

In principle assessment of the Our Place approach and its potential impact

Final

November 2023

Introduction

Our Place engaged dandolo to complete an in-principle assessment of the Our Place approach.

Background

Our Place is a holistic place-based approach to support the education, health and development of all children and families in disadvantaged communities, by utilising the universal platform of a school.

Our Place is an initiative of the Colman Education Foundation. Through the Foundation's ten-year partnership with the Victorian Government, and support from philanthropic partners, Our Place is being implemented in ten school sites across Victoria.

dandolopartners (dandolo) has been engaged by Our Place to complete an in-principle assessment of the Our Place approach, and its potential impact.

Caveats

This in-principle assessment is not an evaluation. It seeks to verify whether the Our Place model is well reasoned, evidence-based and if the overall direction of travel is positive and likely to be indicative of impact in the long-term. Our assessment is based on desktop-research and engagement with Our Place staff only. We have not engaged with external stakeholders or attempted to generate any new evidence about the impact of Our Place.

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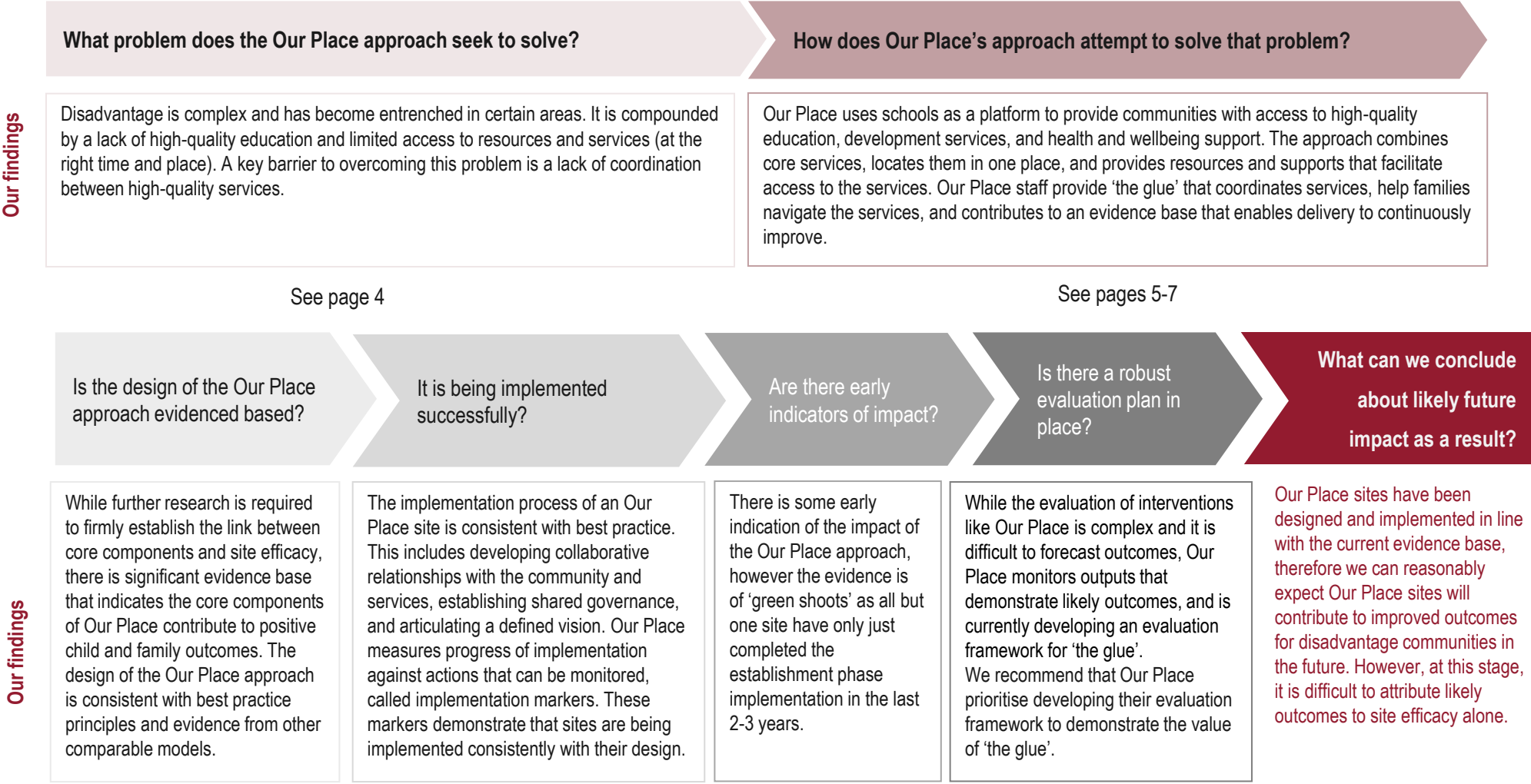
This report sets out our findings.

