

June 2026

# 10 Years of The Auckland Co-Design Lab



Nā tō rourou, nā tōku rourou, ka ora ai te iwi.  
With your food basket and my food basket  
the people will thrive.



# In 2025, The Auckland Co-Design Lab marked 10 years as an Aotearoa New Zealand public sector innovation initiative.

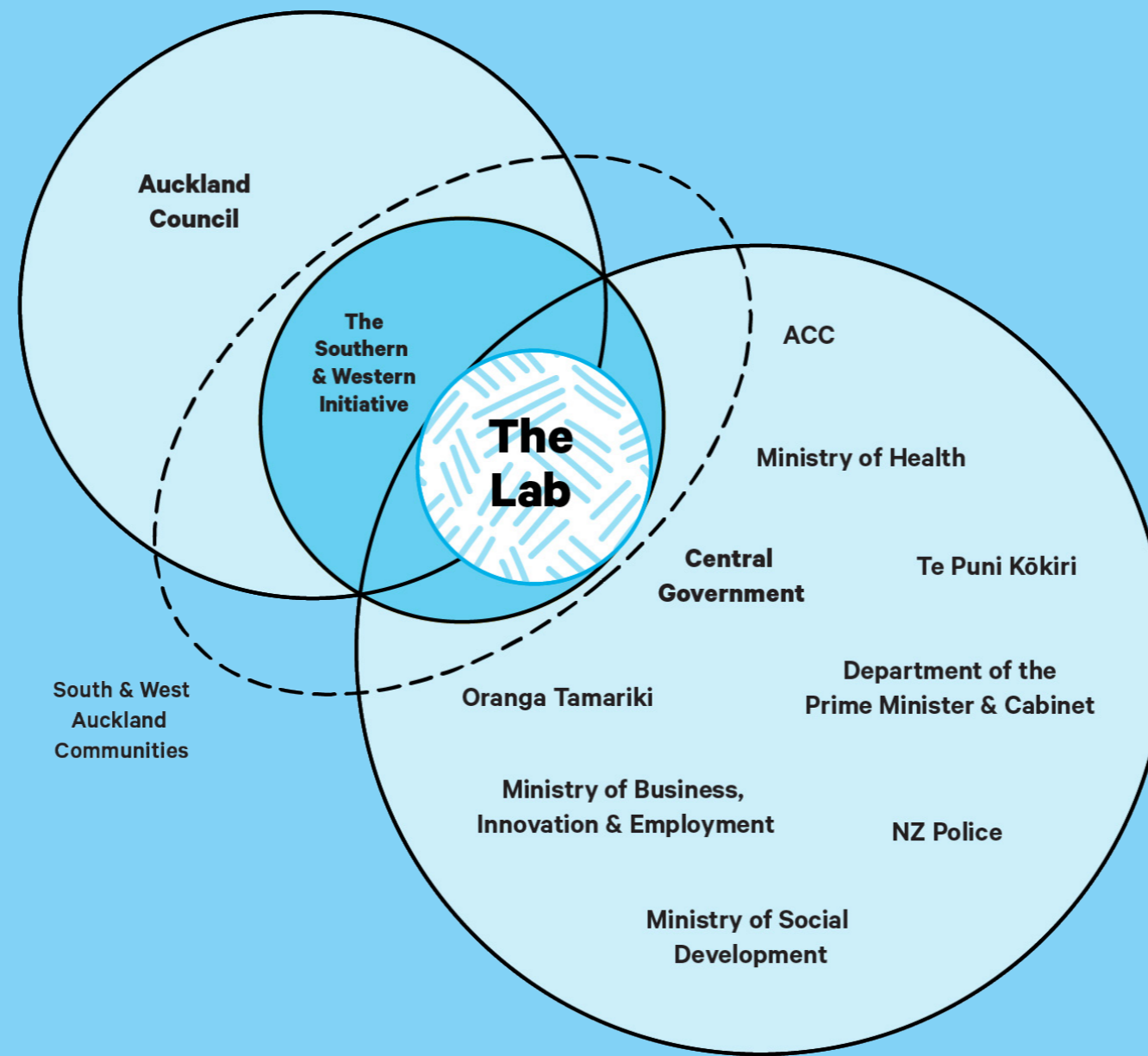
The Auckland Co-Design Lab (The Lab) was established to test innovative, participatory and collective approaches to complex socio-economic challenges. It plays a deliberate and distinctive role in Aotearoa's public sector—demonstrating new practice, building evidence, and strengthening capability and networks to improve outcomes.

This report reflects on a decade of work seeking to deliver on this remit, drawing on interviews with public servants and collaborators over this time.

It examines what we have learned about building public sector capability to address complex collective challenges and sets the direction for the decade ahead.

This report is intended for:

- Senior leaders wanting to accelerate change and innovation
- Kaimahi doing the work of systems change
- Others interested in systems-level innovation in the public sector.



The Lab partners as at 2025

Tuia ki te rangi,  
 Tuia ki te whenua,  
 Tuia ki te moana,  
 Tuia ki te herenga tangata,  
 Ka rongo te pō,  
 Ka rongo te ao,  
 Tihei mauri ora!

The Auckland Co-Design Lab is a local and central government innovation lab. We are nested inside The Southern Initiative, hosted within Auckland Council, and co-funded with central government. We work alongside whānau and hapori (communities) in South Auckland and with other initiatives with aligned kaupapa across Aotearoa.

Our focus is on enabling a more responsive, effective, and evidence informed public service. We do this by connecting the lived realities of whānau with system-level decision-making; bringing local practice and whānau expertise together with national policy and investment; and reshaping the relationship between whānau, hapori and government.



# What this report covers

## 1.

### Why The Lab was established

We revisit the original conditions that led to the establishment of The Lab and the ambition to find more effective ways to tackle complex issues and improve public outcomes.



## 2.

### How The Lab has evolved

The report traces The Lab's development in three phases:

2015–2018	Proving the potential
2019–2021	Closing the gap between insight and action
2022–2025	Building on proven systems innovation practice

Over time, The Lab has shifted from producing insights about the system to working inside complex systems change processes with whānau, hapori and the public sector.

## 3.

### Five lessons from doing the work

1. Insight alone does not lead to different outcomes — learning must be implemented within the system.
2. How we work matters — practice grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems accelerates impact.
3. Working in place strengthens both local and national outcomes.
4. Changing how the system operates requires working across multiple levels at the same time.
5. Impact and value are cumulative, produced through ongoing relationships, networks, and knowledge building.

## 4.

### What this means for enabling public sector innovation

1. Change depends on the system's ability to learn in practice — not just deliver.
2. Change requires readiness, not just recognition.

## 5.

### 2026 and beyond

The next phase of The Lab requires applying what has been learned to enable systems change at scale:

- Increasing understanding and application of Mātauranga Māori
- Deepening place-based approaches
- Strengthening the role of local and central government as enablers
- Connecting local insight with national decision-making
- Supporting collective and multi-level learning and adaptive practice within public institutions.

