

INSIGHTS FOR WALKING ALONGSIDE:

# Lessons learnt from the Our Place partnership



**VISION**  
We are a... and, we... and inclusive environment. We embrace diversity, encourage belonging and nurture learning, empowering and enabling our children and families to achieve their best.

- SITE PRIORITIES**
1. Learning and social opportunities in the early years
  2. Children are engaged and supported in their learning
  3. Access to health and support for development

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

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## Acknowledgements

To inform the development of this paper, reflections and insights were gathered from 18 people directly involved with the Our Place partnership from across state and local government as well as the Our Place team (listed in Appendix A). Thank you to everyone who took part in this research. Your insights have helped bring to life the complexity of partnering and the importance of walking alongside.

We also acknowledge the Our Place commitment to continual improvement and refinement. This paper has also drawn upon insights from the 2022 process which reviewed the Department of Education-Our Place Partnership; 2022 Site Partnership Group Surveys; and the 2023 Department of Education Colman Partnership Agreement.

# Executive Summary

This paper shares lessons learnt as the Our Place partnership with the Victorian Government has grown from one community to nine across Victoria.

It is hoped that these insights prove useful for anyone who might have embarked upon, or may be considering embarking on, a long-term cross-sectoral partnership journey that seeks to improve outcomes for Australian families. The following provides a brief summary in the form of seven pieces of advice for anyone seeking to partner well and to 'walk alongside' each other on the path to systems change:

## 1. Create a shared vision to hold steady.

The commitment to a shared vision can help those in the partnership to hold steady when times are tough. As an initiative scales up, it is important to ensure that this shared vision is translated to be locally relevant and powerful as well.

## 2. Keeping relationships and trust at the core of problem solving.

Even as an initiative scales and grows, trust and relationships are essential for fostering shared understanding, problem solving and action.

## 3. Maintain buy-in from senior leaders.

The act of senior leaders going 'above and beyond' remains critical to any systems change initiative as they are essentially providing permission and backing a different way of working from the norm. The importance of this kind of encouragement of innovation should not be underestimated, even if the key role is to hold back opposition and resistance.

## 4. Investing in people who can work across boundaries.

Cross-sector collaborations will always be complicated because of the competing norms and logics of the organisations involved. The ability of 'boundary spanners' – people who can see, empathise with and navigate these challenges across boundaries – is critical as they are often the ones to find a path through the middle.

## 5. Sustain the approach beyond individual relationships.

While relationships are always key, they also create a potential weakness as individuals may not stay in the collaboration forever. Therefore, there needs to be ways to sustain the approach beyond relationships. This can require establishing governance structures, investing in onboarding new partners and, documenting high-level principles and guidance for implementation, whilst avoiding prescriptions for replication.

## 6. Embed evidence to support joint decision making.

Embedding evidence around how the partnership contributes to change is critical not only to demonstrating the value of the approach, but in generating real-time information and data to drive collaborative decision making.

## 7. Translate the shared vision to shared action.

As initiatives grow and scale, the high-level shared vision must be translated into agendas for shared action. These agendas for shared action are required at every level and help to underpin progress and momentum. Shared agenda setting requires uniquely skilled individuals who can support and enrol partners in action, without 'being in charge'.



# Purpose

In the spirit of transparency and openness to learning, Our Place published *What it means to walk alongside: Exploring the Our Place partnership in 2019*.

That paper explored the creation of the landmark partnership that had been established with the Victorian Department of Education in 2017 to implement the Our Place approach in nine additional communities across Victoria. The original paper explored what it took to establish the formal Partnership, the governance arrangements, and the ways of working that were encapsulated in the original agreement.

In 2023, with more than five years of experience and learnings from the Partnership and implementation in nine diverse communities, Our Place commissioned Orange Compass to develop this paper as the next chapter in their Walking Alongside series. The first paper can be found here. <https://ourplace.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ourplace-exploringtheourplacepartnership.pdf>

With this paper, Our Place and partners are seeking to share their experience for the benefit of others who might have embarked upon, or be considering embarking on a long-term, cross-sectoral, partnership journey that seeks to improve outcomes for Australian families. Through this paper, Our Place also seeks to spotlight the vital role of strong partnerships in enabling

Our Place's holistic place-based approach using the universal platform of schools to support the education, health and development of children and families across Victoria.

This paper is particularly focused on insights from the ongoing evolution of the Partnership between philanthropy and government and key lessons and considerations for working in partnership. It includes selected examples of how the Partnership has progressed and lessons learnt since 2019.

It is intended to be complementary to the recent processes that review the strength of these partnerships including: between the Department and Colman Education Foundation; with Our Place's philanthropic partners; and on an annual basis with Site Partnership Groups.

To inform the development of this paper, reflections and insights were gathered from 18 people directly involved with the Our Place Partnership from across state and local government and the Our Place team. Where appropriate, direct quotes are included.

## Definitions

- In 2022 the Department of Education and Training (DET) became the Department of Education. For consistency, we use the single term of Department of Education (DE) in this document.
- The Our Place approach is currently being implemented across eleven schools in nine communities. The tenth community, Bridgwood, was planned to be part of Our Place for a three-year period that has now finished. For simplicity, we use the term 'nine communities or sites' in this paper.
- When we use the term 'Our Place', we are referring to the organisation that is run by the Colman Education Foundation. When we use the term 'Our Place approach' we are referring to the collaborative efforts of many partners who are involved in implementing the approach.
- When we use the term Partnership with a capital P, we are referring to the formally agreed Partnership between DE and Our Place. In other parts of the text, we use the term 'partnership' (no capitals) to refer to the general activity of partnering and being 'in partnership'.

