



**the national
conversation
development lab**



Building the Australia We Want:

Interim insights from the National Conversation Development Lab

About

This report shares early thinking from the first design cycle of the National Conversation Development Lab. Foundations for Tomorrow has convened the Lab as a collaborative design process to develop and test a model for a National Conversation about Australia's long-term future.

This work is made possible by the more than 260 partners and experts who have contributed their time and thinking to the Lab. What follows is a shared effort of the Lab's many contributors. It reflects many voices and is not always the agreed position of any one of them.

The report sets out the emerging design, the questions participants raised and the early ideas in development. It opens the work to people who have not been part of the Lab, so they can weigh in and share feedback while the thinking is still easy to change.

Nothing in these pages is final. Every part of it is open to challenge. The work is offered in the spirit of collaboration, with a commitment to build on what already exists and avoid duplicating effort wherever possible.

Foundations for Tomorrow

Foundations for Tomorrow (FFT) works to equip leaders, across sectors, communities, and generations, with the tools and insights to embed long-term thinking into governance, policy design and decision-making.

FFT is driven by a generational vision of a resilient, inclusive Australia where leaders across communities, sectors and generations make decisions that safeguard the wellbeing and prosperity of current and future generations.

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A note on the use of AI

At its heart, the Lab is about people learning to collaborate, disagree and design well together. No tool can do that for us, and we work to protect it. AI tools help with the parts of the work that need to scale. In Design Cycle 1, they helped to synthesise insights, cross-check research, build diagrams and refine documents.

FFT retains an unwavering commitment to original thought, meaning that all ideas are conceived without artificial assistance.

Acknowledgement of Country

We, Foundations for Tomorrow, acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the Country and waterways on which we operate, and for which our livelihoods depend. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and we honour the resilience and strength embodied across generations of First Nations communities who have fought for their rights, their cultures, and their self-determination. We also acknowledge those who tirelessly strive to protect, preserve and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, leaving a profound legacy for future generations.

We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded.

We affirm that the Country now known as 'Australia', always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

As an organisation committed to shaping a better future for Australia, we commit to work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, embracing self-determination, social justice, sustainability, equality, and reconciliation. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are diverse, with deep-rooted histories and rich cultures that continue to thrive despite past and ongoing injustices. We deeply honour the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities, and we strive to amplify their sacred wisdom, knowledge and expertise as we work collaboratively to pave the way for future generations.

The Lab's independence

The National Conversation Development Lab is a process dedicated to elevating *how Australia decides*, not what it chooses for itself.

The Lab is testing whether, and how, Australians could be engaged at scale in a conversation about our future, through mechanisms capable of carrying contested questions across time and across changes of government.

The Lab does not exist to advance any specific policy position, and while participants may engage with the Lab through the lens of policy areas that they find most relevant, be that climate, housing or tax, the Lab's focus and outputs are purely methodological with the goal of advancing democratic participation.

Foundations for Tomorrow convenes the Lab and has its own advocacy history and its own advocacy future. These positions are held distinct from the work of the Lab, which is governed by the Lab's Charter, and guided by the Lab's collaborative leadership model.

The loyalty of the Lab to these parameters is governed by the Foundations for Tomorrow Board of Directors as well as the Lab's Charter and Governance Council.

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The full list of Lab members and partner organisations is published at thenationalconvo.org/team.

The partners making the Lab possible



What has been produced by the Lab's six Development Tracks

Track 1 | Government and policy integration

Making the National Conversation and its outputs valuable, feasible and politically desirable to adopt and implement.

→ Scaled Impact Plan

The value created with or without a full National Conversation.

Track 2 | Research design, data and ethics

Building the methodological foundation that makes the Lab's own work and the National Conversation it designs defensible to participants, communities and policy makers.

→ National Research Ethics Application (in development)

Integrates research protocols shaped by the Lab's First Nations Data Sovereignty and Intercultural Engagement and Ethics subcommittees.

Track 3 | Engagement design and technology

Working out what makes participation trusted, engaging and effective, and what mix of technology and people it takes to run each one without losing rigour.

→ Menu of in-person and digital engagement options

Options ranging from paper-based to digital platforms.

→ Success criteria for a National Conversation

Draft measures of a successful process.

Track 4 | Community-led design

Designing a model that honours local leadership while producing nationally cohesive outputs.

→ Commissioning and delivery models for a National Conversation

Options for partnership and collaboration that could make a National Conversation credible and effective.

Track 5 | Accessibility and inclusion

Designing the pathways that overcome the structural barriers that too often define who can take part.

→ Universal Design Ladder

A framework for removing barriers to participation.

→ Universal Design for Civic Engagement

Draft guidelines for inclusive civic participation.

Track 6 | Public engagement

Developing the narrative for the National Conversation, in language that works across generational, cultural and political differences at a time when those divisions are widening.

→ Explaining the National Conversation

The case for a National Conversation in plain language.

→ Who a National Conversation has to reach

Ten public profiles.

Prototypes

Early tools being tested with participants

→ Criteria deck

A card deck for selecting decision-making criteria and working through the tensions between them.

→ Architecture for a National Conversation

The wider model, drawing on insights gathered across all six tracks.

The purpose of sharing these preliminary insights

A National Conversation can only work if it is built with the people and organisations it is meant to serve, not handed to them once finished. That is why the Lab's design process is collaborative and open by intention. Much good work already happens across Australia, and we want to build on it, not duplicate it. Sharing very early work, before it is polished, lets us bring people with us and learn and improve while the design is still easy to change.

What follows is early thinking from each of the six Development Tracks: the tensions that remain open, the assumptions being tested, the options still on the table, and the questions where we need help.

You won't find recommendations or a finished model here, nor positions on any policy issue or views on what Australians should conclude.

How to read this report

Part 1 The emerging design A first sketch of what a National Conversation could be and what it could leave behind.

Part 2 Provocations Four questions, and the tensions where the Lab most needs help.

Part 3 Prototype The criteria deck, an early tool being tested with participants.

Part 4 Reference A glossary, how the Lab is governed, and the sources behind this report.

The design pathway

There will be four design cycles from August 2026 to mid-2027. Each builds on what the last one learned, so the model is tested at every stage before it reaches parliamentary leaders.

2026	24 March 2026	The Lab opens Partners and experts begin joining the Lab.
	11 August 2026	Kick-off Opens the design work across all six Development Tracks.
	Aug to Sept 2026 Cycle 1	Prioritise and find the gaps Workshop 1, 25 and 27 August 2026 Mapping gaps and setting design priorities across all six Tracks.
	13 October 2026 Oct to Dec 2026 Cycle 2	Parliamentary Group meeting and interim report Test early insights Workshop 2, 17 and 19 November 2026 Testing early findings and starting assumptions: what holds, what bends and what needs rethinking.
2027	Jan to Mar 2027 Cycle 3	Stress-test the model Workshop 3, 2 and 4 February 2027 Putting the model under pressure to find where it strains and how to resolve it.
	April 2027 Apr to May 2027 Cycle 4	Parliamentary Group meeting (to be confirmed) Refine and hand over Workshop 4, 20 and 22 April 2027 Refining the model and locking in coherence across Tracks.
	June to Aug 2027	A tested model for a National Conversation Report finalisation, then delivery to parliamentary leaders in August 2027.

The Lab's design process

Each design cycle takes what the previous one produced and puts it under pressure: first finding the gaps, then testing early insights, then stress-testing a draft model, and finally refining it for handover.

This report sits at the end of Cycle 1, alongside the Parliamentary Group meeting on 13 October 2026. Little in it has been tested yet. Workshop 2, on 17 and 19 November, is where testing begins.

Research runs alongside Cycle 2, and roundtables and community pilots run alongside Cycles 3 and 4, so ideas are tried with communities before anything is finalised.

A developed model is due to be released in August 2027.



Part 1

The emerging design

Australians have experienced many ways to be consulted and few ways to shape long-term decisions together. Here is a first sketch of what a National Conversation could be and what it could leave behind.

On the pages that follow

→	Explaining the National Conversation	Plain language explanations of the vision, purpose, objective and remit of a National Conversation.
→	Where public judgement stalls	Where public input stalls on its way to long-term decisions. Drafted to name the problem a National Conversation would need to solve.
→	The outputs	The three outputs the model is aiming for, drafted as the spine the rest of the book hangs from: community visioning, public interest stewardship, and durable and adaptive governance.
→	The model	A first sketch of how a National Conversation could run, phase by phase, working at three altitudes to balance reach and depth.
→	Defining success	Draft measures of whether a National Conversation worked, defined before anything is built, and the value the Lab could leave behind whether or not one goes ahead.

Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4
The emerging design	Provocations	Prototype	Reference

What a National Conversation could offer

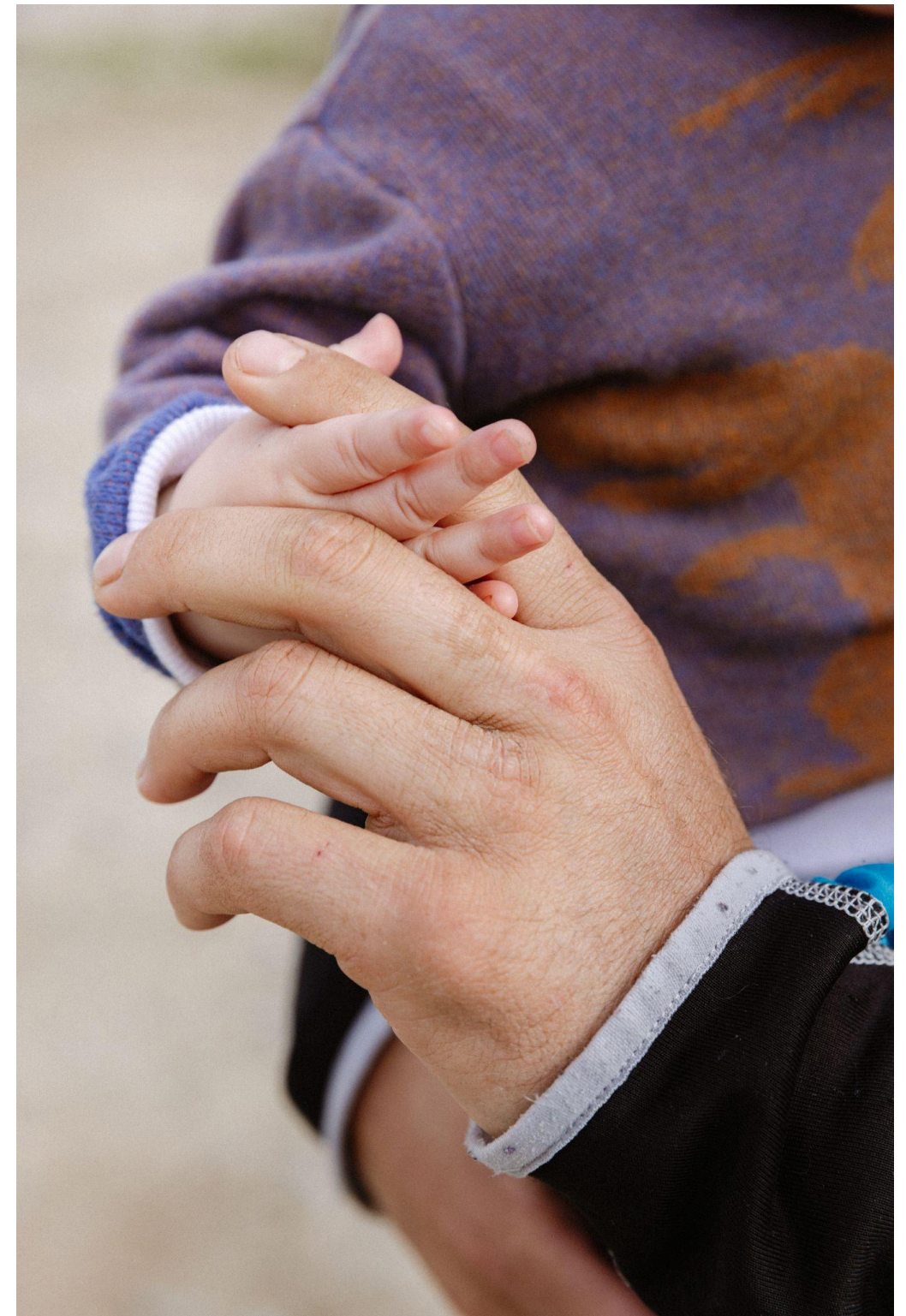
Possible benefits of a National Conversation

- **Engaging across divides:** Generations, regions and communities often talk past each other. A National Conversation could make room for Australians to hear one another before anything gets decided.
- **Reaching the full range of Australian experience:** The design needs to reach people who rarely take part, not only those who always do.
- **Strengthening community cohesion:** A shared process for asking hard questions could help bridge divides, even where people land on different answers.
- **Getting more from existing effort:** Governments, councils and community groups already spend time and money consulting. A National Conversation could make that effort add up, so communities are not asked the same questions again and again.



The world feels more divisive than ever, and a National Conversation offers hope of bringing people together, across divides, to find common ground. It is an opportunity to disrupt patterns of binary and high conflict.

Lab contributor



Explaining the National Conversation

Presented below is a plain account of what a National Conversation could be and what it would be for. These lines are drafts, being tested for whether they hold up in a sentence as well as in full. They set the remit the rest of the book works within: how Australia decides, not what it decides.

What is it? A large-scale, structured, collaborative process that would bring together everyday Australians across generations, communities and regions to explore what matters most, identify what is shared, and build a common direction for where the nation is headed.

Our vision

In a sentence

Enabling all Australians to feel heard and shape a shared future for their family, community, and the country as a whole.

In full

All people living in Australia can look beyond today with a sense of common purpose and the confidence to have a say, feel heard and shape a future for their family, community and the country as a whole.

Our purpose

In a sentence

A way to ask Australians what we want for the future, and actually listen to each other.

In full

To create a trusted process for Australians to define the principles and priorities that matter most for the country and reshape decision-making to prioritise the long-term future.

Our objective

In a sentence

To turn talk into a clear direction for a better future for our country and communities.

In full

To turn community conversations into clear and usable directions for national decisions that respond to today's pressures while building for the long term.

The remit

In a sentence

A National Conversation would seek a clearer, shared account of how Australia should make the decisions that shape its future.

In full

The aim is a process Australians can accept even when they disagree with a result, because they agreed on how it was reached. Done well, it could strengthen the social contract. It could also build the civic capability of the people who take part, which they can carry into their local, regional and state communities.

