Strengthening Communities Position Paper

Brotherhood of St Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

The Smith Family
Learn today, change tomorrow.

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SERVING CHILDREN, FAMILIES & COMMUNITIES

Jesuit Social Services
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MISSION AUSTRALIA

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Acknowledgement of Land

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land throughout Australia and we pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future for they hold memories, culture and dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and continual relationship with the land and we recognise the importance of the young people who are our future leaders.

Acknowledgement of contributors

The Strengthening Communities Alliance would like to thank the many people who have contributed to the development of this paper. This work would not have been possible without the perspective and expertise of:

- Sixty-six community members and practitioners who participated in focus groups;
- Five individual experts in place-based approaches across government, philanthropy and practice who participated in in-depth interviews;
- Tanya Bretherton, who wrote the literature review;
- Inside Policy, a 100 per cent Aboriginal-owned and led strategic policy advisory firm, who facilitated the focus groups and in-depth interviews and prepared a report on those consultations, and a summary of the policy landscape and data on locational disadvantage.

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.

About the Alliance Members

BaptistCare HopeStreet - BaptistCare HopeStreet is a trusted place in some of the most vulnerable communities. The organisation has walked alongside individuals and local communities for more than 40 years, providing support services including domestic and family violence, no interest loans, affordable food, counselling and group programs, women's spaces, social and affordable housing, support with homelessness, and helping people as they navigate complex life situations. With 13 locations across NSW, BaptistCare HopeStreet is passionate about developing strong and caring communities, recognising resilience and seeking to broaden the choices available to those we support.

Brotherhood of St Laurence – BSL is a social justice organisation working alongside people experiencing disadvantage to prevent and alleviate poverty across Australia. Our mission is to pursue lasting change, to create a more compassionate and just society where everyone can thrive. Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile, our approach is informed directly by people experiencing disadvantage and uses evidence drawn from our own and others' research, together with insights from our programs and services, to develop practical solutions that work. We have a long history, over 90 years, of helping to build better pathways to participate in our economy and society through our service delivery, policy work and research.

Jesuit Social Services – Jesuit Social Services has been working for more than 40 years delivering practical support and advocating for improved policies to achieve strong, cohesive and vibrant communities where every individual can play their role and flourish. We are a social change organisation working with some of the most marginalised individuals and communities, often experiencing multiple and complex challenges. Jesuit Social Services works where the need is greatest and where we have the capacity, experience and skills to make the most difference. Our services span Victoria, New South Wales and the Northern Territory where we support more than 57,000 individuals and families annually.

Key Assets - Key Assets Australia is a national not-for-profit organisation, our purpose is to achieve positive and lasting outcomes for children, families, and communities. We have been operating in Australia since 2007, and during this time we have delivered services across the continuum of care, including in early intervention, family preservation and reunification, foster and kinship care, residential step down, intensive family support, statutory child protection services and disability services. To deliver best outcomes for children, their families, communities, and carers we work closely and collaboratively with partner agencies, community sector organisations, and all levels of government.

Mission Australia – Mission Australia is a national Christian charity that has been standing alongside Australians in need since 1859. Our vision is for an Australia where all of us have a safe home and can thrive. Backed by our supporters, funders and community and faith-based partners, we combat homelessness, provide housing, assist struggling families and children, address mental health issues, fight substance dependencies, support people with disability and much more. Given the right support, we believe everyone can reach their full potential. That's why we stand together with individuals, families and communities in need throughout Australia, until they can stand for themselves.

The Smith Family - The Smith Family has been working to improve the lives of children living in disadvantage for 100 years. Over that time, The Smith Family has evolved to become a modern, dynamic, evidence-based organisation that helps children in need create better futures for themselves through long-term support for their education. Today we're supporting around 200,000 children, young people, parent/carers and community professional each year through our programs. This includes 60,000 students on our flagship Learning for Life scholarship program, helping to break the cycle of disadvantage through targeted, long-term support for their education.

United Way Australia - United Way Australia is an Australian registered charity and part of a global network advancing the common good in communities across the world. In Australia, we connect business, government, philanthropy, and communities in a collaboration bound by the belief that, together, we enable strong and resilient societies. United Way is well known for its place-based community-led approach, particularly in Mt Druitt, NSW, where it acts as an intermediary for The Hive.