# Context

## Our Place origins

The Our Place approach is an initiative of the Colman Education Foundation. It was developed from the learnings and outcomes in the original site at Doveton College.



Doveton College, based in an outer suburb of Melbourne, was founded in 2012 as a Victorian Government school. It was designed in partnership with Colman Education Foundation to holistically meet the needs of children from birth to Year 9. The College also incorporated a number of local early childhood and family services offered by not-for-profit providers and which, lacking adequate scale and coordination, had been struggling to meet the high demand and complex needs of the area's residents.

Following on from the success at Doveton College, in 2017 the Colman Education Foundation and Department of Education (DE) signed a landmark agreement to implement the Our Place approach in ten communities across Victoria. Between 2019 and 2020, Doveton was joined by Bridgewood<sup>1</sup>, Carlton, Frankston North, Mooroopna, Morwell, Northern Bay, Robinvale, Seymour, and Westall.

Our Place as an organisation is fully funded by philanthropic investment and the partnerships with philanthropy are also vital to Our Place's capacity to work in disadvantaged communities in Victoria.

## Our Place approach

The Our Place approach is a holistic place-based approach that uses the universal platform of schools to support the education, health and development of all children and families in communities with high level of disadvantage.

A key aim for Our Place is to reshape the existing service system so that it is more accessible and works more effectively for children and families. Creating schools as place-based hubs opens up an opportunity to address persistent gaps and inefficiencies in the system, and to develop consistent ways of working, coordinated pathways for families, and more effective responses built around the priorities and needs of families.

As such, shared ownership for action and outcomes, and sustainable, community-driven change are central to the Our Place approach. It is important for site-level governance arrangements to support this way of working. To this end, each Our Place site has a range of site partners who are committed to implementing the Our Place approach and who form the local governance group – the "Site Partnership Group".

The Colman Education Foundation is not a direct provider of services or programs. Instead, the Our Place team focuses on building increased connection for children and families through its role as 'The Glue'. They bring together the many parts of the integrated, place-based approach to work effectively as a whole. This is not a solo effort and requires a range of partnerships at multiple levels of the system including between the school, local government, early learning service providers, other service providers, and the wider community.

Since 2017, Our Place as an organisation has rapidly developed from a small team at Doveton College to a substantive independent intermediary organisation. As an intermediary, Our Place has grown its capabilities to play a brokering role across networks and boundaries, promoting collaboration and mediating demands. The team also acts as facilitators and enablers that convene the elements of the integrated, place-based approach to support capacity of actors across the sites to work more effectively as a whole. To enable this, Our Place now employs a Partnership Manager for each of its nine sites who leads the site team including at least two Community Facilitators at every site. There are also specialists available as advisors to the sites, as well as a dedicated evaluation team to support impact measurement and learning.

To learn more about the Our Place approach visit [www.ourplace.org.au](http://www.ourplace.org.au)

<sup>1</sup> As mentioned above, Bridgewood was only intended to run for three years and was active from 2019-2021. In the rest of the document we refer to 'nine communities' for the sake of simplicity.

# Evolution in partnership governance

At its core, the Our Place approach is a place-based partnership approach.

The Our Place approach is founded on working in partnership with government, philanthropy and many services and organisations at the local level in the communities where Our Place sites are located, based on the voices and needs of local children and families. As the Our Place approach has evolved, so too has the governance of the relationship between the partners behind the approach.

## Partnership origins

At Doveton College, the focus was on creating a significant change for children and families by engaging the children, their parents and the entire Doveton community. The original agreements in 2009 and 2012 between Government and the Colman Education Foundation gave Doveton College the extra freedom and ability to come up with fresh ideas and innovative programs to empower Doveton children and their families.

Doveton College focused on creating significant changes in the learning environment for children and families. This was underpinned by radical improvements to:

- infrastructure and physical environments (including a single entrance into the school)
- education delivery (including teaching methods and pedagogy)
- parent and carer involvement in the school curriculum as well as in progressing their own and their children's education
- linkages between schools and other services that support families with young children
- engaging and welcoming children, their parents and carers and the entire Doveton community.

This in turn led to significantly improved education outcomes in:

- attendance and retention rates
- literacy, numeracy, language and self-regulation
- engagement in extra-curricular activities.



In November 2017, a new landmark Partnership Agreement was signed between the Victorian Government and the Colman Education Foundation to expand the Our Place approach beyond Doveton (the "Partnership"). It was the success of Doveton College that paved the way for this new agreement, formalising conversations that had begun several years earlier.

The purpose of the Partnership was to outline the agreed governance mechanisms and ways of working to enable the partners to implement the Our Place approach and deliver improved educational and social outcomes in other targeted communities in Victoria.

Building on the 2012 agreement, the 2017 agreement confirmed a commitment to establish a unique place-based, integrated education approach at an additional nine communities across Victoria. It also provided a process and criteria to identify the nine new sites as well as an initial governance model.

The Victorian Government also committed significant capital investment to support infrastructure and building works at each site, as part of planned expenditure for school upgrades, to enable the Our Place approach.



## Evolution of governance structures

Investing in shared governance at a site and state level to ensure authorisation and commitment to the Partnership's objectives and implementation of site strategic plans has been a critical component of the Our Place approach. To support this, the Partnership is reviewed every three years and the approach to governance has evolved over time.