# Why The Lab was established



“The masterstroke was situating The Lab in South Auckland, not a downtown policy shop. It allowed real relationships to form and a completely different kind of collaboration to emerge.”

The Auckland Co-Design Lab (The Lab) was established in 2015 as a two-year public sector proof of concept, funded through The Treasury's Better Public Services Seed Fund.

It was a response to growing evidence that existing tools were not adequate for tackling complex socio-economic challenges, particularly for communities experiencing the greatest inequities and positioned furthest from policy and service design.

New, more participatory and collaborative approaches for delivering public outcomes were needed – approaches that could bring together different perspectives and forms of data, break down silos, and engage more effectively with interconnected, cross-agency, and system-level issues.

The Lab's origins lie with a committed group of public sector leaders in Auckland and Wellington who shared both a frustration with the status quo and an ambition for new ways of working.

The public servants, responsible for shaping the initiative, spent more than a year in conversations, briefings, and influencing across agencies to build momentum for a different kind of collaboration.

## LOCATION AND MANDATE

The Lab was located in South Auckland through a partnership with The Southern Initiative (TSI), with Auckland Council hosting as a key sponsor and partner. Being based outside Wellington was an intentional design choice. It situated public sector innovation in a real-world context and placed the work close to the whānau and hāpori experiencing the challenges the Lab was designed to address.

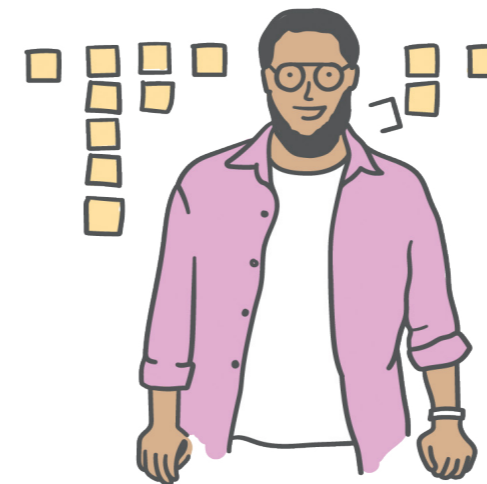
The Lab's tagline, *Together we discover*, reflected the intention to create a neutral cross-agency space for tackling complex socio-economic challenges. The work drew on co-design, collective impact, and other evaluation and innovation approaches.

The Lab's mandate was to test design approaches to complex cross-agency issues and build the case for change. Early work was structured around co-design challenges tackled over four to six months. Design coaches supported cross-agency teams to explore, reframe, and prototype responses to real-world issues alongside whānau, hāpori, and other partners.

Challenges were expected to align with the strategic priorities of Auckland Council and central government. They needed to span agency boundaries and offer scope for transformational or radical change, with the potential to contribute to systems-level innovation through a human-centred approach.

A key focus is to provide space for multi-agency teams to collaborate, work alongside citizens and to support and broker innovative ideas and solutions. It also focuses on unlocking people's capability to participate in designing their future, while advocating for system-level change.

Auckland Plan 2018



The Lab's early set up around key cross-agency challenges was informed by New Zealand Trade and Enterprise's Better by Design programme.

This helped to provide an initial mandate for design-led approaches and to legitimise prototyping and experimentation within the public sector.



Early Years Challenge 2017



Drivers License Challenge 2016



Attitude Gap Challenge 2016

# How The Lab has evolved

The Lab's development  
can be traced across  
three phases.



"The Lab moved from exploring what could be – to testing what it actually takes to get there."

## 2015–2018

### Proving the potential

Fast paced, time bound co-design challenges. Building co-design awareness and capability. Collaborating with whānau, hapori, business and public sector partners at operational and policy levels.

## 2019–2021

### Closing the gap between insight and action

Longer timeframes, focus on implementation of policy intent, centering tikanga-led and Indigenous innovation. Shift to working alongside public sector partners, testing and implementing changes to key system levers.

## 2022–2025

### Building on a proven systems innovation practice

Building on a strong evidence base and proven multi-disciplinary practice, helping to shape how the public sector is investing in complex issues. Demonstrating a Te Tiriti leadership and practice model, with national influence into policy and practice.

Example Activities:

Capability building with government and community partners via training, Master Classes, toolkits, presentations.

05.2018  
**Policy by Design**  
Exploring the intersection of design & policy in Aotearoa NZ: 7 case studies



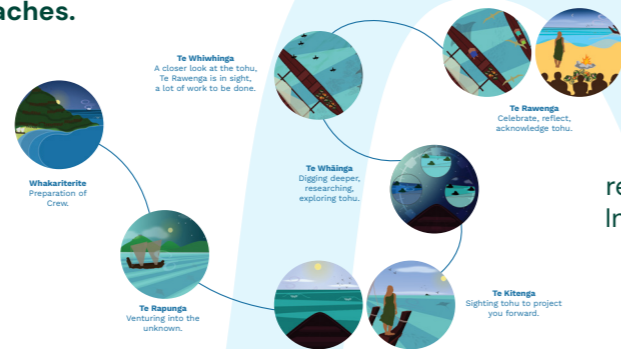
Central government partners seconded from BAU into cross-agency co-design challenges.



Early Years work evolves into **Tamariki Wellbeing**, working with Auckland Council, national and philanthropic partners, informing the Child and Youth Strategy.



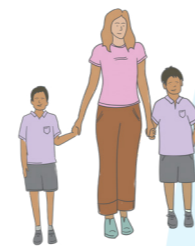
Growing use of **Indigenous and tikanga-led approaches.**



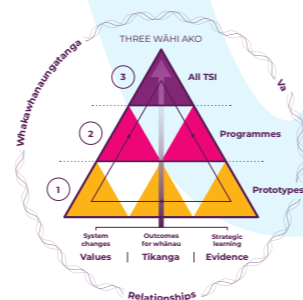
Early insights and practice continues to influence e.g. **Te Taiwhanga Rangatahi** Youth Lab grows out of MOE Education and Engagement work.



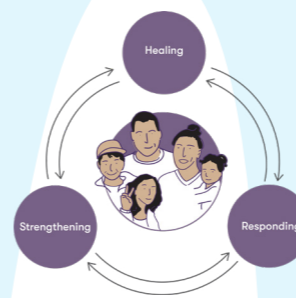
Focus tightens on **targeting central government levers** for change e.g. commissioning, investment, measures, ethics, looking beyond services.



**Hautū Waka** replaces co-design as an Indigenous framework for navigating complexity.



**Niho Taniwha** emerges to connect multiple prototype and to support systems-level learning and change e.g. within Auckland Council libraries, Work and Income, Plunket.



**Te Tokotoru** brings together evidence for change from across social and economic work of TSI, influencing policy and investment e.g. Te Aorerekura.



Spurred by COVID, online tools allow for amplified reach, including **national, cross-agency convening** such as ACC Prototype to Learn and Early Years Implementation Platform.



