicRoads in relation to fines he had accrued. He also registered an ABN in her name, creating potential tax liabilities. Belinda relied on buy-now-pay-later schemes to survive, as requests for money triggered her husband's aggression.

Northern CLC identified this as family violence and advised Belinda of her legal options. Over $15,000 in debts were waived, and Belinda gained confidence to leave the relationship. When she fell behind on rent during the payment processing period, Northern CLC partnered with Beyond Housing to prevent eviction and secure a payment plan.

A further referral was made to a private law firm who agreed to finalise the outstanding tax debt to the Australian Tax Office at no cost to Belinda. Belinda is now rebuilding her financial independence and providing a safer future for her children.

### 4.1.3 Service capacity

The preliminary evidence and data from the surveys indicate that the Strong Foundations Grant has enabled an increase in service capacity for some grantees. For the grantees that have directed their funding towards building greater service capacity, outcomes achieved have included the opening of a new office, updating a Worker Advice Line and developing integrated practice guidelines.

The responses from the Bi-Annual Assessment Tool and Bi-Monthly Mini Surveys reflect that the impact on service delivery has generally been more indirect (and often secondary – often with a focus on better or more efficient services rather than more services). Several grantees have put in place firm foundations for improving how they deliver services. Indirectly, the

Strong Foundations Grant has enabled grantees to increase service capacity through supporting their workforce capability uplift; and improving learning and data capability (see **section 4.1.6**).

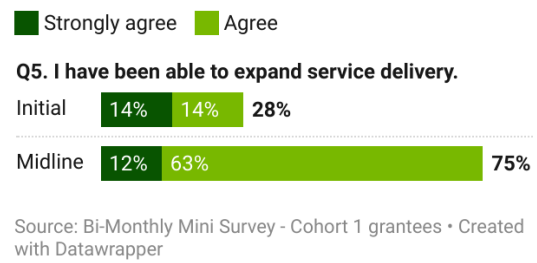



**Figure 10: Cohort 1 responses to service expansion question**

75% of the responses to the Bi-Monthly Mini Survey at Midline agreed or strongly agreed that the Strong Foundations Grant funding enabled expansion of service delivery (see **Figure 10**).

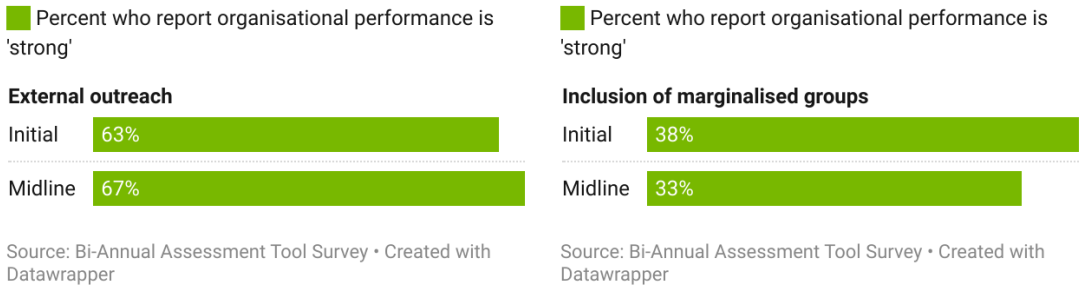



**Figure 11: Cohort 1 responses to external outreach + inclusion of marginalised groups questions**

67% at Midline responded that their organizational performance is ‘strong’ for external outreach (an increase from 63% at Initial) (see **Figure 11**). This indicates that respondents see room for improvement. Similarly, 33% responded that their organisation’s approach to inclusion of marginalised groups at Midline was strong (see **Figure 11**).

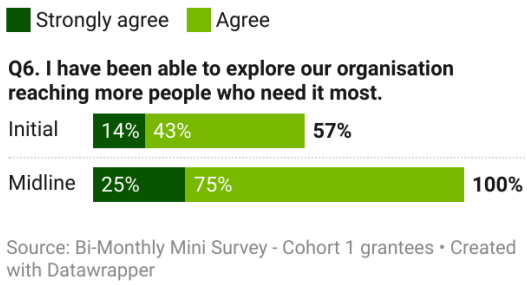



**Figure 12: Cohort 1 responses to organisational reach**

100% of survey respondents agreed/strongly agreed that the Strong Foundations Grant enabled them to explore their organisation reaching more people who need it most at Midline. This is an increase from a response of 57% of survey respondents at Baseline. This response reflects that the grant funding is contributing to organisations working towards improving

access to justice for groups experiencing vulnerability. This was also mentioned in many of the free text comments in the Bi-Monthly Mini Survey responses.

## Early Findings and Outcomes

**The Strong Foundations Grant contributed to more people who need it most receiving a service.** Two Cohort 1 grantees demonstrated significant impact on service capacity and one grantee primarily invested in expanding service delivery by opening a new satellite office. The opening of the satellite office saw a doubling of clients with new services from the catchment region. The new office also contributed to a 10% increase in clients receiving casework assistance over a 12-month period. In its response to the baseline data collection tool, the grantee indicated that 92 clients in the past 12 months lived in the catchment area for the new office. In the grantee's follow-up response, this had increased to 226 clients with 61% of these clients receiving a service from the new office. Of those 226 clients in catchment: 174 were victim/survivors of family violence (an increase from 77 at Baseline); 19 were young people (an increase from 5 at Baseline) and 9 received non-legal support from the Integrated Program Coordinator (an increase from 0 at Baseline).

As a result of the funding, grantees demonstrated increased capability to develop a multidisciplinary practice and integrated practice delivery. One grantee restructured their integrated case management team to include a range of non-professional roles and deliver more efficient services. One grantee was successful in codesigning and piloting a legal needs assessment tool and embedding this across three partnerships to improve the identification of legal needs, and address the underlying legal needs of clients whose needs may otherwise have gone unnoticed.

> *There's the direct and the indirect benefit … If you've got more staff… who are feeling better about themselves and focusing on performance, they're going to be better at delivering the services they deliver. In that way there will be… an improvement in quality in service delivery.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Interview)***

> *We were able to appoint a part time [role] and, within the time that we had [role], there was a 10% increase in being able to provide services to the community.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Interview)***

> *We have moved from identifying that we are answering just 33% of sector calls to our worker advice services, to now answering 100% of calls made during opening hours. We are now in the position to drum up more demand to increase our reach and impact.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Bi-Monthly Mini Survey)***

**The Strong Foundations Grant contributed to timelier delivery.** One grantee has upgraded their advice lines following a strategic review. This resulted in a 30% increase in the answer rate for their phone line resulting in increased accessibility and a more timely response

for clients and prospective clients. Additional efficiencies are currently being considered to further enhance this program.

> *We designed and launched a pilot of the [service], which has already improved accessibility by 30% within the first 14 weeks.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

**The Strong Foundations Grant is indicating contributions to improved access for priority communities.** Following an upgrade to its advice lines, one grantee has seen an increase in reach to underserved communities, particularly through a dedicated advice line for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

> *We have also had a 30% uplift of accessibility on our [dedicated] advice line due to the grant funding.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

Several other grantees have been able to expand their reach including one grantee successfully reaching culturally diverse communities and newly arrived migrants through enhanced service delivery and another grantee successfully establishing clinics for refugees.

> *A strength of the grant is that it has allowed [our organisation] to provide services to hardest to reach cohort groups… Providing legal services can be even harder to for newly arrived 'fresh' migrants; in particular there has been a huge number of South Asian communities settling in [service area], an increase in the Indian population.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Interview)***

> *…the Strong Foundations program has enhanced our capacity to maintain and grow our core integrated legal services - telephone advice, day and evening advice services, full casework representation, legal clinics and community information sessions.* ***– Cohort 2 grantee (Roundtable)***

## 4.1.4 Efficiency

The evidence relating to the Strong Foundations Grant Program's impact on grantees' efficiency and its contribution to more efficient tools, systems or ways of working is mixed. While there is some emerging evidence from the data collected for this evaluation that grantees' investment in skilled staff is leading to efficiency gains, more time is needed for investments in tools and systems to translate to more efficient ways of working.

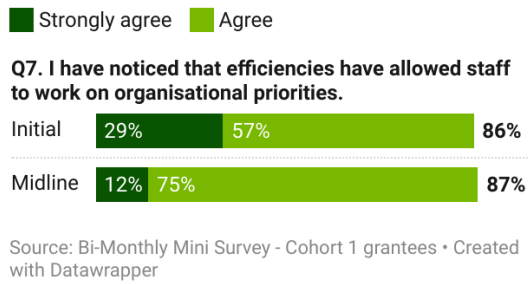



**Figure 13: Cohort 1 responses to organisational priorities**

### Early findings and outcomes

**The Strong Foundations Grant is enabling the right people to work on the right things**. Responses to the Bi-Monthly Mini Survey reveal a strong perception that the grant has allowed staff to work on organisational priorities. While the proportion of respondents who strongly agreed with the statement 'I have noticed that efficiencies have allowed staff to work on organisational priorities' dropped slightly between the initial and midline, overall agreement with the proposition was very high at both stages (85% and 87% respectively) (see **Figure 13**).