### The context in 2019

In 2019, as part of implementation of the 2017 agreement, a three-tiered governance structure was created to support implementation of the Our Place approach across sites. This included:

- Tier 1 – Steering Committee (state level)
- Tier 2 – Strategic Management Group (cross-site)
- Tier 3 – Site Partnership Group (site level)

The 'Tier 1 – Steering Committee' was the overarching governance body tasked with resolving system-level barriers, providing strategic direction for the Partnership arrangements, endorsing recommendations for Our Place sites, monitoring progress and reporting to the Minister for Education and Minister for Families and Children. The membership included the Secretary and Deputy Secretaries (DE), CEO of Victoria School Buildings Authority, CEO and Director of Our Place, and CEO of Municipal Association of Victoria.

### What has evolved since then?

It was the 2020 review and agreement that led to confirmation of new sites and funding; a 'Shared Approaches to Success' element; and further changes in governance structure.

Due to the rapid growth in implementation and scale, it was also identified that an increased level of coordination and oversight was needed. A three-level governance framework that supports the partnership was retained. However, the Partnership's governance structure was strengthened with a focus on a 'whole of government' approach to drive greater integration of government service delivery at each Our Place site for the benefit of families in vulnerable communities. It evolved to consist of:

### Our Place Inter-Departmental Committee (IDC)

- Chaired by the DE Secretary, with senior representatives from Department of Premier and Cabinet; Department of Health; Department of Families, Fairness and Housing; Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions; Department of Justice and Community Safety; and Colman Education Foundation.

- The committee provides a pathway across government to facilitate the integrated delivery of services at Our Place sites. Specifically, the IDC provides whole-of-Victorian government support and strategic alignment for implementation of the Our Place approach to ensure:
  - integration of government service delivery through collaboration and partnerships at Our Place sites, including by facilitating the resolution of inter-departmental issues and risks.
  - the Our Place approach is conceptually aligned, to the extent appropriate, with relevant service delivery reforms and place-based approaches.
  - active engagement by portfolios through place-based approaches to maximise the breadth of strategies being used.
  - Our Place experiences and lessons contribute to the broader program of government place-based initiatives.

#### Our Place Partnership Management Group (PMG)

- Chaired by DE, with senior executives from across the Department and Our Place, to oversee the partnership, manage issues and risks, and exchange information and insights about the Our Place approach for the benefit of the broader school system.
- This is critical as DE facilitates establishment of the Our Place approach at schools and also supports the schools and early childhood services at Our Place sites to be implementing the approach.

#### Site Partnership Groups (SPG)

- Site-based partnership groups are established at each site to oversee the implementation of the Our Place approach at the site.
- The Group is chaired by a staff member from DE Regions with membership comprising representatives from site partners including: the School Principal; Early Learning Centre operator; local council; Department of Families, Fairness and Housing; Our Place; and local service providers.
- The SPG groups' operations are supported by the signing of a Site Operating Agreement, which is signed by DE, local government and Our Place as foundational partners for each site and provides a connection to the overarching Partnership Agreement. This document is a critical enabler as it sets out the shared commitment to the Our Place approach and operational responsibilities for shared site facilities. Reaching agreement on these topics provides local site staff with the ability to focus their efforts on collaborative change and activities.







## Our Place governance structure

### INTER-DEPARTMENTAL COMMITTEE (IDC)

Provides a pathway across government to deliver the integrated services required to operate the Our Place sites under one umbrella.



Chaired by the DE Secretary, the IDC develops strategic direction, ensures work is conceptually aligned with system-level service delivery reforms and maximises the breadth of strategies being used across portfolios.

### PARTNERSHIP MANAGEMENT GROUP (PMG)

Sustains and enhances the effectiveness of the partnership over the long-term.



Shares collective learnings, identifies system-level barriers, supports issue resolution, facilitates access to expertise and resources, fosters accountability and monitors outcomes.

### SITE PARTNERSHIP GROUPS (SPG)

Coordinates and supports the implementation at each Our Place site.



Chaired by a senior representative nominated by DE and supported by the Our Place site team, the site partners co-design and agree to long-term work plans and shared ownership for action and outcomes.

Additionally, dedicated roles were created in both Our Place and DE to manage the partnership at a high level and to support the Inter-Departmental Committee and Partnership Management Group. These roles have day-to-day custodianship of the partnership agreement and support its governance and long-term success.

Since 2019, in addition to the Partnership Agreement between DE and Our Place, additional agreements have also been made with other government departments for key projects at different sites.

## The 2023 agreement

In 2023, the Partnership Agreement was again reviewed and recommitted to which cemented the ongoing relationship. The maturity of the relationship means that the revised 2023 Partnership Agreement was able to be jointly developed between the two counterparts, ensuring continuity of information and learning in and between the two organisations.

While the 2023 Partnership Agreement was updated, the original intent set out in the 2017 Partnership Agreement remains. These include:

- Striving for the best outcomes for children and families.
- Taking a continuous improvement approach to the Partnership and implementation at Our Place sites.
- Working with communities and partners to respond to complex issues through locally relevant and responsive solutions.
- Rigorous monitoring and evaluation including enabling data-informed decision-making at a site and state level and the sharing of emerging lessons to inform government practice and policy.
- Supporting quality teaching and learning in all education settings.
- Maintaining the strong relationship between both organisations, recognising the inherent complexity of working in partnership and working with values of transparency, accountability, communication and trust.

The 2023 revised Partnership Agreement reflects work to date, changing contexts, and also the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. It reflects learnings about shared approaches for achieving success and codifies agreed ways of working that support the intent of the Partnership, recognising the potential impact of changes in key personnel. It is a longer agreement, (72 pages compared to 21 pages in 2020) and has increased on clarity around fundings, outcomes and evaluation. It also provides greater clarity around responsibilities, with clear roles and provisions for support defined.