Where public judgement stalls

Communities hold ambition and local insight. The Lab's starting view is that institutions lack a reliable way to draw on it.

Long-term decisions need public judgement behind them. Today that judgement stalls at three points on its way to a shared national direction. At each one, decision-makers have no agreed account of the ambitions of the public, so short-term pressures tend to win and hard decisions are deferred. Deferred decisions often return later, and can return at higher cost.

Trust is short in both directions

Officials doubt the public can weigh complexity, and the public doubts the process leads anywhere. Social cohesion is under strain too. Between 2020 and 2025, the share taking great pride in the Australian way of life fell 14 points, to 34%, and 37% trust the federal government to do the right thing almost always or most of the time (Scanlon Institute 2025). Civic knowledge is falling too: in 2024, 28% of Year 10 students met the proficient standard in civics, down from 38% in 2019 (ACARA 2025).

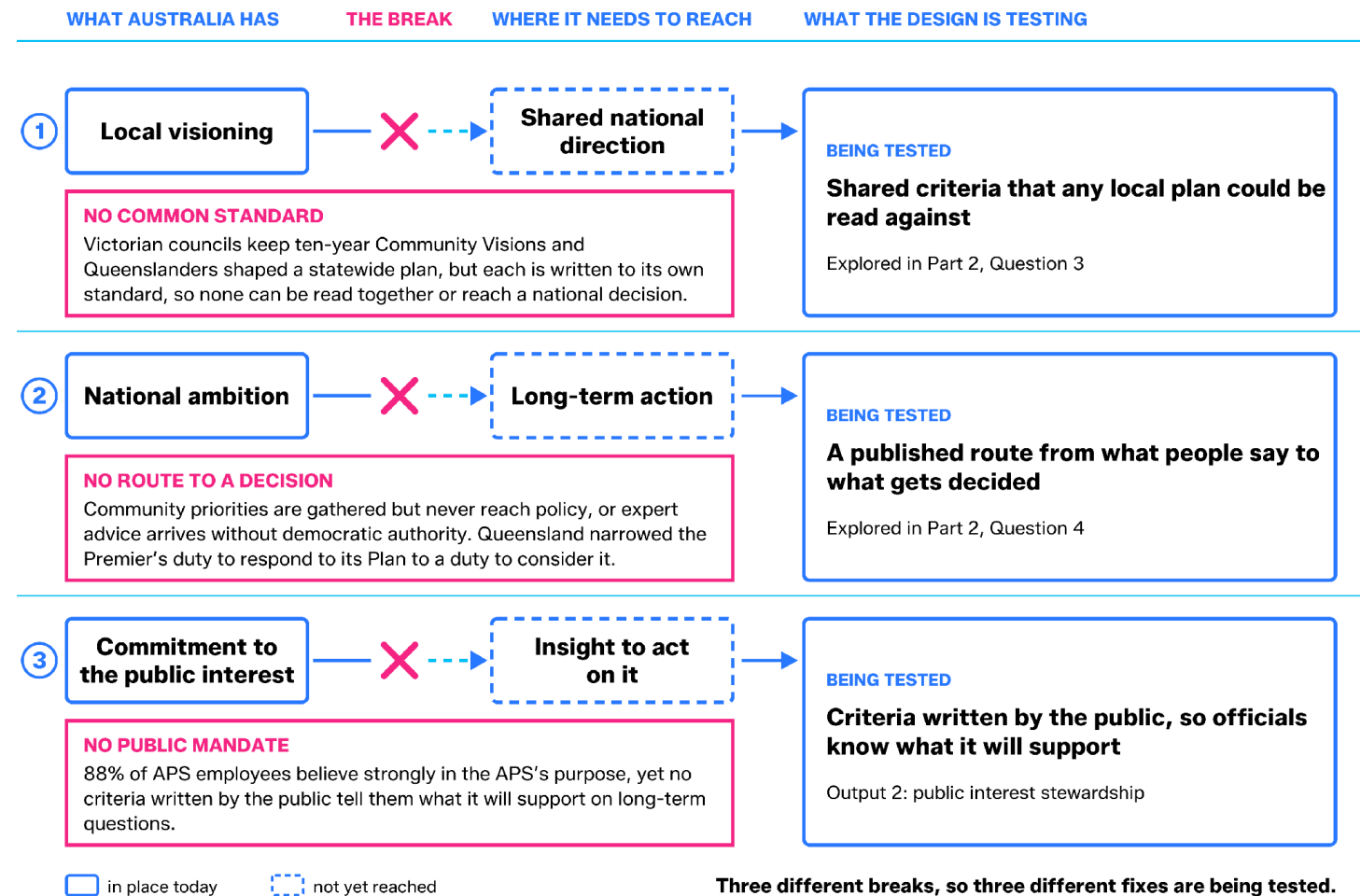


Figure 1. Public judgement stalls at three different points between what Australia has and where it needs to reach, and each break needs its own fix.

Source: Track 2: Research design, data and ethics (2026), drawing on the Local Government Act 2020 (Vic), the Queensland Plan Act 2014 (Qld) and Australian Public Service Commission (2025).

The outputs

Translating national engagement into lasting impact

National engagement often ends with a report, and the next effort can spend its first year rebuilding trust. Meanwhile long-term decisions stall in a cycle: governments lack an agreed account of what the public will support, officials take a personal risk when they engage, and people see little come of having a say.

The design starts from a different question: what should the country keep when a National Conversation closes? The working answer is three outputs, each designed to outlast the initial 'National Conversation'. Most provocations in Part 2 are tagged with the output they most affect.



Output 1 Community visioning

(an ongoing practice, not a fixed vision statement)
People practise imagining a shared future and disagreeing well. The networks and civic capability this builds outlast any single decision.

Why it matters

Designed to strengthen the public voice. A hard decision needs social licence, and people who have weighed a real choice together could become the social licence a hard decision can stand on.

Stays with the people who took part



Output 2 Public interest stewardship

Communities define the public interest as criteria to guide long-term decisions, and the public service builds the capability to apply them.

Why it matters

Designed to reduce the risk of acting. Officials would gain a public basis for frank advice, and leaders would gain informed public judgement that lowers the political risk of acting.

Carries into how decisions are made



Output 3 Durable and adaptive governance

National coordination infrastructure, built over time as a public good, so public engagement can continue from the ground up.

Why it matters

Designed to keep the investment going. Criteria written by the public carry no party's name, which should make them more likely to survive a change of government, and standing machinery would mean the next decision does not start from scratch.

Builds lasting national infrastructure

This initiative is an investment in a thriving Australian democracy and is not intended to replace the important work of our Parliamentarians. A National Conversation could support clearer evidence of what the public will support, and the social licence to act on it. That benefit is not automatic. It depends on a process designed to find out what people think, not to win their endorsement, and on a commitment to respond to what it hears, even where the answer is no. The Lab is treating this as a theory of change, still to be tested with ministers, advisers and public servants.



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I could wallpaper my house with the amount of vision options I have been involved in creating.

Lab contributor

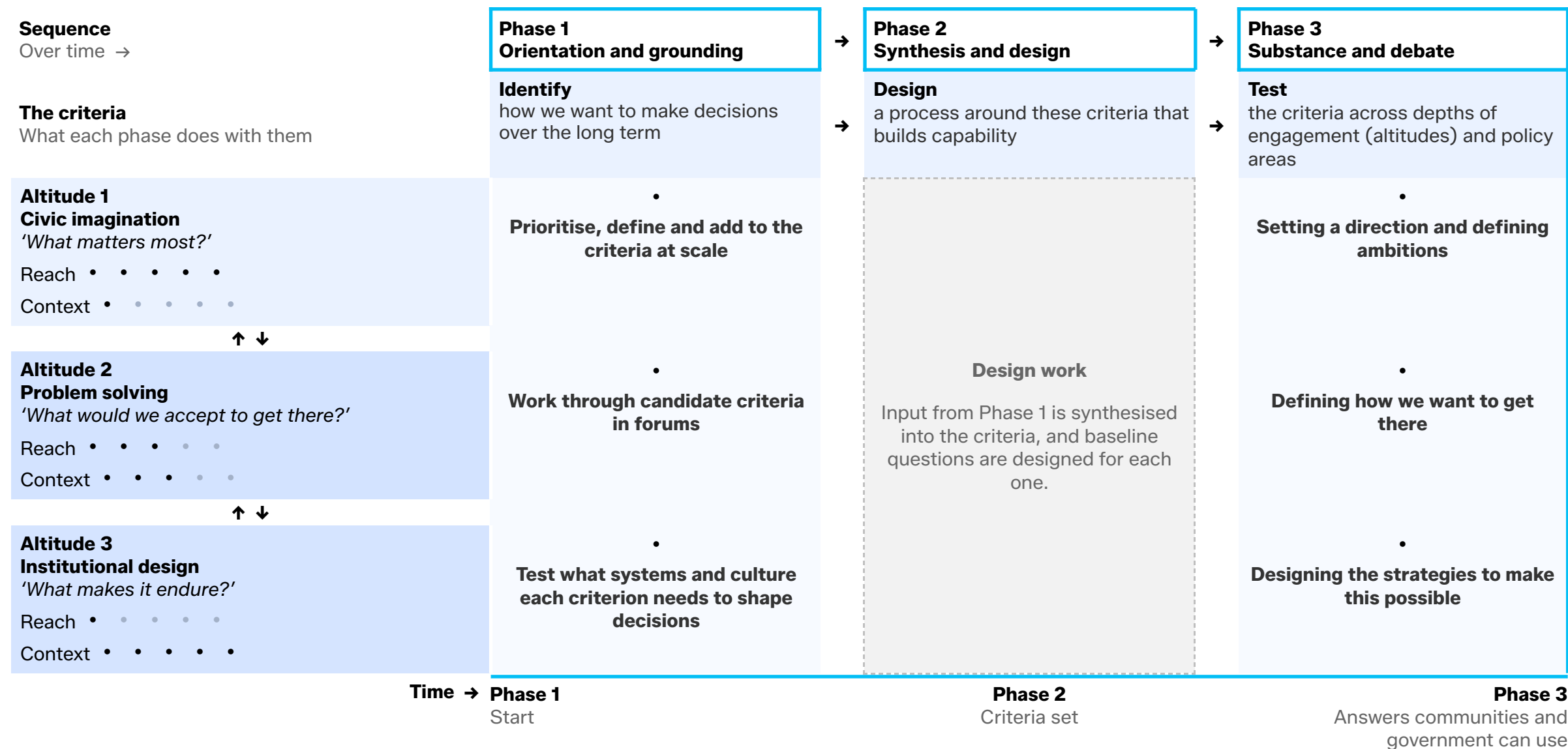
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This is a chance to come together with others in your community and dream.

Lab contributor

Designing a National Conversation

Figure 2. Three phases, run at three altitudes, aim to produce three outputs.



The model

No single method can reach millions of people and weigh hard choices well, so the model combines several methods. A first sketch, drawn from all six Development Tracks through the Architecture for a National Conversation, moves through three phases over time and works at three depths of engagement, called altitudes, at once. The public interest criteria run through all of it. Every box is a draft for the provocations to push against.

A closer look at each phase: what happens, who takes part, and what it produces. The design work underneath runs alongside all three.

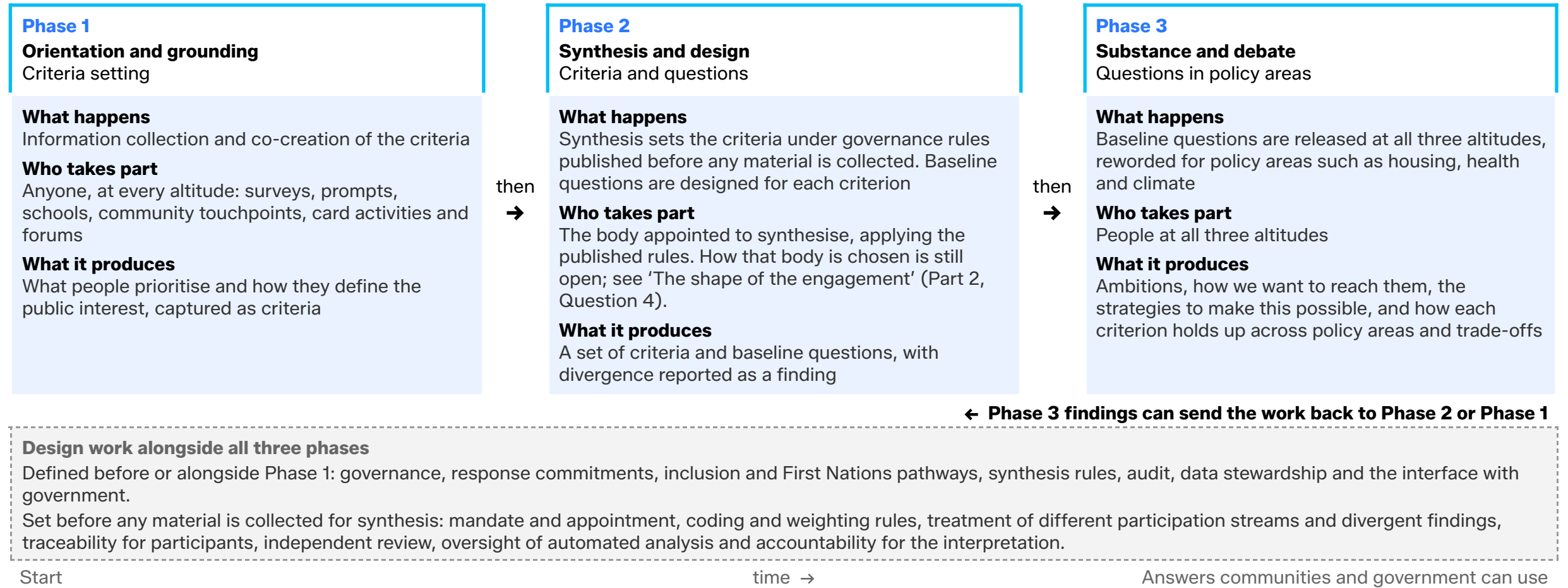


Figure 3. The three phases of the sequence. Each phase starts once the one before it has produced its result. Design work runs alongside all three, and Phase 3 findings can send the work back to an earlier phase.

Working at three altitudes

An altitude is a depth of engagement: how much context an activity can assume. Each form of engagement trades reach for depth. A deliberative panel produces careful judgement from a few people, and the same design stops it scaling. A survey reaches many people, and cannot settle how to reach a goal. Reach falls as context rises. Working at three altitudes lets each contribute what only it can, while the criterion being tested stays fixed.