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Findings on a page

Based on our desktop research, we have concluded that the Our Place model, including its design and implementation, are consistent with best practice. Therefore, we can reasonably expect to see improvements in outcomes in the future.

We sought to answer the following key questions to reach a conclusion about the likely long-term impact of the Our Place approach.



Introduction and background

The problem

Disadvantage is complex and has become entrenched in certain areas. Disadvantage is compounded by a lack of high-quality education and limited access to resources and services. A key barrier to overcoming this problem is a lack of coordination between high-quality services.

The equity gap is widening between the wealthy and the poor in Australia. Education can help break the cycle of disadvantage driving this gap.

Complex and entrenched disadvantage is concentrated in certain postcodes, but where you are born shouldn't determine your opportunities in life.

Children facing challenges that arise from social and economic disadvantage need to be in supportive environments to thrive.

The wealth of resources and services available are often not of adequate quality to make a difference and/or are not accessed by the people that need it the most.

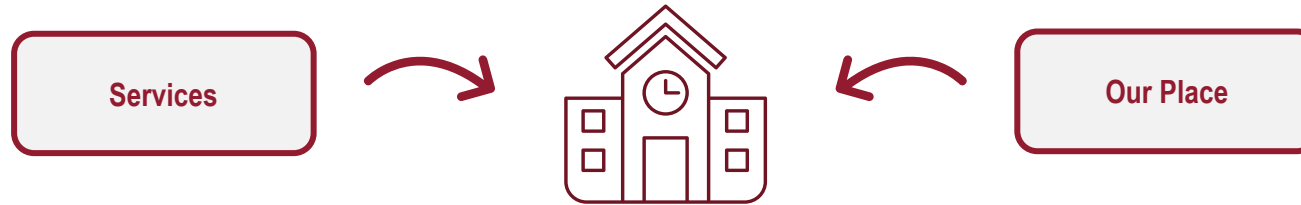
The Our Place approach seeks to overcome the barriers to educational achievement by focusing on:

Supporting high-quality learning environments for children – at home, in early learning settings, and in schools.

Supporting the service system to better address known risks to child and family wellbeing, allowing for prevention and early intervention.

What is Our Place?

Our Place is an organisation that partners with service providers for a period of 10 years to enable and increase access to services for those who need them most. Operating out of schools, which serve as welcoming 'hubs,' Our Place convenes high-quality education and child development services, health and wellbeing support, and provides 'glue' that holds these elements together.



Each site has an average of ~25 services and activities available that respond to the needs of the community. This means that while all sites provide services that help break cycles of disadvantage, each Our Place site is different.

Doveton: 2012 -

Services and activities: 26

The first 'demonstration' site, established in a community with long-term disadvantage, purpose built to provide wrap-around services from maternal and child health, early learning, to Year 9 schooling.

Bridgewood: 2018 - 2021

Services and activities: -

Partnering with Our Place for an agreed three years, the site was established in a newly developed growth area, providing a purpose-built primary school, early learning centre, and child and family services.

Carlton: 2020 -

Services and activities: 18

Our Place Carlton is situated in an urban suburb with significant wealth inequality. Physically co-locating early years' service at Carlton Primary School built continuity between the services and led to increased enrolments.

Robinvale: 2019 -

Services and activities: 24

Robinvale is a dispersed community with many families based on rural properties, so, in addition to onsite services, Our Place helps coordinate an online hub to provide information about services available for families.

Seymour: 2020 -

Services and activities: 16

Our Place and DFFH's site representative facilitated a relationship with a local allied health provider to establish onsite services, including an additional speech pathologist due to high uptake.

Morwell: 2020 -

Services and activities: 20

Our Place Morwell and the local council partnered to secure an onsite GP and pediatrician Morwell Central Primary School, achieving an attendance rate of 80%. Our Place Morwell Park opened in 2023.

Northern Bay: 2020 -

Services and activities: 27

The DFFH Early Help Trial integrated onsite family services and other early intervention programs to more readily refer families to these services prior to problems escalating.

Frankston North: 2021 -

Services and activities: 39

Community consultation identified the need for better access to health services. The site now includes a health hub at the primary school with a team that provides initial assessments and referrals for walk-ins.