It jointly commits The Department of Education and Colman Education Foundation to:

- Strive to provide all Our Place sites with the enabling conditions and services that contributed to initial success at Doveton. This followed a series of discussions with the Department and the IDC to capture and confirm what the most critical components of success were at Doveton as an aspiration for all sites. This has in turn enabled Partnership discussions to be focused on key topics to enable this.

- Maintain shared governance at a site and state level to ensure authorisation and commitment to the Partnership's objectives and implementation of site strategic plans.
- Continue to assess community need in each Our Place site to determine how this can be met through the shared resources of the Partnership including growing engagement with the community through partnerships with local government, health services and other community organisations.

To support effective site implementation, governance and reporting on progress, specific commitments from each party are also referenced. For example, the Department has committed to:

- Facilitate access to data held by the Department via a Data Access and Use Protocol to enable evidence-based decision making at sites and to support Our Place's evaluation of the approach.
- Support regular Senior Executive engagement between the Department and the Colman Foundation.

While examples of Colman Education Foundation commitments include:

- Leading capability building at sites about the Our Place approach with site partners.
- Facilitating data driven decision-making to respond to community need among site partners.
- Leading monitoring and evaluation activities to report on progress against outcomes to the Partnership's governance groups.

Importantly, DE recognises that this Partnership is unique and that working in this way is a different approach than usual on both sides and so the learning and the level of internal and external coordination now reflects this. It has committed in-kind support through central partnership teams, senior executive engagement, and authorisation for school staff to actively engage with the Our Place approach.



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In terms of governance, a lot of work has been put into the Partnership Management Group, which is the governance group that sits within the Department of Education. That has regional representation and representation from early childhood and our colleagues in evaluation. I think that's an example of us working well together as partners.

State Government Partner

#### A note on partnerships with philanthropy

The focus of this paper is on the partnership with government. However, it is also important to acknowledge that there has also been a significant expansion of philanthropic partnerships to enable the Our Place approach.

In 2019, there were five philanthropic organisations providing long-term support to Our Place: Colman Foundation; Dusseldorp Forum; Paul Ramsay Foundation; Ray & Margaret Wilson Foundation; and William Buckland Foundation. Each came on board because they saw the great potential of the Our Place approach to create lasting impact and understand the importance of sustained long-term support in order to achieve lasting change.

In 2023, there are now eleven Philanthropic Foundations supporting Our Place sites: Colman Foundation; Dusseldorp Forum; Paul Ramsay Foundation; Ray & Margaret Wilson Foundation; Besen Family Foundation, Sabemo Foundation, R.M. Ansett Trust, Helen MacPherson Smith Trust, Kennards Hire Foundation, Brian M Davis Charitable Foundation and The William Buckland Foundation.

Recently Our Place undertook a 'Philanthropic Partner Health Check' and it was evident from this that there are a variety of ways that Our Place's philanthropic partners approach philanthropy.

Each partner is unique and, as such, there are a range of approaches to supporting Our Place. Our Place has recognised that philanthropy has so much more to give than just money. While some want to provide funding and 'get out of the way', others play an active role as thought partners, advocates and connectors across the fields of early childhood, education and socio-economic empowerment. It is this variety of approaches that provide significant opportunities for exploring how philanthropic partnering can really serve and amplify the achievement of its mission.

Our Place established the Our Place Philanthropic Alliance in 2019, where philanthropic organisations who co-invest with the Colman Education Foundation pursue broader objectives beyond those at a site level. The Alliance's role is to explore ways to promote systemic changes through policy adoption and advocating for changes in policy and funding in the longer term. The Alliance also provides an important pragmatic function in simplifying reporting requirements across the diverse range of funding organisations. This significantly reduces the administration burden enabling more time and funds to be directed to the actual value-adding activities that Our Place undertakes.

# Lessons learnt — partnering at scale

As the Our Place approach has moved from one community to nine across Victoria, changes have occurred in how the partnerships underpinning the approach are implemented.

Many lessons have been learnt during the implementation of the Our Place approach. In the following seven sections, the original intent and earlier 2019 context are briefly described, followed by a reflection on the 2023 reality and some of the lessons learnt along the way.

The goal here is to provide tangible examples of how the Partnership has evolved and why. It is hoped that these examples and lessons learnt prove useful for anyone who might have embarked upon, or may be considering embarking on, a long-term cross-sectoral partnership journey that seeks to improve outcomes for Australian families.



# 1. Shared vision to hold steady

At Doveton College, the focus was on creating a significant change for children and families by engaging the children, their parents and the entire Doveton community. The original agreements in 2009 and 2012 between Government and the Colman Education Foundation gave Doveton College the extra freedom and ability to come up with fresh ideas and innovative programs to empower Doveton children and their families.

## ← Earlier context

The 2017 Partnership Agreement formalised a commitment from both partners “to work in collaboration to deliver improved educational and social outcomes in targeted disadvantaged communities in Victoria”. The intent was that this commitment meant that any time that negotiations entered difficult moments around contracts and funding, or when the partners hit against red tape, there was a strong purpose holding the group together.

It was also clear from the beginning that there was a shared vision between the parties that further articulated what was meant by “improved educational and social outcomes”. This included a need to agree on what an integrated approach to education could look like, and the potential role that schools could play in becoming a hub for the community. Therefore, the 2017 agreement<sup>2</sup> encapsulated a shared vision for a joined-up approach – one that would deliver:

- High-quality early learning, starting prenatally.
- High-quality intentional teaching in primary school.
- Provision of wrap-around health and wellbeing support, including Maternal and Child Health, allied health, GPs, paediatricians and immunisations; access to a range of adult activities including volunteering, formal and informal education and training, and job-seeking support.
- Provision of a wide range of out of hours activities (before/after school and weekend) for children and families.