The working view is that a decision needs all three altitudes. Civic imagination sets a direction and ambitions, but cannot say how to reach them without time and information. Problem solving works out how to get there, but cannot design the institutions to carry it. Institutional design turns public input into durable and adaptive rules and bodies, but has no standing to set the direction.

Each altitude therefore checks the others. A proposal that contradicts the direction set at a lower altitude would go back to that altitude before it is adopted.

Four draft rules govern what each altitude may ask. They reappear among the eight draft design rules later in this report.

- **Non-negotiables come first.** Participants settle what must not be traded before they weigh any trade-off. Non-negotiables sit outside every zone of public tolerance. Asking people to put a price on something they hold sacred produces outrage and no usable answer (Fiske and Tetlock 1997).
- **No question presumes people go without essentials.** No question asks participants to accept that others will go without a home, care or safety.
- **Necessity before settlement.** Problem solving records a tension as avoidable when better sequencing, cross-portfolio work or a longer horizon would remove it. A later decision that treats that tension as unavoidable can then be challenged.
- **No cost at civic imagination.** A cost is put to people only where they have the time and information to weigh it. Civic imagination therefore asks no trade-off questions.

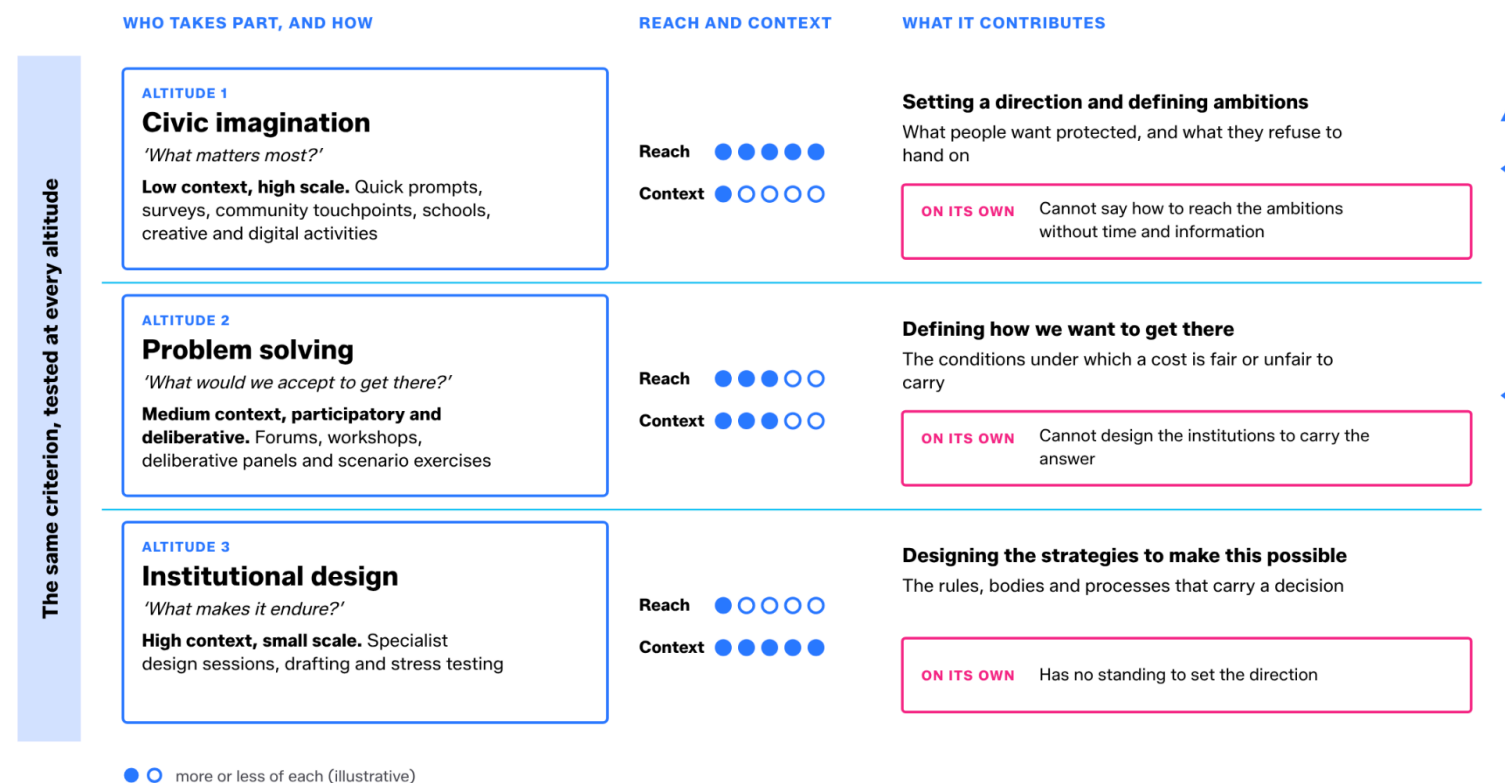


Figure 4. Reach falls as context rises, so each altitude contributes what the others cannot, and a decision needs all three.

Defining success

Two measures of success

Defining success for the Lab means holding two questions at once. One looks at the initiative as a whole and the value it leaves behind. The other looks closely at each engagement and whether it was done well. Both matter, and they're measured differently.

The impact of the Lab

Is the Lab worth doing?

Tracks what the initiative builds and where that could lead over years, not single events. Success here means the goodwill, time and expertise people invest leave communities, practitioners and governments better equipped than before: tested methods, trusted networks and capability that communities, practitioners and governments keep and use. The measure holds whether or not a full National Conversation goes ahead.

The quality of each engagement

Did this engagement work, and did it count?

Sets a shared standard that every engagement is held to, from a Lab pilot in one community to a national deliberation. Each is judged on who took part, how well it served its purpose, what it left in people, whether its outputs can be trusted and what changed as a result. Holding every engagement to the same standard is intended to let results be compared, trusted and built on.

The working assumption is that engagements meeting these criteria are what would produce the lasting value the impact map describes.

Assumptions being watched

The map rests on three early assumptions, each still being tested: that relationships are the infrastructure of change; that showing something can work lowers the political risk of trying it; and that the conditions for leaders to act can be built by deliberate effort. The Lab is tracking its contribution to these outcomes, not claiming them as its own.



What the Lab leaves behind

The Lab's work should be worth doing even if a full National Conversation never happens. This map traces what we're building now, what could follow if conditions allow, and the value that remains for communities, practitioners and governments on every pathway.



The Lab

What we are building now

Methodological outputs

Intended to be practical and ready to use. A tested methodology comprising governance arrangements, the architecture for a National Conversation, engagement methods and proposed criteria for the public interest.

Relational outputs

Networks, trust and participation infrastructure. A national coalition of community organisations, civic leaders and youth networks, alongside enhanced capability across community hosts and partners, ready to sustain a National Conversation if it goes ahead.



A full National Conversation

the larger pathway, if conditions allow

Community visioning

Community members practise imagining a shared future and disagreeing well, working through tensions with mutual respect. The networks and civic capability this builds outlast any single decision.

Public interest stewardship

Criteria for the public interest, defined by the public and tested across contexts and policy areas to inform how long-term decisions are shaped, with support for the development of engagement capability across the public service.

Durable and adaptive governance

National coordination infrastructure, as a public good, for a sustained and adaptive approach to ongoing engagement between the public and government beyond the election cycle.



Alternative impact pathways

Value with or without the full process

Assets given back

To community, practitioners, and state and territory governments, including practical methods and tools local groups can use to start their own processes.

Possible contributions to national reporting

For example, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data, the federal Budget, the Intergenerational Report and Measuring What Matters.

Elevation of local leadership

Local leaders and locally led dialogue carried into national policy conversations.

Strengthening APS engagement capability

Investment in identifying areas to support the policy making process and in developing engagement capability across the public service, bridging the divide between local leaders and national policy making.

Value created through participation, regardless of the final outcome:



Network development and capability building

Finding and connecting the hubs that already exist in universities, councils and community organisations, and building the coordination function to work with and through them.



Strong, connected communities

Strengthened trust and relational networks across generations, regions and communities, built through structured dialogue in which people can disagree without fracturing and differ without disengaging.



Civic agency

The confidence, cross-community perspective and collaborative habits people build by taking part, which help them engage with complex national trade-offs and connect local dialogue to national policy.

What successful engagement looks like

A National Conversation asks a lot of the people who take part and the institutions that commit to it, so success needs to be defined clearly before any engagement begins. These criteria set out how each engagement would be judged: who took part, how well it worked for its purpose, what it left in people, whether its outputs can be trusted and what changed as a result.

Success criteria

What would show it



1 Reach and depth of participation

Who took part, and could they bring their whole selves to it?

- Participant profile against ABS benchmarks, published with the shortfalls, including whether it reached people who would not otherwise have engaged
- Cohort participation reported on its own, not averaged into a national figure
- Self-reported safety collected identically across formats, and a visible record of how complaints, withdrawals and distress were handled



2 Efficacy of the engagement

Assess each engagement against the sub-criterion that matches its purpose, not against all three.

2a Civic imagination

Did it reach people who would not otherwise have engaged, on their own terms?

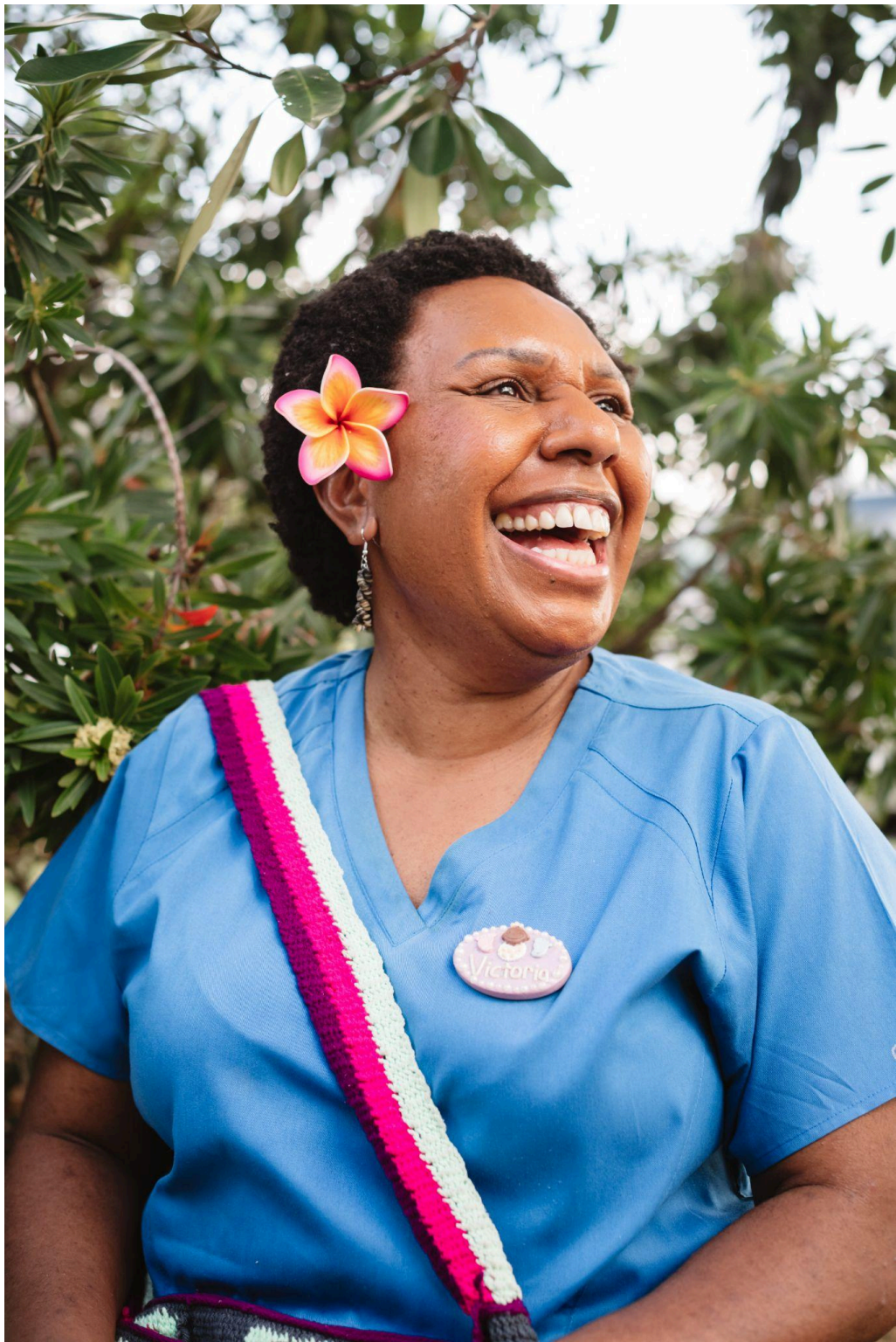
- Reached people who would not otherwise have engaged
- Accessibility as experienced rather than as designed: format, language, cost, care, time
- Room held for dissent, with minority views visible rather than averaged away
- People left able to picture a different future and name their part in it

2b Engaged citizens

Substantive engagement of citizens in policy debate. Was the outcome theirs, was it reasoned, and did it move anything?

- People stood behind it: those who disagreed with the outcome still say they were treated fairly
- It was not steered: random selection, and who set the remit, chose the evidence and picked the speakers, on the record
- People reasoned: working through the evidence and trade-offs rather than restating what they arrived with, with the expertise and time to do it
- Participation demonstrably shaped the framing, criteria, options, decision or reasons given

Success criteria	What would show it
2c Resilient design <i>Could the people who must build, fund, advocate or activate it shape the answer?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Those who would build, fund, regulate or live with it were present early enough to shape the question, not only to react to the answer Practicalities surfaced honestly: cost, legal authority, workforce, data, timing, and what would be given up Named custodianship: who builds it, who advocates for it, who activates it
 3 What it leaves in people <i>Were people changed by taking part, and could they see where their contribution went?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Movement in stated positions, and whether people can name what shifted them, distinguishing considered change from hardening into more extreme versions of existing positions Warmth toward those who disagree, and connections still active at twelve months How many participants can say what happened to their input, how quickly they received a real response, and a published record of what was taken forward, what wasn't, and why Belief that the future can be shaped, at entry, exit and twelve months
 4 Credibility and strength of what it produces <i>Is it believed, and are the outputs sound enough to carry a hard decision?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independent method review published in full, and aggregation methods published before results Perception among non-participants tracked in waves, and whether critics attacked the findings or the method Outputs that name disagreement rather than averaging it away The public interest stewardship criteria back-tested against past decisions, usable inside budget and Cabinet process, auditable
 5 Adoption and change in the wider system <i>Did anyone use it when it told them something they did not want to hear, and what shifted that would not have otherwise?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The instrument carrying the commitment: departmental, ministerial or legislated Instances where the public interest stewardship criteria produced an inconvenient answer, and what happened next Take-up beyond the first instance, a second cycle funded and run, and infrastructure that survives a change of government with clear custodianship Movement in related instruments: the Intergenerational Report, Measuring What Matters, stewardship as APS practice, and others adopting the method Whether setting aside what the process documented carries a visible cost



Part 2

Provocations

Four questions frame the design work. Each is tested through a small number of provocations raised in Workshop 1, setting out what is being tested, where contributors disagree, and where the Lab most needs input.