Mooroopna: 2021 -

Services and activities: 26

The DFFH representative connected Our Place to the local NDIS provider to establish an onsite NDIS presence, addressing the low uptake of uptake of NDIS services despite the perceived need.

Westall: 2022 -

Services and activities: 29

Our Place helped school staff identify a new source and method for distribution of food relief to school families. Provision increased and the method of distribution enabled families to connect to other services.

How does Our Place work?

Our Place has developed an approach that combines core services, locates them in one place, and provides resources and support that facilitate access to the services.

Our Place combines key elements that contribute to improving outcomes for children, families, and communities. The key elements are:

High-quality early learning



Sites include early learning from birth, as well as playgroups, child health care, and parenting support.

High-quality schooling



Our Place supports principals to create school environments where students can achieve and thrive.

Wrap-around health and wellbeing



Our Place site infrastructure makes it easier for families to access the services they need when they need it.

Engagement and enrichment



Sites offer affordable opportunities for children to develop their interest in sports, arts, and other hobbies.

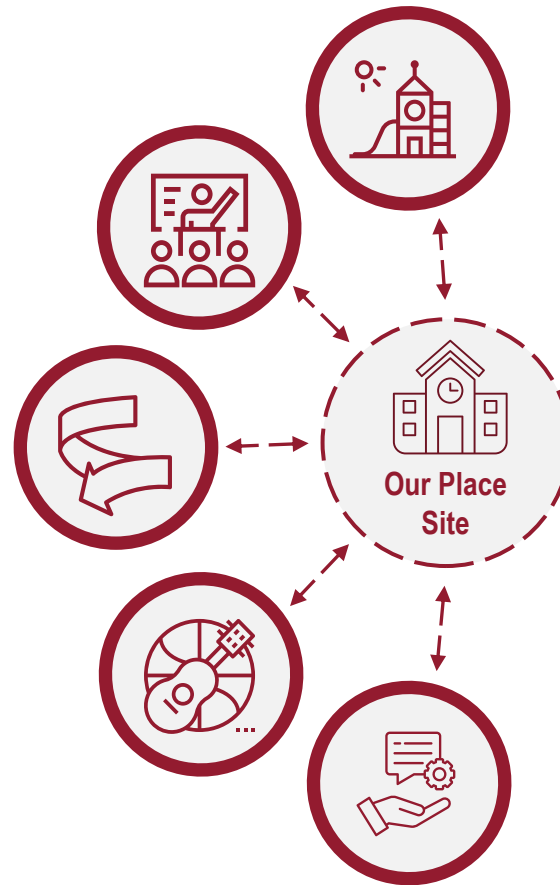
Adult engagement and learning



Our Place sites provides opportunities for families to engage in learning that create pathways to employment.

Services that provide these elements are integrated in schools. This facilitates access to services for communities who need them most.

'The glue' holds together the services, develops shared ways of working, and generates knowledge.* Aspects of 'the glue' include:



People

People with the expertise and time to support and maintain interprofessional partnerships and local relationships.

Partnerships

A three-tiered governance approach that coordinates collaboration between Our Place management, government departments, and each Our Place site.

Knowledge

An approach that includes an Evidence Framework and Evaluation Plan to support continual improvement.

Infrastructure

A shared, physical reception area that provides a stigma-free entry to the school and additional services.

*expanded on the following page

What is 'the glue'?

Our Place staff and governance structures form 'the glue' that coordinates services, help families navigate the services, and contributes to an evidence base that enables delivery to continuously improve.

People

People in place with the time and expertise to build relationships and trust, and drive action

The Our Place approach depends on collaboration between Our Place staff, service partners, and offsite organisations. These relationships are supported by:

Community Facilitators and Partnership Managers

- Work closely with the community and services to understand local needs and make resources available.

Site partners

- Look at what services are available, talk to the community, and analyse available data to plan for the site.

Partnerships

Governance structures that support collaboration

Our Place has a three-tiered approach to governance:

1. The Site Partnership Group

- Focuses on achieving site-level implementation goals and local systems change
- Enter into a Site Operating Agreement covering their shared goals and agreed responsibilities.

2. The Department of Educations Partnership Management Group

3. The Victorian Government Interdepartmental Committee

- Govern collaboratively to support system-level issues and change.

Knowledge

Evidence-informed decision making

The Our Place approach is based on evidence and aims to contribute to this body of evidence as well as drawing on it to inform decision making at the site level by:

- Establishing and maintaining a skilled data support role
- Providing information, guidance, templates to those collecting data
- Building local capacity to collect, collate, and use data
- Prioritising the collection of feedback and implementation data to inform future decisions.