In 2019, the Partnership was still operating under this agreement and further work had been done to articulate what each of these elements contained and required.

## ↳ 2023 reality and lessons learnt

- **Holding steady in tough times:** In reflecting on the shared vision in 2023, interviewees felt that there remains a strong sense of shared vision and values. This commitment to a shared vision was attributed as being critical to ‘holding things together’, especially when times have been tough. For Victoria, from 2020–2022, the Covid-19 pandemic created a particularly complex context with many months of school lockdowns across the State.
- **Retaining commitment to a joined-up approach:** In addition to holding steady in tougher times, the shared vision has continued to ensure a commitment to holistic responses even when it would be easier to just give in to the temptation to create more ad hoc programs. This has proven important as a decision-making tool, especially when new program funding opportunities arise that could move collective effort away from core purpose.
- **The vision has become more relevant over time:** While there has been a long-term commitment of stakeholders from across government to a more ‘joined-up’ approach to tackling complex public policy issues that are critical to the Our Place approach, there is also growing recognition by others that the wellbeing of children (and their families) is not the responsibility of any single service, sector, or government department. If anything, the vision has become more relevant over time, not less.
- **It takes work to ensure the shared vision resonates locally:** The further development and articulation of a shared vision that resonates for each community has also proven important. This is because no one partner can shift local outcomes and that each partner has a role to play in achieving change. Site Partnership Groups have been key as they have led this work to develop a locally relevant shared vision that guides local partnerships and collaboration. And the Site Partnership Group’s 2022 survey indicated the greatest improvement was in the area of ‘purpose’, going from ‘very good’ 4.9 to ‘excellent’ 5.1 (out of 6). This is reflective of the Site Partnership Group’s deepening their commitment to a common goal over the past three years and coincides with SPGs across all sites having completed their strategic planning process by the end of 2022.

<sup>2</sup> DET and the Colman Foundation: A collaborative partnership, 2017

## 2. Keeping relationships and trust at the core of problem solving

### ← Earlier context

If there has been one key ingredient in the Our Place partnership, it is trust. It has been widely acknowledged that initial success required building personal relationships and interactions that foster mutual understanding and shared motivation. And it was intended that building further trust between organisations would ensure that the Partnership would be respected by the key parties. It was also seen as critical to enabling individuals to negotiate and collaborate on behalf of their organisations in the partnership, towards a shared goal.

This trust firstly had to be built between senior leaders and this process took place over time. There were formal meetings and negotiations as well as opportunities to build relationships and shared experiences. Many of the relationships that enabled the Our Place partnership didn't arise from a blank slate. There was pre-existing trust and history between different people within the partnership. Not everyone knew each other but there was enough overlap to create confidence that a partnership could be successful.

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We were able to talk through any issues and flag what might be a challenge. And I think that was really crucial. If we'd have just spoken to each other on the phone you probably wouldn't have got that. But having that in-person relationship was a really crucial part of the success of it.

Local Government Partner

### → 2023 reality and lessons learnt

- **Trusted relationships underpin ongoing collaboration:** Trusted relationships are still key, and this was spoken about by most interviewees. This echoes findings of the recent review of the Partnership where trust between the partners was reported as strong and 'currently the best it has ever been' – with the recognition that there is always still room for trust to be further strengthened. This is achieved not just by relationship building, but also by ensuring that the right people are in the right roles with the capabilities required to navigate a collaboration.
- **Trusted relationships are especially critical when challenges arise:** Interviewees spoke about the importance of being able to work through challenges with trusted partners. While relationship building is time consuming, it was seen to 'pay off' when difficulties arose. A key part of this trust building was felt to require face-to-face meetings. This was also reflected when the Department and Our Place reviewed the Partnership, where the ability to be able to meet face-to-face and connect on a more personal level was seen as critical. Covid-19 and the requirement to work more 'remotely' created some challenges to this – but people felt they were able to find workarounds where necessary. Post-Covid, relationships are again being strengthened through face-to-face interaction.



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A lot of time goes into relationship negotiation with each partner – the maintenance, fostering and development.

Our Place staff member

### 3. Maintaining authorisation from senior leaders

#### ← Earlier context

Knowing that government must constantly balance a variety of priorities and a deluge of requests for action, it was strongly felt that a key enabler for the Our Place partnership was the willingness of senior departmental staff to be prepared to invest their time and intellect to help the project germinate and to champion the initiative in a way that sets as expectation to work differently and to embrace the opportunity presented by Our Place. In addition, the partnership was proposing an entirely new way of working, as well as a new way to build and operate in a school environment. This can naturally lead to resistance, and it was anticipated that there would be challenges along the journey. Having senior leaders on board was a critical enabler for those working through the difficulties of implementation.

When the partnership was first established, there was support and interest from a range of senior leaders within government. This included the former Deputy Premier and Minister for Education from the outset. It also included the Departmental Secretary, Regional Directors and other departmental staff who each made a conscious choice to invest time and political capital in developing the idea and advancing it towards fruition. This helped the Department and The Colman Foundation bring onside those who had dismissed it as “all too hard”. Unquestionably, without this endorsement the Partnership would never have materialised. Also critical was the support and efforts of exceptional school leaders and principals who worked to implement the Our Place approach on the ground which is essential to maintain local engagement and progress.