Developing systems capability for **Place-Based approaches** e.g. Hikitia!, Social Investment.



Relationships and ways of working in the public sector sustained through **community of practices, practice networks and learning platforms.**



Growing body of evidence for ecosystems approaches and investing beyond services.



**Established frameworks**, with evidence base, being applied beyond the Lab, and recognised internationally.



**Embedding Mātauranga Māori and culturally grounded frameworks** across local and central government teams.



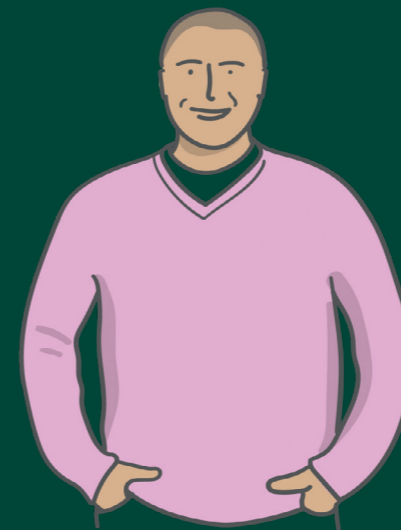
Outputs & Outcomes:

- Visual tools for better policy making
- Key systems levers identified
- Whānau and hapori perspectives validated
- Better understanding of issues
- New starting points for solutions
- Value of a different methodology affirmed
- Improved capacity for public sector to involve communities.

- A shift to innovation with the system
- New cross-disciplinary methods developed
- Frameworks enabling others to work this way
- Shift in public sector language and norms
- Contribution to international discourse
- Influencing national strategies
- Demonstrating place-based system change approach.

- Internationally recognised body of work and collaborations
- Value of frameworks demonstrated in multiple settings
- More joined up local and regional practice
- Continued adoption and diffusion of evidence and practice
- Strong network of practitioners
- Increased readiness for place-based approaches
- Greater capacity for local/central partnerships.

# Five lessons from doing the work



“What began as local experimentation evolved into lessons for national outcomes, particularly in how problems are framed before solutions are developed.”

# Lesson #1

Insight alone does not lead to different outcomes – learning must be implemented within the system.

Understanding or reframing problems is only the first step.

Closing the implementation gap requires working with agencies, whānau and hapori to implement reform in practice, building capability across the system, and connecting insight with action at both local and national levels.

The Lab’s early co-design challenges demonstrated the power of combining system data with the lived experiences of whānau and hapori. This helped decision-makers better understand how policy and service design shaped outcomes, and where systems were creating barriers. Lived experience and expertise was treated as legitimate evidence, not anecdote.

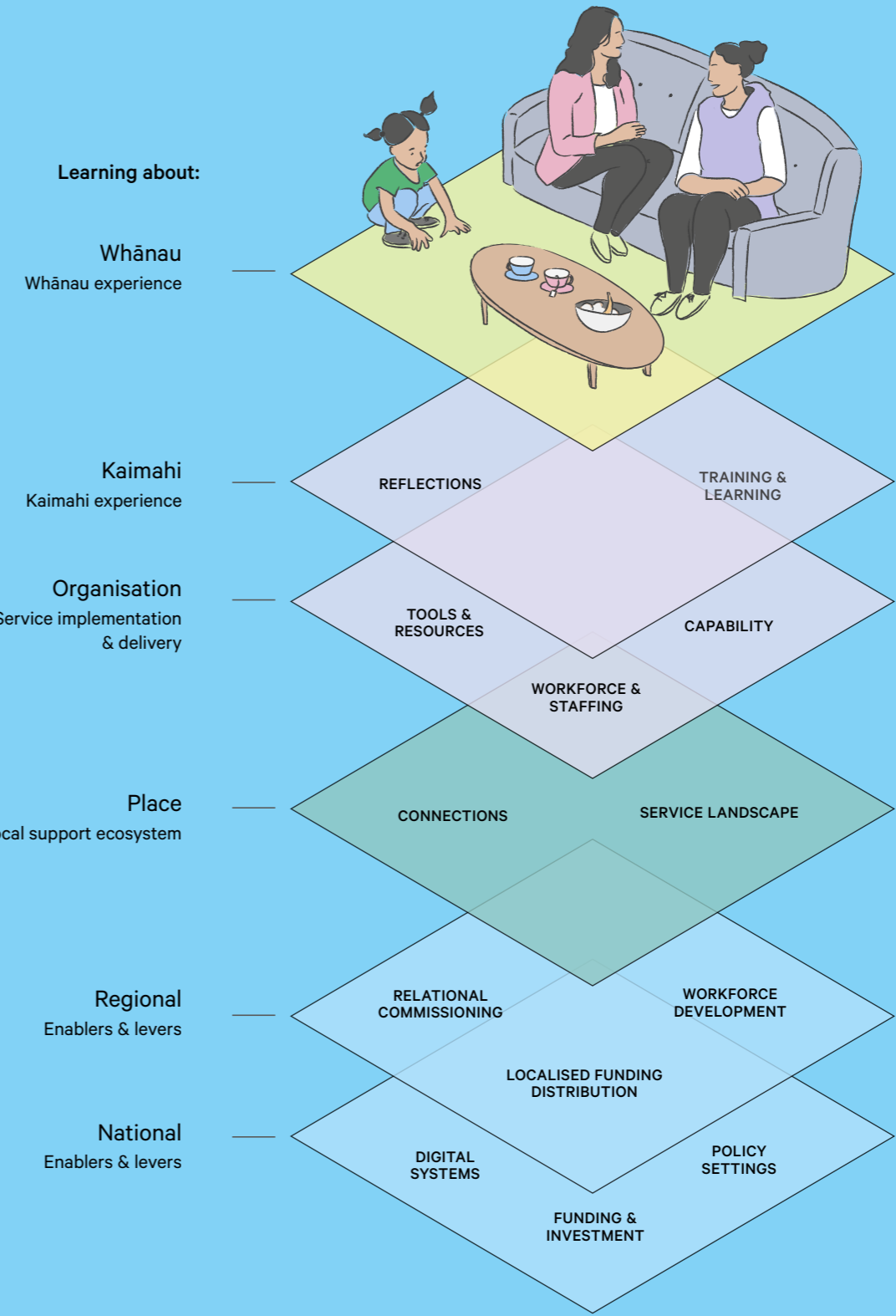
While this work generated powerful insights, it also had limitations. After the challenges ended, individuals returned to organisations with new perspectives but limited ability to influence change. Learning remained disconnected from business as usual.

Work alongside whānau also consistently revealed that community ambition and capacity to improve outcomes were often constrained by behaviours or limitations built into the system. Many of these barriers were shared across different issues, and included how public sector levers such as commissioning, measurement, resourcing, and investment were being applied.

Even when the changes needed were well understood and clearly articulated in policy and strategy, a gap remained between intent and implementation. Achieving impact at scale required greater attention to the effort and time required for the implementation of change.