Infrastructure

A shared, welcoming entrance, reception, and community spaces that are accessible and appropriate for families:

- Helps families become comfortable with schools and early learning environments
- Reduces parents' and carers' anxiety in interacting with organisational staff
- Helps the people involved in frontline engagement share a common approach and provide a seamless experience for families.

'The glue' makes an Our Place site greater than the sum of its parts

Is the design of Our Place evidence based?

Evidence underpinning Our Place core components – brought together by ‘the glue’

Our Place partners with service providers to deliver core components and employs evidence-based strategies to support their delivery. There is evidence that the core components contribute to positive child and family outcomes, but further research is required to determine how the combination of components and operation of each site drive impact.

High-quality early learning

There is extensive evidence that demonstrates the strong relationship between early experiences and the pathway to health, wellbeing and happiness in adulthood.

Our Place use some of the following evidence-based strategies to support children in their early years:

- Engage parents and carers early to support them and connect them to services
- Focus on high-quality early learning and making it accessible and affordable
- Ensure continuity of learning from early years through to school years.

High-quality schooling

Research shows that high-quality schooling has the potential to mitigate the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on student achievement, health, wellbeing, and future outcomes.

Evidence demonstrates:

- Parent engagement that includes family-led learning and strong family-school partnerships influences student outcomes
- School leadership can influence teaching, learning and school improvement.

Our Place support of high-quality schooling includes, but is not limited to, supporting school leadership and supporting parents to engage with their child’s learning.

Wrap-around services

There is comprehensive evidence that the traditional, siloed approach to service delivery is failing disadvantaged children and families.

While the effectiveness of wrap-around models is still under investigation, research suggests that well-implemented models are valued by families and practitioners and are perceived to increase access and quality of support.

Evidence-based strategies integral to Our Place’s approach include:

- Core services delivered on school sites and through established partnerships
- Families only need to tell their story once
- Warm referral protocols across sites.

Engagement & enrichment

Evidence can demonstrate clear benefits and impacts of engagement and enrichment activities on the development and growth of children.

Research suggests the children from disadvantaged families have the most to gain but face barriers to participation. Evidence demonstrates that access is the greatest barrier to participation.

Our Place increases access to school-based extracurricular activities for young people by:

- Developing partnerships with recreation providers and clubs
- Allocating staff hours to implement and support activities
- Encouraging and facilitating parent engagement.

Adult engagement & learning

There is significant evidence that children’s outcomes improve when their parents have increased access to social connection, education, and employment, especially mothers.

Evidence suggests that providing opportunities for adults to engage in social activities fosters connection. Opportunities for learning is also crucial to provide a pathway to economic participation.

Our Place creates opportunities for:

- ‘Soft-entry’ social and educational activities
- Entry-level skills development
- Warm referrals to accessible adult learning services.

Our Place also works with employment services providers to support pathways to employment.

Evidence from comparable models

We know similar models exist in different countries and contexts that combine core components at a universal platform and feature coordinating actors. Place-based initiatives that aim to break concentrations of disadvantage intervene within complex systems across significant timeframes. This makes evaluation difficult and expensive. As such, evidence of long-term outcomes is sparse, but there is some evidence we can draw on from evaluations and reviews of these other models.