Uniting NSW.ACT – Uniting NSW.ACT is responsible for the social justice, community services and chaplaincy work of the Uniting Church in NSW and the ACT. We provide care and support for people through all ages and stages of life, with a focus on people experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. We value diversity and always welcome everyone, exactly as they are. As one of the largest not-for-profit organisations in Australia we offer over 550 services across NSW and the ACT in the areas of aged care, retirement and independent living, early learning, disability, chaplaincy and community services. Our purpose is to inspire people, enliven communities and confront injustice.

About our Learning Partners

Two learning partners have greatly assisted in the development of the Alliance's thinking through constructive conversations and information sharing about place-based community-led work.

Australian Red Cross - Australian Red Cross was established in 1914 and is part of the largest humanitarian Movement in the world as members of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Crescent Societies (IFRCC). Trusted as the leading humanitarian organisation, making a genuine difference in the lives of people and communities. We bring people and communities together in times of need and build on community strengths. We do this by mobilising the power of humanity. Since our foundation, Red Cross continues to be guided by the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. These are Humanity; Impartiality; Neutrality; Independence; Voluntary Service; Unity and Universality.

Collaboration for Impact - Collaboration for Impact is a national not-for-profit organisation that enables people and organisations to transform systems through collaboration. CFI works with an Australian-wide network of communities, government, funders and other collaborators to build capability, social infrastructure and collective influence for systems change. Ultimately for a more equitable and just society where people, planet and place thrive.

About this Position Paper

This Position Paper describes the Alliance's approach to place-based work and outlines a number of recommendations for change. The ideas and conclusions expressed in this paper are the joint views of the Alliance members. They are derived

from consultations with managers and practitioners from across the Alliance organisations, discussions with community members, interviews with experts from government and philanthropy, a review of the research literature and other key material.

To assist in the development of this paper, the Alliance commissioned desktop reviews of the relevant research literature, policy landscape and data on locational disadvantage. In addition, a number of focus groups and interviews were conducted with practitioners and community members involved in place-based initiatives facilitated by the Alliance partners.

In total, 66 individuals participated in four workshops; 16 organisations were represented along with several unaffiliated individuals involved in a private capacity. Five in-depth interviews were also conducted, with experts in place-based approaches across government, philanthropy and practice. Co-authoring by the Alliance has further drawn in expertise from eight non-government organisations.

The quotations used throughout the report come from workshops with Alliance practitioners and/or community members.

The development of this Position Paper was primarily funded by Mission Australia and largely drafted by Kathryn Di Nicola of Mission Australia, with substantial input from Laura Breslin of Uniting NSW.ACT and with contributions from Inside Policy and Tanya Bretherton. We would like to thank the many people from within and outside the Alliance organisations that contributed ideas and insights.

For further information

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).

Executive summary

This Position Paper presents the unique perspective of several non-government organisations engaged in place-based community-led work, who have collaborated to reflect on their efforts and consider:

- What is going well in place-based work?
- What barriers are in the way?
- What further needs to be done?

The field of place-based work in Australia is growing and maturing, influenced by communities, service providers, governments, philanthropists and researchers. The Stronger Places, Stronger People program by the Federal Government is one prime example such work and exists alongside initiatives generated and funded outside of government like those facilitated by the Alliance members (see *Appendix 1 – Examples of Alliance contributions to place-based community-led change*).

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). These create an opportune moment to assess the current state of place-based work in Australia and what is required to most effectively scale its approach and impact.

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 that focuses on building strengths and capacities in communities where people are working together on building solutions to persistent and complex disadvantage, that demands

[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).

collaborative action from a range of partners and that inverts standard power dynamics to privilege genuine community leadership.

Why 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 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 (see *Systems-level considerations*), 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.

We are committed to place-based community-led work for three reasons:

- it leads to better outcomes for people and communities, and allows communities to overcome challenges to create the change they want to see better than the traditional human services system;
- it advances self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; and

[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*.

- it shifts existing power dynamics to ensure the agency of community members as part of active, participatory citizenship.

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. Sometimes we work as place-based intermediaries, and sometimes as agencies delivering services or other supports within a collaborative local service system that is being re-shaped to meet community needs.

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.

That system is bound up in regulations and processes that demand a particular form of financial accountability, that discourage investment in activities beyond a narrow range of 'outcomes' to be measured, that provoke competitive relationships between organisations and that usually privilege minimum-cost and Western modes of delivery.

This system contributes to the existing investments in many communities being fragmented, siloed and not in areas that the community wants – usually, more money is not needed, but rather better design and delivery of existing funds.