On the pages that follow

→	Question 1: Should a National Conversation go ahead?	On what basis should it not proceed? Is Australia ready for a single National Conversation? Is Australia ready for the answer it might produce?
→	Question 2: Who takes part, and how?	Honouring local leadership Who is kept out Universal design Technology and voice
→	Question 3: How do many voices become a decision?	Premise of criteria Trade-offs
→	Question 4: Will it make a difference?	Where does the line from voice to decision break? Commissioning and delivery The shape of the engagement Building authority

Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4
The emerging design	Provocations	Prototype	Reference

Part 2 - Question 1

Should a National Conversation go ahead?

Before asking how a National Conversation could work, the Lab is asking whether it should happen at all. These pages test the premise: what would count as a reason not to proceed, whether Australia is ready for a large-scale structured national process or needs to build from local ones, and are leaders ready for what a National Conversation might produce?

This question will include

→ On what basis should a National Conversation not proceed?	What would count as a reason to stop, and why deciding that now protects the idea and the people asked to take part.
→ Go or no-go?	Four questions a National Conversation would need to clear: is it desirable, feasible, ethical, and will it make a difference?
→ Is Australia ready for a single National Conversation?	Whether one national process can hold a fractured sense of national identity.
→ Two routes being weighed	One National Conversation now, or local conversations first, building to national. Both routes are still open.
→ Is Australia ready for the answer a National Conversation might produce?	Trust in the public to weigh hard choices, and the public’s trust that a conversation will lead anywhere.

Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4
The emerging design	Provocations	Prototype	Reference



On what basis should a National Conversation *not* proceed?

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Maybe it is about creating the environment for respectful local, place-based conversations to emerge that can inform a collective national understanding of our priorities, values and vision for the future.

Lab contributor

Every design process builds momentum, and momentum makes it hard to stop. Put plainly: better not to do it than to do it poorly. Deciding now what would count as a reason not to proceed protects the idea, and protects the people asked to take part from a process that cannot keep its promises.

Testing the premise: **is a National Conversation desirable, feasible, ethical and likely to make a difference, and can it honour local leadership?**

One of the first priorities to emerge in the design process is testing the Lab’s own assumptions. Track 4 (Community-led design) is putting that question to community leaders between the workshops, and participants in several Tracks suggested that knowing the conditions under which a National Conversation should not proceed is a valid and responsible outcome. Three things are being tested.

- **What local leadership has already achieved.** The Lab should learn from and build on what place-based work has already achieved, not restate it as new.
- **Whether the Lab’s understanding of the challenge is correct.** The starting view is that Australia has strong local leadership and growing national awareness that decision-making has to change, and that what is missing is the bridge between the two. Does that match what people see on the ground, and if it does not, what is the real problem instead?
- **Whether a National Conversation would actually help.** Is it a plausible contribution to the problems communities face, and how would people want to see it done, or not done?

Consideration: Desirable	Consideration: Feasible	Consideration: Ethical	Consideration: Impact
Whether Australians and their leaders still want a National Conversation once they see what it would ask of them.	Whether the funding, authority and delivery partners exist to run it at the quality the design demands.	Whether it can run without raising expectations it cannot meet, particularly for communities who have been consulted before and seen nothing change.	Whether there is a clear route from what people say to what gets decided.

Go or no-go? A first test

Deciding in advance what would count as a reason not to proceed is one of the first priorities to emerge from the design process. The Lab is drafting a test a National Conversation would need to pass before it begins. It asks whether one would be desirable, feasible, ethical and likely to have an impact. Each criterion carries questions the Lab is still working through. A 'no' on any of them could mean not yet, or not at all.

Should Australia proceed with a National Conversation?			
Desirable Is it wanted?	Feasible Can it be done?	Ethical Should it be done?	Impact Will it matter?
Do Australians still want it, once they see what it asks of them? Does it build on local leadership, rather than duplicate or displace it? Are we ready for an answer we might not like?	Are the money, mandate and partners in place to run it at the quality the design demands? Who commissions it, and who runs it? Can it reach people at scale and still go deep?	Can it keep its promise to the people who take part? Does it include people who rarely take part? Does it remain focused on how we decide, not what we decide?	Is there a clear route from what people say to what gets decided? Will commitments survive a change of government? Does it clear a no-go threshold agreed in advance?

//

For a National Conversation, we are better off not doing it than doing it poorly, because a poor process would further erode the trust we want to build.

Lab contributor

Is Australia *ready* for a single National Conversation?

A single national process assumes a shared sense of 'we'. Participants questioned whether that foundation exists right now, or whether a National Conversation has to be built from local ones.

The state of nationhood

As the figures in Part 1 show, pride in the national way of life has fallen since 2020, and trust in the federal government is low. Participants described belonging that is strongest close to home, in place, community and culture, and thinner at the national level. Alongside Track 6 (Public engagement), the FFT team is charting how Australian national identity has shifted, to shape how a National Conversation should be framed.

A National Conversation could meet this in two ways. It could become one more national process asking people to identify with a story they do not feel part of, or, it could start where belonging is strongest, and give local conversations a way to add up to something national.

Where engagement already happens

The Commonwealth is where a national tool would land, but it is not where most community engagement machinery sits. Councils in New South Wales, Western Australia and Victoria already renew a long-term community vision or plan every four years, as their state's local government law requires (Foundations for Tomorrow, 2026a).

- **Ownership versus coherence.** The more freedom local partners have to adapt, the harder results become to compare across places. Track 4's working position is fixed inquiry questions, with framing, format and language adapted locally within documented bounds.

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I think Australia is increasingly ready, as more and more Australians see and feel that our status quo system is not working for more and more people. The social contract is breaking down. Complacency has made us unfit for a national conversation. But as people are shaken from that complacency, we need to put a hopeful conversation in front of them, before they turn disempowerment into anger.

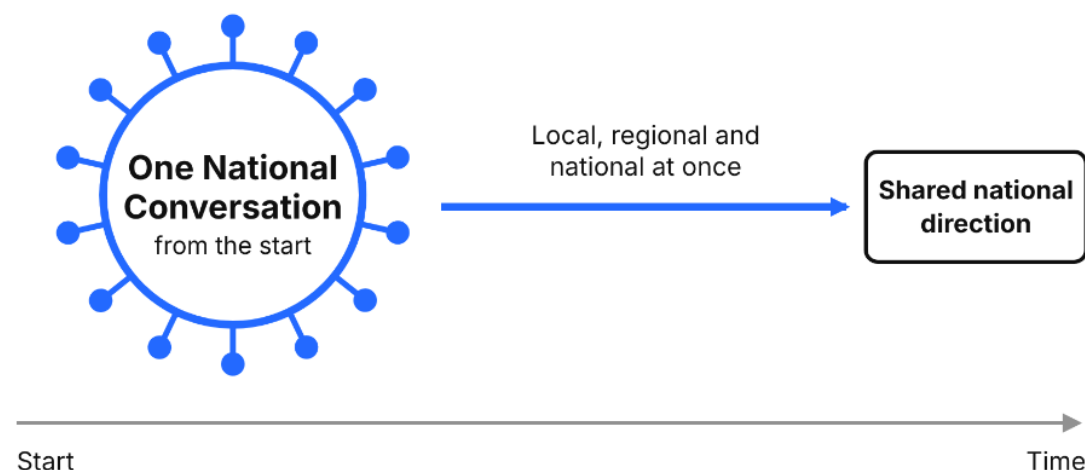
Lab contributor

Question 1 | Should a National Conversation go ahead?

Two routes being weighed

The design assumes the country can hold one National Conversation. Given concerns raised about how fractured national identity is, an alternative raised in design conversations is to start with city and local community conversations, and let a National Conversation build on them once that foundation exists. Both routes are still open.

Figure 5. Both routes aim for the same shared national direction; they differ in where they start and how fast a national process forms.



Route A

One National Conversation now

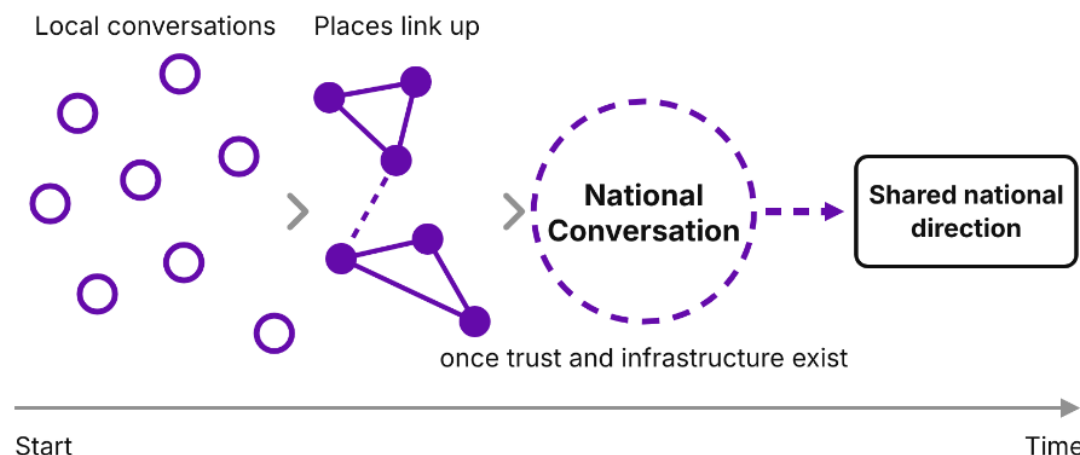
Proceed as designed: a single national process working across depths, from local touchpoints up to national synthesis.

What it offers

- + Matches the design work already done.
- + Avoids an arbitrary choice of which cities or regions go first.

What it risks

- ✗ Asks for national coherence before any shared foundation of trust exists.
- ✗ A fractured starting point could produce a result no group recognises as legitimate.



Route B

Local conversations first, building to national

Run place-based conversations first, and let a National Conversation emerge once the infrastructure and trust exist.

What it offers

- + Fits a pattern in design conversations so far: federal is sticky but a necessary inroad, local government a viable opening, and state and territory governments the layer participants were most wary of.

What it risks

- ✗ Could take years to reach a national process at all.
- ✗ Leaves open which local results feed national ones, and how they would be reconciled.

Is Australia ready for the *answer* a National Conversation might produce?

Trusting the public means accepting that a National Conversation might land somewhere its designers, funders or political champions would not choose. If everyone must be able to see themselves in the result, the result may say very little. If it says something clear, some will not like it.

Radical trust in the public

Two kinds of trust are in play: trust in the public to weigh complex decisions, and the public's trust that a conversation will lead anywhere. The Architecture for a National Conversation (Track 2: Research design, data and ethics, 2026) treats trust in the public as essential, given time, structure, accessible information and clarity on how input will be used. Others doubted that the machinery of decision-making can be opened to everyday Australians at all.

What makes it hard

- **Meeting people where they are.** Setting a conversation up to succeed has to be reconciled with the chance that it lands somewhere its designers did not hope for.
- **Federal focus against local delivery.** Track 1 (Government and policy integration) discussions note that what earns federal attention may make a contribution feel too distant to matter locally.

What the Lab is testing

- **A process designed to find out, not to endorse.** Leaders gain space only from judgement the public recognises as its own.
- **Agreeing in advance what happens to the answer.** A published decision route, and an obligation to respond with reasons, set before anyone takes part.

Consideration: Radical trust

Whether leaders are prepared to act on an outcome they did not expect.

Consideration: Meaning versus consensus

Where the line sits between an outcome everyone can live with and one that says nothing.

Consideration: Follow-through

Whether the skills and the will exist to stay true to what the conversation surfaces.

Part 2 - Question 2

Who takes part, and how?

A National Conversation is only as credible as the people it reaches. These provocations test whether it can build on the local leadership already in place, who is kept out before it begins, and whether technology widens or narrows who is heard.

This question will include

- **Honouring local leadership** Can a National Conversation contribute to a shared national direction, while still honouring local leadership? How could local conversations add up to a national one?
- **Who is kept out** Who is kept out before a conversation begins? What are the social barriers to participation?
- **Technology and voice** Does more technology mean more voice?

Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4
The emerging design	Provocations	Prototype	Reference



Can a National Conversation contribute to a shared national direction, while still honouring local leadership?

Across the country, councils, community organisations and local leaders already run conversations about the future, often with more trust than any national process could claim on day one. A national effort that ignores that work risks duplicating it at best and displacing it at worst. The open question is how those conversations could shape a shared national direction without losing what makes them local.

The assumptions we are testing

Track 4 (Community-led design) is asking local leaders whether a National Conversation would be desirable, feasible and ethical, and whether it could be done in a way that honours their work. The Local Leader Discovery Process is under way between the first two workshops, and what local leaders tell us will shape the next cycle.

Consideration: The right tool

Whether a National Conversation is the right tool at all, or a different response would serve communities better.

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It is primarily about identifying people in community who have existing trust and connections there and finding a way to support them to have local level conversations e.g. through funding, giving them confidence rather than giving them training and a framework.

Lab contributor

How could local conversations add up to a national one?

Most conversations about the future happen locally, and many already work well. Participants asked whether local conversations need to connect to a national one at all, and if so, what would let them shape it without losing what makes them local. Their questions are shared as they were asked.

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If communities are having locally-oriented conversations and making their communities better, do they need to actively connect the local to the national? Or is it better to foster local conversations, and have a small number of people do the systems work to connect local insights to national policy change?

Lab contributor

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How can we ensure that a national conversation is deeply informed by local communities? What has been shown to work, and what new conversations are needed, and where?

Lab contributor

Who is kept out before a conversation begins?