In response, The Lab shifted to working alongside agencies with a mandate for reform, supporting implementation in practice and building capability across the system. COVID-19 accelerated this shift, highlighting community capability and enabling real-time connection between community experience and policy decision-making, while expanding The Lab’s ability to convene and work at a national scale.

“Combining the data with lived experience paints such a fuller picture, being able to grasp the reality of things has been quite profound.”



Visual from Te Whatu Ora, Kahu Taurima Tamariki Wellbeing learning partnership. This illustrates working at multiple layers and levels to support system reform.

# Lesson #2

**How we work matters – practice grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems accelerates impact.**

**How we work can have as much impact as what we work on. Co-design created space for collaboration and lived experience, but it was quickly reshaped by Māori and Pacific practitioners.**

**Practice moved beyond imported methods toward approaches grounded in Mātauranga Māori and Indigenous knowledge systems, connected to local context.**

Co-design entered the public sector as a new approach with international credibility. This credibility helped create space for lived experience, collaboration, and experimentation. From the outset, however, its place in South Auckland and Aotearoa was questioned and extended by Māori and Pacific practitioners.

Quite quickly, the co-design methodology was augmented, and in some cases replaced, with practices that reflected the cultural context of whānau and 'aiga in South Auckland. These approaches prioritised tikanga, relationships, and culturally grounded ways of working. This created spaces where whānau felt welcomed and saw themselves reflected. In turn this enabled whānau not only to participate, but to connect, heal, and lead the innovation process.

A deeper shift emerged as practice moved beyond this hybrid model to approaches shaped from within community knowledge systems and grounded in Mātauranga Māori. Rather than refining imported methods, The Lab began working from Māori ways of knowing and leading, recognising and reflecting the wider history and context of Aotearoa and our place in the Pacific.

Indigenous knowledge systems are inherently relational, strengths-based, place-based, and responsive to complexity. Western innovation practice has only recently begun to recognise their importance. Being grounded in Indigenous values challenges the status quo and offers different starting points, which build whanaungatanga, shift power, and drive change.

Starting from an ao Māori and Indigenous practice mindset also offers a counterpoint to the Western worldview that has shaped many of the policies linked to the social and economic inequities The Lab was established to address. It supports innovation that shifts systems away from deficit and crisis responses toward wellbeing and strength-based approaches, while also helping rebalance the worldviews that influence current policy and system design.

Grounding practice in Mātauranga Māori laid the foundation for a rigorous and nuanced transdisciplinary approach. It enabled multiple forms of evidence to be held together, and for rigour to be explicitly defined as contextual, linked to place, tikanga and values.

The co-leadership model adopted in 2022, with Angie Tangaere and Penny Hagen serving as Directors Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti respectively, was a direct expression of this commitment. Te Tiriti o Waitangi provided ways to structure how we worked together as innovation practitioners, as well as demonstrate accountability to a different way of working.

This approach has been affirming to Māori practitioners inside and outside the public sector, and continues to be recognised internationally as leading practice.

**“It was a “circuit breaker” which created space for doing design and co-design differently, creating a different agenda, different visibility, and a different cohort of people to start to frame and work in those spaces.”**



# Lesson #3

**Working in place strengthens both local and national outcomes.**

**Proximity to whānau and hapori — where the impacts of policy and investment decisions are experienced — makes complex issues visible and harder to ignore.**

**Meaningful changes at scale comes from working at the intersection of local contexts and national levers.**

Starting in place naturally disrupts centralised traditional policy processes. It also aligns strongly with ao Māori worldviews, which understand people and whenua as interconnected, and recognise that different places have distinct contexts, histories, capabilities, and starting points.

Working locally and in partnership with The Southern Initiative, while also being connected to national partners, has been critical to The Lab's impact.

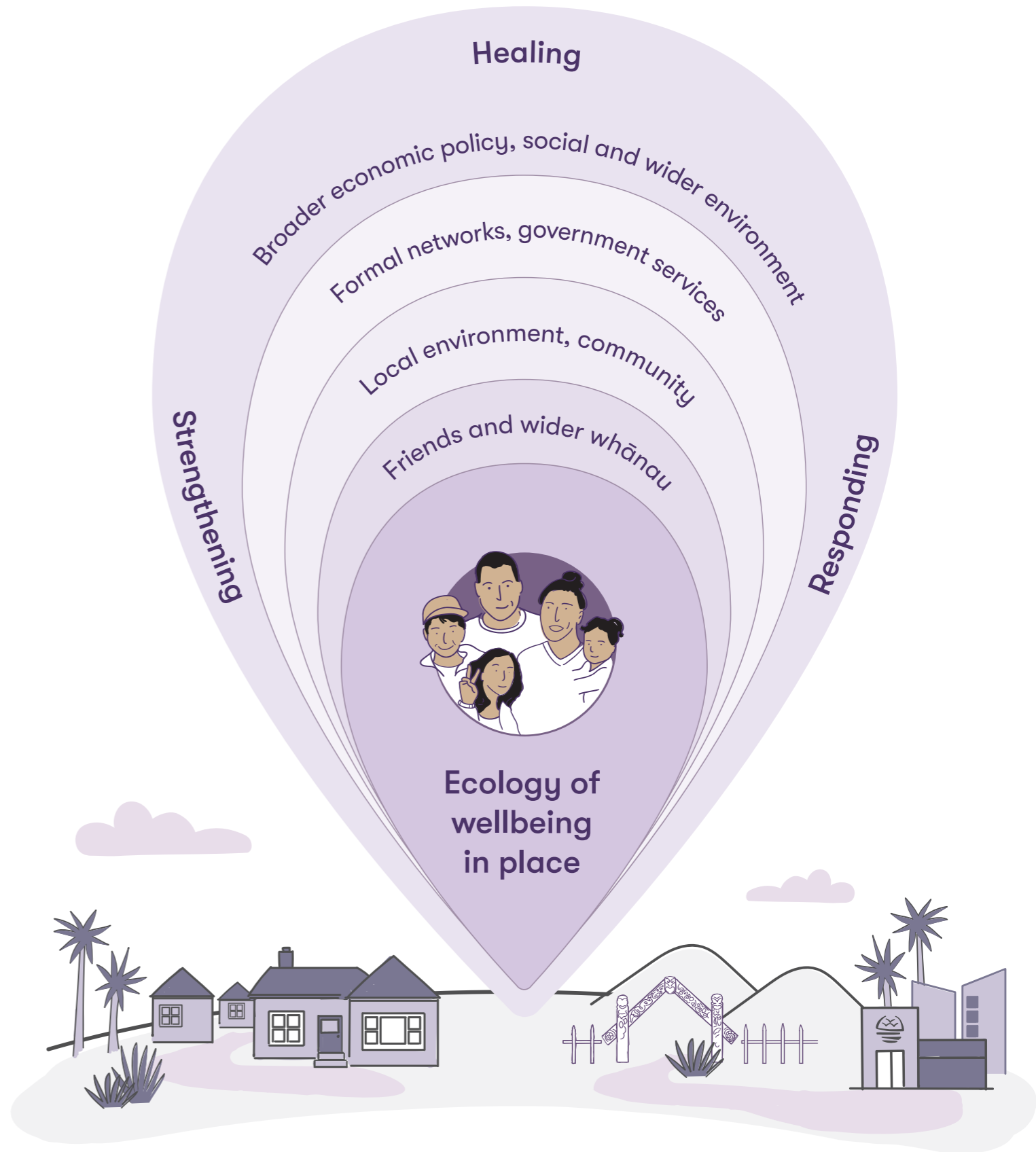
Being embedded in South Auckland has enabled the work to reflect the histories, relationships, strengths, and harms that shape outcomes for whānau, and has helped build trust and legitimacy with hapori and practitioners.