Within this system, people are positioned as 'clients' or 'consumers' of a service, rather than active, engaged citizens with a desire and a responsibility to contribute to the wellbeing and vitality of their community and nation. It is designed in many cases to concentrate on the individual or sometimes their immediate family, and ignores the fundamental role played by community – both informal/natural supports (such as neighbours, broader kin networks, social groups, peers, etc) and the web of actors in other systems (such as GPs, schools, hospitals, etc).

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 non-government organisations – 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 non-government organisations 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 non-government organisations 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.

How can place-based community-led work be scaled?

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. The Federal Government should **create a national centre of excellence** with the remit of building all actors' capability for place-based

community-led work. 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. 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.

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.

6. Separate to place-based community-led initiatives, many place-sensitive, community-informed but government-led programs support individuals and families within communities. 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**.

Many of these recommendations are directed to the Federal Government, in recognition of its leading role in setting the policy agenda for place-based work, including through the establishment of the Nexus Centre. These recommendations should be considered by the Nexus Centre and more broadly by the Federal Government as cross-cutting recommendations for all relevant departments and agencies.

What is place-based community-led work?

There is not yet consistent agreement on the language used to described place-based work, but the Alliance takes the following definition as our starting point:

> 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*.[3]

This definition highlights the geographically-bound nature of place-based work, its focus on building strengths and capacities in communities where people are working together on developing solutions to persistent and complex disadvantage, the importance of working collaboratively with a range of partners, and the inversion of standard power dynamics and privileging of genuine community leadership.

It points to advances in the field of place-based work that have moved beyond debates about the efficacy of 'place' as an organising principle and are now focused on the critical importance of community leadership.

There is a strong body of thought setting out principles for place-based community-led work. The Alliance supports the following principles for place-based work proposed by Collaboration for Impact[4]:

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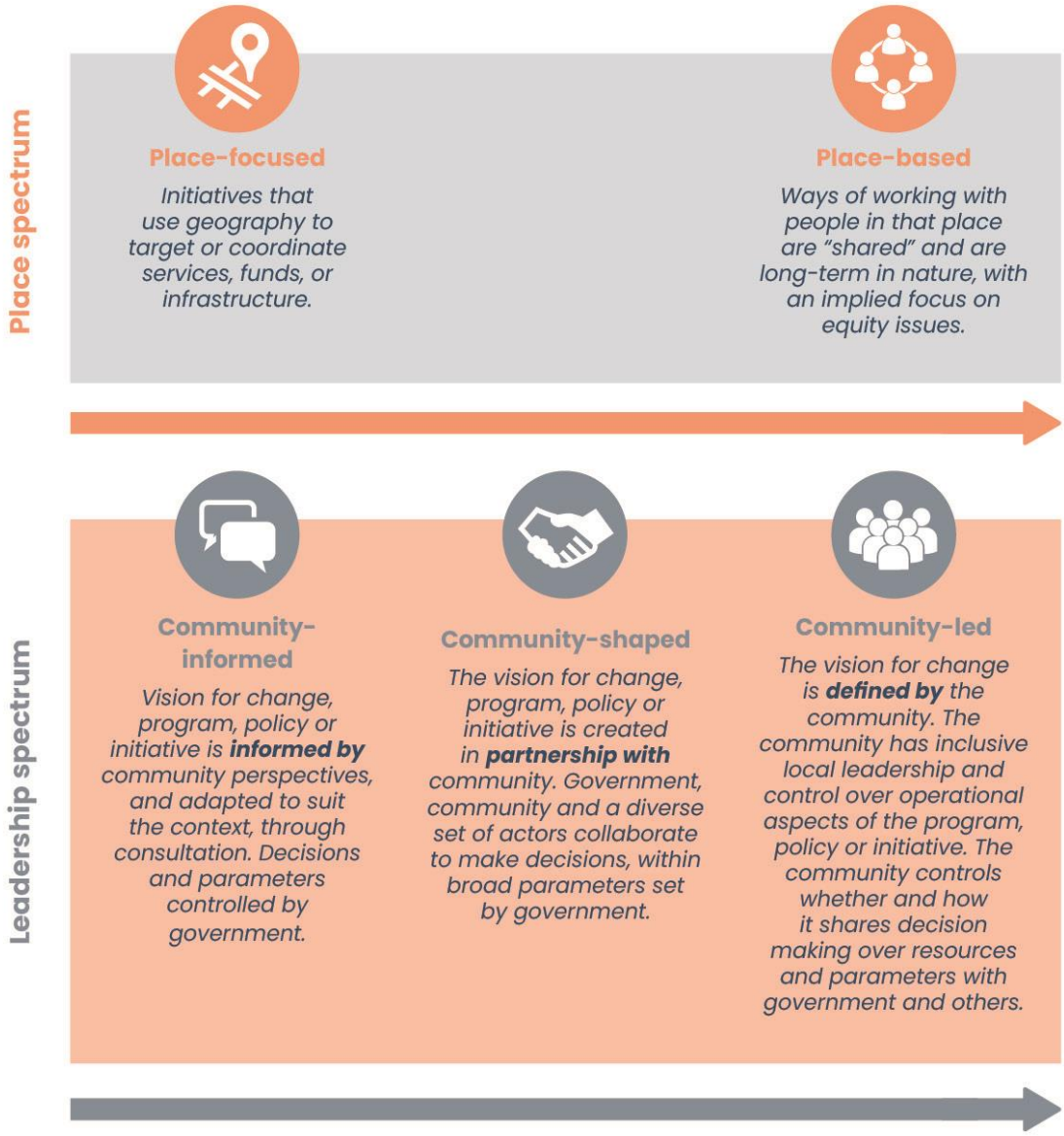
[3] Dart, J. 2018. op. cit.