	Overview of approach	Evaluation evidence	Alignment with Our Place
Full service community schools program (US)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public elementary or secondary schools collaborate with local educational agencies, community-based organisations, non-profit organisations, and other public and private entities. Designed to offer easy access to comprehensive services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An independent study identified the importance of respectful relationships between partners and developing shared visions and goals for collaboration. It suggested that these factors be supported by sufficient time for communication and community and parental participation in implementation planning. The study also indicated the importance of the role of coordinator and location of coordinator on the school site (Min et al. 2017). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our Place emphasizes the importance of building relationships. Our Place recognises the key role of coordinating staff and co-locates staff on school site.
Sure Start Local Programs / Sure Start Children's Centres (UK)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The program was initially highly responsive to local needs and improved local services without specifying the approach to take. When developed into Sure Start Children's Centres, delivery was more focused with specified services. Managed by a partnership of health, education, social services, and voluntary sectors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A quasi-experimental observational study undertaken in 2008 found that specified services and a focused approach was more likely to improve parenting and child wellbeing (Melhuish et al. 2008). The same study also found that beneficial effects could possibly be attributed to the increase in service use that parents reported. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our Place specifies the inclusion of core components at each site and has developed an implementation process for each site to follow.
Child and Family Hubs (AU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'One stop shop' co-locates health and social services to provide better detection and support for families. Core components include: family friendly entry point, wellbeing coordinator to help navigate relevant services and parenting support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This model is currently under evaluation using mixed-methods realist evaluation approach. The co-design process highlighted the importance of the following actions that encouraged participation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raising awareness of available supports Providing support to enable families to navigate the system Ensuring services take a 'whole-of-family' approach (Hall et al 2021). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our Place recognises the key role of coordinating staff. Our Place takes a 'whole of family' wraparound approach to service provision.
Community Hubs (AU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The program is embedded in primary schools and connects culturally diverse families with the community, schools, and services. Based on the partnership between coordinators, the hub leader, and school leadership, the program aims to improve social cohesion and connectedness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key enabling factors determined by an early independent evaluation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hub Leader's role in relationship building is integral and essential for working respectfully with families, takes time and skill, and needs to be perceived and endorsed as legitimate work Dedicated Hub space encourages a welcoming environment, increases the effectiveness of Hub work, and broadens the scope of what Hubs can provide the community (Press et al 2015). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our Place acknowledges that it takes time to establish the necessary relationships in implementation process. Our Place establishes a family friendly shared entrance.

Alignment of Our Place with best practice

While no two models are the same, evidence highlights that the function of ‘the glue’ is critical and identifies key enablers of effective place-based initiatives designed to improve access to high-quality services for communities facing disadvantage.

Comparable approaches demonstrate that:



Enabling roles drive change. They are the essential ‘glue’ that works to set a shared agenda, coordinate action, and create accountability.



Relationships are key. Effective place-based initiatives have strong relationships built on trust between communities and service providers.



The quality of services and resources matter. For place-based initiatives to be effective, communities need both higher quality and better access to services and resources.

Evidence suggests that effective place-based initiatives require four key enablers:



Involve and reflect community needs and priorities



Collaborative governance between service providers, government, and communities



Effective data collection that drives evidence informed decision making



Physical space and the infrastructure to utilize space and resources well

We can map the strategies chosen by Our Place in their Theory of Change against what the evidence indicates is best practice.

Together with partners, Our Place aims to...								
Bring together families to connect them to opportunities, services and to each other	Provide a welcoming single-entry point to services in schools	✓						✓
	Have dedicated staff to build relationships with families and elevate their voice	✓	✓		✓			
Coordinate schools, early learning, and services to keep families at the centre of their work	Build collaboration between services to better connect families	✓	✓	✓				✓
	Understand what communities need and set priorities	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
	Bring partners together for shared governance	✓	✓			✓		
Work with government and philanthropy to demonstrate the potential of the approach	Share evidence and identify recommendations to inform decisions	✓					✓	
	Advocate for lessons from the Our Place approach to be adopted			✓		✓		

Is Our Place being implemented effectively?

Our Place's implementation approach

The implementation process of an Our Place site is consistent with best practice. This includes developing collaborative relationships with the community and services, establishing shared governance, and articulating a defined vision.

The implementation process works in six-step cycles. The process is not linear as some steps overlap or happen concurrently, and the timing of the cycles vary between sites due to several factors, including the length of the pre-establishment phase. This suggests that **Our Place allows for time to establish relationships, which is consistent with best practice.**

Evidence highlights that space and infrastructure is critical. Designated space enables schools to become hubs and makes services and resources more accessible for families.