Qualitative data indicates that the Grant has enabled this in two ways. The first has been by freeing up senior leaders to focus on strategic work by making it possible for the organisation to recruit new staff to focus on service delivery or operational matters. The second has been by supporting grantees to recruit highly-skilled individuals into functions which have previously been undertaken by the leadership team or legal staff. Grantees have found that bringing professionals in priority areas such as people and culture, data and evidence, and advocacy into their organisations has not only boosted the quality and effectiveness of these functions, but also the efficiency of their operation. Some grantees anticipate there will be flow on effects as these staff share their skills and build the capacity of others in the organisation, leading to more effective and efficient ways of working.

> *When you have staff employed who are experts in doing that work rather than other professionals who are playing in that space, it's much more efficient.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Interview)***

**Efficiencies from better tools and processes are yet to be fully realised**. While onboarding appropriately skilled staff has translated into rapid efficiency gains for some organisations, more time is needed to assess the impact of investments in new systems and tools.

Several grantees are drawing on their Strong Foundations Grant to improve intake processes, or to enhance data quality to inform decision-making and service delivery, which are expected to produce efficiencies for the organisation. These grantees are in the development and implementation phases of this work, and any impact on efficiency is unlikely to be detectable for some time.

### 4.1.5 Workforce stability

The preliminary evidence and data from the surveys indicate that the Strong Foundations Grant has contributed to increased workforce stability. The majority of grantees from Cohort 1 have utilised the grant funding for the creation of new positions, with recruitment to the positions complete. Similarly, Cohort 2 grantees are progressing the use of their grant funding, however recruitment is underway with many of these newly created positions to be filled. Some early emerging themes and outcomes achieved to date include:

- a more stable workforce through staff recruitment and retention
- improved succession planning through establishing partnerships
- improved workforce culture and morale including through greater professional development and recognition of senior leaders.

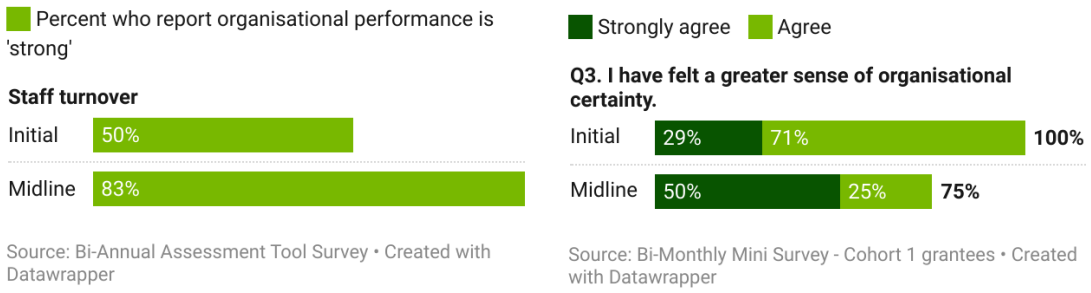



**Figure 14: Cohort 1 responses to staff turnover + organisational certainty questions**

When asked to describe their organisation's approach to staff turnover, 83% of Cohort 1 respondents were strong at Midline, an increase from 50% at Initial. 75% of Cohort 1 respondents agreed/strongly agreed that they had a greater sense of organisational certainty at Midline. It is noted that this is a decrease from the Initial response when 100% of Cohort 1 respondents agreed/strongly agreed (see **Figure 14**).

This change over the timeline could be a reflection of changing economic conditions given financial constraints impacting Cohort 1 grantees, or a reflection of the fact that the grant funding is often a small contributor to some grantees' budgets.

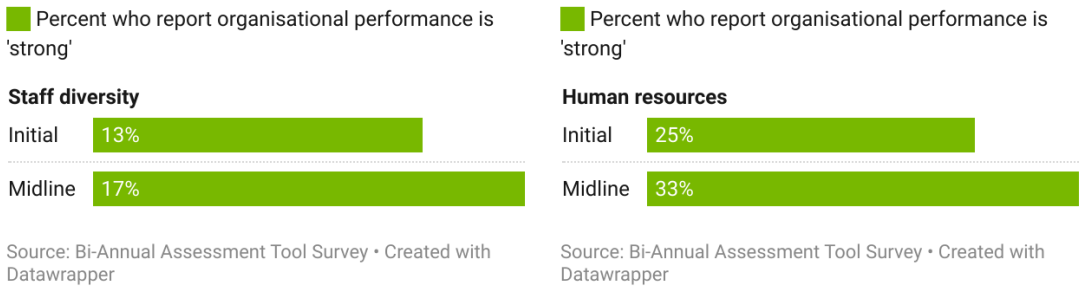



**Figure 15: Cohort 1 responses to staff diversity + human resources questions**

When asked to describe their organisation's approach to human resources, 33% of Cohort 1 respondents were strong at Midline (an increase from 25% at Initial). Similarly, responses to the grantee organisation's approach to staff diversity, only 17% of Cohort 1 respondents were strong at Midline (an increase from 13% at Baseline). These responses indicate that grantees see room for improvement in these areas (see **Figure 15**).

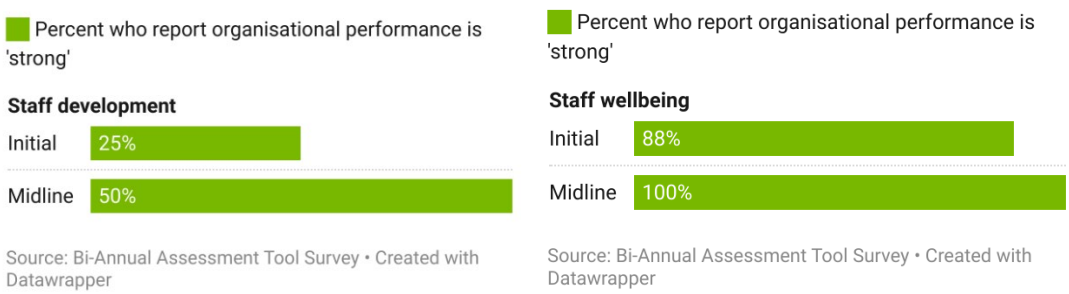



**Figure 16: Cohort 1 responses to staff development + staff wellbeing questions**

When asked to describe their organisation's approach to staff development, 50% of Cohort 1 respondents were strong at Midline (an increase from 25% at Initial) (see **Figure 16)**. However, when asked to describe their organisation's approach to staff wellbeing, 100% of Cohort 1 respondents were strong at Midline (an increase from 88% at Baseline) (see **Figure 16**). These responses indicate that their organisations have strengthened considerably across all measures. There is emerging evidence from the data collected for this evaluation from the data collected for this evaluation that the Strong Foundations Grant Program is contributing to an increase in grantees' financial resilience. Cohort 1 grantees reported across several data sources that their capacity to explore and raise funds has increased. The percentage of Cohort 1 grantees describing their organisation's fundraising capacity as strong increased 100% (from 25% to 50%) between May/June 2025 and September/October 2025. This mirrors the results of the Bi-Monthly Mini Surveys, in which the proportion of grantees describing their ability to attract or explore diversification of funding sources has more than trebled (see **Figure 9**)

## Early Findings and Outcomes

**The Strong Foundations Grant contributed to a more stable workforce through staff recruitment and retention.** Several grantees have created and filled new positions including in data and learning, advocacy, and human resources. The ability to be able to employ staff

for more than 12-month contracts emerged as a clear factor in contributing to a more stable workforce. The ability to recruit and retain high quality staff is enhanced when able to hire staff for greater than 12 months.

> *Increased resourcing through this grant has enabled us to restructure our case management team to recognise seniority and improve staff retention and job security. We were facing a funding cliff in relation to some of our funding for this work, and the availability of funds through this grant has given us confidence to transition to ongoing contracts where this may not have been possible in the past.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

> *The [funded role] has significantly enhanced both internal and external engagement, strengthened our Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) framework, and expanded our capacity in both areas.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

> *If you advertise a 12-month contract, excellent people are not going to apply for that because they can go elsewhere and get long-term permanent contracts. So, we will inevitably lose out on good people because of job security* ***– Cohort 1 grantee Champion (Interview)***

**The Strong Foundations Grant has contributed to improved workforce culture and morale through recognition of senior leaders.** Several grantees have been able to support retention and increase culture through improving entitlements or providing promotions to senior staff. This has also enabled increased capability across grantees. The funding has also supported grantees to provide appropriate coaching and support to emerging leaders within organisations to have difficult conversations and manage teams.

> *The [role] originally started 8 or 9 years ago as a project funded through [funder]. We had a couple of years of funding to pilot that work…. But that funding ran out and then we had to try and find a way of keeping that position going, because it was really making a crucial positive impact. We tried a couple of [options] to get the project funding to continue, but they were unsuccessful. So when we had the strong Foundations money, we said well, this is a real priority to maintain that role… It's meant we haven't been so actively chasing that kind of funding for the last couple of years, but it will remain a priority to keep that going.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Interview)***

Other examples of grant funding bolstering workforce stability include:

- A Cohort 1 grantee has developed their human resources framework to improve workplace culture through a well-informed, best practice people and culture function.