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**It is both the skills and the time and effort required to establish and maintain partnerships. You cannot take a set of principles and forget. You've got to be prepared to sustain the effort and also be prepared to ride the wave of the good times and the tougher times.**

State Government Partner

#### → 2023 reality and lessons learnt

- **Senior leadership help ensure the partnership remains a priority:** Having committed senior leadership made it possible for the Department to sustain its engagement, even in the face of competing policy priorities that emerged over time. However, as Our Place has been scaled up, engagement with Department senior leaders has been supported through the day-to-day collaborative effort by staff at all levels, which is important for ongoing credibility and momentum of the partnership.
- **Senior leaders are experts at finding solutions:** Interviewees spoke about the many senior leaders who had gone above and beyond in enabling adoption of the Our Place approach, often despite barriers in the system. This has included ongoing work from within government and philanthropy.
- **Maintaining authorisation takes effort:** Over the years, the people taking up the role of Minister, Secretary and Departmental Secretary's responsible for the Our Place partnership have changed. This has meant that both Departmental and Our Place staff have had to work hard to ensure that new leaders are well briefed on the work and its importance and to ensure authorisation is renewed with the departure of every leader at a state wide and site level. This is particularly important in the recruitment of new school principals or senior executives.
- **School leadership remains critical:** The Our Place approach relies on schools becoming a universal platform for delivery. At a site level, leadership from Principals and Early Years management has proven essential to enable site staff to work in partnership. Without their support, the approach cannot work. This is not just at an organisational level. It includes supporting others within the school to take part. For example, interviewees spoke about how important it was for teachers and educators to be given 'time out' to meet and collaborate as a key part of the Our Place approach.

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**Leadership is the biggest enabler at the site level. This includes buy-in from Principals and Early Years management. That buy-in at the site level, the releasing of staff to spend time with Our Place and buy-in for site partnership is key and this takes time.**

Our Place staff member

## 4. Investing in people who can work across boundaries

### ← Earlier context

The organisational contexts for government and philanthropy are strikingly different. For Our Place, it was believed that investing in people who can work across boundaries (often referred to as ‘boundary spanners’ in the literature) was important because they can see and empathise with the competing organisational demands and requirements that affect collaboration. They typically end up being the ones who negotiate any mismatches and are able to cope with ongoing sources of tension and ambiguity.

It was hoped that key people within the Department of Education and Our Place would be able to become boundary spanners – those that could see both sides of the story and understand how to meet in the middle. This proved true and especially critical when creating the 2017 Partnership Agreement. It required people on both sides of the Partnership to draw on diverse experiences inside and outside of government, as well as personal relationships, to build bridges across organisational barriers. They helped to mediate alternative world views and navigate different systems, vocabularies, timelines, and alternative ways of getting things done.

### → 2023 reality and lessons learnt

- **Even more boundary spanners are needed:** Since 2019, Our Place has more intentionally amplified its ‘boundary spanning’ workforce. Over the past four years, several long-time public servants moved from working in government to be employed by the Colman Education Foundation directly – very much filling the boundary spanner role. This has significantly helped other Our Place staff to better understand and navigate complex government processes and requirements.
- **Boundary spanners can help to build shared language:** The boundary spanners in Our Place and the Department have been critical in developing more documentation on the Our Place approach and strategy, working to create a shared language that speaks to different audiences and partners.
- **Boundary spanning can be a function, not just a person:** In addition to individuals with cross-sectoral experience, the creation of the IDC as a cross-departmental authorisation structure at a state level has embedded boundary spanning as a function not just a person. The design of the structure requires boundary spanning of every participant.
- **Boundary spanning is needed at every level:** At a site level, an increased emphasis has been placed on finding local leaders in schools, local government, service providers and the wider community, who can grapple with the sectoral differences that occur across the partnership.



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There are now systems, policies, data, research papers and briefings that contribute to the partnership. It has made a huge difference and has formalised many processes.

Our Place staff member



## 5. Sustaining the approach beyond individual relationships

### ← Earlier context

Relationships were always seen as key in the Our Place partnership. However, over time it became apparent that, in the face of ongoing staff turnover, there needed to be an ongoing commitment from the organisations involved, not just the individuals. Otherwise, when staff moved on to new roles, collaboration was also lost. The Our Place partners were very conscious of 'key personnel' risk and sought to formalise the collaboration through the governance arrangements described above.

In 2019, interviewees drew on past experience of this, speaking of being involved in previous collaborations led by individuals, which had fallen apart as soon as the individuals who founded the collaboration left. There was strong support for other efforts to embed the Our Place approach and new ways of working, including learning networks that were being established at the time, such as the Our Place Principal's Network.

### → 2023 reality and lessons learnt

- **There will likely always be a tension between individual relationships versus embedding organisational commitments:** The tension between a reliance on personal connections and the need for more embedded organisational commitments to collaboration has remained. As mentioned above, the shared commitment of key individuals remains essential. However, the challenge from changes of key personnel is ongoing. To this end, embedding collaboration through governance has been a key achievement and 'protection' for the Partnership. The creation of the Our Place Inter-Departmental Committee and the Partnership Management Group have also helped to embed more formal mechanisms to manage issues and share insights about the broader education system. The tension is that while mechanisms have the advantage of sustaining collaboration, they also potentially create new barriers to innovation as they become more standardised. The need to keep revisiting and adapting governance arrangements is a key way to manage this tension.
- **The onboarding of new people can be streamlined:** Another key learning has been the need to improve the ability to communicate the key elements of the Our Place approach to newcomers. With the goal of responding to turnover with better induction and documentation, a range of materials have been created that partners can use to bring people up to speed.
- **Codifying a new way of working can be tricky:** Creating a more detailed description of the Our Place approach was not as easy as it sounds. While seeking 'replication' to some extent, at the heart of the approach is a deep commitment to respond to the specific needs, priorities, aspirations and interests of communities where Our Place is working. This is consistent with an approach that is genuinely developmental, with an emphasis on 'grounded theory' in place. In efforts to unpack the approach, the emphasis has been on creating high-level principles and guidance for translation, rather than instructions for replication. Since 2019, much more of the approach and ways of working has been documented and codified. For example:
  - The five key elements and The Glue have been further articulated and documented.
  - Implementation Guides were developed and refined 2021.
  - Detailed Evidence Reviews for key elements were undertaken in 2022.
  - Induction processes for staff and sites were improved in 2022.
- **Trusted relationships are still needed:** The ongoing challenge now is to maintain a balance between building trusted relationships, retaining flexibility for innovation and also the provision and consolidation of guidance, principles and supporting structures.