It has highlighted the existing capacity, capability and resourcefulness sitting within whānau and hapori, and the interconnected role of the wider ecosystem in shaping outcomes. It also points to the opportunity to invest beyond formal services — an opportunity for the public sector that still remains largely unrealised.

Being place-based, and advocating for the public sector to build capability and investment for locally-led approaches, also raises challenges. While policy makers may recognise the value of these approaches in principle, in practice they are often perceived as slower and more resource-intensive than centralised alternatives.

There has also been tension around whether the benefits from investment in The Lab should accrue locally or nationally. We have found that the evidence base developed in Auckland is strengthened when it can be tested and iterated in other places. It also produces evidence and ways of working that help shape policy and benefit whānau and hapori nationally. Local and national benefits are not in competition; each reinforces the other.

**“Grappling with complex challenges in place is what gives policy a chance of actually working.”**



# Lesson #4

Changing how the system operates requires working across multiple levels at the same time.

Delivering systems-level change required a shift from individual prototypes to coordinated testing and learning across multiple places and levels of the system simultaneously.

It also required supporting the public sector to actively engage in its role as a learning partner to whānau and hapori, with collective accountability and responsibility for change.

The starting point for The Lab were practices that prioritised experimentation, prototyping, and learning through doing.

Drawing on different forms of expertise and evidence was integral. Indigenous knowledge, academic research, government, business, and community data sources were grounded and tested through the perspectives and experience of whānau and hapori, resulting in new practice-based evidence.

As The Lab's understanding matured, so too did the methodology — shifting from individual prototypes with whānau and hapori to testing and learning across multiple places and levels of the system at the same time.

New frameworks like Niho Taniwha, grounded in Indigenous knowledge and developed through practice, were created to enable experimentation and test change at a larger scale.

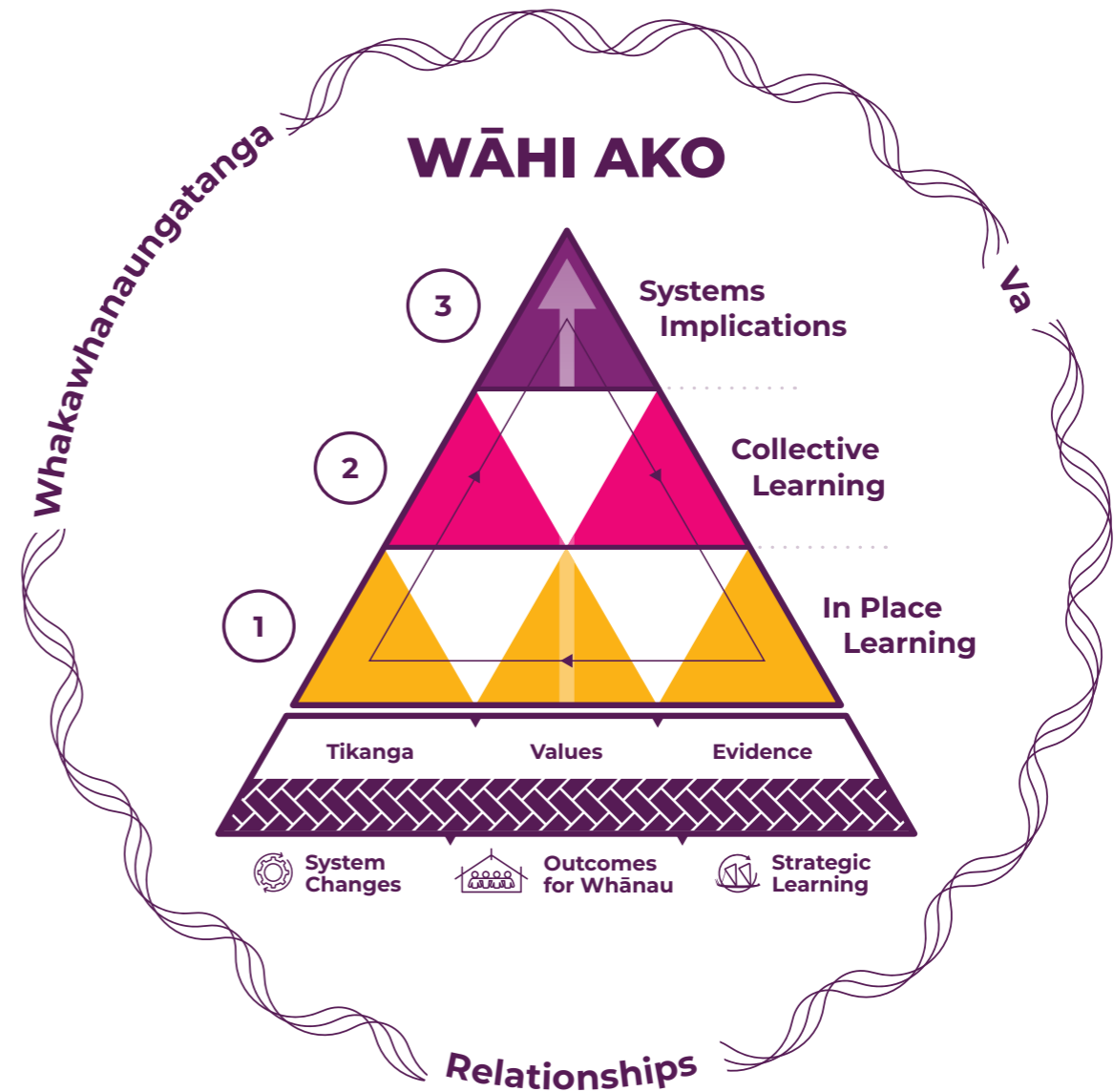
Niho Taniwha provides an infrastructure for system-wide learning by connecting the different levels and points where change must occur, and creating feedback loops within and between local, regional, and national levels. It also supports a strong focus on system levers — such as commissioning, measurement, and workforce capability — as critical targets and points to track change.

Active engagement by the public sector in its role as a learning partner — not just a commissioner or funder — is a critical part of this. This includes taking responsibility for changing internal system settings to enable better outcomes.