- A Cohort 1 grantee has utilised the grant funding for continuing professional development activities for staff.

> *Being in a position to commence an innovative and transformative program across People and Culture has been invaluable* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Bi-Monthly Mini Survey)***

One grantee has also been able to bolster support to its workforce through the development of an internship program with a university law school.

> *Student placement is now formally recognised by Melbourne University such that each student receives academic credit for completing the 15-week placement. In addition, a formal feedback mechanism has recently been developed to capture the impact the experience has on each student's future desire to work in a health justice setting. The aim is to use these insights to build a future workforce pipeline do.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Follow up data collection tool)***

### 4.1.6 Learning capability

The preliminary evidence and data collected to date indicate that the Strong Foundations Grant funding is contributing to strengthening and improving learning capabilities and the evidence base for what works for the respective grantees. A number of grantees reported that funding has enabled investments in capacity building around greater data and analytics, information technology, cyber security and conduct of evaluations. Many Cohort 1 grantees reported that the insights generated from improved data analytics has enabled them to improve and re-align their service delivery models. Early findings and outcomes achieved to date include:

- The grant funding has contributed to the grantees' capability to manage and use data to inform decision-making including recruitment of Business/ Data Analyst positions and dashboards created for increased reporting.

- The grant funding has contributed to the grantees' evidence base for what works such as the conduct and completion of evaluations.

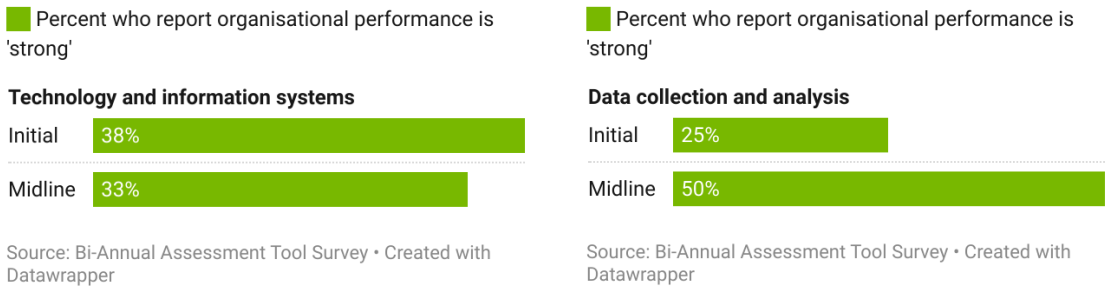



**Figure 17: Cohort 1 responses to technology and information systems + data collection and analysis questions**

When asked to describe their organisation's approach to technology and information systems, 33% of Cohort 1 survey respondents were strong at Midline (a decrease from 38% at Initial). When asked to describe their organisation's approach to data collection and analysis, 25% of Cohort 1 survey respondents were strong at Midline (an increase from 50% at Initial). These responses indicate that grantees see room for improvement in these areas for their organisations.

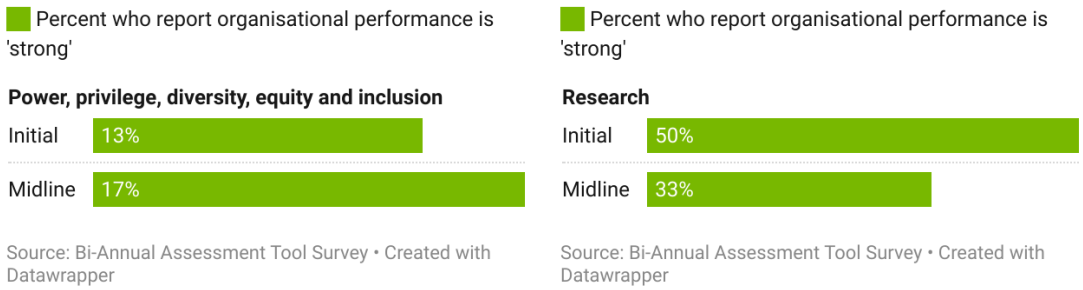



**Figure 18: Cohort 1 responses to power, privilege, diversity, equity and inclusion + research questions**

When asked to describe their organisation's approach to applying a power, privilege, diversity, equity and inclusion lens to their work, 17% of Cohort 1 survey respondents were strong at Midline (an increase from 13% at Initial). When asked to describe their organisation's approach to research in support of advocacy efforts, 33% of Cohort 1 survey respondents were strong at Midline (a decrease from 50% at Initial). This decrease may be due to shifting organisational capacity to focus on undertaking research in this area. These responses indicate that grantees see room for improvement in these areas for their organisations.

## Early Findings and Outcomes

**The grant funding contributed to the grantees' capability to manage and use data to inform decision-making**. For example, at least two Cohort 1 grantees reported that they have been able to generate dashboards and this has been critical for improved service delivery and improved efficiency in real-time. Data collected has also been used to chart service needs and key demographics to inform advocacy functions; and to support submissions to key stakeholders.

> *We've learned that data is not just useful—it's essential. Reliable, accessible data is not just for reporting on funding cycles, but essential to running our day-to-day services in efficient and effective ways. Real-*

> *time data enables us to monitor demand, adjust resourcing, and make informed decisions about staff support and services. It has become clear that our ability to respond effectively and strategically hinges on our commitment to continually improving reliability and accessibility of our service data, analysing and acting on it.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

Grantees have been able to implement enhancements to support continuous improvement. One grantee has employed a Data Analyst supporting the grantee to capture data and adapt organisational responses accordingly. This includes receiving feedback following a referral service, with the aim of better understanding effectiveness and appropriateness of referrals in assisting individuals with required supports. Another grantee has implemented a Digital Strategy to improve use of technology to support staff, volunteers and clients.

> *Understanding and taking time to interrogate integrated service data/evidence has played a pivotal role in enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of Intake and Triage services. Valuable insights have allowed [grantee] to correlate peak day/time of calls with problem matters and better align resources at the entry point in line with service demand.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

> *The work has included further development of file management systems to improve access to information, as well as enhancements to their database to enable better data collection, including for volunteer engagement.* ***– Cohort 2 grantee (Bi-Monthly Mini Survey)***

**The grant funding has contributed to the grantees' evidence base for what works.** Many grantees have used the grant funding for ongoing monitoring and evaluation. One grantee has completed an outcome evaluation, and another grantee has embedded evaluation processes into their day-to-day work. The data collected through these evaluations is contributing to an evidence base to inform service delivery, engagement work and to monitor impact of services on clients.

> *A key prerequisite for building acceptance of integrated legal help is establishing evidence of its efficacy. In the past 12 months [grantee] has produced several publications that provide evidence regarding the merits of [model] and have disseminated these findings widely across the legal assistance sector, private practitioners, government and philanthropic funders and research and academic bodies. Feedback from these stakeholders indicates growing acceptance that [model] is the model of choice for complex client groups.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

> *We're really focused on our legal practice services and building an evidence base about how those services are [working], who they're reaching, where and how well and that has actually eventuated in … a*

> *lot of really good information for our engagement team to hone in on a better engagement plan.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Interview)***

### 4.1.7 Advocacy capacity

There is early evidence that the Strong Foundations Grant Program is enabling many grantees to expand and deepen their engagement with partners and government, and in some cases dedicate more sustained effort to advocacy activities. While only a small proportion of grantees have identified advocacy capacity as an explicit priority for their Strong Foundations Grant, a wider range of grantees have indicated that their capacity to influence decision-makers and systems in the broader sense has been enhanced through the Grant.

#### Early findings and outcomes

**Strong Foundations has allowed grantees to onboard highly credible staff and deepen their advocacy focus**. Grantees who have focused explicitly on building their advocacy capability and capacity have described significant strengthening in this area. While many have described an increase in advocacy outputs, grantees have located the true drivers of their strength not in the number of outputs but in the skill and credibility of staff recruited to lead the work, and in the ability to direct sustained and intensive effort towards advocacy. These grantees have recruited highly skilled and experienced staff into dedicated roles. This has enabled the organisation to increase its networks, participate in working groups and other fora, increase advocacy products, and take a more strategic approach to advocacy on key issues. Several grantees consider that this has enhanced their positioning as credible voices on key issues and allowed them to take on a leadership role within and beyond the CLC sector.

> *The greatest impact that is directly attributable to the Strong Foundations Grant funding is our increased capacity to undertake systemic advocacy work. This has resulted in an increase in the number and quality of submissions we have made, and our pursuit of pro-active advocacy work.*
> ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Bi-Monthly Mini Survey)***

Assessing the impact of advocacy activities is notoriously complex and understanding attribution even more so. However, one champion articulated the significant contribution which a role-holder funded through Strong Foundations has made to concrete law reform efforts:

> *I am not over egging it to say it has been transformative… As a result of [funded role], there were significant changes to the proposed bail reform that would not have been included had it not been for [funded person] having the time [and] capacity to both practise and understand the practise on the ground. [Funded person] attended meetings with the progressive crossbench and attended meetings with the Attorney General. So having that dedicated role meant that [funded person] was able to exert significant influence in that space.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee Champion (Interview)***

**Organisational strengthening in other domains has indirectly enhanced grantees' influence**. Some other grantees that did not invest specifically in advocacy capability have nonetheless reported that the Strong Foundations Grant has indirectly boosted their ability to influence decisions makers and systems. This is reflected in data from the Cohort 1 Bi-Monthly Mini Survey, which indicates that over 85% of respondents at both initial and midline timepoints consider that they have strengthened their organisation's advocacy capacity.