[4] Collaboration for Impact. 2022. *The language and practice of place-based and community-led change in Australia: Building a shared understanding*. These principles align closely with the key characteristics of place-based work that emerged from the Alliance's research and consultation. They are also similar to other identified critical elements to building communities, such as those proposed by the Centre for Social Impact in a report for the NSW Department of Communities and Justice: genuine and inclusive co-design and partnerships, leveraging strengths and building capacity, creating safe and effective spaces, intersectional and safe approaches, and a whole system approach. See Centre for Social Impact. 2023. Community Strengthening Evidence Review (nsw.gov.au).

1. Overarching parameters and objectives jointly set by governments and community, often with service providers/NGOs, and business, philanthropy, corporate sectors etc.
2. An agenda or priorities are developed by whole-of-community, for example through generative processes and ensuring equal access to data and information.
3. Governance structures create equity, draw on local knowledge and are representative of the community. These structures enable strategic decisions about use of resources, governance mechanisms and reporting and measurement to be shared between government, community and others.
4. Community leadership structures drive day-to-day operational decisions, including the primary language of communication with partners.
5. Consciously building ways to work collaboratively across diverse sectors, government, community, and people. This includes understanding and working with formal and informal roles, power dynamics, mindsets and assumptions.
6. Commitment to, and action towards, aligning funding to community priorities, set out in a community agenda.
7. Accountability for change, early instances of impact and outcomes are shared between community and governments, and ideally service providers.

The language used to describe place-based community-led work is important. Several words and phrases are used interchangeably to describe place-based community-led change, but interrogating them further reveals quite divergent frameworks and principles. Both 'place' and 'community leadership' can be viewed on a spectrum:



Source: Adapted from Collaboration for Impact, 2022

As an Alliance, we would like to:

1. Highlight and articulate the importance of work that is to the right-hand side of this spectrum: work that privileges community leadership, self-determination and an inversion of typical power dynamics which is referred to throughout this paper as **place-based community-led** work.
2. Acknowledge that different types of 'place' work, and different degrees of community voice and decision-making, can be appropriate in different contexts.

While this paper is focused on place-based community-led initiatives, we do not intend to imply that all government or service delivery activity should aim to transform into place-based community-led initiatives. There are ongoing legitimate reasons for programs that are not organised according to this approach and acknowledge that there is value in some programs being ordered by other organising principles, including the needs of particular cohorts or across particular outcome areas. However, we recommend that strong efforts be made across all programs to be place-sensitive and community-informed.

Why 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.[5] Place-based community-led work is also linked to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and to 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

[5] 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. Op. cit.

system, poverty, and the severe lack of social and affordable housing, that get in the way of creating what communities want for their future.

While there is no doubt that action from government is required to reform the structures that lead to localised disadvantage (see *Systems-level considerations*), 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.