Multiple prototypes are connected up for stronger evidence building around systems-level change, while creating repeated opportunities to test and refine that change in context.

In this way, The Lab's innovation approach has become more rigorous and distinctive, reflecting the complexity of the context, and staying accountable to multiple different audiences and partners.

“The ground-up ecosystem is powerful – lived experience was being heard and shaping where things were going. Regular papanoho<sup>1</sup> provided a way to share findings with key government stakeholders.”



<sup>1</sup>Papanoho is a dedicated space to gather for collective reflection and learning. The literal meaning is an observation deck on a traditional canoe.

# Lesson #5

Impact and value are cumulative, produced through ongoing relationships, networks and knowledge building.

Shifting how the system operates requires sustained effort that builds both practitioner and system capability over time.

Individual initiatives generate valuable insights and momentum, but it is their cumulative and connected impact that shifts capability, priorities, language, policy, and ways of operating across the system.

Building public sector capability and changing how the system operates is patient work. Impact is not always immediately visible, and outcomes are often not linear.

The Lab has shifted from a collection of projects to a learning and innovation platform. It builds knowledge and supports its application over time, convenes cross-agency networks to shape policy, and helps those networks remain connected to that knowledge through periods of disruption. In doing so, it has become an enabler of new ways of operating in the public sector, rather than a delivery unit.

As The Lab's practice has evolved, so too has our understanding of what impact looks like and where to look for it.

The diagram on the next page illustrates how The Lab contributes to shifting public sector outcomes at scale through three mutually reinforcing activities. Over time these have contributed to systemic change, better outcomes for whānau and hāpori, and ripple effects beyond any single initiative.

The Indigenous-led frameworks that underpin The Lab's practice have grown out of place, community, and experience. They are accelerating change by shifting how the public sector approaches complex issues and works alongside whānau and hāpori.

The adoption of these delivers outcomes in its own right: stronger feedback loops between communities and system partners, investment that is shaped from the bottom up, affirmation of ao Māori ways of working, and more effective collaboration across local, regional, and national teams.

Niho Taniwha, in particular, is helping to grow a new kind of public sector infrastructure — one that supports experimentation, learning, and feedback across multiple levels, rather than defaulting to reporting and monitoring that may not inform change. It is also supporting the public sector to fulfil its stewardship role by enabling locally-led responses, rather than prescribing national deliverables.

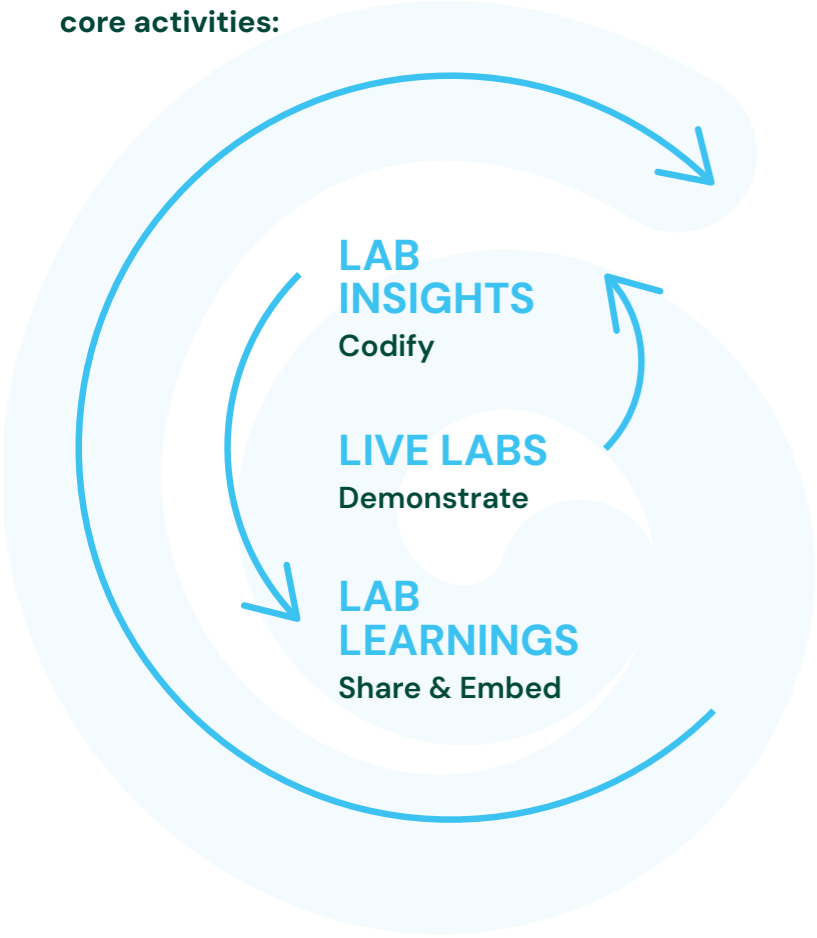
The Lab occupies a distinct position in the system, different from consultancies or academic institutions. It bridges evidence, practice, and action at both community and system levels, builds institutional and cross-agency capability, and reduces duplication. Its role is not to deliver solutions on behalf of the system, but to build the conditions for others to act.

“The role of the Lab has been in holding that scaffold. Creating the opportunity to empower whānau to develop solutions, have voice, challenge government, walk alongside, do it together, and maintain long-term relationships.”



# Tracking the impacts and ripple effects of The Lab

The Labs three core activities:



## Immediate

**Actionable insights and evidence** about what works and what needs to change.

"The learning shaped vocational reform and youth employment approaches."



**Individual capability and confidence** for new ways of working for those participating.

"I took back a head full of people's stories and lived experiences that really changed my practice."



**Stronger relationships and connections** between sectors and parts of the system.

"The relationships formed through the work often outlasted the projects themselves."



## Medium-term

**Growing body of evidence** continues to be applied beyond initial projects.

Review into Local Government

Child & Youth Strategy

Knowledge of what needs to change **shaping language, policy and strategy.**

**Frameworks** developed that make applying that knowledge easier.

"Te Tokotoru helps us to hear what matters and connect that straight into what that could look like from a systems perspective."



Efforts to **use levers differently** are starting: commissioning, measures, funding, investment, ethics and reporting begin to prioritise learning with whānau and hapori.

**Networks of practice and practitioners** are applying and sharing learning in different contexts.

"The relationships formed through the work often outlasted the projects themselves."

## Over time

**Sustained platforms** enable testing and **embedding of learning back into the system.**

Commissioning for prevention

Place-based approach to social investment

There is **greater level of understanding** around the required skills and capabilities to achieve outcomes.

**Collective learning** is happening across a network. Impact shifts from individual to **systems capability** that can be maintained through disruption.

Niho Taniwha network

Local, regional and national entities are **working together differently.**

**Application of proven frameworks** that support teams to work differently are applied beyond The Lab's own projects.

Te Tokotoru Case Studies

Niho Taniwha Case Studies

## Indicators

Are public sector levers being applied in ways that prioritise whānau and hapori capability and context?