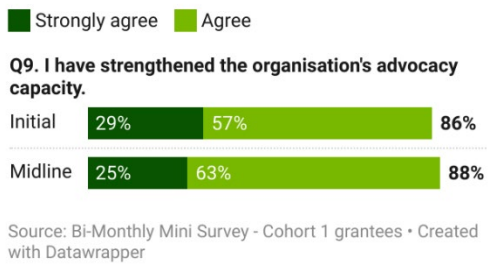



**Figure 19: Cohort 1 responses advocacy capacity question**

While the specifics vary across grantees, data indicates three key mechanisms producing this change:

1. **Grantees have broadened and deepened partnerships**

A large number of grantees have reported that the Strong Foundations Grant has enabled them to expand or deepen partnerships and collaborations to amplify efforts to bring about system reforms. Grantees have worked with partners and collaborators to develop joint approaches to campaigns, prepared joint submissions to parliamentary inquiries and other similar processes, and advocated directly to decision-makers.

2. **Grantees have leveraged funded activities to increase their profile and build relationships with decision-makers**

There is some evidence to suggest that the Strong Foundations Grant is boosting the status and profile of grantees as effective organisations. Grantees described the grant enhancing their profile within their communities, within the CLC sector, with partners and potential partners, and with decision-makers.

> *It's given us... a better profile, for want of a better word, with broader stakeholders. It's elevated the general knowledge of our organisation and the status that we are an effective service.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Bi-Monthly Mini Survey)***

One grantee described how the service expansion they have undertaken using their Strong Foundations Grant has raised their local profile and put them in contact with a range of local, state and federal government representatives. The organisation has leveraged these new relationships to lobby decision-makers, informed by better data and evidence secured under the Grant (see **section 4.3.1** for further information on partnerships and access to justice).

> *Building on the capabilities and capacities of staff has enabled us for the first time to jump on an issue and be the lead. This would not have been possible 12-18 months ago. An example of this is our advocacy around [local council's] decision to investigate fining people experiencing homelessness… We have also been very active on social media about this, again something we didn't have the ability to do prior. As a result of our role and leadership, we are raising our profile and reputation, which I'm confident will lead to new opportunities.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Bi-Monthly Mini Survey)***

3. **Grantees' efforts to improve legal systems are informed by consumers**

Two grantees reported an uplift in their incorporation of consumer and client perspectives in their advocacy work. One reported working with 47 clients on media and campaigns in the 2025 calendar year. These efforts ensure advocacy is grounded in lived experience, amplifies the voices of those most affected, and ensures advocacy is empowering and people-centred.

> *It has allowed us to increase our response to the redevelopment of public housing towers in in our catchment, and to be able to really engage with the people affected by those decisions and prepare a submission and appear before the Senate inquiry.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Interview)***

## 4.1.8 Strategy

The preliminary data and evidence indicate that the Strong Foundation grant funding has enabled delivery of outcomes against strategic objectives and priorities of grantees in various ways. Cohort 1 grantees are at the early stages of being able to demonstrate tangible outcomes, whilst Cohort 2 grantees are less advanced in progression given their funding has commenced later. Nevertheless, there is early evidence that many grantees have made progress towards the realisation of one or more strategic objectives, and some have improved their approach to strategic planning.

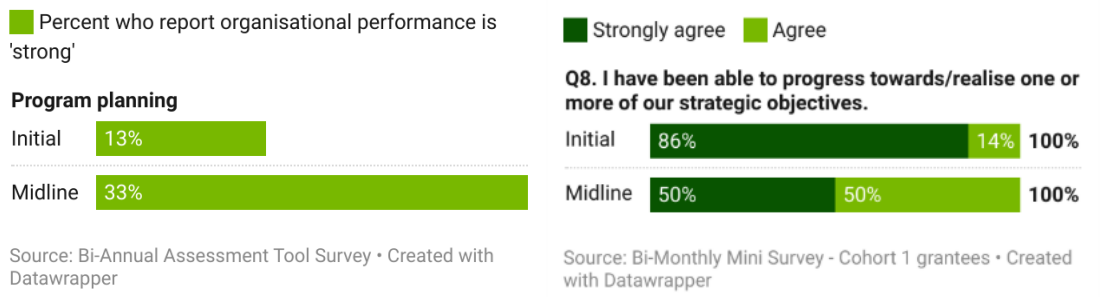



**Figure 20: Cohort 1 responses to program planning + progress towards strategic objectives questions**

When asked to describe their organisation's approach to strategic thinking and planning, 67% of Cohort 1 respondents were strong at Midline (an increase from 50% at Initial) (see **Figure 20**). Similarly, 100% of Cohort 1 respondents agreed/strongly agreed that the Strong Foundation grant enabled them to progress towards/realise one or more of their strategic

objectives at Midline (**see Figure 20**). These responses reflect the fact that the Strong Foundation grant has enabled development of strategic plans and implementation of strategic initiatives.

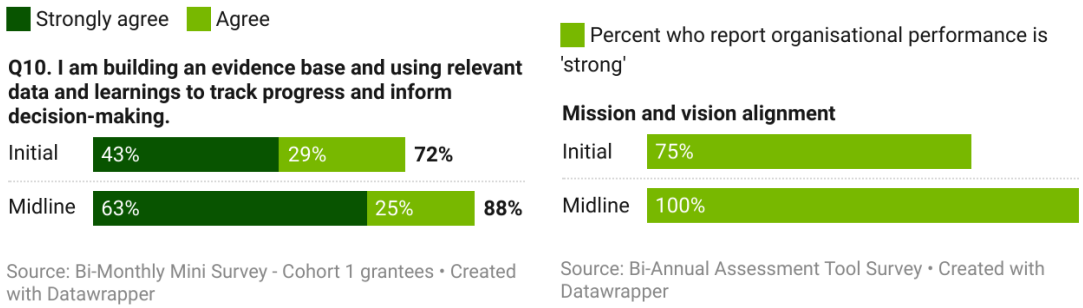



**Figure 21: Cohort 1 responses to evidence-based decision making + mission alignment questions**

88% of Cohort 1 respondents agreed/strongly agreed that the Strong Foundation grant enabled them to build an evidence base and use relevant data and learnings to track progress and inform decision-making at Midline (an increase from 72% at Initial) (see **Figure 21**). Results from the Midline Bi-Annual Assessment Tool demonstrate strong alignment of organisational performance with mission and vision across all Cohort 1 grantees, up from 75% at Initial.

## Early Findings and Outcomes

The Strong Foundation grant has enabled grantees to work on strategic leadership and priorities. The overwhelming response from grantees was that the grant enabled them to work on one or more strategic objectives. A Cohort 1 grantee reported that by the creation and recruitment to new positions, the capacity of senior leaders was freed up to focus on strategic initiatives and service lines.

An example is that over the last 12 months, a Cohort 1 grantee has developed its Strategic Plan 2025–30, setting key priorities to ensure ongoing sustainability, growth, and resilience in a changing environment. This organisation has made progress towards implementing key components of its Strategic Plan, including strengthening enhanced intake, expanding leadership roles, establishing working groups and improving trauma and enhancing client safety. Another organisation developed their strategic plan for the next 5 years, after receiving input from staff, senior management and the board.

> *We are holding our Strategic Planning workshop this Thursday, and have been able to engage with staff and the senior management team for the first time in our strategic planning activities due to increased resourcing we have had to allocate to this important work.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Bi-Monthly Mini Survey)***

**Grantees have contributed changes in strategic direction and/or priorities for their respective organisations.** A Cohort 1 organisation have utilised the Strong Foundations Grant funding to enhance their capacity to scale services dynamically, expanding or

contracting in response to real-time demand. Another Cohort 1 grantee has developed a new model of health justice lawyering based on principles of trauma informed care and client empowerment to further embrace a specialist framework. A Cohort 1 grantee was able to complete a major legal needs analysis, which formed part of a major submission. Another Cohort 1 grantee was able to appear as amicus curae in an appeal relating to the consideration of caring responsibilities in the context of sentencing decisions.