A National Conversation that only hears from people who already take part would repeat the problem it sets out to solve. Track 5 (Accessibility and inclusion) is mapping what stops people taking part, so the design can remove these barriers.



Can I get there, can I stay, can I play, is the question we should be asking ourselves.

Lab contributor

Who is in the room is a design decision. Civic engagement has to seek out a diverse audience whose participation may be brief or irregular, rather than take its participants as given.

Where the design responds

- **Three stages of universal design:** access covers awareness and reach.
- **The Universal Design Ladder:** builds provision for everyone first, so the cost of access falls on the process.
- **Menu of engagement options:** treats the face-to-face, offline pathway as an equal to the digital one.

What Track 5 is mapping

Barriers are experienced differently by each person and community, but are usually systemic: the products of structures not designed to be accessible, inclusive and adaptable across geography and time. A National Conversation that ignores them risks repeating patterns of exclusion, intended or not. Track 5 is exploring how the design could actively remove or work around them, not only 'reach' people.

Unable, or unwilling? A working distinction being tested

Structural barriers

Leave people unable to take part

Mapped by Track 5. Covered on this page.

- **Awareness:** not knowing a process exists or applies to you, or never being asked. The most often reported barrier in the sources reviewed.
- **Cost:** the trip, and the cost and delay of arranging support.
- **Time:** fixed sessions that clash with care or shift work.
- **Distance and transport:** getting there at all.
- **Venues:** inaccessible physical spaces.
- **Language:** no plain language materials or easy way to request an interpreter, including Auslan.
- **Disability:** repeated disclosure, arranging support and providing evidence.
- **Digital access:** devices, connection and confidence online.
- **Socioeconomic disparity and civic literacy:** unequal resources, and unequal familiarity with how decisions are made.

Social barriers

Leave people unwilling to take part

Mapped by Track 6. Explored on the Social barriers page.

- Distrust of institutions
- Past experiences of discrimination
- Stereotyping of particular identities
- A sense the process is not for them

Three stages of universal design

Most efforts to include people stop at getting them through the door. The three stages of Universal Design hold the design to a higher standard: can people get in (access), can they stay as themselves (belonging), and does what they say reach someone who acts on it (influence)? Each stage may have different barriers for different people, for different reasons, and may need a different fix. Checking all three at every point of contact is how a National Conversation could avoid hearing only from the people it would already reach.

Stage	What it covers
Access	<p>Covers awareness and reach.</p> <p>Aware: knowing it exists, knowing it applies to someone like me, knowing what taking part involves, and having actually been asked.</p> <p>Reach: being able to get to the place or the platform, afford the trip, and complete registration.</p> <p><i>In the sources reviewed, awareness is the most often reported barrier, and the one most often designed for last.</i></p> <p>Drawn from: NSW Government (n.d.), Levesque et al. (2013), Disability Standards for Education 2005, Brady, Verba and Schlozman (1995), Commissioner for Children and Young People (SA) (2023)</p>
Belonging	<p>Covers staying and safety.</p> <p>Stay: remaining present and able to keep taking part, across a single session and across a multi-session commitment. Drop-out belongs here and is a measure of what the design assumes about people’s lives, not of interest.</p> <p>Safety: being able to take part as yourself, without masking, without disclosing more than you chose to, and without it costing you something afterwards. Covers who else is in the room, what authority they hold, and what the power differential does to what people are willing to say.</p> <p><i>Participation can cause harm. Cultural load, public exposure, online abuse and being asked to debate your own belonging all have to be designed against.</i></p> <p>Drawn from: CAST (2024), OECD (2022)</p>
Influence	<p>Covers voice and audience.</p> <p>Voice: contributing in my own way, at my own pace, in the form that suits me, and saying the true thing rather than the safe thing.</p> <p>Audience: that contribution being received intact, carrying the same weight as anyone else’s, reaching decision-makers, and visibly affecting something.</p> <p><i>The two fail separately, and in the sources reviewed the second fails more often. A process that delivers voice but fails audience produces exactly the loss of trust a National Conversation would exist to answer.</i></p> <p>Drawn from: European Commission (2022), CAST (2024), IAP2 (2014), Foundations for Tomorrow (2026e)</p>

The Universal Design Ladder

Where something cannot be offered to everyone by default, the Ladder sets the order in which other options are tried, so the cost of access falls on the process rather than the person.

The Ladder helps the Lab apply universal design, and decide what to do when something cannot be offered to everyone. It is being applied in the Lab’s own workshops now and is proposed for a National Conversation.

Each step down transfers work, cost and exposure from the process to the person. For a person with a physical disability, for example, it can mean repeated disclosure, arranging support and providing evidence, inaccessible transport or venues, extra cost and delay, and carrying the consequences when arrangements fail. These burdens compound with each step down.

The cost of access, step by step

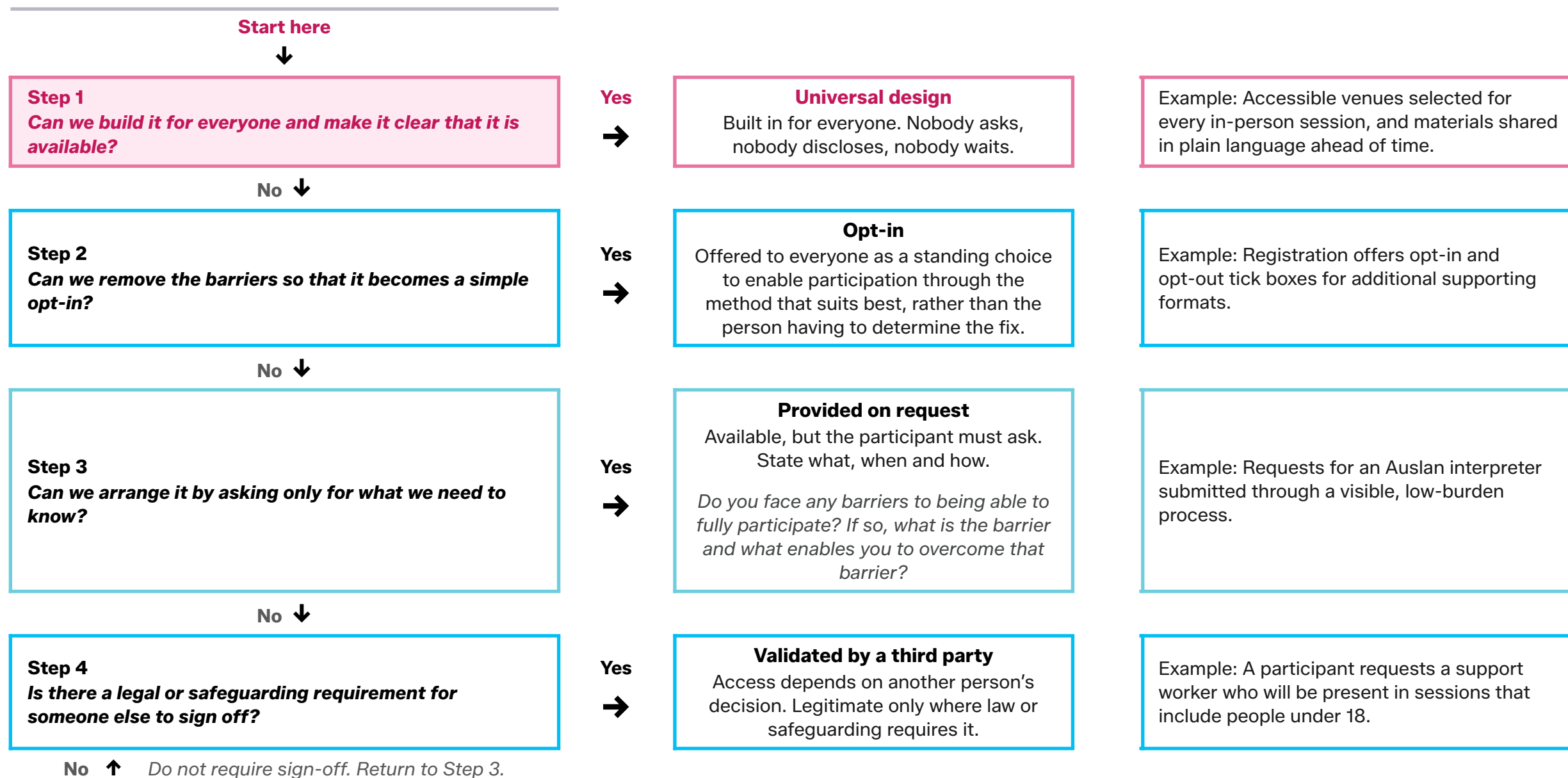
Step 1 keeps the cost of access with the process. Each step below moves more of it onto the person, so a step down is taken only when the step above cannot be met.



Run every stage of taking part through the Ladder



Working down the Ladder



Question 2 | Who takes part, and how?

Social barriers to participation

Who a National Conversation has to reach

Socio-cultural barriers leave people unwilling to take part. Track 6 is mapping them through ten profiles, to check the design speaks to the people it needs, not only those who always take part.

Every Australian voice matters in a National Conversation about our future. These ten profiles represent the main groups the Lab needs to reach, and those it can engage through this work. Each is a state of mind rather than a demographic. Any individual may move between them.

The profiles are not exhaustive, and some Australians may sit beyond what this project can reach with the time and resources available. The Lab expects to start with those already engaged, ready to engage, or doing aligned work, and build towards less engaged Australians as momentum grows.

The profiles guide and test the Lab's communications, alongside the conviction that a National Conversation belongs to everyone.



01 The Organisers

The Australians who think the country can still be improved and are actively working towards improving it.



03 The Risk Readers

The Australians who have seen enough good ideas fall over to know what it takes.



05 The Frontline

The Australians already carrying the cost of systems that were not built with their interests in mind, often while doing the work that keeps the country running.



07 The Institutional Guardians

The Australians who value settings that have proven themselves, seek to safeguard standards and integrity, and believe change should be careful and earned.



09 The Sceptics

The Australians who have watched politics promise and fail to deliver often enough to tune out, and will only lean in when something real is on the table for them or their community.



02 The Political Operators

The Australians who keep the work moving from inside the machinery, persisting in the face of institutions that are slow to move.



04 The Community Glue

The Australians who hold their communities together, and have been 'engaged' so often that they are left fatigued.



06 Australians by Choice

The Australians who made this country their home by choice, and know better than most what it means to belong, and what it takes to build a life here.



08 The Stretched

The Australians working to build a life, holding it all together for the people who rely on them.



10 The Strivers

The Australians who are still trying to get a foothold, whether just starting out or starting again, unsure some days whether they can make it, and looking for a way that feels possible.

Does more technology mean more voice?

Digital platforms promise wide reach at low cost, and the most technical options on the menu can process contributions at a scale no room of facilitators could match. They can also end up hearing most from the people already most comfortable online, and turn a conversation into a data set.

Reach, volume and representativeness measure different things

Reach is how many people knew a process was happening, volume is how many took part, and representativeness is whether they resemble the country. France’s 2019 Grand Débat drew large-scale online participation, yet the regional conferences of randomly selected citizens held within it drew far less public attention (Track 2: Research design, data and ethics, 2026).

A hybrid menu can widen representation, but ‘live’ digital options do not improve accessibility for all. The Lab is considering ‘asynchronous’ digital engagement for people with, for example, high care burdens, shift work or high social anxiety, who may only be able to take part at irregular hours or without the emotional load of a live session.

What Track 3 is testing

- **A hybrid.** The working position treats the offline, face-to-face pathway as an equal to the digital one, not a fallback. Engagement in ‘live’ sessions and through ‘asynchronous’ options such as surveys or self-paced modular engagement are also treated as equal.
- **Synthesis people can inspect.** Taiwan’s vTaiwan process grouped participants by how they voted on each other’s statements, so anyone could see how agreement was found (Track 3: Engagement design and technology, 2026). That property, not the technology, may be what makes a narrowing point defensible.
- **Disclosure before the first pilot.** National-scale synthesis is likely to involve some automated analysis, so what sits over it and what is disclosed needs settling before pilots begin.

Consideration: Reach	Consideration: Synthesis	Consideration: Trust
Who a platform brings in that would not otherwise take part, and who it leaves out.	Whether large volumes of input can become something decision-makers can use, and whose judgement shapes that summary.	Whether participants can see where their contribution went, whatever the technology behind it.

Question 2 | Who takes part, and how?

Menu of in-person and digital engagement options

No single channel reaches everyone. The menu sets out how people could take part, from face to face to fully digital, with international case studies mapped to each tier (Track 3: Engagement design and technology, 2026).¹

	Tier	Option	What it is	Relevant case studies
Most technical	6	Fully custom, integrated platform	Links input, synthesis, policy tracking and accountability in one owned system.	Singapore REACH, Brazil Transparency Portal, Taiwan Join No single precedent. Assembled from parts.
	5	Identity-linked national infrastructure	Verification and authentication layer, not itself deliberative. Years to build.	Estonia e-ID and X-Road, Ukraine Diia, Chile Clave Única
	4	Structured deliberation and synthesis	Platform plus real analytical capability. A two-way loop between citizens and process.	vTaiwan and Pol.is, Chile online consultation data processing, Ireland Mi-Voice
	3	Licensed engagement platform	Configurable SaaS. Structured input collection at moderate scale, needs a facilitation layer.	Spain Decidim, Hamburg DIPAS, Norway citizen panel, Iceland Better Reykjavik, Canada digital statement submissions
	2	Broadcast and campaign channels	Off-the-shelf social and messaging platforms. Wide reach, weak synthesis and feedback loop.	India MyGov WhatsApp, Finland #suomikuvahaaste photo challenge, Wales #futurecymru
Least technical	1	In person, paper and analogue	Physical distribution, manual collection and coding. Census-like reach, no digital access required.	Canada TRC statement gathering, Wales postcards and drawings, Finland Espoo benches

¹ Technological complexity should not be confused with quality of engagement. A more complex option is not necessarily a better one.

Part 2 - Question 3

How do many voices become a decision?

Hearing from many people is only half the task. The harder half is turning what they say into something a decision can be tested against. These provocations test whether the public can set the criteria decisions must meet, and whether naming trade-offs builds credibility or permits harm.

This question will include

→ Premise of criteria	Whether the public can set the conditions a decision must meet without making the decision itself.
→ Is tackling 'trade-offs' an essential consideration, or permission for harm?	Whether naming hard choices builds credibility triggers a scarcity mindset. Contributors disagree.
→ Name the cost, without fixing the trade-off	The working position: eight objections raised in the workshops, and a draft design rule in response to each.
→ What has to exist first	The shared foundations a real trade-off depend on, and the open choice of words.