Are relationships across agencies and sectors stronger, including between local, regional, national?

Is knowledge or change sustained beyond an individual leaving or political shift?

Do outcomes create multiplier effects or further outcomes durable beyond initial investment?

Is there meaningful diffusion and adoption of knowledge, frameworks, and practice beyond Lab projects?

Are we reducing duplication, is knowledge and effective practice shared across networks?

# What this means for enabling public sector innovation



“Interest in The Lab’s approach has come not only from domestic agencies but also internationally, such as the UK cabinet office.

Not through promotion, but through others recognising the practical value of how The Lab framed issues and surfaced grounded insight.”

# Change depends on the system's ability to learn in practice — not just deliver

**While there is growing recognition of the importance of learning and adaptativity in the public sector, most systems are still structured for delivery in ways that separate learning from practice and outcomes.**

**This creates a persistent constraint: data and learning are generated, but they are not consistently applied to shift how the system actually operates.**

Learning in this context can be misunderstood as reflective or “soft”. Our work over the past decade has shown the opposite. Learning is not the alternative to outcomes; it is how better outcomes are achieved. It is not simply about insight generation or discussion, but about actively testing different ways of working and adapting in real time. Without testing and learning in practice, the system defaults to the status quo — even when it knows it needs to change.

Over time, it has become clear that learning must happen through delivery and be directly connected to systems-level change. Systems change, in this context, is not abstract. It involves aligning levers, capabilities, and relationships across national, regional and local levels. This enables learning to influence how resources are allocated and how decisions are made.

Embedding this is part of the system steward role within the public sector — a shift from delivering services to operating as an active learning partner alongside whānau and hāpori. This includes shared, two-way accountability: communities contributing expertise, insight and leadership, and public sector agencies taking responsibility for acting on learning by adjusting system settings, investment approaches, and measures of success.

This is not yet how most parts of the system are designed to function. Without built-in learning infrastructure, learning and adaptation are difficult to sustain within existing structures, incentives, and accountabilities. As a result, insight accumulates, but its impact on system behaviour is limited.

Where change has occurred, it has been supported by:

- Ongoing feedback loops between communities and decision-makers
- Capability built through practice across multiple levels of the system
- Deliberate alignment of system levers, including funding, commissioning, and measurement.

This points to a more fundamental shift: change is less about scaling specific interventions and more about strengthening the system's ability to test, learn, and adapt in practice across multiple contexts at once.

“What set The Lab apart was not the novelty of method but the discipline of grounding innovation in real policy challenges and using that work to shift how government learns.

A lot of these test and learn functions in government do a lot of the testing, but not so much of the learning, and definitely not much of the sharing.”



# Change requires readiness, not just recognition

**While there is broad recognition that existing approaches to addressing the complexities communities face are not sufficient, progressing something different depends on the conditions for change.**

**Changing how systems operate requires mandate, leadership, and sustained space for experimentation, alongside shifts in power, capability, and system settings to support new ways of working.**

This work has made visible a persistent tension. Starting with what matters to whānau in place, rather than services or programmes, requires a fundamentally different role for the public sector. Unlocking whānau and hapori capability and capacity, and reconfiguring systems from the ground up, is genuinely radical.

While there is awareness that change is necessary, recognition is not the same as readiness. Progressing this depends on more than strong ideas and evidence. As well as mandate and leadership support, there also needs to be an appetite for discomfort.

Conditions for experimentation need to be protected even in the face of instinctive returns to established practice.

Changing how systems operate is not just a technical exercise. It requires institutions to confront where power sits, how resources flow, and whose knowledge is legitimised. Reflective practice surfaces tensions and dysfunction that can be challenging to work through. At times, aspiration runs ahead of readiness.

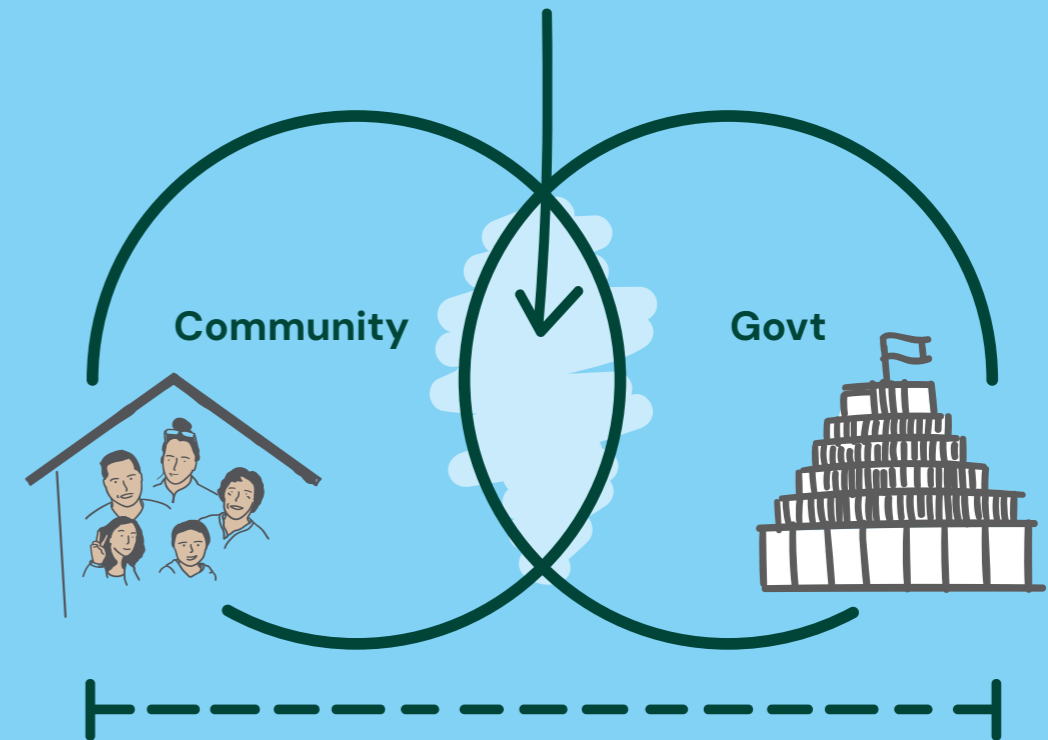
Over time, this has clarified an important discipline: not every opportunity leads to systems impact. Recognising where conditions for change exist — and where they do not — has become a core part of the practice.

Moments such as COVID demonstrated what becomes possible when those conditions shift and systems are forced to adapt — greater trust in community capability, faster learning cycles, and closer connections between lived experience and decision-making. At the same time, these moments revealed how far current structures and system settings are from routinely supporting this way of working.

Closing the gap between what is known to be important to whānau and hapori and what is currently possible requires continued evolution of public sector systems.

“The Lab has impact on people’s perspectives, ways of thinking. Learning to actively listen and look for opportunities to do things differently. I am supporting my team of people to be challenged and to challenge the systems we have.”