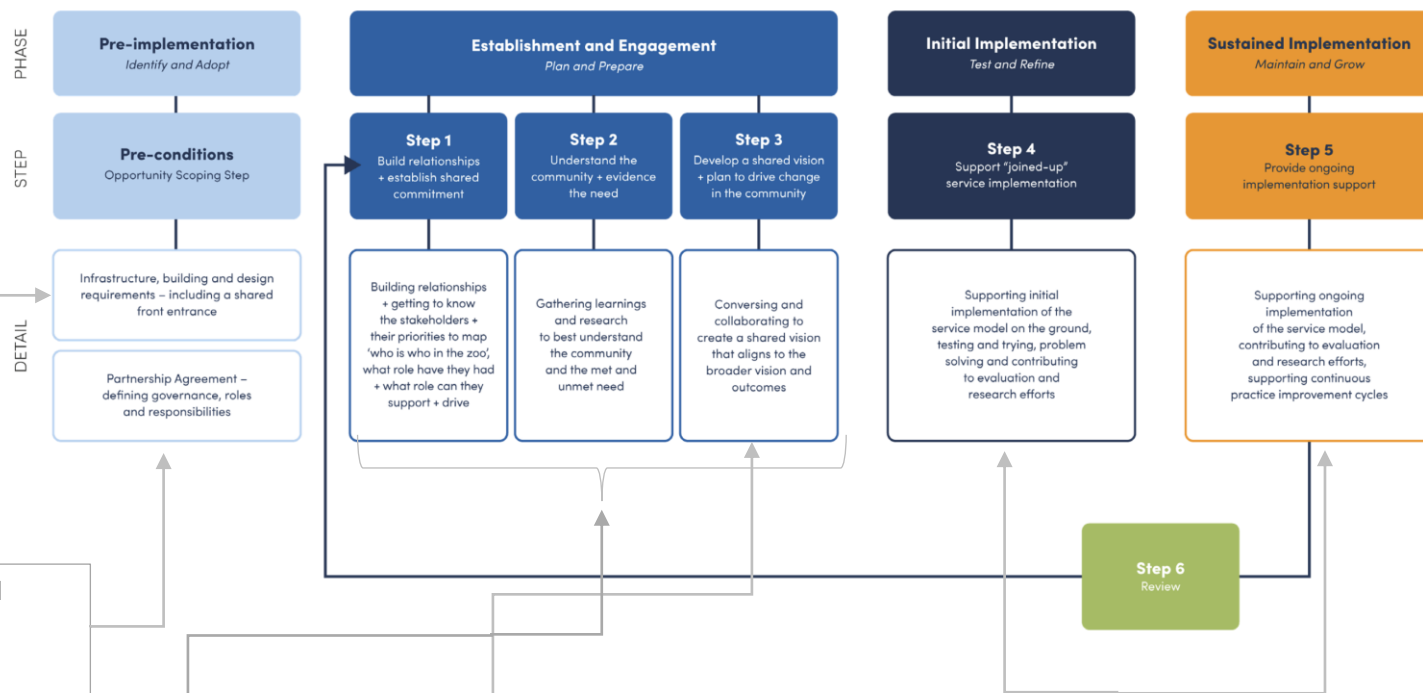
Collaborative governance between senior members of all organisations that provide core site activities. The Site Operating Agreement covers shared goals and agreed responsibilities.

Our Place builds time into the implementation process to build and develop relationships, which reflects the emphasis the evidence-based places on the time and effort required for effective community engagement. **The focus on relationships is a consistent theme in the literature.**

Literature emphasises a shared vision, developed with the community and reflects community priorities. This helps create alignment and ensures community voice is at the centre of the collective effort.

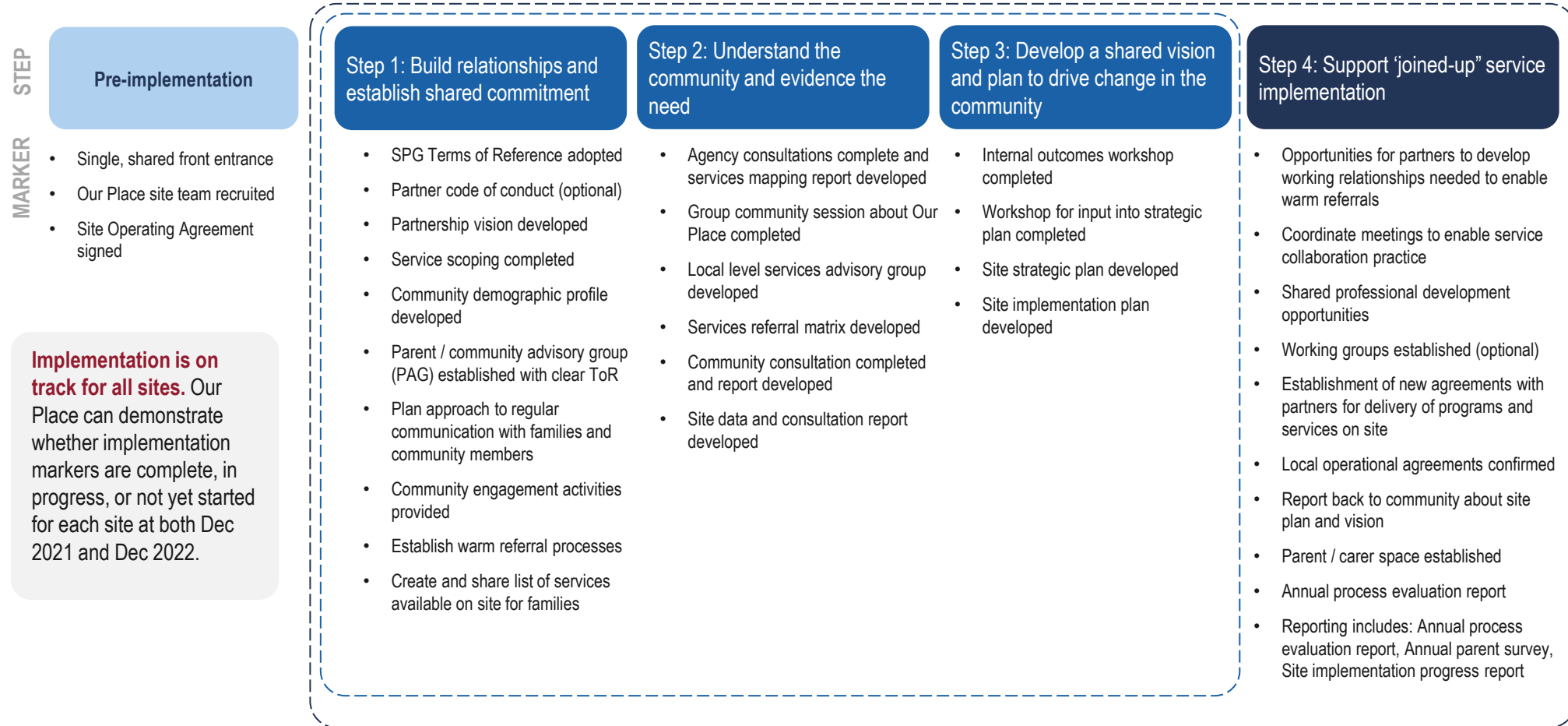
Supporting continuous practice improvement cycles reflects calls in the literature to move to a culture of learning and innovation.