Part 1

The emerging design

Part 2

Provocations

Part 3

Prototype

Part 4

Reference



Question 3 | How do many voices become a decision?

Premise of criteria

Output 2 rests on an idea still being tested: that the public can set the conditions a decision must meet without making the decision itself. Figure 6 below shows how that might work for one criterion, using a hypothetical housing example.

How, not what?

Some criteria could settle an argument before it starts. A draft criterion such as 'precaution against irreversible harm' could decide much of a climate or land-use debate on its own. Synthesis will need a rule for when a criterion crosses from how the country decides into what it decides. Who should draw that line, and how would you know it had been crossed?

Why criteria, not a list of preferences

A criterion is a question every long-term decision must answer, such as who carries the cost and for how long. A view on one policy says nothing about the next. A criterion is designed to hold across policy areas, including decisions nobody has yet imagined.

- **Contributions could add up.** A community hall in Darwin, a phone survey in Geelong and a Treasury workshop could feed one national result if each tests the same criterion.
- **It could help meet an existing duty.** Since December 2024 the *Public Service Act 1999* has required the APS to support the public interest now and into the future. Criteria written by the public offer one practical way to act on it.
- **Rejection is a finding too.** If the public consistently declines to rank a criterion as important, a justification resting on it is unlikely to persuade.

Still open: how zones are set and validated, and what form review takes when a decision breaches one.

A zone records the conditions under which people accept a cost. It sets no price.
Illustrative example only. Participants set the real conditions at the problem solving altitude.

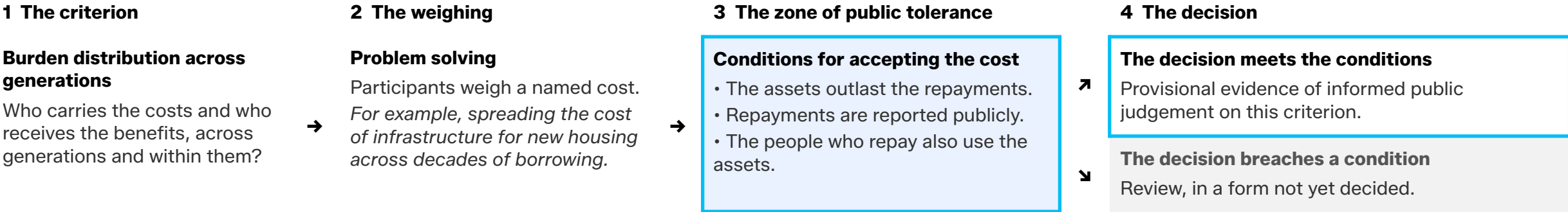


Figure 6. How a zone works, using an illustrative housing example. The conditions shown are hypothetical.

Are 'trade-offs' an essential consideration, or accepting scarcity too soon?

Many decisions about the future involve giving something up, though acting early can sometimes remove the need to. A conversation that avoids trade-offs can leave everyone feeling heard and nothing decided. A conversation built around them can harden divisions and make loss feel like the point. Contributors disagreed on which risk is greater.



Everyone wants to go to heaven but no one wants to die. People don't realise they are linked.

Lab contributor

The language of trade-offs: does naming hard choices build credibility, or trigger a scarcity mindset?

Framing is an exercise of power. The way a question is framed can exclude people, even unintentionally. How hard choices are named is a design decision in its own right.

- **Against leading with them.** Participants in several Tracks felt the word prompts a scarcity mindset, and preferred language about impact, causation and what leaders should stand for. Some issues were judged too morally loaded for trade-off logic at all.
- **For keeping them.** Practitioners and government representatives saw naming costs as a mark of credibility. Representatives of historically marginalised communities saw it as a defence against 'silent trade-offs' landing on people without a say.
- **Agreement in the abstract is cheap.** Principles such as fairness between generations attract broad support. The difficulty appears when a principle meets a cost: most Australians support the energy transition, yet 64% disagree with paying more for electricity to achieve it (CSIRO 2024).

Trade-off language remains an open question, and the Lab will keep working on it.

Consideration: Silent trade-offs

The choices made by default when a process avoids naming what is being given up.

Consideration: Baking in the trade-off

Designing choice into the process so people weigh real options rather than a wish list.

Consideration: Generative framing

Whether starting from what people want, rather than what they must sacrifice, builds the trust a harder conversation needs later.

Name the cost, without fixing the trade-off

Many long-term decisions impose a cost on someone. The working position is that a National Conversation should name each cost, who carries it and who decides, without fixing any trade-off in advance. A value people state and a cost they will accept are different findings, and a conversation that only measures the first has not measured the second.

Objection raised in the workshops

Talk of loss narrows thinking. Trade-off language can trigger a scarcity mindset that crowds out the long view community visioning needs.

Fixed trade-offs hide better options. Opening with a trade-off can miss options that would remove the need to trade at all.

A named trade-off can become a licence for harm. 'There was no alternative' is used as a justification as often as a finding.

Some things must not be priced. Asking people to weigh a sacred value against money produces outrage, not answers.

It can divide people alive today. A conversation built around who loses now sets groups against each other.

It can undo the long-term vision. Testing a vision against short-term trade-offs lets short-term interests win again.

It can repackage old compromises. Framing decisions as trade-offs can repeat the compromises that produced today's problems.

It can justify decisions already made. A tool that records trade-offs after the fact can defend a decision but not shape it.



We don't have to commit to a zero sum game, but we must grapple with trade-offs. Trade-offs exist even if it is not a zero sum game.

Lab contributor

Draft design rule in response

- **No cost at civic imagination.** Early questions never ask people to choose between groups or accept a cost. Constraints enter later, as assumptions people can contest.
- **Necessity before settlement.** The design asks whether a trade is necessary before it asks how to settle one.
- **A test, never a licence.** Criteria set tests a decision must pass before a loss is imposed, and the record states what was protected.
- **Non-negotiables come first.** A decision that fails to protect a non-negotiable fails, however well it weighs trade-offs. Non-negotiables sit outside every zone of public tolerance.
- **No question presumes people go without essentials.** No question asks participants to accept that others will go without a home, care or safety.
- **Conditions made explicit.** People are asked to state the conditions they attach to their aspirations.
- **Constraints are broader than money.** Workforce, time, land, attention and political capital bind decisions however spending is financed.
- **Direction-neutral instruments.** Cards are designed so that choosing one does not signal which way a participant leans; how the prototype deck does this is still being tested.

What has to exist first

People can weigh a real trade-off more readily when some shared foundations are in place.

A trusted information environment

Regional media and research written for a general audience.

Civics and adult education

A working sense of how decisions actually get made.

A shared factual ground

Facts settled before the debate, so it turns on the choices before us, not the numbers.

A habit of constructive deliberation

About the long term, built alongside the process.

Local trust built on reciprocity

Repaired first where government has been extractive.

Whether a National Conversation builds these before it runs, alongside it, or later is unresolved.

Open choice: the word used with participants

'Trade-offs' remains the technical term. Whichever word is chosen with participants must still ask them to name a cost. Candidate words:

hard choices	competing goods	conscious choices	weighing what matters	what we are willing to give up	priorities under constraint
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Use 'trade-offs'

For: Practitioners and government see the term as realistic and credible.

Against: It prompts people to think in terms of scarcity. Some participants prefer language about impact, causation and what leaders should stand for.

Use an alternative term

For: It avoids prompting a scarcity mindset and still asks participants to name costs.

Against: A softer word risks weakening the question until it no longer names a cost.

Part 2 - Question 4

Will it make a difference?

Australians have been consulted many times and often seen little change. These pages trace where the line from voice to decision breaks, and what would hold it. They cover who commissions a National Conversation and who must answer, how the narrowing is made visible, and what keeps commitments in place after an election.

This question will include

→ Where does the line from voice to decision break?	Three places the line tends to break, and the tensions being worked through.
→ How a National Conversation could turn the loop	An engagement loop being tested, where each turn could lower the political risk of acting on the long term.
→ Commissioning and delivery models for a National Conversation	Who could commission and run a National Conversation, and the trade-off between independence and influence.
→ The shape of the engagement	Five common patterns for how engagement widens and narrows. None has been chosen.
→ Building authority	Six draft building blocks for the authority to act on what a National Conversation produces.

Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4
The emerging design	Provocations	Prototype	Reference



Question 4 | Will it make a difference?

Where does the line from voice to decision *break*?

Many people know the experience of making a submission and never hearing what came of it. A National Conversation could only earn participation if people can see a line from what they say to what gets decided. That line tends to break in three places: at the start, when no one with authority is obliged to answer; in the middle, when many voices are narrowed out of view; and at the end, when commitments reset with each election.

//

The country continues slowly drifting away from what the people want and towards what the powerful want.

Lab contributor

Tensions being worked through

- **Commitment to listen, or commitment to act.** Asking government to commit to act risks refusal; asking only that it listens is achievable. The working position is to state publicly the minimum commitment sought.
- **Independence, or policy relevance.** The more independent the process, the harder a policy response is to secure; the closer to government, the more its legitimacy is questioned.
- **Feedback that scales.** Consultation fatigue comes partly from engagement that never reports back. The working position is one guaranteed return to every participant.

A third option being explored: Between listening and acting sits an obligation to respond: to consider findings on the record and give reasons. In Ostbelgien (the German-speaking Community of Belgium), a parliamentary committee must consider every recommendation from the citizens' assembly with the responsible minister, and give reasons for any it rejects (Parliament of the German-speaking Community 2019).

Consideration: Obligation

Whether whoever receives the output must respond formally, in public, and while decisions are still being made.

Consideration: Visibility

Whether people can see who narrows their input, and under what rule.

Consideration: Durability

Whether commitments survive a change of government, or reset with every election.

Question 4 | Will it make a difference?

How a National Conversation could intercept a vicious cycle

Long-term policies impose visible costs now for uncertain gains later. Informed public judgement could change that calculation, lowering the political risk of acting and raising the visible cost of not acting. The loop starts with investment in engagement capability across the public service, the point a National Conversation can act on directly, and each turn could make the next one cheaper. The Lab is treating this as a theory of change, still to be tested with ministers, advisers and public servants.

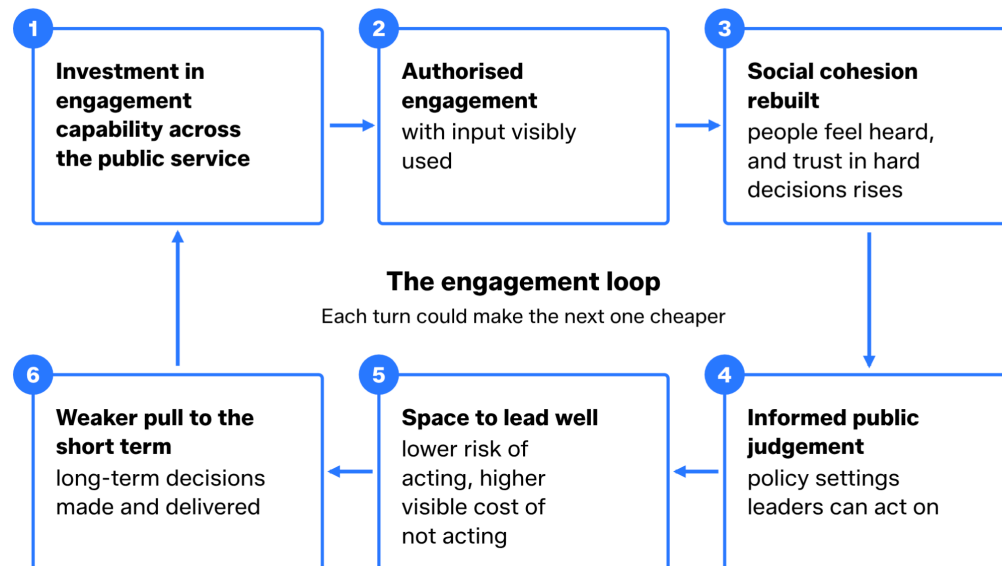


Figure 7. The engagement loop being tested: authorised engagement, visibly used, could make each long-term decision less risky than the last.

Source: Track 2: Research design, data and ethics (2026).

What keeps the loop turning

- 1 Investment that outlasts one process.** Capability is lost when engagement winds down. Output 3 (durable and adaptive governance) would keep it in use between conversations.
- 2 Feedback closed every time.** People who see what happened to their input are more likely to take part again. Consultation fatigue can start where they do not.
- 3 A process designed to find out, not to endorse.** Engagement seen as predetermined raises political risk. Leaders gain space only from judgement the public recognises as its own.

Why this could work

- Most Australians want a greater say.** Most Australians want a greater say: 65% want ordinary citizens to have a much greater say in setting core policy priorities (Centre for Policy Development, 2026).
- Deliberation can give leaders room to move.** Ireland's Citizens' Assembly let a governing party consider a contested constitutional question before taking a position, and the 2018 referendum that followed passed with 66.4% (RTÉ News 2018).

The full analysis is set out in Track 2: Research design, data and ethics, Architecture for a National Conversation (Deep dive 4), available from the Lab secretariat on request.

Commissioning and delivery models for a National Conversation

The first break comes at the start, when no one with authority is obliged to answer. A well-designed conversation still needs someone with the standing to call it and an obligation to answer it. The models below map who could commission a National Conversation and who could run it, from a government department to a coalition of local organisations. Each choice carries a trade-off between independence and influence. A process close to government may find it easier to be heard in Cabinet, and harder to be trusted by Australians who feel government has not listened before. Read against all three breaks, one option, shared mandate locally delivered, appears to address all three. It is also likely to be the slowest to assemble, and is untested.