Location and disadvantage

An international body of work spanning close to fifty years shows strong causalities between geography and poverty. There is now significant empirical evidence to demonstrate that where a household is located will greatly impact the lived experience of poverty.[6] In Australia, successive reports from the *Dropping off the Edge* research series, led by Jesuit Social Services, clearly show that 'complex and entrenched disadvantage is experienced by a small but persistent number of locations in each state and territory across Australia.'[7]

The emergence of the concept of 'wicked problems' is closely associated with place-based responses. The term 'wicked' was coined in the early 1970s by design theorists to describe planning challenges that appear resistant to change.[8] Since then, the concept has been applied to a range of challenges in the fields of social policy, health care, education and climate change which are endemic and persistent, diverse in the way they manifest locally, and for which there is not a single known cause, but many.[9]

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[6] See, for example, Biddle, N., & M. Montaigne. 2017. Income Inequality in Australia – Decomposing by City and Suburb Economic Papers 36, 4: 367-379; McLachlan, R., Gilfillan, G. & J. Gordon 2013 Deep and Persistent Disadvantage in Australia, Productivity Commission Staff Working Paper, Productivity Commission, Melbourne; OECD. 2021. How's Life? OECD, Paris; ACOSS. 2020. Poverty in Australia UNSW & ACOSS; Prosser, B. & G. Helleren-Smith. 2020. Mapping the Potential: Understanding persistent disadvantage to inform community change Catholic Social Services Australia; Randolph, B., Liu, E. & B. Bradbury. 2020. Poverty, Property and Place: a Geographic Analysis of Poverty after Housing Costs in Australia Report for the ACOSS-UNSW Poverty and Inequality Partnership by the City Futures Research Centre and the SPRC.

[7] Jesuit Social Services. 2022. *Dropping off the Edge 2021*.

[8] Rittel, H. & M. Webber. 1973. Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning *Policy Sciences* 4, 2: 155-169.

[9] Lavery, J. 2016. 'Wicked problems', community engagement and the need for an implementation science for research ethics *Journal of Medical Ethics* 44, 3; Head, B. 2019. Forty years of wicked problems

Also in the 1970s, neoliberal principles began to be applied by Western governments to human services systems. This created market-like arrangements in human services, including a shift to third party provider models and purchaser-provider contractual arrangements for managing relations within and between organisations. There has been a growing realisation, however, that neoliberal reform has exacerbated rather than alleviated disadvantage.[10]

This realisation of the failure of neoliberal policies, combined with widespread acknowledgement of 'wicked' problems and growing awareness of place-based disadvantage has been slowly leading to shifts in frontline practice and modes of service delivery.

Better outcomes for people and communities

Long-term positive outcomes for communities that face complex structural challenges are extremely difficult to achieve. Making progress across multiple root causes of disadvantage takes time. It requires those who are interested in seeing sustainable solutions to work collaboratively and embrace new mindsets and values.

The evidence base on the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of place-based community-led initiatives is still being built. Nevertheless, research literature and analysis of the data collected by Alliance members indicates that place-based community-led work contributes to better outcomes for people and communities. These include signs of the early preconditions for change, such as agency and hope in the community, cultural identity, and capacity to respond to issues quickly and locally. They also include population-level health and social outcomes, including improved family strength (such as a reduction in domestic and family violence), improved youth development (such as an increase in Year12 retention), and improved adult empowerment (such as a reduction in days spent in custody).[11] Evidence of the impact of collective impact initiatives on population-level change in

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literature: forging closer links to policy studies *Policy and Society* 38, 2: 180-197; Peters, B. G. & M. Tarpey. 2019. Are wicked problems really so wicked? Perceptions of policy problems *Policy and Society* 38, 2: 218-236.

[10] Uniting NSW.ACT. 2021. *Place in social policy: Concepts and implications for place-based work*. Unpublished paper.

[11] KPMG. 2018. *Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project Impact Assessment.*

areas as diverse as health, homelessness, environmental and economic outcomes contributes to this view.[12]

Self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, place-based community-led initiatives are inherently linked to self-determination. They are one manifestation of power shifting so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have control over policies, programs and activities that affect them and their communities. The Alliance members are committed to working towards the self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, including through engaging in place-based community-led work that privileges the power of local communities.

Active citizenship

Community involvement in and leadership of place-based initiatives is one sign of active, participatory citizenship. Ideally, people with lived experience of disadvantage will be part of place-based community-led initiatives and participate in decisions that affect them. This can assist in rebalancing power relationships and improve trust between the human services system and individuals. For those affected by trauma, having control over their own lives and designing their own solutions can promote healing.

[12] ORS Impact and Spark Policy Institute. 2018. *When collective impact has an impact: A cross-study site of 25 collective impact initiatives*.

Key characteristics of place-based community-led work

Learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches to place-based work

Acknowledging, valuing and including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' ways of operating is foundational for place-based community-led work.