Our Place's Implementation Process



Implementation of Our Place sites in practice

Our Place measures progress of implementation against actions that can be monitored, called implementation markers. These markers demonstrate that sites are being implemented consistently with their design.



Implementation is on track for all sites. Our Place can demonstrate whether implementation markers are complete, in progress, or not yet started for each site at both Dec 2021 and Dec 2022.

Does Our Place contribute to long term outcomes?

Early indicators of success

There is some early indication of the impact of the Our Place approach, however the evidence is largely of 'green shoots' because all but one site have completed the establishment phase implementation in the last 2-3 years.

Doveton is the only fully established site. Now in operation for a decade, there is evidence of impact across all five core components, including improved NAPLAN results and a reduction in developmentally vulnerable children.

Impact of high-quality early learning:

- 100% of students who attended the early learning centre in 2013 and continued at Doveton College into 2017 were at or above national minimum standards for reading and numeracy in Year 3
- Reduced the number of children identified as developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains by more than one-third, from 55% in 2012 to 36% in 2021, with the number identified as developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains dropping by nearly half, from 24% to 13%, since 2018

Impact of high-quality schooling:

- Consistent improvements in NAPLAN results since opening, with 2021 data showing Year 5 students as 'Well above' students from similar backgrounds in spelling, grammar and numeracy

Impact of engagement and enrichment:

- Student engagement in extracurricular activities grew from 5% 2015 to 62% in 2019

Impact of adult learning and engagement:

- More than 115 employment outcomes obtained by parents or community members who either accessed employment support (resume, career counselling or work placement support) and/or attended educational opportunities offered at the College

Impact of wrap-around health and wellbeing:

- NDIS access on site allows children to spend far more time in class than if they accessed this support away from the school as would typically be the case in most schools

Early indicators of impact at other Our Place sites highlight the role of 'the glue' in improving the coordination of services, increasing access for families and children, and advocating for the Our Place approach.

- The onsite Early Learning Centres at Our Place **Northern Bay**, **Westall**, and **Frankston North Alder court** have received Exceeding Ratings in the National Quality Standards. This included the criteria of 'Collaborative partnerships with families and communities' which have been supported through engagement by Our Place.
- Continuity between school and early years' service at Our Place **Carlton** has contributed to increased school enrolments. While the school has struggled to attract enrolments, 2022 and 2023 saw a 20% increase in prep enrolments, with a majority of new students coming from the new onsite Early Learning Centre.
- An evaluation of the DFFH Early Help Family Services Trial, which was embedded in Our Place **Northern Bay** and **Morwell**, found that services at Our Place sites reached a wider range of families in a non-stigmatising setting and can reach families earlier in need, rather than being crisis oriented.
- Our Place sites were swiftly established despite the challenges of COVID, and the number of onsite services and activities have grown across Our Place sites from 149 in Term 1 2022, to 237 in Term 4 2023.
- The Our Place approach has gained increased interest from other states, the Federal Government, academics, and thought partners. To date, external stakeholders have undertaken 18 site visits, and the work of Our Place has been referenced in 5 external publications and 9 conferences and symposiums.

