

EVIDENCE BEHIND THE OUR PLACE ELEMENTS

**The glue  
that enables  
place-based  
initiatives  
to work**

# Executive Summary



**ourplace**  
education is the key to the door

Place-based approaches aim to bring together the resources communities need to thrive. Grounded in collaboration within and across community, they work towards strengthening communities and making sure the service system is responsive to local needs (Australian Government, 2021).

They are one of the most promising solutions to the persistent challenge of a fragmented, ineffective and inefficient service system that does not meet the needs of, or deliver changes in outcomes for children, families or the community (Fox et al. 2015; Moore et al. 2014).

There is a large and growing body of research on what it takes for place-based approaches to be effective. This paper outlines the evidence on four key enablers:

1. Building community relationships and engagement.
2. Forming collaborative governance.
3. Guiding evidence-informed decision-making.
4. Appropriate space and infrastructure.

Collectively, these factors form the glue that turns the aspiration for community transformation into practical and sustained action.

# 1 Building community relationships and engagement

Reviews of effective place-based initiatives highlight the critical importance of delivering on the needs, aspirations, interests and priorities of the community, and the importance of including community voice in decision-making.

There are clear benefits to prioritising the voice and participation of communities, and transparent risks in not doing so (BSL, 2015; Burns and Brown 2012; Moore et al. 2014). For example, that:

- The actions and solutions pursued may not be appropriate, acceptable or compatible with community needs.
- Processes and any change may simply reinforce inequitable power structures, particularly where the people leading the initiative come from different cultural or socio-economic backgrounds from the communities they are aiming to serve.

- Actions might focus on service-oriented improvements or the agendas of service delivery organisations or leaders, rather than the kinds of transformative change that would tackle the root causes of complex issues (Smart, 2017, p. 8).

Although evaluations of place-based initiatives show persistent challenges in engaging communities effectively and consistent gaps between aspiration and practice, there are a range of strategies and approaches that the literature identifies as important enablers of engagement (Zanghi et al, 2014; Raderstrong and Boyea-Robinson, 2016; Lynn et al, 2018; CFCA 2016; Welsh Government, 2022; Rodrigues and Fisher, 2017; Lewing et al, 2020; Pennington et al, 2018; Moore 2021; Hall et al, 2022; Smart, 2017). Key themes from the research include:

- **Explicit commitment.** Clear, strategic and whole-of-initiative commitment to including community voice and involvement in decision-making.



- **Dedicated time and resources for engagement.** Recognition of the time required to build and maintain relationships and trust – including building this explicitly into people’s roles and responsibilities, recognising the sophisticated skills required, and building in time for relationship development in project planning.
  - **Focus on relationships.** Trust built through personal relationships that grow over time, which are grounded in respect and focus on recognising and working with people’s strengths rather than focusing on deficits.
  - **An ongoing approach.** Community voice and participation is fostered through ongoing, persistent efforts that become part of business as usual rather than one-off activities, events or efforts – while at the same time, not asking too much and overburdening the community.
  - **Established processes for engagement.** Informal or ad-hoc approaches to engagement are likely to lack consistency, clarity, transparency, inclusiveness. Purposeful processes and pragmatic protocols for engagement help embed engagement in routine ways of working.
  - **Active outreach.** Going to families, inviting them in, and tailoring engagement approaches to their needs. This is particularly important for priority cohorts. Hiring community members and local staff to act as trusted intermediaries is an important strategy for this.
  - **Shifting power and accountability to community.** Awareness of how power dynamics are operating is critical, with an overarching objective of shifting ownership of decision-making and power from system leaders to the community members over time. This includes consistently amplifying community voice, reporting back to community and being accountable to the community (for ways of working and driving meaningful change) via ongoing feedback loops.
  - **Openness to learning.** A culture of learning, adapting and improving, with established feedback loops and a commitment to understanding community dynamics, norms and values, histories and demographics.
- Underpinning all these elements is recognition that building positive community relationships and enabling effective engagement with families cannot be ad-hoc – it must be prioritised and adequately resourced.
- Building genuine trust and engagement with the community is a collective effort, involving leaders and partners across the community. But it also requires dedicated community facilitation leaders with responsibility for engagement, a deep understanding of local contexts, and with sophisticated relationship-building skills (dandolopartners, 2022).

# 2 Forming collaborative governance

While consistently acknowledged as critically important, forging and maintaining collaboration between service providers – and between government and communities – is not simple to achieve. Indeed, Homel et al refer to the “historic failure of attempts at collaboration or service integration, despite the rhetoric and despite more than one hundred years of effort” (2012, p. 375).

To be effective, collaborative governance needs to change what and how services are delivered – a more challenging and transformational change than simple co-location or shared planning, often requiring change on the ground in how people work together and what service providers offer, and at system-level, around how agencies align their work and respond to local priorities.

Building community coalitions is challenging work, but there are core and consistent themes in the literature about effective place-based initiatives and what’s required for effective local planning and to support new ways of working, including:

- **A shared vision that reflects community aspirations.** A shared vision and ambitious agenda that is developed with the community is considered critical for securing buy-in of the wider community and partners. It helps crystallise a sense purpose, create alignment with existing efforts and broader agendas, and ensure community voice and community priorities are at the centre of the collective effort.
- **Investment in relationships and sophisticated interpersonal capabilities.** Research on community change initiatives highlights the importance of dedicated roles with the time, capacity and sophisticated interpersonal skills required for proactive relationship development and facilitating collaboration (Branch et al, 2022).
- **A dedicated partnership broker or enabler to create and hold shared governance.** A key element of contemporary place-based initiatives is the critical role of ‘backbone’ or intermediary organisations. There

are critical roles for backbones in guiding vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, supporting shared measurement, cultivating community engagement and outreach, advancing policy and mobilising resources (Collective Impact Forum, 2021).