> *We've begun by reviewing the literature regarding trauma informed lawyering and integrated legal practice and connected with practice experts and academics who've agreed to provide thought leadership as we progress this piece.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Bi-Monthly Mini Survey)***

> *In the past, both client exit survey data and client stories/case studies have been distilled in a fairly ad hoc, episodic way ... Strong Foundations funding has enabled us to take a more deliberate and strategic approach to extracting, analysing and applying client satisfaction data and documenting client case stories.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Bi-Monthly Mini Survey)***

**Identification of organisational gaps.** In undertaking their funded activities, grantees found additional organisational gaps, for example in their data collection and analysis, which could be strengthened. Some grantees have had the time, space and focus to conduct in depth analysis of existing capabilities and systems, and how these align with and support their strategic objectives. In roundtable discussions, some grantees reflected that this 'spring clean' has surfaced new challenges and priorities. This provides an opportunity for growth, however, it has also added items to their organisational 'to do list' which may not be resourced or prioritised under their current strategic direction.

> *An in-depth analysis of our data has revealed the need for greater investment in our data management and presentation methods. For instance, we need to implement PowerBi, but currently lack the financial resources to do so.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

## 4.2 Impact of the trust-based funding model on organisational strength

The Strong Foundations Grant is based on the principle of trust-based funding. Trust-based funding differs from more traditional project-based funding in a number of ways, including how funds can be used, grant making processes, and the overarching objectives of the funding. Key features of project-based and trust-based funding are summarised in **Table 2.**[4]

| | Project Based Funding | Trust Based Funding |
|---|---|---|
| **How funds can be used** (ie, scope) | **Restricted**<br>Funds must be used for a specific project with a defined scope and budget.<br>Spending categories are often pre-approved and tightly monitored. | **Unrestricted / flexible**<br>Organisations may allocate funds where they're most needed.<br>Emphasises grantee autonomy and recognises they know how best to use their resources. |
| **Flexibility for the grantee** | **Low flexibility**<br>Funds cannot be shifted to other organisational needs.<br>Limited provision to resource overheads or emerging priorities. | **Higher flexibility**<br>Funds can support:<br>• salaries<br>• operations<br>• infrastructure<br>• emergent needs. |
| **Duration of support** | **Short-term, tied to project**<br>Time-bound; tied to project timelines (e.g., 12–36 months).<br>Renewal is uncertain and usually requires reapplication. | **Multi-year, partnership**<br>Long-term partnership orientation.<br>Multi-year commitments are common to support stability and planning. |
| **Objectives and deliverables** | **Innovation, service delivery**<br>Funders expect specific, measurable outputs or outcomes tied to the project. | **Organisational strength, systems change**<br>Focuses on organisational health and mission, not specific deliverables.<br>Outcomes may be discussed, but not as rigid requirements. |

[4] This table draws on a range of sources, including: Trust-based Philanthropy Project, 'Six Practices of Trust-based Grantmaking' https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/practices (accessed 15 Dec 2025); Trust-based Philanthropy Project , 'How is Trust-Based Different from Conventional Philanthropy?' Trust-Based Philanthropy vs. Conventional Grantmaking — Trust-Based Philanthropy (accessed 15 Dec 2025); Salehi, Shaady and Tedesco, Nick, 'Trust-Based Philanthropy: Shifting Power to Communities' *Citi GPS: Global Perspectives & Solutions* (Nov 2021); OECD Centre on Philanthropy, *No Strings Attached? Making Sense of Flexible Financing in Philanthropy* (2024).

| | Project Based Funding | Trust Based Funding |
|---|---|---|
| **Application and proposal requirements** | **Extensive**<br>Detailed proposals with:<br>• project rationale<br>• methodology<br>• activities<br>• line-item budgets<br>• evaluation plans<br>• Time-consuming for applicants. | **Minimal**<br>Streamlined applications with minimal paperwork.<br>Funders rely more on existing materials (e.g., annual reports) and conversation-based due diligence. |
| **Reporting and monitoring** | **Detailed, metrics-based**<br>Frequent, structured reporting:<br>• progress reports<br>• budget reports<br>• key performance indicators<br>Funders may require site visits and formal evaluations. | **Streamlined, relationship based**<br>Simplified reporting, often relationship-based:<br>• verbal check-ins<br>• grantee-driven reporting<br>Funders may request stories or reflections instead of specific metrics. |
| **Accountability** | **Delivery-focused**<br>Accountability through:<br>• data-driven metrics<br>• deliverables<br>• project outcomes<br>Success is measured at the project level. | **Trust- and learning focused**<br>Accountability through:<br>• relationship-building<br>• learning, dialogue, transparency<br>• mutual trust<br>Success is measured at the organisational or community impact level. |
| **Alignment** | **Project-specific**<br>Alignment is issue- or project-specific. Funders support work closely matching their strategic agenda. | **Mission-focused**<br>Alignment is mission-level. Funders support the organisation because they believe in its leadership, vision, and long-term strategy. |

**Table 2: Comparison of project-based and trust-based funding**

This section addresses the following KEQs:

- KEQ 5: What factors, if any, have hindered or enabled the success of the Strong Foundations funding model in achieving its stated goals and objectives?

- KEQ 6: What factors, if any, have hindered or enabled the success of the organisations in achieving their strategic objectives and intended outcomes?

In doing so, the following questions have been considered:

1. To what extent did the specific features and design of the Strong Foundations Grant contribute to outcomes under KEQ 2? What specific features and designs were most significant?

2. In what ways could the outcomes under KEQ 2 been achieved through a project-based grant?

3. Have there been any unintended/perverse consequence of the trust-based funding model?

4. What would be the effect on organisations if Strong Foundations funding ceased?

### 4.2.1 Key enabling features of the Strong Foundations Grant

Grantees and champions identified four features of the Strong Foundations Grant Program's trust-based model which most significantly enabled the achievement of the outcomes outlined in **section 4.1**. These are: the scope of the grant; the flexibility of the grant; the duration of the grant, and the VLSB+C's approach to administering the grants. Each is discussed in turn below.

#### The scope of the Strong Foundations Grant enables grantees to do work which is often unfunded

The factor most frequently identified by grantees as pivotal to achieving the outcomes in **section 4.1** is that the Strong Foundations Grant enables them to do work and focus on areas which are often not funded, or not sufficiently funded, through other means. Most grantees have used the grant to strengthen their underlying capability, systems and tools, to reinforce their evidence-base, and/or to undertake exploratory and innovative initiatives. This has included particular focus on building data and learning capability, strengthening people experience and culture, and investing in systems and capability to improve the quality and efficiency of service delivery. Many have used it to deepen their relationships with partners, decision-makers and their own communities.

These endeavours are complex and multi-faceted, requiring deep and sustained thinking and work. For many, it has required and facilitated culture change by elevating and prioritising particular ways of working (such as evidence-based practice, integrated approaches, and collaboration) and values (such as the importance of valuing the wellbeing of staff). The impact of this type of work is often unpredictable, uncertain, and difficult to detect and attribute. For these reasons, traditional funding models have not always fully and explicitly supported it.

> *It's not [directed] to service delivery outcomes, that's really fundamental. All of our other grant streams have got client targets, service delivery targets, volume... The Strong Foundations Grant] buys us thinking space. It buys us reflective thinking, exploratory design workspace, evaluative space. It's not linked to a service delivery target, and that is absolutely critical.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Interview)***

> *What I love about Strong Foundations is that we all try and make the partnerships work - that's what we're all trying to do – and... we're trying to do an integrated support model… [but] nobody funds that work. Nobody allows that capacity building, that collaboration, the partnership work, that's quite time consuming and detailed and takes cultural change. You have to have mindset change. You have to actually invest in your*

> *team to get this work done. The ultimate outcome will be systems change for the better, and earlier intervention - everything that government always wants and we all want. For me, Strong Foundations is the Holy Grail. It's the thing that makes it possible.* ***– Cohort 1 Champion (Interview)***

### The trust-based model enables grantees to be flexible, agile and responsive

The flexibility of the Strong Foundations Grant enables organisations to be agile and to seize opportunities. As described in **section 3.2**, several organisations adapted their planned activities in ways that may not have been possible (or would have been very difficult) under other funding arrangements. One grantee noted that this avoided a common scenario whereby the organisation has to persist with an activity which is no longer a priority or the most effective use of resources in order to fulfil funding requirements. Instead, the Strong Foundations Grant embeds a culture of learning and innovation by allowing organisations to pivot in response to changing operating contexts, community need, and lessons learned.

> *In terms of the trust-based element… that flexibility just makes it easier to make smarter decisions in the way that we need to make them.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Interview)***

While most grantees continue to work towards the outcomes articulated in their Strong Foundations Grant applications, several have adapted the activities they are undertaking to achieve these outcomes. This has included deprioritising and resequencing activities, and changing the emphasis of their work in response to the skills of new staff and emerging data. One grantee has diverted significantly from their original workplan in order to take up an opportunity which aligns closely with their strategic aims. Adaptations to planned activities are discussed in **section 3.2**.