Indicators of long-term outcomes and the complexities of evaluation

Our Place monitors outputs that indicate possible long-term outcomes.

Using schools as the 'platform' helps to contain what to measure and collect. To demonstrate that educational outcomes for children are improving, Our Place currently monitors whether there is:

- Improved attendance and engagement of parents and children in services and learning
- Improved parental confidence to support their children's learning and development
- Stronger relationships and common goals between services that improve quality and access
- New ways of working that better support families and their needs

To demonstrate the increased uptake of family-centred systems, practices and policies, Our Place monitors:

- Adoption of Our Place approach in policy and capacity to scale

However, evaluating interventions like Our Place is complex so it is difficult to forecast how the Our Place approach impacts long-term outcomes.

Similar initiatives have not been robustly evaluated so we do not have a deep understanding of what makes them effective. The lack of evaluation of comparable models is due to the inherent complexities of place-based initiatives. Our Place face the same obstacles to evaluation.

Some of the complexities include:

- **Individual and collective impacts**
 - It is difficult to disaggregate the nuanced impact of 'the glue' from impact driven by core services
- **Causality and attribution**
 - Approaches like Our Place are complex, making causal links to outcomes almost impossible
- **Site variability**
 - Place-based interventions are responsive to each site
- **Data availability, gaps and bias**
 - Collection methods may evolve, new data may become available, and inconsistencies make comparing data across long periods of time difficult
- **Changes over time**
 - Long-term interventions mean there are multiple points in time at which data needs to be collected
- **Balancing stakeholder interests and objectivity**
 - Internal evaluations are critical to constant improvements, but independent evaluation avoids objectivity issues

Our assessment

Summary

The design of Our Place aligns with the available evidence and is implemented according to best practice.

The design of the Our Place approach aligns with comparable models overseas and research in effective practices in Australia

- Our Place's approach aligns with comparable models such as Sure Start in the UK and research on effective practices in Australia— by providing specific services that are known to contribute to improved outcomes, and to help families access these services when they need them. There is a large body evidence that supports the five key elements of Our Place's approach, as such, we are confident that these elements contribute to long-term impact.
- The Full Service Community Schools program in the US and community hubs in Australia indicate that relationships, built on trust, and over time forms the foundation of successful integrated service provision and highlights that the work to build these relationships takes expertise and time.

Our Place 's approach to implementation is consistent with its design and aligns with best practice

- The Our Place approach to implementation aligns with supporting evidence, for example, the focus on relationships throughout the cycle of implementation is consistent with what we find in the literature, as is building in processes that support continuous improvement.
- We are confident that the Our Place approach is implemented effectively and consistent with its vision, values and implementation plan / model. The implementation markers are monitored and measured, and implementation fidelity can be tracked.

Our Place can demonstrate early indicators of success. It monitors outputs aligned with its theory of change and that can be reasonably expected to contribute to long term outcomes.

Attributing outcomes to the Our Place approach is methodologically difficult, however we are confident that Our Place is positioned to contribute to this knowledge base in the future.

While there is strong evidence for the elements of Our Place's approach, attribution to the Our Place approach is difficult because Our Place does not directly provide services but supports the provision of the key elements through the work done as 'the glue.'

There is much less high calibre evidence about the effectiveness of different approaches to providing 'the glue' or which aspects of this way of working are most predictive of outcomes. Nevertheless, we are confident that Our Place will likely contribute to long term outcomes for the following two reasons:

- Our Place aligns with comparable models that demonstrate best practice principles
- And the Our Place approach focuses significant energy on evaluation and knowledge building

This means that Our Place is well positioned to contribute to the knowledge base and offer insights into the trickier, procedural questions over time.

Evaluation, staged over a period of 10 years, aims to provide comprehensive understanding of how Our Place contributes to intermediate and long-term outcomes across all ten sites.

Our Place have developed a detailed evaluation plan that is expected to include granular, child-level data. This should help to address the challenges of evaluating change over a long time period.

We recommend that Our Place prioritise developing their evaluation framework to demonstrate the value of 'the glue'.

This will support the aim of Our Place to increase the uptake of family-centred systems, practices, and policies, and therefore improve the educational outcomes for children.