		Who commissions it			
		Government	Parliament ²	Government and community jointly	Civil society
Who runs it	One national body	<p>Government-run</p> <p>A department, commission or statutory body designs the process, funds it, runs it and reports through government.</p> <p>Strengths: direct route into budget and legislation, with resourcing, data and reach available from commencement.</p> <p>Constraints: independence is contested, scope is set by the government of the day, and continuity is tied to the electoral cycle. Low trust in government can attach to the process, and commitments may go undelivered.</p>	<p>Parliament-commissioned</p> <p>Parliament sets the question by resolution and delegates delivery to an independent body, under terms fixed before commencement.</p> <p>Strengths: aims to outlast a change of government. A response obligation can be drafted into the commission.</p> <p>Constraints: the response obligation exists only if written into the terms. Parliament can legislate on the findings, but funding and delivery depend on the government of the day. Low public trust in parliament can also attach to the process.</p>	<p>Shared mandate, single body</p> <p>Government or parliament and a community coalition co-sign the terms. One body runs the process under them.</p> <p>Strengths: legitimacy on both sides, and a decision route agreed before participation is sought.</p> <p>Constraints: negotiation is slow and can fail publicly. The community signatory has to be a standing coalition with a mandating procedure.</p>	<p>Independent convenor</p> <p>A civil society body designs and runs the process. Government or parliament receives the output without owning it.</p> <p>Strengths: independence is demonstrable. Work commences without a government decision.</p> <p>Constraints: no party carries a response obligation. Legitimacy and funding are built from the base.</p>

² Government denotes the executive: ministers, departments and the agencies they control. Parliament denotes the legislature, acting by resolution of one or both houses. A government commission can be wound up by the office-holder. A parliamentary commission aims to outlast a change of government (committees lapse at dissolution and would need re-establishing) and carries no funding or program power, which remains with the executive.

		Who commissions it			
Who runs it	Many local organisations	Government	Parliament ³	Government and community jointly	Civil society
		Community seed grants Government sets a common design and funds local organisations to deliver it in their own places. Strengths: reach into places a national body cannot access, local trust carrying recruitment, and a shared design keeping findings comparable. Constraints: quality varies between hosts, timelines run shorter than the work requires, and delivery risk sits with local organisations.	Parliament-commissioned, locally hosted <i>Partial precedent</i> Parliament sets the question and the response obligation. Local organisations host the conversations. Strengths: multipartisan cover combined with local reach, and a receiving body intended to outlast the commissioning parliament. Constraints: no precedent outside constitutional transitions. Unless created by statute, funding routes through the executive, which reopens scope.	Shared mandate, locally delivered Terms co-signed before commencement, delivery held by local hosts, reception written into a standing parliamentary mechanism. Strengths: reach and a receiving body in a single design. On early mapping, the one position that may address all three failure points identified earlier in this section. Constraints: highest assembly cost, longest lead time, untested end to end.	Community conversations Multiple organisations run conversations under a shared framework and pool findings. Ownership is distributed. Strengths: distributed ownership, scale at low central delivery cost, partners carrying existing audience trust, and continuity through a change of government. Constraints: consistency between partners is difficult to hold and ownership of findings is contestable.

³ Government denotes the executive: ministers, departments and the agencies they control. Parliament denotes the legislature, acting by resolution of one or both houses. A government commission can be wound up by the office-holder. A parliamentary commission aims to outlast a change of government (committees lapse at dissolution and would need re-establishing) and carries no funding or program power, which remains with the executive.

The shape of the engagement

Every engagement widens and narrows. The second break in the line from voice to decision comes in the middle, when many voices are narrowed out of view. Any process that turns many voices into a decision has to narrow somewhere. What matters is who narrows, under what rule, whether those not selected can see it happen, and whether the result has somewhere agreed to land. None of the five shapes on these pages has been chosen.

The tension being weighed

Visibility against cost. The cheapest shapes reach many people and are politically comfortable, but narrow out of public view. People cannot trace what they said, and the result arrives with no constituency behind it.

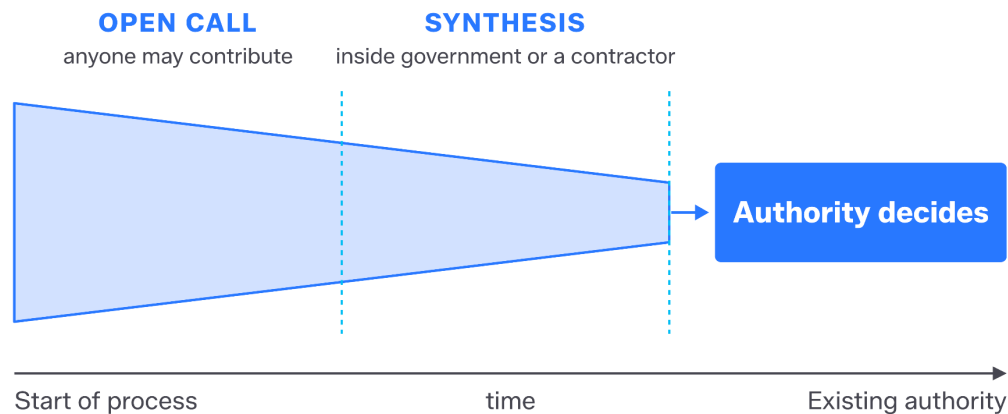
Logistics and attention. Shapes that return to the whole public at each stage are fairer, but multiply cost and logistics, and need public attention that is hard to sustain over years.

Political will. A result only lands if a route to a decision is agreed before it starts. Without one, even a strong process ends with a report and nowhere to send it.

What is feasible now. One option being explored keeps the simpler shapes but stops the narrowing ending engagement abruptly, so people can keep contributing and watch findings develop.

The funnel

Anyone can contribute, then synthesis happens out of view and an existing authority decides. Contributions cannot be traced back.

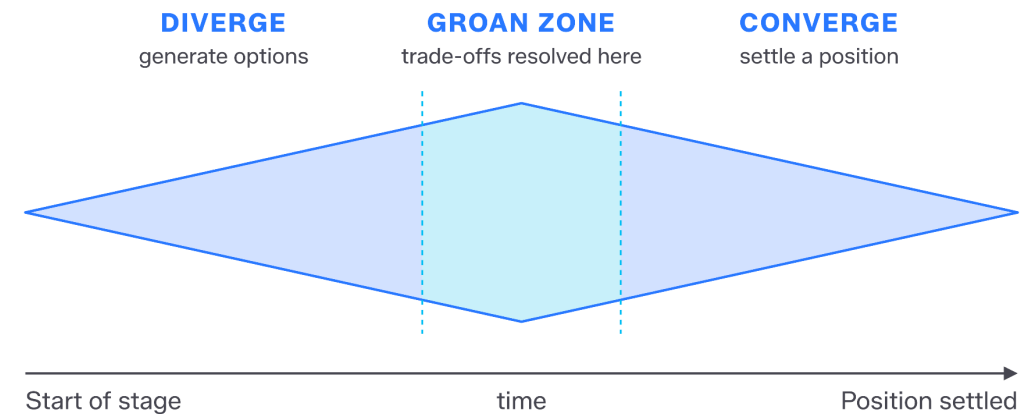


What it delivers: Wide, visible reach at low cost per person.

What it costs: Narrowing happens out of view, so people cannot trace their input.

The diamond

The same people generate options, work through trade-offs in the middle, then settle a position.



What it delivers: Time to work through trade-offs together.

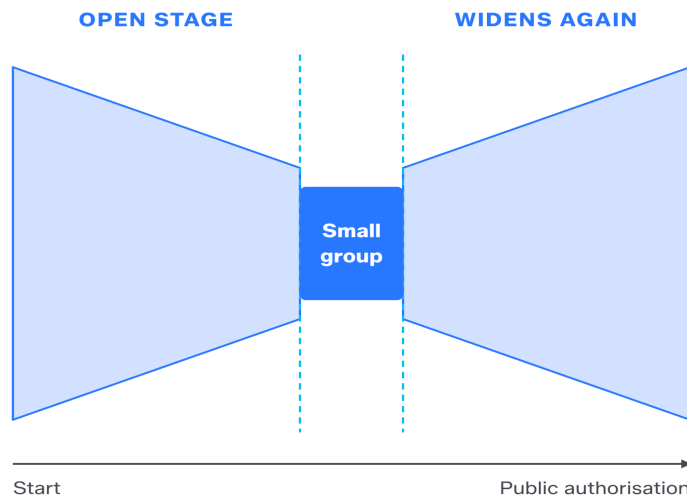
What it costs: Works inside one stage, and the middle has to be resourced deliberately.

Question 4 | Will it make a difference?

The shape of the engagement, continued

The bow tie

A wide-open stage narrows to a small representative body, then widens again for public authorisation.

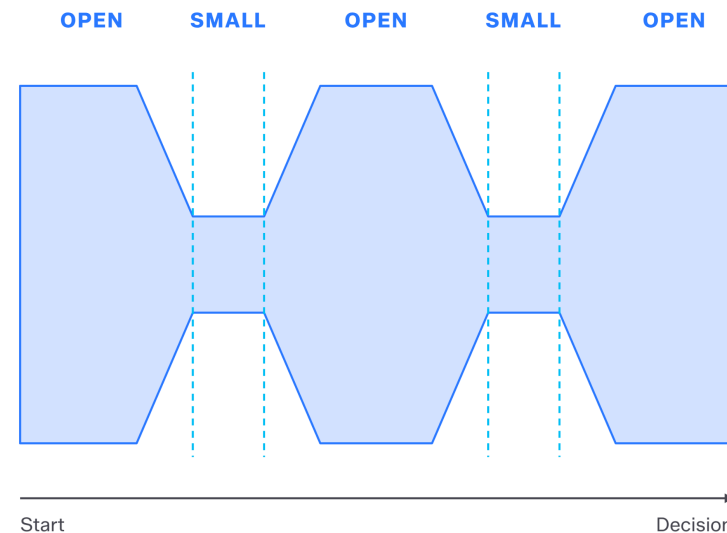


What it delivers: The one shape of the five that aims to produce both considered judgement and public authorisation.

What it costs: Likely the most expensive and fragile, and it depends on the narrow stage being visible.

The wave

Open stages alternate with small groups, each open stage reviewing what the last small group produced.

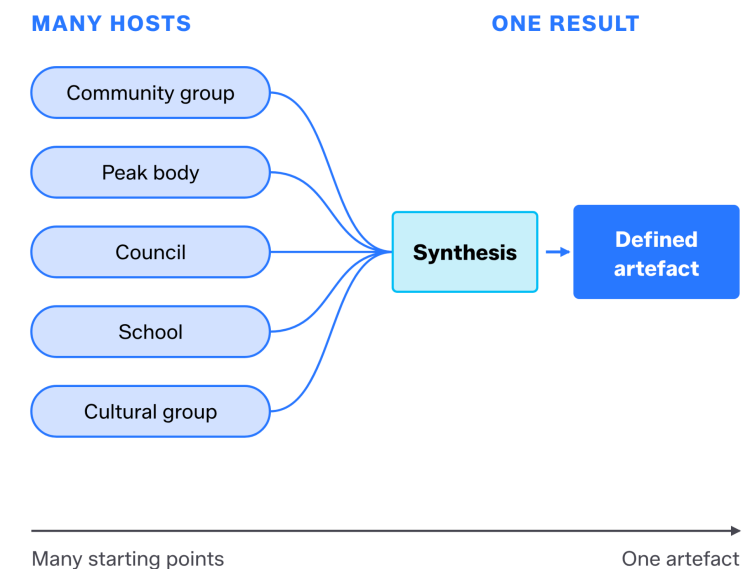


What it delivers: No single narrowing carries all the risk.

What it costs: Every narrowing needs its own published rule and its own route back to the public.

The cascade

Many parallel conversations, each under its own banner, narrow through synthesis into a defined artefact, not through selection of people.



What it delivers: Reaches people through hosts they already trust.

What it costs: Results vary with each host and facilitator, and depend on how the synthesis is edited.

Building authority

Six building blocks that build a National Conversation's authority with communities and decision-makers

The third break comes at the end, when commitments reset with each election. The authority to act on what a National Conversation produces will not appear by itself. The first four of these six draft building blocks would need to be in place before people are asked to take part. Each carries a draft test of when it is in place.

1. Model design

Establishing a published model that specifies the decision route and the means by which alternatives are generated before preferences are sought.

What this enables: assessment of the process against its own stated route, not its outputs alone.

In place when: a published model names the receiving body and the response obligation it will seek.

2. Coalition building

Establishing a community counterparty with sufficient standing and reach to hold authority alongside government.

What this enables: a signature on the community side that carries a mandate.

In place when: a standing coalition has an agreed procedure for mandating a signatory.

3. Terms of reference

Securing a written instrument, negotiated in public and signed by both parties, that fixes scope and decision rights before participation is sought.

What this enables: participants can see what is open, who decides, and what happens to what they contribute.

In place when: a signed instrument fixes scope, decision rights and the response obligation, and an independent evaluation has been commissioned.

4. Resourcing

Ensuring that parties critical to delivery have access to, and agency over, the resources required to deliver the model.

What this enables: local hosts able to carry the work at the quality the design assumes, without absorbing its cost.

In place when: funding is allocated to hosts for the full duration, and the allocation is published.

5. Engagement

Delivering the conversation through local hosts to a shared design, under the terms of reference.

What this enables: reach into places a central body cannot access, with findings that remain comparable across them.

In place when: findings are comparable across sites, participants can see the terms of reference, and the process is visible beyond those taking part.

6. Consideration and response

Securing an obligation on a multipartisan mechanism to consider the findings on the record and account for what it does with them.

What this enables: a decision, with reasons, that participants and the public can hold to.

In place when: reasons are given for any recommendation declined or modified within a defined period, with published progress reporting against those accepted.



Part 3

Prototype

Most public debate argues about decisions and never reaches the criteria behind them. The criteria deck, an early tool being tested with participants, turns Output 2 into something people can hold: cards for weighing those criteria and seeing where they pull against each other. It will change as it is used in workshops and pilots.

On the pages that follow

→ Criteria deck

A card deck for weighing the criteria that shape decisions. Drafted to make an unstate layer of decision-making visible and open to discussion.

Part 1

The emerging design

Part 2

Provocations

Part 3

Prototype

Part 4

Reference

Criteria deck

A card deck for weighing the criteria that shape decisions

Policy decisions rest on criteria, and many of them go unstated. Which criteria are applied, and how conflicts between them are resolved, shapes what a decision delivers and for whom. Public debate rarely reaches this layer. Attention tends to fall on the decision itself rather than on the tests it was held to.

The criteria deck brings that layer into the open. Seventy-five criteria for good decision-making, drawn from Australian practice and international governance frameworks, are set out on individual cards that participants can sort, rank, pair, set aside and challenge. Nine blank wildcards allow participants to add criteria the deck does not contain. The deck serves four purposes.