> *The flexibility has been instrumental in enabling us to remain responsive to emerging insights and grounded in evidence. By allowing us to follow the data, collaboratively reflect on our practices, and adapt in real time, this funding has not only strengthened our current work— it has laid the foundation for long-term sustainability. It has empowered us to learn, evolve, and make strategic decisions that are aligned with our mission and focused on delivering the greatest impact.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

### The duration of the grant gives grantees a measure of stability and certainty

Grantees also identified the duration of the Strong Foundations Grant as a feature which is contributing to outcomes. Strong Foundations Grants are offered for up to five years, which is a longer period than most project-based and other funding cycles. The longer funding period has been critical to organisations' success in several ways. Firstly, it has enabled grantees to attract exceptional talent by offering them longer-term contracts and a degree of job certainty. Secondly, it has supported grantees to undertake thorough and considered planning

processes. Finally, it has given grantees the confidence and certainty to invest other resources in the Strong Foundations initiatives.

Several grantees also expect that a benefit of the longer duration of the Strong Foundations Grant will, in the later phases of the grant period, be the ability to embed and consolidate the outcomes of the initiatives which have been undertaken. This will enable organisations to invest in the cultural change and ongoing skills development necessary to ensure that the outcomes of the work endure long after the funding period ends.

> *Knowing that the funding is in place for a significant period of time gives us that stability and that confidence to be able to plan, which you don't always get. One of our huge challenges which all other CLCS probably face is just constant budget fluctuations.* ***– Cohort 2 grantee (Interview)***

> *I think what it's also enabled us to do is think that longer term for the implementation of all of these things. So it's difficult to be able to put something in place that's going to look at systems and processes… in isolation and not have then the continuation to be able to actually embed the outcomes of these projects as a result of it.* ***– Cohort 2 grantee (Interview)***

Grantees (in particular in Cohort 1) are turning their minds to the question of sustaining the outcomes achieved through the grant. While most grantees consider the funding period to be appropriate, some expressed unease about sustaining the impacts of their grant (see **section 4.1.2**). A small number of grantees reflected that, knowing what they know now, they would have planned for an extended funding period (e.g. from 3-years to a 5-year funding period) to support greater stability. Similarly, grantees suggested that the grant funding period be extended to support long-term and sustainable change within their organisation. While some grantees are seeking (and will seek) funding from other sources to maintain the progress made under Strong Foundations, others anticipate that the strengthening of their organisation will become self-sustaining. A focus for the 3-year Evaluation Report will be understanding whether, and how this occurs.

### Application process

Grantees spoke positively of the grant application experience, and in particular the initial application form. They reflected that the application did not require as much specific detail as other applications, and the process supported productive discussions with the VLSB+C on what the outcomes of the grant could be. Grantees considered that the process was respectful of their time and effort and focused on the soundness of their concept rather than detail of implementation.

> *I really welcomed the fact that it was a broad scope for the grant application. I think that's what I see as one of its most positive aspects… Sometimes I think in grant applications they're expecting a whole lot of information… that evidence base, and if you haven't had the resources to work on this area, then sometimes you're unsuccessful. But I think in*

> *the Strong Foundations, the fact that there's a recognition… that you've got a concept, you've got a reasonable level of evidence… so you don't [have to commit] large scale resources to [the application].* ***– Cohort 2 grantee (Interview)***

This contrasts with most other funding opportunities, which require detailed application forms and documentation, which can be resource and time intensive for potential grantees.

> *Putting so much time into these grant applications and then not getting the money is devastating. And so that was really nice because at least you don't submit your entire thesis and then not get the money. That's really wonderful. I think the way that they did that was really great.* ***– Cohort 2 grantee (Interview)***

Grantees also identified the ongoing dialogue and collaboration with VLSB+C as a positive factor supporting efficient administration of the grant, as well as enabling flexibility and agility.

> *Having that conversation [with VLSB+C] was really easy because we've been talking about what we were doing throughout the whole year. So it came as a natural progression rather than a funding situation where you're given money and then 24 months later, you think, 'oh my God, have I done the right thing' and things have changed and you don't have that relationship. The way that that relationship has been facilitated and the regular contact that we've all had as a group, I think has really assisted that.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Interview)***

Grantees also appreciated the light-touch reporting requirements, although several commented that the requirements of this evaluation increased their reporting burden.

### Trends in funding of the sector are shaping the impact of the Strong Foundations Grant program

Several grantees and champions observed that the Strong Foundations Grant Program has come at a critical moment for the CLC sector. Commencement of the new **National Access to Justice Partnership 2025-2030** following the **Independent Review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership 2020-25**, and high rates of legal problems and unmet legal need across Victoria,[5] are all features of a dynamic and uncertain operating environment for CLCs. In this context, the advantages of the Strong Foundations Grant Program's trust-based funding model are amplified and seen by grantees as even more valuable.

> *I know that [the grant has] been really positively received from the sector… fewer reporting requirements, the ability to be a bit more flexible*

[5] Victoria Law Foundation, *PULS Volume 1: Everyday Problems and Legal Need - Report summary* (June 2025).

> *and to react and respond because it's really shifting landscape for CLCs–* ***Cohort 1 Champion (Interview)***

However, some grantees considered that the broader funding environment has lessened the impact of the Strong Foundations Grant because it has required them to use the grant as core funding rather than using it for more innovative purposes. These grantees noted that the Strong Foundations Grant could create more impact if they received more core funding from other funders.

> *It's a shame that we have to rely on… grant money to recruit to roles which should really be central and core to running a CLC… If we already had sufficient core funding to have monitoring and evaluation built in and the [funded role], you know … we could use the money for something even bigger.* ***– Cohort 2 grantee (Interview)***

### 4.2.2 Could the same outcomes have been achieved with project-based funding?

Many of the outcomes described in **section 4.0** would have been less likely to have been achieved through project-based funding. This is particularly the case where grantees have invested primarily in systems, processes and ways of working rather than direct service delivery.

> *When I think about this funding, it's like the sky's the limit, whereas project funding is so discreet. It's time limited, it's guard-railed by your project deliverables and [with Strong Foundations] we don't have any of that.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Interview)***

**Table 3** provides a preliminary analysis of the likelihood that the same outcomes relating to organisational strength set out in **section 4.0** would have been achieved using project-based funding. This analysis draws on the key features of trust-based and project-based funding outlined in **Table 2**, and insights garnered through this evaluation. It does not take into account the availability of project-based grants to CLCs, or the criteria or guidelines for any specific project-based grant programs.

| Domain | Summary of outcomes achieved as a result of the trust-based funding model | How likely is it that the same outcomes could have been achieved through project-based funding? |
|---|---|---|
| **Leadership** | The evaluation has found evidence that the Strong Foundations Grant is strengthening grantees capability across:<br>• Governance<br>• Partnerships and collaboration<br>• Organisational structure<br>• Succession planning | It is unlikely that the same leadership outcomes could be achieved through project-based funding.<br>The focus of project-based funding on restricted activities achieving specific and measurable outputs means it is unlikely that project-based funding would lead to the same leadership as have been achieved through trust-based funding. The Strong Foundations Grant has enabled deep thinking time, planning and investment in building relationships – actions which are not generally funded through project-based grants. |
| **Financial resilience** | The Strong Foundations Grant Program is contributing to an increase in grantees' financial resilience. As a result of the grant, some grantees are securing funding; and feeling more confident in their ability to secure funding.<br>The Strong Foundations Grant is also contributing to grantee's financial resilience by enabling them to clarify their strategic intent, and better articulate their value and capability through improved collection, management and use of data, and enhanced skills in monitoring, evaluation, and storytelling. | It is possible that the same strengthening of financial resilience could be partially achieved through project-based funding.<br>Project-based funding can support financial resilience by enabling organisations to build expertise, presence and demonstrated impact in particular areas of practice. This can assist in attracting other funding.<br>Project-based funding is unlikely to support financial resilience by enabling organisations to clarify their strategic intent and articulate their value and capability. |

| Domain | Summary of outcomes achieved as a result of the trust-based funding model | How likely is it that the same outcomes could have been achieved through project-based funding? |
|---|---|---|
| **Service capacity** | Overall, there is evidence that the Strong Foundations Grant is enabling grantees to:<br>• Reach more clients, either overall or in target priority cohorts including CALD and First Nations communities<br>• Improve quality and timeliness of service delivery, including better intake and multidisciplinary practice. | It is likely that the same service capacity outcomes could be partially achieved through project-based funding.<br>In particular, it is likely that increases in client numbers and better reach into priority communities could be achieved through project-based funding.<br>It is less likely that work undertaken to improve quality and timeliness would be funded through project-based funding, as this requires sustained focus on staff capability and ways of working rather than clear measurable outputs. |
| **Efficiency** | Evidence on the extent to which the Strong Foundations Grant is boosting efficiency is mixed. To the extent that efficiencies have been achieved, this has been achieved by the grant enabling the right staff to work on organisational priorities. The grant has supported grantees to recruit people with specific technical skills, and has given them the space to work on developing fit for purpose systems, approaches and relationships.<br>Investment in improved systems is expected by some grantees to boost efficiency once these systems mature. | It is unlikely that the same outcomes in efficiency could be achieved through project-based funding.<br>Project-based grants do not generally provide substantial resourcing for non-project specific, service-delivery roles (although they may contribute to funding such roles through the allocation of a proportion of the grant to overheads). Roles in, for example, People and Culture and Data are unlikely to be funded through project-based funding.<br>Project based funding also does not generally allow for investment in systems such as data infrastructure. |