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**Commitment to the model by all is an amazing outcome. The challenge is the churn in leadership positions just as you start to get traction. Implementation is made much more difficult when someone leaves. In government, people can change roles with a degree of frequency.**

State Government Partner

## 6. Embedding evidence to support joint decision-making

### ← Earlier context

Making deep use of evidence to confirm that the Our Place approach contributes to change for children, families and communities is at the heart of the Our Place approach. This includes being able to show progress, report data that helps indicate what has happened to date and whether things are progressing as expected. It also includes using evaluation to support evidence-based joint decision-making at a site level.

In the early years, evidence was gathered across the work at Doveton, to inform evaluation work led by Our Place. The level of data sharing was made possible due to the unique school-led governance structure of Doveton, which made it possible to track data across a range of services without the need for multiple data sharing agreements.

Since 2019, efforts were made to ensure that data was captured in a consistent manner that can enable analysis within and across sites to track progress towards shared outcomes. Additionally, to ensure that evidence continued to be amassed, Site Implementation Plans included a requirement for data collection. This was originally designed to reflect similar data collection and evaluation methods as had taken place at Doveton.

### → 2023 reality and lessons learnt

- **Less is more when gathering data at scale:** The things that can (or should) be measured at one site are not necessarily the things that should be measured as more sites are incorporated. This learning is about the realisation that the evaluation strategy needs to evolve as an initiative is scaled up. The things that need to be measured to tell the story of the partnership and its impact will change. And it is more powerful to measure fewer things well than try to measure too many things at once. Otherwise this creates an unnecessary burden on partners and is not sustainable. Our Place is currently in the process of reviewing and streamlining its approach to evaluation across the whole and at an individual site level – both in terms of what is measured and how much is being tracked.
- **Gathering evidence from across different sources is not simple:** It would be fair to say that creating processes to collect timely data from across organisations has been a challenge for a range of reasons – not least data sharing rules of various organisations, including government departments. Organisations have to manage a range of data requests and central authorisation and commitment to the Our Place approach is required to fine ways around these. Work is still underway to establish and refine systems that allow for longer term data tracking and research that supports contribution to the broader evidence base – as well as inform evolution of the approach.
- **An overarching outcomes framework can act as the guiding light for data gathering:** To better facilitate data sharing, Our Place has established an Outcomes Framework which details the initiative's intended long-term objectives, how the approach will be implemented across all sites, and indicators to evaluate 1) implementation fidelity; and 2) progress towards identified outcomes. As part of this, a formal data agreement enabled DE to provide Our Place with relevant aggregated data to inform evaluation findings.
- **Plan for continuity of effort:** The Our Place team has retained responsibility for overseeing the monitoring and evaluation of the Our Place approach – whilst working in collaboration with both central office and site-based DE staff. This is seen as important for coordination and also because Our Place is guaranteed to 'exist' for the whole ten-year timeframe, while there is always a likelihood of departmental restructures and school staff relocations during that time. Having Our Place as lead helps to ensure continuity of effort over the lifetime of the initiative.

- **Data sharing and analysis is as important as data gathering:** While progress has been made, there is still work to do to ensure that data is collected and analysed in timely, safe ways with the intention of effectively demonstrating the true value of place-based initiatives such as Our Place. The revised 2023 Partnership includes an increased focus on the shared effort in measuring and communicating progress to demonstrate the impact of the approach. In response, the 2023 Partnership Agreement strengthens this joint focus of Our Place and DE on data collection and sharing going forward.
- **Reporting on progress helps drive collaborative decision making and ownership:** Interviewees also made clear the importance of reporting against shared outcomes by simplifying communication between organisations. It means everyone is ‘speaking the same language’ and ‘on the same page’. This links to the point above about the importance of sharing evidence in timely ways on a regular basis. An example was given where evidence had been regularly collected, both on ways of working and outcomes, and shared through ‘traffic light reporting’. Interviewees reported that this had really helped inform real-time decision-making and collaboration and ensures that all partners could see the value of their investment.
- **Shared capacity for data analysis is critical:** Another key strategy has been to build the data capacity of partners and staff across the nine sites. This enables the work that Our Place does to support data collection and analysis across all sites to be useful in a local context. It also means each site can play an active role in the ongoing interpretation of results and use data to show and drive change. A bank of qualitative case studies and ‘most significant change’ stories is now available to demonstrate and explain how the key principles underpinning the approach come to life in the real world.



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**Measurement is key.  
 Traffic light reporting  
 has ensured everyone  
 knew and had  
 visibility of the ways  
 of working together.**  
 State Government Partner

## 7. Translating shared vision to shared action

### ← Earlier context

As mentioned above, the 2017 Partnership Agreement helped to clarify a shared vision between the parties to pave the way for collaboration. This focused on what an integrated approach to education could look like, and the potential role that schools could play in becoming a hub for the community

In the early days, when working at a single site, Doveton, it was enough that “all those involved in developing the partnership had a common belief in the potential of education and of the notion of school as the hub of the community to overcome disadvantage, create greater equity, and improve social cohesion in community” (2017 Partnership Agreement).

