



Strengthening Communities Summary Paper

May 2023





About the Strengthening Communities Alliance

The Strengthening Communities Alliance is a network of organisations committed to creating positive social change by taking a place-based community-led approach to supporting the systemic drivers of wellbeing and equity in communities.

Our members have expertise across research, social policy and community services and are investing in catalysing place-based change in addition to our traditional models of work. We recognise we have a role to play in building a thriving ecosystem for place-based work and we are committed to leveraging our assets and experience to contribute to this growth.

Our members are BaptistCare HopeStreet, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Jesuit Social Services, Key Assets, Mission Australia, The Smith Family, United Way Australia and Uniting NSW.ACT, and we are greatly assisted by continued dialogue with our learning partners, Australian Red Cross and Collaboration for Impact.

Advancing place-based community-led work in Australia

The field of place-based work in Australia is growing and maturing. Communities are increasingly self-organising to try to drive change. The last 10 years have seen more service providers, governments, philanthropists and researchers entering and influencing the field.

Recent policy developments have spotlighted place-based work, including the Federal Treasurer's identification of it as a key way to reduce poverty and disadvantage, and Federal funding for the design of a National Centre for Place-Based Collaboration (Nexus Centre).

The Alliance welcomes initiatives like the Stronger Places, Stronger People program and the establishment of the Nexus Centre, which create a prime opportunity to provide much-needed infrastructure to support the scaling of place-based community-led work in Australia.

What is place-based community-led work?

Place-based work is *A collaborative, long-term approach to build thriving communities delivered in a defined geographic location. This approach is ideally characterised by partnering and shared design, shared stewardship, and shared accountability for outcomes and impacts.*¹

Place-based community-led change is an approach that focuses on building strengths and capacities in communities where people are working together on building **solutions to persistent and complex disadvantage**, that demands collaborative action from a range of partners and that inverts standard power dynamics to privilege genuine community leadership.



¹ Dart, J. 2018. *Place-based Evaluation Framework. A national guide for evaluation of place-based approaches*, report, Commissioned by the Queensland Government Department of Communities, Disability Services and Seniors (DCDSS) and the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS).

Why do place-based community-led work?

Place-based community-led work has led to **positive outcomes in communities where traditional models of service delivery have failed**, despite massive financial investment.² Place-based community-led work also advances Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and active, participatory citizenship that builds, mobilises and focuses community strengths and resources to create change.

Place-based community-led work is a response to persistent, entrenched, localised disadvantage. This disadvantage is generally the result of systemic factors, in particular the rationed nature of services, the silos and fragmentation of the service system, poverty, and the severe lack of social and affordable housing, that get in the way of creating what

communities want for their future. Overcoming these structural challenges and creating change in communities requires multiple actors collaborating on a complex response.

While there is no doubt that action from government is required to reform the structures that lead to localised disadvantage, place-based community-led work is a complementary response that privileges community voice, action and leadership in creating solutions and shifts power from centralised institutions towards local communities in the process.

The Alliance members strongly believe that **place-based work is worth investing in** and we often put our own skin in the game, contributing our own resources to community-led change. Our belief is informed by our long histories as service providers, our close relationships with many communities, and the research and policy activities that we undertake to support this work.

² Australian governments spent \$64.0 billion on welfare services in 2019-20. Cash payments to individuals, such as the Age Pension, Disability Support Pension and JobSeeker Payment cost an additional \$128.9 billion. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2021. [Welfare expenditure](#).

What is the role of non-government organisations (NGOs) in this work?

The Alliance members – and many other NGOs – are co-contributors to place-based community-led work. We are committed to **strengthening how traditional models of service delivery align with community agendas for change** and, where invited by communities, play a catalysing role to strengthen local leadership for collaborative place-based change.

We recognise that our organisations have been part of the dysfunction and power imbalance experienced by some communities. Most service providers, including many of the Alliance members, are accustomed to operating in a largely government-funded human services system that discourages collaborative, community-led ways of working.

We know there is a better way. **We are committed to working differently**, stepping outside our traditional modes of service delivery and disrupting our normal processes, so that we can contribute to a new approach in which communities lead on developing solutions that will enable them to thrive.



What are the key characteristics of place-based community-led work?

Good place-based community-led initiatives pay attention to:

-  **1 Learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches**
-  **2 Community leadership and power**
-  **3 Collaboration**
-  **4 Community readiness and trust**
-  **5 Succession and sustainability**
-  **6 Capability focus**
-  **7 Systems leadership**
-  **8 Good governance**
-  **9 Data to inform action and reflection**
-  **10 Evaluation and outcomes measurement**

What are barriers and enablers of place-based community-led work?

Creating a national approach to place-based community-led work will be a significant undertaking. The Alliance has identified a number of barriers that are currently hindering progress towards this, and ideas for transforming these into enablers.

1. Organisational internal readiness and mindset shifts:

Many organisations across the place-based ecosystem are not ready for a new way of working. Place-based community-led approaches require consideration and self-reflection on the part of external partners, including service providers and funders, on how to shift from their traditional 'business as usual' models and mindsets within and from their own organisations out to communities. This includes valuing lived experience, ceding power to communities, and committing to genuine collaboration with communities over the long term. It also requires building capability for this work in communities and organisations.

2. Systems-level considerations: Place-based community-led initiatives cannot operate on their own to break entrenched disadvantage. There is no current mechanism by which insights

from such initiatives can be fed into systems change work. A 'connecting middle' is required to translate on-the-ground expertise to those setting the rules and back again. Government departments and other organisations with responsibility for and expertise in health, education, housing, justice, employment, planning and others need to be brought into discussions about place-based work.