| Domain | Summary of outcomes achieved as a result of the trust-based funding model | How likely is it that the same outcomes could have been achieved through project-based funding? |
|---|---|---|
| **Workforce stability** | The Strong Foundations Grant is contributing to workforce stability by:<br>• Enabling grantees to recruit into technical positions such as human resources, and data and learning<br>• Allowing them to offer longer-term contracts, providing greater certainty – although this does not yet seem to have improved retention overall<br>• Contributing to improved workforce culture and morale<br>• Enabling grantees to invest in human resources frameworks and functions | It is unlikely that the same outcomes in workforce stability could be achieved through project-based funding. Many of the roles established through the Strong Foundations grant offer core capability in cross-cutting areas (such as data, learning and people and culture) and would be unlikely to align with project-based funding criteria.<br>Some organisations have recruited into roles which might be more likely to attract project-based funding – such as additional lawyers. Project-based funding would not, however, provide the certainty of longer-term contracts.<br>Investment in better people management through people and culture roles and improved people management frameworks would not generally be supported by project-specific grants. |
| **Learning capability** | The evaluation has found evidence that the Strong Foundations Grant is strengthening many grantees' capacity and capability to manage and use data to inform decision-making, and build a stronger evidence base for what works. This has been achieved primarily by investing in internal capability.<br>Several grantees are investing in improved information and data systems. Evidence suggests this has not yet to improved organisational performance; this may change as new systems are implemented. | It is unlikely that the same outcomes in learning capability could be achieved through project-based funding.<br>Project-based funding is unlikely to support the organisational FTE, capability uplift and systems necessary to strengthen an organisation's learning capability. Functions such as learning which cut across projects and issues generally fall outside project-based grant criteria. |

| Domain | Summary of outcomes achieved as a result of the trust-based funding model | How likely is it that the same outcomes could have been achieved through project-based funding? |
|---|---|---|
| **Advocacy capacity** | As a result of the Strong Foundations grant, over 85% in each Bi-Monthly Mini Survey reported strengthening in this area. This has variously been achieved through:<br><br>• Onboarding highly credible and skilled advocacy staff<br>• Broader and deeper partnerships<br>• A higher profile and stronger relationships with decision-makers<br>• More consumer engagement | It is possible that the strengthening of advocacy capacity as achieved through the Strong Foundations Grant could be partially achieved though project-based funding.<br><br>Project-based grants may fund specific advocacy activity (for example, advocacy on a particular topic or area of law). However, a key element in attracting high quality staff into the advocacy roles established through Strong Foundations has been the funding duration, which is unlikely to be replicated in a project-based grant.<br><br>The scope and duration of project-based funding is unlikely to extend to the broader partnership and relationship building made possible by trust-based funding. |
| **Strategy** | All Cohort 1 grantees agreed that they had been able to progress towards or realise one or more of their strategic objectives as a result of the Strong Foundations grant.<br><br>This strengthening is primarily attributed to the grant providing senior staff with more time and space to focus on strategic planning and priorities, and identify organisational gaps. | It is unlikely that the same outcomes relating to strategy would be achieved through project-based funding. The restrictions on how project funding can be spent, the focus on measurable outputs or outcomes, and the issue- or project-specific alignment makes it unlikely the same outcomes could be achieved with project-based funding. |

**Table 3: Likelihood of outcomes through trust-based and project-based funding**

### 4.2.3 Unintended consequences

Early evidence suggests there are several potential unintended consequences of the Strong Foundations Grant program.

#### Sector funding inequity

A few stakeholders noted that, generally, the strongest sector organisations receive the most funding, whereas smaller and less well-resourced sector organisations receive less core or project-based funding. These smaller or less effective organisations may have less opportunity to strengthen as they lack the resources needed to develop their organisation. In turn, stronger organisations are funded more frequently, strengthening their organisation and position within the sector, widening the gap.

These stakeholders reflected that there are opportunities to use the Strong Foundations Grant and trust-based funding model to strengthen smaller or less effective organisations. Stakeholders suggest that by providing smaller or less effective organisations opportunities to develop, it may increase equity in the sector. It is important to note that it is too early to tell if the Strong Foundations Grant, or the funding model itself, is creating inequity in the sector. Substantial time is required to understand the impact of the Strong Foundations Grant on the sector at large.

#### Strong Foundations Grant 'Community of Practice'

There is evidence to suggest that the in-person evaluation workshops and roundtables have provided grantees a beneficial opportunity to discuss their grant funded work, akin to a Strong Foundations 'Community of Practice'. In-person evaluation workshops and roundtables have provided grantees an avenue to share their experiences, challenges and opportunities related to their grant funding. Discussing key learnings and activity progress supported knowledge sharing and between grantees. Some reflected that the achievements of other grantees were aspirational and expanded their understanding of possibilities within the sector. Additionally, grantees reflected that the in-person events prompted further offline discussions between grantees to discuss their learnings to maximise their strategic impact.

#### Travel for evaluation and funding activities

While grantees have generally appreciated the opportunity to come together as a group, the additional burden this places on grantees from regional areas have not been fully recognised and accounted for. Regional grantees must travel a substantial distance to attend evaluation and funding activities hosted in Melbourne, including workshops and roundtables. One grantee reflected that these engagements encompassed a long travel time, including overnight stays, and out of pocket financial investment to attend. This is in contrast with grantees who are located closer to the CBD, who have shorter travel times to attend. This disparity should be considered for future engagements with grantees.

### 4.2.4 Consequences of ceasing the Strong Foundations funding

At this stage, the evidence suggests that the outcomes described in **section 4.1** would not be sustained should the Strong Foundations grants be discontinued. While investments in new staff, systems and approaches are leading to initial outcomes, many grantees expect the impacts of the grants to be fully realised only once these changes have been fully implemented. Ceasing the grants would likely result in many of these initiatives being halted, scaled back or deprioritised, and contracts of new staff terminated or not renewed.

As discussed in **section 4.1.2**, while some grantees have attracted funding as a result of the Strong Foundations Grant, sustainability remains a concern. Several grantees expect to sustain the work and outcomes achieved through the Strong Foundations Grant through embedding these systems and capabilities as BAU. More time is needed to enable these processes to occur and for organisations to strengthen.

## 4.3 Access to justice

This section addresses KEQ 4 To what extent have outcomes under KEQ 2 contributed to improved access to justice?

### 4.3.1 Improving access to justice

There are early indications that the Strong Foundations Grant has the potential to improve access to justice. Grantees noted that strengthening their organisational capability and capacity will have a positive impact on access to justice. As access to justice is a core strategic goal for many grantees, funding which strengthens their capacity and capability to deliver advocacy, services, and other strategic activities, may increase access to justice indirectly. This aligns with the overarching Theory of Change for the grant (see **section 2.3**).

Emerging themes on access to justice relate to influencing decision makers and enhancing holistic and systemic responses to improve access to justice. As the funding continues, further evidence on the impact of the Strong Foundations Grant on access to justice will be assessed.

**Influencing decision makers**

There is evidence to suggest that grantees are using advocacy and evidence sharing to influence key decision makers in areas aligned with their strategic goals. However, it is too early to ascertain the broader impact of these activities on policy and the justice system.

Grantees have utilised a range of mechanisms to influence decision makers, such as publishing evidence, utilising social media to raise awareness of key issues, supporting submissions with key partners, and meeting with state and local government.

Evidence utilised by grantees includes evaluation reports, academic and legal research. Grantees have disseminated and discussed this evidence to key stakeholders, including government, funders, and academic bodies.

> *In the past 12 months [grantee] has produced several publications that provide evidence regarding the merits of health justice partnerships and have disseminated these findings widely across the legal assistance sector, private practitioners, government and philanthropic funders and research and academic bodies. Feedback from these stakeholders indicates growing acceptance that integrated legal help is the model of choice for complex client groups.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Progress report)***

For key partners, the expert knowledge of grantees was key in supporting them to respond to inequity via submissions to key decision makers and enforcement agencies.

> *They're able to bring a level of expertise that we don't have, they're able to do research. They're able to look into the issue and interrogate it, they're able to provide expert secondary consultation. They're able to get the facts right. They're able to translate that into information for the sector. A lot of their workers have been helping us understand the implications of changes to bylaws or local laws, and to help us draft responses to the local government and to police.* ***– Cohort 1 Champion (Interview)***

Grantees are undertaking a range of work to influence key decision makers (see section **4.1.7** on advocacy for further information). However, at this stage of grant delivery and the evaluation, assessing the impact of these engagements on increasing access to justice, is limited.

### Enhanced holistic and systemic responses

There is emerging evidence from the data collected for this evaluation to suggest that grantees are using the funding to support holistic and systemic responses to key issues, delivered by both legal and non-legal sector organisations. Several grantees reflected that partnership with non-legal sector organisations was key to their work. For some grantees, partnerships were core to service delivery.

These partnerships consisted of health justice partnerships, and partnerships with key service providers of mental health, domestic violence and social services. These organisations provide services to people experiencing vulnerability and systemically disadvantaged populations, who have inequitable access to justice.