- 1. A participatory way to weigh criteria.** Participants decide which criteria they want shaping decisions, rather than responding to options framed in advance by others. Handling physical cards is intended to lower the barrier to taking part, and the cards show participants the range of criteria that shape decisions.
- 2. Understanding of the tensions between approaches.** Each card identifies the criteria it most often pulls against. Working with the cards is meant to show how deliberate, and at times imperfect, policy decision-making is, and to build the habit of questioning the criteria behind a decision as well as the outcome.
- 3. Faster conversations about criteria.** The cards give a group a shared vocabulary for concepts that would otherwise take a long time to define, so a single session can reach substantive discussion of the tensions and points of conflict in policy-making.
- 4. Insight into the preferences of Australians and the public interest.** Patterns across sessions, including which criteria are prioritised, how tensions are resolved and what wildcards introduce, generate evidence about what participants consider the public interest to require. Subject to research design and ethics approval, that evidence may inform Phase 2 synthesis and the criteria that underpin public interest stewardship.

1 Suit

The group the card belongs to, shown by name, icon and colour.

2 Criteria name

The name of the criterion being tested.

3 Question

A plain English question to ask out loud about the decision.

voice

1

2

3

4

5

6

Participation

Did the people affected help shape this, or were they only asked to comment once it was finished?

Definition: Involves the people affected from the outset rather than only consulting them on a finished proposal, and reports back on what was done with their input.

Where a 'good' decision falls short

A new national disability service model designed by experts and released for a short comment period, where the people who use those services had little say and never hear what was taken from their submissions.

May pull against

Timeliness, Efficiency, Simplicity

4 Definition

A one-sentence test that a decision can be held against.

5 Example

Where an otherwise 'good' decision would fall short on this criterion.

6 May pull against

The criteria most likely to come into tension with this one.

Part 3 | Prototype

A card deck for weighing the criteria that shape decisions



Figure 8. Draft cards from the prototype deck, shown front and back. Each card names a criterion, the question it asks, where a good decision can still fall short, and the criteria it may pull against.

Your wildcard

What test is missing from the deck? Name it in three words or fewer. If a decision went wrong, what would you say it failed to consider? Which card would you trade away to get more of it?



Part 4

Reference

Terms used throughout this report, how the Lab is governed, and the sources behind it, so readers can respond to the substance without first decoding the language.

On the pages that follow

→	Glossary	Short definitions of the structures, roles documents and terms named in this rep
→	How the Lab is governed	The collaborative leadership model, and nine principles that underpin it.
→	References	Lab outputs and other sources cited in t report.

Part 1 The emerging design	Part 2 Provocations	Part 3 Prototype	Part 4 Reference
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Glossary

Short definitions of the structures, roles and documents named in this report.

How the Lab is organised

- **Lab Governance Council:** The Lab's deliberative body, providing strategic direction and integrity guardianship. Its authority is deliberative; legal and fiduciary authority sits with the FFT Board.
- **Research Ethics and Cultural Integrity Group:** The home for ethics, research practice and conduct across all six Development Tracks, with two subcommittees.
- **First Nations Data Sovereignty Subcommittee:** Composed exclusively of First Peoples, it holds authority over data involving First Nations knowledge, on the basis of free, prior and informed consent.
- **Intercultural Engagement and Ethics Subcommittee:** Guides the intercultural protocols of the Lab.
- **Development Tracks:** The six workstreams of the Lab's design work. They run at the same time and feed into one another: 1 Government and policy integration; 2 Research design, data and ethics; 3 Engagement design and technology; 4 Community-led design; 5 Accessibility and inclusion; 6 Public engagement and communications.
- **Track Co-Chairs:** Subject-matter experts who lead each Track, give strategic guidance and review track materials before they reach the full membership, within parameters set by the Council and Secretariat.
- **Core Partners:** Individuals or organisations working directly inside one or more Development Tracks over the life of the Lab, through the kick-off and four workshops.
- **Strategic Advisors:** Subject-matter experts who contribute across the Tracks rather than inside one, at the depth of a Core Partner, on terms shaped case by case.
- **Expert Advisory Network:** Experts and leaders who stay close to the design without attending live sessions, reviewing outputs and giving ad hoc advice.
- **Community Network:** Councils, community organisations, youth groups and local leaders who connect their networks, take part in engagement and may host pilots.

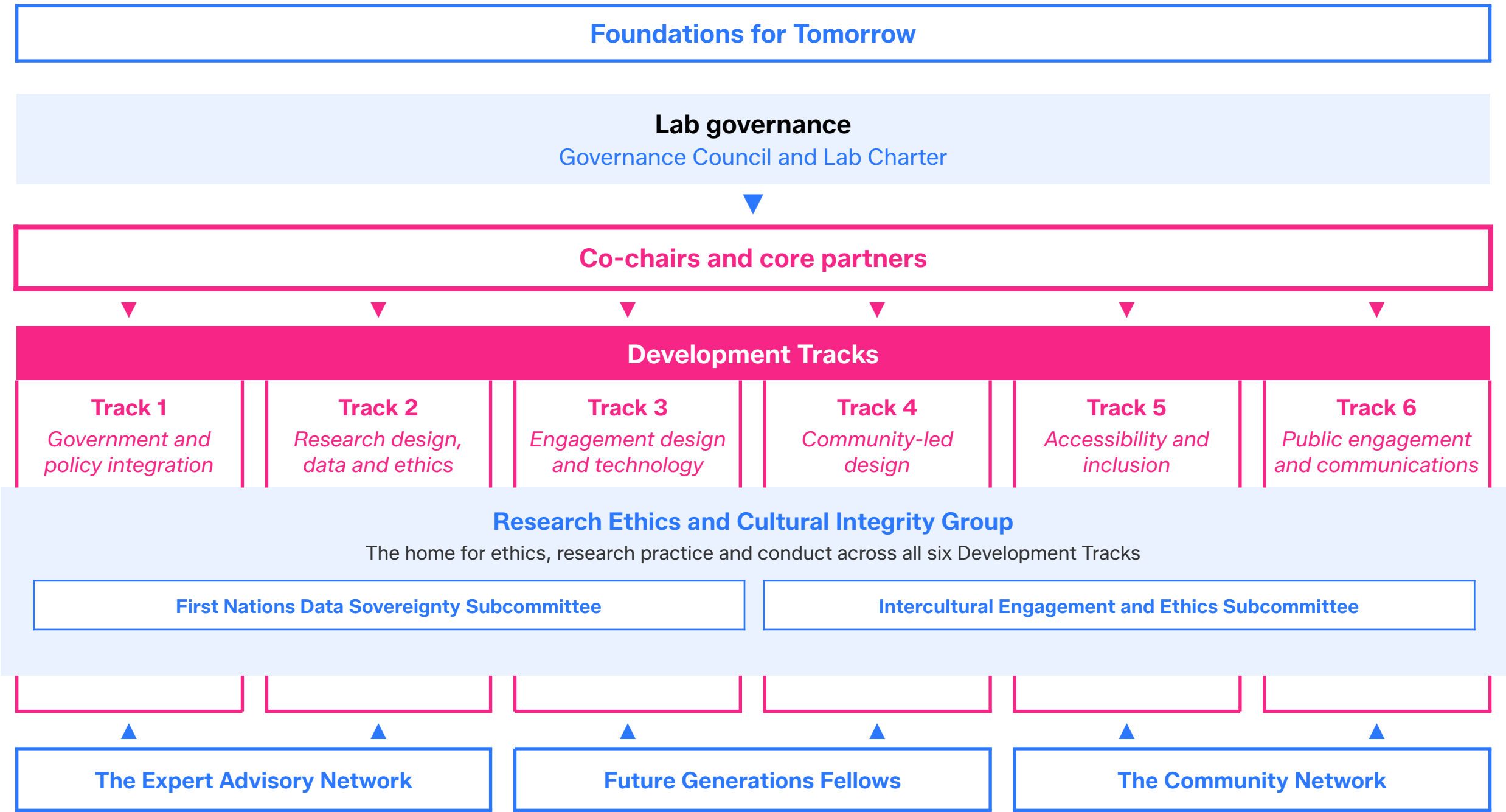
Terms used in this report

- **National Conversation:** A large-scale, structured, collaborative process that would bring everyday Australians together to explore what matters most, identify what is shared and build a common direction. It would come after the Lab, if it goes ahead.
- **The Lab:** The National Conversation Development Lab: the participatory design process developing and testing a model for a National Conversation. It is not the National Conversation itself.
- **Participatory:** Describes how the Lab works: people shape the design as it develops, rather than being consulted on a finished proposal.
- **Architecture for a National Conversation:** The Lab's working design document for the model, drawing on all six Development Tracks.
- **Outputs:** The three kinds of lasting value the design aims for: community visioning, public interest stewardship, and durable and adaptive governance.
- **Community visioning:** People imagining a shared future and disagreeing well, building networks and civic capability that outlast any single decision.
- **Public interest stewardship:** Communities defining the public interest as criteria to guide long-term decision-making.
- **Durable and adaptive governance:** Laying the building blocks, over time, for national coordination infrastructure as a public good.
- **Phases:** The three stages a National Conversation would move through over time: orientation and grounding, synthesis and design, and substance and debate.
- **Altitudes:** Three depths of engagement that run at once, each trading reach for depth: civic imagination, problem solving and institutional design.
- **Public interest criteria:** Draft questions that every long-term decision would answer, to be set by the public and designed to hold across policy areas.
- **Go or no-go tests:** The four tests a National Conversation would need to pass before it proceeds: whether it is desirable, feasible and ethical, and whether it would make a difference.
- **Zone of public tolerance:** The conditions under which the public would accept a cost from a decision. It records conditions, not a price.
- **Trade-off:** Giving one thing up to gain another, often something now for something later. Whether to use the word with participants is still open.
- **Provocation:** A tension raised by participants and set out for readers to respond to.

- **Design cycles:** The four cycles of design work between August 2026 and mid-2027, each built around a workshop and each building on what the last one learned.
- **Community pilots:** Tests of elements of the model with everyday Australians, run by community leaders, civil society organisations and parliamentarians, with insights fed back into the Lab.
- **Governance and Operating Charter:** The document that sets out how the Lab is governed, its strategic objectives and its operating principles.
- **Terms of Reference:** The terms that set the scope and conduct of participation in the Lab. Amendments sit with the FFT Board.
- **Operating principles:** The nine principles in the Charter that guide how the Lab deliberates, decides and presents itself. They apply equally to the Council, Secretariat, Tracks and Core Partners, and are summarised at the back of this report.
- **Parliamentary Group for Future Generations:** A group of parliamentarians from both houses, convened by FFT, and one of the first readers of this report.
- **Core Advisors:** Senior advisors who work alongside the FFT team on the Lab's strategy, communications and research.
- **FFT Future Generations Fellows:** Participants in FFT's Future Generations Fellowship who contribute to the Lab's design work.
- **Universal design:** Designing for everyone from the start, so people do not have to ask, disclose or wait to take part.
- **Universal Design Ladder:** The order in which access options are tried when something cannot be offered to everyone by default, from universal design down to third-party sign-off.
- **Local Leader Discovery Process:** Track 4's conversations with local leaders about whether a National Conversation would be desirable, feasible and ethical.
- **Scaled Impact Plan:** What the Lab is building now, the larger pathway if conditions allow, and the value that remains with or without a full National Conversation.
- **Success criteria:** Draft measures of whether a National Conversation worked, defined before anything is built.
- **Criteria deck:** A prototype card deck for weighing the criteria that shape decisions and seeing where they pull against each other.

The collaborative leadership model

The collaborative leadership model brings partners, advisors and communities into how the Lab is run, under shared principles, so that its outputs are developed and owned together. Decisions sit under a published Charter, guided by the principles opposite.



The principles that underpin the model



01 Non-partisan inclusion

Political independence is a condition of the Lab's legitimacy. The Lab has no alignment to any political party or ideological tradition, and cultivates good-faith participation across the full breadth of Australian political life.



02 Universal design

The Lab's ambition is to serve the best interests of Australians across geographies, generations, cultural backgrounds, political traditions, and circumstances.



03 Process focus

The Lab is about how Australia decides, not what it decides. The Lab does not advocate for policy positions in areas such as housing, climate or health, though participants may surface these topics through their engagement.



04 Accountability

The Lab is accountable to communities, partners, funders, and the public for the integrity of its work, through transparent decision rationales, responsiveness to community engagement, and visible feedback loops.



05 Quality over scale

Reaching more people by sacrificing process quality reproduces the consultation fatigue the Lab is designed to address. Where a choice arises between scale and quality, quality must be treated as paramount.



06 Evidence-based practice

The Lab is driven by evidence-based dialogue and decision-making. Evidence includes peer-reviewed research, government and intergovernmental data, professional practice literature, cultural knowledge and lived experience.



07 Mutual respect and curiosity

Respect in the Lab means surfacing the full range of insights in the room, rather than advocating for one's own position. Every contribution is approached with curiosity, except those that breach the Lab's Terms of Reference or fundamental legal and ethical standards.



08 Strengths-based engagement

The Lab approaches communities and participants from their capabilities, knowledge, and aspirations, in line with international standards. Social and emotional wellbeing is treated as a baseline condition of genuine participation.



09 Culturally responsive design

The Lab engages communities, organisations, and individuals through methods, language, and protocols suited to their context. Intercultural, intergenerational and intercommunity collaboration is essential to robust, defensible, and durable outputs.

These descriptions have been streamlined. The full principles are available on the Lab's website and in our Charter.

What happens next

From early sketch to tested model

Everything in this book goes into Workshop 2 on 17 and 19 November 2026, where testing begins. Your responses will shape which ideas hold, which bend and which are rethought. Three further design cycles follow, with research, roundtables and community pilots alongside, before a developed model is presented to parliamentary leaders in August 2027.

●	○	○	○
Now	17 and 19 November 2026	November to June	August 2027
Interim report	Workshop 2	Design cycles 2 to 4. Research, roundtables and community pilots	Developed model to parliamentary leaders

Testing in your community

Community pilots are planned to test elements of the model with everyday Australians, run by community leaders, civil society organisations and parliamentarians. Planning is at an early stage and open. Could you host one in your electorate, organisation or community? What would you want it to test?

Respond by Friday 6 November 2026: hello@foundationsfortomorrow.org, the Lab's WhatsApp on +61 435 294 435, or www.thenationalconvo.org.

How to respond

Questions for you appear throughout this book. Answer one, several or all of them, or tell us what we have missed. Responses received by Friday 6 November 2026 will shape what is tested at Workshop 2.

Email

hello@foundationsfortomorrow.org

Send a response, a document or a question.

WhatsApp

The Lab's WhatsApp +61 435 294 435

Share thoughts as the design develops.

Online

www.thenationalconvo.org

Read the latest outputs and get in touch.

Thank you for engaging and for helping shape what comes next.

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