As the initiative has grown and spread to different sites, it was recognised that the shared vision must translate into more specific agendas for shared action. It was realised that there needs to be an agenda for shared action at every level, particularly at every site amongst all site partners. Such an agenda does not simply arise due to good faith and willingness. It takes a range of skills and capabilities to build and realise. This includes the challenge that, as in any collaboration, this isn't a matter of hierarchy. In a collaboration, no single person is 'in charge'. In 2019, it was acknowledged the work of building agendas for shared action would require a unique skill set and individuals that could support and influence partners, rather than needing to operate with 'authority' or 'control'.

### → 2023 reality and lessons learnt

- **Developing an agenda for shared action requires shepherding:** As mentioned earlier, both the Our Place organisation and the Department of Education dedicated staff roles to help shepherd the wider vision and a more concrete shared agenda. This is important because pursuing shared action can be complicated by the fact that each partner still must navigate their own internal authorising environment. Both Department and Our Place staff recognise there can be an inherent tension due to the different authorising environments, but that this tension does not generally impact relationships or the partnership. It was recognised that what was required were new ways of working that might sit outside organisational norms. This needs to be coupled with acknowledgement of the sometimes tricky pathways each partner must navigate in their own organisation. There is a strong link here to the boundary spanning capabilities mentioned earlier.
- **Tangible action plans help strengthen the collaboration:** At a site level, each Site Partnership Group has been required to complete a three year strategic plan which takes place through a process of developing an understanding of local community need, sharing data and developing a joint plan with shared accountability. The first round of this is now complete, with all sites having completed their strategic planning process by the end of 2022. This strategic plan is accompanied by an annual implementation plan. As with evidence gathering, less is more here. After two years, the strategic plans will be reviewed and updated for the next three-year period. This annual revisiting of progress – such as attracting new services, increasing parent engagement, or improving attendance aligned with a local strategy, is important to enabling tangible action and realistic milestones.
- **Small wins lead to bigger things:** Across many of the sites, collaboration has been built through collective action on smaller actions or initiatives first, to enable the development of mutual trust and new ways of working. And to demonstrate the outcomes that collaboration can deliver. The small wins and stepping stones help maintain momentum and clarity of purpose, for example, by working together to promote playgroup attendance, partners can see the increase in parent engagement, which in turns aligns to a long-term evidence-based strategy to improve early years development. Making the time to celebrate stories of success is key to maintaining momentum towards long-term goals.

- **Creating agendas for shared action is not instant nor easy:** There has been an ongoing challenge for each partner to see their role in achieving change and in the importance of shared action and effort outside traditional organisational responses. To help progress this work, the Our Place approach has become much more intentional around the necessary 'partnering capabilities' and conditions. Our Place staff are supported to build expertise in:

- Establishing shared commitment across site partners.
- Understanding the local community and gathering evidence of their needs.
- Supporting all partners in implementation of the shared agenda.
- Regularly reviewing and adapting the response to meet local needs and context.

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**Influencing, negotiation, coordinating, and good communication becomes key. I think those have been the critical skills or capabilities of the establishment phase.**

State Government Partner

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**We've all signed up to work in a particular way which then creates the collaboration amongst partners to work differently to how we normally would.**

Our Place staff member



# Conclusion

This paper has shared lessons learnt as the Our Place partnership has grown from one community to nine across Victoria. It has included seven pieces of advice for anyone seeking to partner well and to ‘walk alongside’ each other on the path to systems change:

1. Create a shared vision to hold steady.
2. Maintain buy-in from senior leaders.
3. Keeping relationships and trust at the core of problem solving.
4. Investing in people who can work across boundaries.
5. Sustain the approach beyond individual relationships.
6. Embed evidence to support joint decision making.
7. Translate the shared vision to shared action.

It is hoped that these insights prove useful for anyone considering or embarking on a long-term cross-sectoral partnership journey that seeks to improve outcomes for Australian families.



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# Appendix 1 – Interviewees<sup>3</sup>

**Greg Blakeley**  
Regional Director  
DFFH Inner Gippsland

**Julius Colman**  
Chair  
Colman Education Foundation

**Sean Cory**  
CEO  
Our Place

**Jennifer Doultree**  
Partnership Manager  
Our Place Morwell

**Ruth Hamilton**  
Early Childhood Coordinator  
City of Greater Geelong

**Rebecca Hickey**  
Partnership Manager  
Our Place Northern Bay

**Cindy Hinterholzl**  
Partnership Manager  
Our Place Robinvale

**Frances Martin**  
Director Services Development  
Our Place

**Nicola McCaul**  
Early Childhood Improvement Branch Manager  
DE

**June McLoughlin**  
Executive Director  
Our Place

**Shannon Newman**  
Director Research & Evaluation  
Our Place

**Kate Simmons**  
Acting Director, New Schools and Education Plans  
DE

**Angela Singh**  
Regional Director  
DE North Western Victoria

**Lynne Smith**  
Manager Family Services  
City of Melbourne

**Glenn Stewart**  
Robinvale Community Development Adviser  
Our Place Robinvale

**Elfie Taylor**  
Director Services Early Years  
Our Place

**Karen Turner**  
Acting Manager, Our Place Partnership  
DE

**Lee Watts**  
Assistant Deputy Secretary – IDC member  
DE

<sup>3</sup> Job titles are correct as at the date interviews were held (April-May 2023)



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

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📍  
Carlton | Doveton | Frankston North | Mooroopna | Morwell  
| Northern Bay | Robinvale | Seymour | Westall