> *The bandwidth… that is something that this funding enables you to do, and certainly from my perspective, we are running five health justice partnerships which have really strong governance… We're also in partnership with six other men's behaviour change facility programs. Just having the time to actually invest in those relationships in a meaningful way, so that the expectations are met and exceeded, is such a blessing when it comes to this type of funding.* ***– Cohort 1 grantee (Interview)***

For some grantees, using the funding to expand their partnership with key organisations is anticipated to increase access to justice over time, as these relationships are built and strengthened.

> *Having the capacity for someone to get that message out early is improving access to justice and certainly with partnerships, nurturing or having someone that can nurture those relationships to build on, ultimately is going to improve referrals, which is going to improve access to justice.* ***– Cohort 2 grantee (Interview)***

Grantees are undertaking a range of work to expand holistic and systemic responses to improve access to justice. However, at this stage of grant delivery and the evaluation, there is insufficient data to assess the impact of these responses on increasing access to justice.

# 5.0 Opportunities

This section considers potential opportunities to improve the funding model (or grant program) (KEQ 7). Overall, grantees were highly positive about the trust-based funding model. In the context of a constrained funding landscape, the flexibility of the funding has been deeply appreciated by grantees. The following recommendations are intended as opportunities for the VLSB+C to further enhance and promote the impact of the Strong Foundations Grant Program.



**Recommendation 1: Continue delivering the Strong Foundations Grant Program**

Evidence indicates that the Strong Foundations Grant Program is achieving its objectives and that the trust-based model is strengthening organisations and systems. This evaluation recommends its continued delivery.



**Recommendation 2: Take steps to support the sustainability of impacts for grantees and the sector**

This should include:

(a) Considering extending the grant period beyond 5 years, and/or considering whether grantees should be eligible to re-apply for consecutive Strong Foundations Grants

(b) Advocating for the merit of trust-based funding to support sustainability and ongoing grant funding of this nature.



**Recommendation 3: Consider embedding more opportunities for collaboration and capability building both amongst grantees and with the wider sector**

Several grantees have built significant capability as a result of the Strong Foundations Grant. Opportunities should be explored to share the knowledge gained from this funding both with other grantees and with the community legal sector more broadly, to support capability building. Opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, and mentoring should also be considered.

## Appendix A: Glossary

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| ARC Justice | Advocacy and Rights Centre Justice |
| BUILD | Building Institutions and Networks initiative |
| CALC | Community Action Legal Centre |
| CEO | Chief Executive Officer |
| CLC | Community Legal Centre |
| DJCS | Department of Justice and Community Safety |
| DTF | Department of Treasury and Finance |
| ECLC | Eastern Community Legal Centre |
| FCLC | Federation of Community Legal Centres |
| Grantee | A grant recipient under the Strong Foundations Grant round |
| HR | Human Resources |
| KEQs | Key Evaluation Questions |
| LIV | Law Institute of Victoria |
| NCLC | Northern Community Legal Centre |
| OMT | Organisational Mapping Tool |
| ToC | Theory of Change |
| The VLSB+C | Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner |

## Appendix B: Snapshot of grantees' intended outcomes

*Icons indicating domains of focus have been attributed by the evaluation team, based on grantees' Strong Foundations Grant application, grant reporting, and other data collected as part of the evaluation. They have not been validated or confirmed with grantees.*

### Law and Advocacy Centre for Women

LACW promotes justice for women involved in the legal system. With Strong Foundations funding, LACW aims to strengthen its impact by employing a Policy and Advocacy Manager, expand access to social work services, and embed robust monitoring and evaluation processes to ensure lasting effectiveness.

**Domains of focus:**

### First Step

First Step Legal aims to increase access to justice for people with intersecting needs by bringing compassionate legal help to them, wherever they present for support. First Step Legal is using Strong Foundations funding to strengthen their unique practice model, develop a workforce pipeline, build an evidence base and advocate for the inclusion of legal help in a wider range of settings.

**Domains of focus:**

### Southside Justice

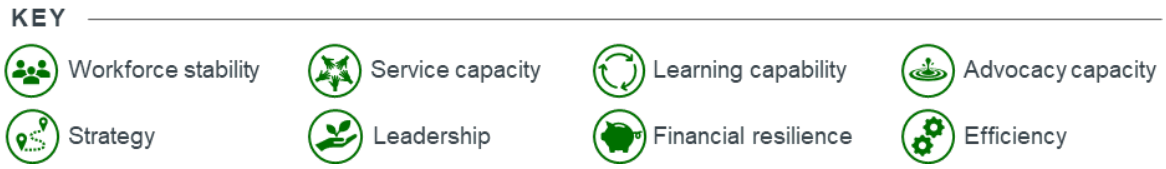
Southside Justice works to address critical issues such as gender-based violence, homelessness, and financial insecurity in Melbourne's bayside suburbs. Their revamped strategy emphasises early intervention, strong collaboration, and organisational capacity building. The funding is being used to drive their overarching strategic objectives as well as deepen their work in the key impact area of housing justice.

**Domains of focus:**

### Northern Community Legal Centre (NCLC)

NCLC provides legal advice, assistance, education and advocacy among one of the fastest growing and most disadvantaged areas in Melbourne, focusing particularly on issues such as family violence, immigration and youth justice. With Strong Foundations funding, NCLC has expanded to a new office at the community services hub in Wallan to meet the significant legal need in the Lower Mitchell region and enhance collaboration among agencies.

**Domains of focus:**



### Consumer Action Law Centre (CALC)

CALC tackles issues ranging from debt and scams to disasters by improving access to justice through frontline services, online tools, and advocacy. Strong Foundations funding is being used to enhance legal advice and website accessibility for vulnerable groups, redesign advice services to empower community workers, and improve data collection to address systemic consumer issues and drive impactful campaigns.

**Domains of focus:**

### ARC Justice

ARC Justice's new strategy articulates their commitment to supporting the diverse needs of the communities they serve in northern and central Victoria by ensuring people understand their rights and can exercise them. Strong Foundations funding is providing ARC Justice with the opportunity to establish and embed their climate justice program into their service model, helping residents adapt to liveability and affordability changes in the face of changing climates.

**Domains of focus:**

### Westjustice

Westjustice knows that the key to sustaining an impactful organisation is a happy and supported workforce. WEstjustice is using Strong Foundations funding to develop their WISED UP framework, which aims to ensure that workers feel included, safe, and well. The anticipated outcomes of this funding are to increase job satisfaction, retention, performance and enable Westjustice to increase their impact and support to their communities in the western suburbs of Melbourne.

**Domains of focus:**

### Eastern Community Legal Centre (ECLC)

ECLC offers free legal assistance, outreach programs and strong community partnerships to more than a million residents in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. Their focus is on expanding their integrated programs, prioritising community needs, and investing in prevention. Strong Foundations funding is helping ECLC enhance intake processes, data utilisation, staff training, and knowledge sharing across the legal sector, fostering growth and innovation.

**Domains of focus:**

### Peninsula Community Legal Centre (PCLC)

PCLC provides services to Melbourne's south-eastern communities. To enhance their collaborative work with community partners and deliver on two key strategic objectives, PCLC is supporting the implementation of a Stakeholder Engagement Framework, Quality Improvement and Communication Strategy and Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan through increased capability.

**Domains of focus:**

### Hume Riverina Community Legal Service (HJPs)

HRCLS improves access to justice for communities in regional and rural north-eastern Victoria through legal services and advocacy. HRCLS is delivering targeted legal services which will strengthen operations, improve efficiency, and maximise impact. They have eight key priorities including disaster recovery support, technological capabilities to support delivery, and innovative Health Justice Partnerships (HJP).

**Domains of focus:**

**KEY**

- Workforce stability
- Service capacity
- Learning capability
- Advocacy capacity
- Strategy
- Leadership
- Financial resilience
- Efficiency

### Refugee and Immigration Legal Centre (Refugee Legal)

Refugee Legal is Australia's largest provider of free legal assistance for people seeking asylum, refugees and disadvantaged migrants. Refugee Legal is implementing a comprehensive Digital Strategy Project (DSP), developing an annual leadership program to strengthen capability of the leadership team, and developing a separate and expanded Family Violence Program for women and children on temporary visas or without visas.

**Domains of focus:** 

### West Heidelberg Community Legal (WHCL) (Holstep Health)

WHCL is one of Australia's longest running health justice partnerships, servicing the residents of Banyule. They allocate resources across key areas including a dedicated Partnerships and Integration Lead, a new role to implement their Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, and additional resources to enhance their intake and access processes.

**Domains of focus:** 

### South-East Monash Legal Service (SMLS)

SMLS provides free legal services to the south-eastern region of Victoria. SMLS will allocate resources to three key areas to expand reach, deepen impact and strengthen staff engagement. These areas are impact monitoring, reporting and storytelling; data systems uplift; and internal cultural safety and skills development.

**Domains of focus:** 

**KEY**






+61 418 901 876
office@allenandclarke.com.au
www.allenandclarke.com.au