3. Long-term commitment, financial and non-financial:

Current funding does not reflect the work being done and that is required to be done in place-based community-led initiatives. Longer-term commitments are required from partners in terms of both funding timeframes and commitment to presence in community. And we won't get place-based work right without actively acknowledging, valuing and including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' ways of operating.

4. Commissioning and funding of services:

Current commissioning and funding processes do not support place-based community-led work. Co-commissioning processes would allow all actors in the place-based ecosystem to design and implement new approaches.

5. Competition in human services:

Competition within the human services system is getting in the way of place-based work. A reduction in competitive approaches – led by government and NGOs – will help to transform the human services system and create an environment that supports place-based work.

6. Data sharing and access: Data sharing efforts are minimal and this is holding communities back from describing and analysing local issues and responses. We need governments and NGOs to commit to sharing data for place-based work, and work together with communities, philanthropy, researchers and others to develop data-sharing protocols and recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data sovereignty.

7. Evidence from evaluation and outcomes measurement: Measuring the outcomes of place-based work is complex and mired in outdated ideas about what constitutes 'evidence'. Co-designed approaches to outcomes measurement would instead draw on a range of techniques, and focus on

learning and improvement as well as demonstrating impact. Investment is required for evaluation across the lifecycle of place-based work, developing capability indicators, and mapping social capital across a range of communities.

8. Policy and service delivery amnesia:

Government and NGOs alike suffer from institutional amnesia. This prevents the lessons of previous attempts to develop place-based work from being considered and applied to new efforts. We need to consider, assess and share sources of information about existing and historical place-based work.

9. Place-based work alignment across portfolios:

The field of place-based work tends to be narrowly held, within government departments with responsibility for social services, and human service delivery organisations. Government departments and other organisations with responsibility for and expertise in health, education, housing, justice, employment, planning and others need to be brought into discussions about place-based work.

Recommendations

To scale the possibilities offered by place-based community-led work, we need a systemic response. Many more communities around Australia would greatly benefit from place-based community-led initiatives, but their formation depends on unlocking a suite of opportunities.

Scaling up place-based initiatives across Australia and making them sustainable will not happen without intentional and coordinated national leadership to realise these opportunities.

Our six recommendations for action are:

1 Emergent new place-based community-led initiatives cannot establish themselves without **understanding the principles, mindsets and preconditions** of this work. This is a fundamentally different way of working between all stakeholders including governments, philanthropists and service providers, across multiple policy areas and disciplines.

The Federal Government should create a national centre of excellence with the remit of building all actors' capability for place-based community-led work to enable the transformation of leadership, practice and processes across all relevant disciplines and policy areas. The development of a centre of excellence could be part of the Nexus Centre design process.

2 **Funding must be simplified and sustained** so that more communities can benefit from place-based community-led initiatives.

The Federal Government should co-create an investment framework with community representatives, government funders, philanthropic funders, NGO funders and intermediary bodies. The Framework would innovate funding and commissioning practices so they are fit for purpose and aligned with principles of place-based community-led work. It would streamline and coordinate investment to create transparency and equity, avoid competition and duplication, and create common principles for sustainable funding. It could be supported through a cross-jurisdictional taskforce led by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to facilitate investment across policy portfolios and through all levels of government.

3

Building the evidence base through **improving methods for measuring the impact of place-based community-led work** will help individual communities to understand the impact of their work towards change, policy makers to determine future priorities and funders to make decisions about future investments.

The Federal Government should coordinate a national effort to improve outcomes measurement and evaluation approaches that accommodate the complexities and developmental nature of place-based community-led work, underpinned by a recognition that these efforts must contribute to learning processes and not be only 'instruments of accountability'. This solution needs to be coupled with a commitment to sharing data across governments, non-government organisations and community groups, to equip all with knowledge to make informed decisions. Indicator development and data and evaluation protocols must respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data sovereignty and be co-designed with communities.

4

Effective and efficient place-based community-led work depends on **sharing learnings, avoiding duplication and avoiding 'reinventing the wheel'**.

The Federal Government should establish a national clearing house to codify existing work, document and disseminate learnings and overcome intellectual property barriers to the sharing of ideas and innovations. Addressing the barriers and enablers to scaling a national clearing house could be part of the Nexus Centre design process.

5

Leveraging and coordinating the existing multiple place-based community-led initiatives would make the most of current investment.

The Federal Government should audit, review and realign existing place-based programs with the goal of minimising overlaps and duplication and embedding consistent definitions and principles of place-based work. This would cover programs funded by Federal Government agencies, State/Territory agencies, NGOs and philanthropy. It should advise the optimal funding terms, governance structures, definition of place, settings to balance innovation and fidelity, and funding pooling.

6

Separate to place-based community-led initiatives, many **place-sensitive, community-informed but government-led programs** support individuals and families within disadvantaged communities. Examples include Communities for Children funded by the Department of Social Services. While not the focus of this paper, the Alliance values the place and community focus of these programs, and advocates that such focus should be incorporated into the design of all programs.

The Federal Government, through the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, should work with other agencies, NGOs and community groups to develop guidelines to support commissioners to incorporate place- and community-focussed principles into program designs.

Contact us

For further information about the Strengthening Communities Alliance, this paper, or to obtain a copy of the commissioned literature review please contact Kathryn Di Nicola at Mission Australia dinicolak@missionaustralia.com.au or Laura Breslin at Uniting NSW.ACT breslinl@uniting.org.au.