The work is in closing the gap between what we know is possible when whānau and hapori lead, and how government operates — too often this gap remains wide.



# 2026 and beyond



“The Lab’s most significant contribution lies in showing that insight drawn from practice and place can inform policy thinking in ways that enable broader participation without compromising rigour.”

The challenges facing whānau and hapori are growing more complex, while public sector systems face increasing pressure.

This decade of work has clarified that enduring change cannot be delivered through programmes alone. It requires systems that can learn and respond to complexity in ways that are grounded in place and connected to what is happening in communities, as well as globally.

Looking ahead, the opportunity is to apply what has been learned more deliberately. This means:

- **Reshaping public sector practice** through increased understanding and application of Mātauranga Māori and Indigenous-led knowledge and perspectives
- **Deepening place-based approaches** that respond to the distinct contexts and aspirations of communities and inform systems-level innovation
- **Strengthening the role of local and central government** as enablers of locally-led leadership, investment and decision-making
- **Connecting local insight with national decision-making**, so that policy and investment are informed by real world experience
- **Collective and multi-level learning** and adaptive practice within public institutions.

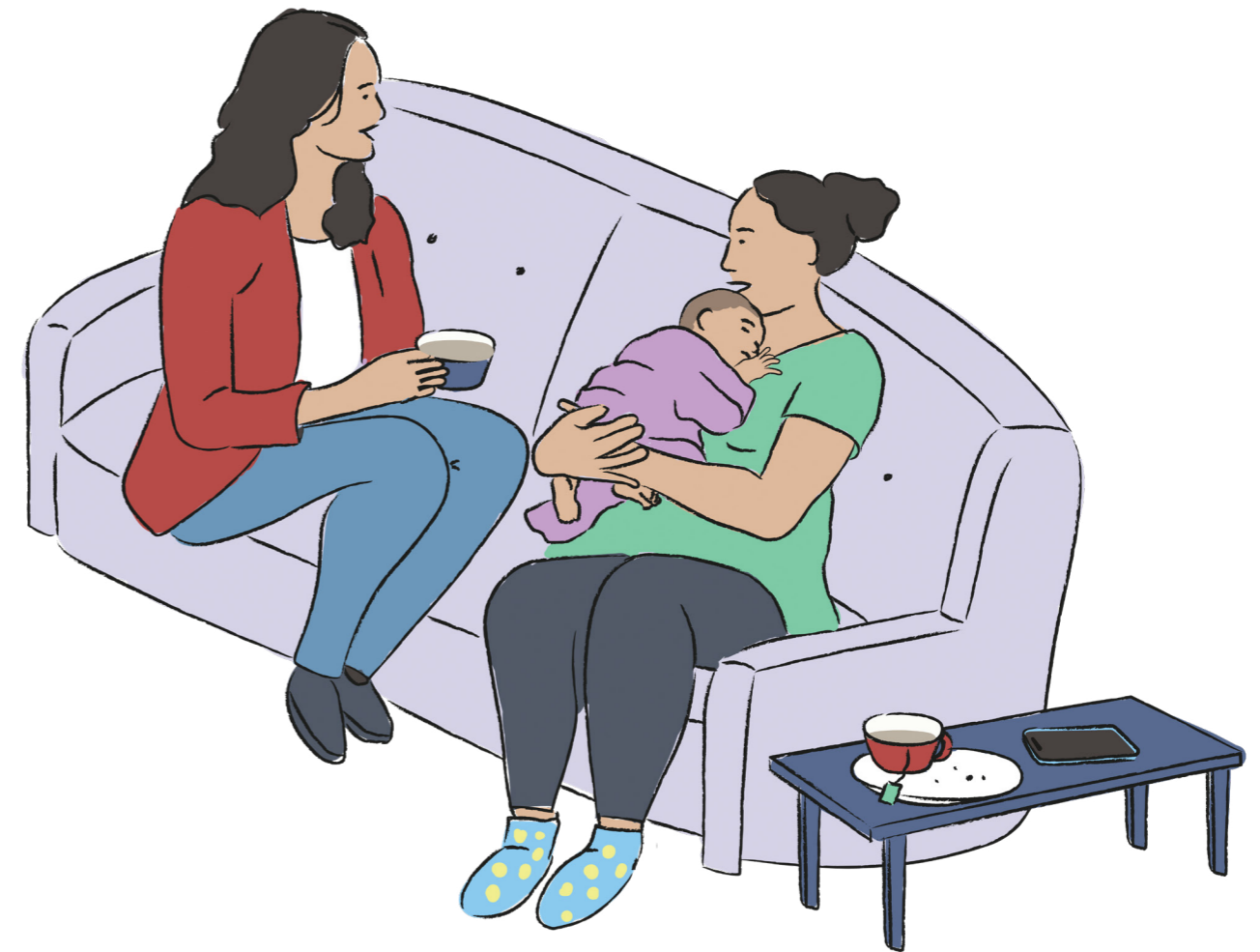
Operating from South Auckland remains central to this work. The Lab's role is to strengthen outcomes locally while sharing what is learned here with the wider system.

Partnering with place-based efforts in other regions builds a richer national evidence base and demonstrates that locally-led, system-connected ways of working can take hold beyond a single place. This is how local learning becomes national capability.

If the first decade of The Lab was about demonstrating what is possible, the next is about enabling others to act on that knowledge. This involves mobilising capability across the system, strengthening networks of practice, and supporting institutions to work differently in the face of uncertainty. It also requires discipline: focusing effort where the conditions for change exist and being realistic about what it takes to sustain change over time.

This next phase calls for deeper systems capability, not just more programmes. It requires building the confidence, capability, and momentum across the public sector to act as an enabler – supporting whānau and hapori to thrive, now and into the future.

“The Lab creates the opportunity for us as local leaders in the system to learn how to bring creative solutions to life.”



## E ngā mana, e ngā reo, e ngā mātā waka, tēnā koutou katoa.

Our respect to the public servants who were prepared to try something different at the outset of this journey.

Our aroha to the whānau and hapori who trusted us enough early on to show us what different looks like and were brave enough to lead the way.

This has continued to open up the world of what is possible when we start with people in place, work collectively and are grounded in Mātauranga Māori.

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- Te Puni Kōkiri
- Ministry for Social Development
- Te Whatu Ora
- Manutū Hauora
- Department of Corrections
- Ministry of Education
- New Zealand Police
- Oranga Tamariki
- Accident Compensation Corporation
- Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
- Social Investment Agency
- The Centre for Family Violence and Sexual Violence Prevention
- Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment
- Auckland Council
- The Southern Initiative

To the Lab team members and hoa haere in Aotearoa and beyond who have worked as part of our whānau ensuring our work is always pushing the boundaries, connected, relevant and rigorous.

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Ehara taku toa,  
he takitahi, he  
toa takitini.

My success is not that  
of one, but of many.