- **Collaborating effectively with government.** A critical role that backbone organisations play is equipping communities to engage effectively with government, building and sustaining relationships across the range of departments and levels of government needed to achieve change, helping build the authorising environment and capability within government to work differently, and helping provide the evidence government need to secure the required funding or flexibility.

Central to collaborative governance is organisations and government working differently together, taking account of local contexts, thinking strategically about how to make the best use of existing resources, and partnering to provide the support communities need to thrive.

It requires people, organisations and governments to form different kinds of relations, to make decisions in different ways, to invest their resources (time and financial) in different ways, and to consider different perspectives and priorities than they might otherwise (ASISB 2011; Gill, Dakin & Smith 2017; Wilks, Lahausse & Edwards 2015). Given the complexity of the change, skilled facilitation and leadership is critical.



# 3 Guiding evidence informed decision-making

A critical element of place-based initiatives is the capacity to use data effectively. Given the often-entrenched issues place-based approaches aim to resolve, and the long timeframes required to achieve change, being guided by data is necessary to:

- Understand local strengths and challenges, including highlighting inequalities experienced by particular cohorts in the community.
- Identify priorities for action and build consensus on where to focus effort.
- Monitor progress and support iteration, experimentation and innovation.
- Measure impact, celebrate achievement, maintain momentum and enable continuous improvement (Fox et al. 2015; Kingsley, Coulton & Petit 2014; Smart 2017).

The research does identify a number of enablers for enhanced data collection and use. There are a range of factors that need to come together to ensure data goes beyond identifying problems to guiding and driving meaningful action. These include:

- Relationships and trust. Trust is often a precondition for organisations to feel comfortable with sharing data or confronting challenging findings highlighted by the data.
- Building data literacy. Support and scaffold the data literacy of community members and partners, as well as growing technical capacity among partners, and coaching to translate data into changed practice, actions or behaviour.
- Being creative about data sources. Empower community members to collect and share data, collecting qualitative and quantitative insights, community initiatives designed to fill knowledge gaps, and focusing on how people's everyday experiences of services and the community are changing.
- Provision of data collection and analysis tools. Access to easy-to-use data collection and reporting tools.

- Data access partnerships. Collaborations with researchers or government agencies to seek access to government data (although there are limitations to this approach, see Homel et al, 2020).
- Investment in independent evaluation. Building more precision about how and why the initiatives are having an impact.
- Focus on action. Ensuring that data is shared with people as part of a change process that helps them to take actions in their sphere of influence (not just as part of admiring the problem).
- Rapid review cycles. Collecting diagnostic data as well as population data, particularly focusing on indicators that show the community whether system is operating as intended – for example, smaller-scale factors that shape whether outcomes are likely to be achieved, such as expected behaviours of service providers, the experiences of families, the reach of initiatives to target cohorts.
- Dedicated data resources and ongoing focus on data-led learning, led by the backbone organisation. Backbones play a critical role in bringing stakeholders together to understand local data, support learning, and building the capacity and authority to take action. They can also help mitigate the risk of data being collected but not used. This is a space in which technical expertise and support makes a real difference, but the convening role of backbones is as important as the provision of data analysis.
- Learning cycles that create a safe-to-fail culture and support reflection and innovation. Aligning data with broader efforts to shift the culture of systems to one of learning and innovation, including embedding data in regular learning cycles as part of a culture that makes reflection, experimentation and adaptation the norm (Gill and Smith, 2017; Smart, 2017; Inkelas and Bowie, 2014; Grieve, 2014).

# 4

## Providing advice on space and infrastructure

Space and infrastructure are also critical – and often overlooked – enablers of place-based initiatives. They are also central for enabling schools to become community hubs and making services and resources more accessible for families (ARACY 2015; Dryfoos, Barkin & Quinn 2005; Hoy 2011; Royston & Rodrigues 2013; Sobó, Seid & Reyes Gelhard 2006). Research points to the value of schools offering wrap-around services, including:

- Helping create a sense of belonging and community around the school.
- Increasing access to formal services – like early learning, parenting support, allied health, adult education and other specialist services (see the paper on wrap around services and support).
- Increasing engagement in informal activities – like sport, dance, arts and crafts, informal learning opportunities (see the papers on adult engagement and enrichment and youth engagement and enrichment opportunities).

This value is created and enhanced by ensuring there is dedicated space within the school. Although there's little direct empirical evidence of the impact of space and infrastructure on the effectiveness of school-based community hubs, there are clear themes in the available literature. These include:

- Space that is welcoming and inviting for families and communities.
- Multi-purpose spaces that enable service integration and formal and informal use by the community.
- Community engagement is essential to ensure what's offered through the school is aligned with family needs and priorities.
- Space alone isn't enough – dedicated site management, collaborative governance and effective implementation is needed to ensure the space is considered welcoming, safe, accessible and therefore is used well (Lewing et al, 2020; Tasmanian Department of Education, 2020; Valli et al, 2014; Butler, 2022).





# Our Place Elements



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## Contact

info@ourplace.org.au  
ourplace.org.au

## Our Place sites

Bridgewood	Morwell
Carlton	Northern Bay
Doveton	Robinvale
Frankston North	Seymour
Mooroopna	Westall