While the term 'place-based' may not always be used within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander initiatives, many are working in place in ways that involve similar practices and principles. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander place-based work and engagement with community 'can be essential to self-determination, identity and accessing essential services in a culturally safe way. This includes building on community strengths and priorities, and understanding what works in terms of appropriate evaluation methods and developing indicators which capture the diversity of Aboriginal lived experience.'[13]

Creating a shared 'middle space' where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people can meet and work together is an idea that was raised during consultations for this paper. This is very different to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities being compelled to engage in Western practices and ways of working, which is typically how the human services system still operates.

> *We need to shift the national conversation, vision, psyche to really unlock what we mean by power sharing, who holds decision making … and ensuring that we really seize what conditions might be there right now, to really build true and deep collaboration and self-determination for First Nations people.*

The shift to recognising and incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches has been highlighted at the federal level by the recent National Agreement on Closing the Gap between the Australian Government and the Coalition

[13] Jesuit Social Services. 2022. *What works for place-based approaches in Victoria? Part 2: A review of practice*. Report for Department Jobs Precincts and Regions (DJPR).

of the Peaks. Place-based community-led approaches including Maranguka, a model of Indigenous self-governance guided by the Bourke Tribal Council, the Murdi Paaki Regional Assembly programs, Empowered Communities and the Federal Government's Connected Beginnings program provide examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led programming, decision making and governance.

Community leadership and power

As noted above, one of the frontiers of place-based work is its commitment to community leadership and investment of power in the community.

When accepting that an initiative will be truly be led by a community, organisations accustomed to directing activity and holding power must accept that they need to share that power. This is a challenge for the Alliance members as practitioner organisations, but one which we are committed to take up. It is also a challenge to governments, philanthropists and others used to holding power.

It means that the community itself decides on priorities, strategies and activities via the governance structure of the place-based initiative. Such initiatives can still have legitimacy if they are initiated and/or facilitated by government, philanthropy or service providers, but only if the community fully supports and subsequently leads the work.

Sharing this power is not an invitation for government, philanthropy or service providers to take a hands-off approach, as there is a responsibility to be an active partner once a commitment is made to engage. There are various roles that those organisations can and should fulfil, but these should be directed towards facilitating and supporting community leadership, if and when requested by the community. The long-term goal of place-based community-led initiatives should be sustainable community leadership. This may include an ongoing support or advisory role for organisations or government agencies, but any provision of such support would be on the community's terms:

> *… in one of our communities … we've been working in that community for well over 10 years, or supporting that community for well over 10 years, supported building the capacity to enable them to build their own entity to transition our services over to them, but it's taken that long. And it's something that I feel you can't rush … So you're actually balancing the power and allowing communities*

to take over that self-agency, so they take over the control but we still provide aftercare.

Collaboration

In order to address complex disadvantage comprehensively, a number of stakeholders should be involved in a collaboration. First and foremost, this includes community members who are selected by community. It also includes government at all levels, including local government and funders, if they are invited in by the community. Where people in key organisations do not participate in the initiative or are not well-aligned with its aims, activities and culture, is it very difficult to generate and sustain outcome results.

A challenge for collaborative working is the long-term systemic exclusion of some people, including people who do not have the time and resources to participate but whose voices are critical to the endeavour. The often volunteer and in-kind nature of community involvement in place-based community-led work can act as a barrier to the inclusion of people whose time and resources need to be devoted to income-generating, caring or other roles. This can have the effect of privileging the involvement of people whose paid roles with organisations and government agencies lend themselves to place-based community-led work. It is crucial to pay attention to who is not at the table and consider when best to bring them in.

Intermediaries can play a vital role as collaborative partners. Four different types of intermediaries have been identified: capability specialist, evidence-action lab, place-based backbone and field catalyst:

Table 1. Types of intermediaries[14]

Type	What it does	Key functions
Capability specialist	Provides one or more supporting capability to the field (e.g. social finance, innovation management, human centered design, reconciliation, policy advocacy, research).	• Research & evaluation • Education & professional development • Networking opportunities • Facilitation, coaching and technical assistance • Granting & investment advance policy • Contribute technical support to direct-service providers
Evidence-action lab	Focuses on research and development, advising policy makers, and helping the field's practitioners learn, improve, and scale solutions.	• Developing, testing and evaluating innovative solutions • Disseminating results to issue stakeholders • Providing facilitation, coaching and technical assistance to solution adopters • Advancing policy and regulatory change to support the scaling of the solution
Place-based backbone	Coordinates local and regional cross-sector stakeholders and supports them in collectively transforming a fragmented field	• Advancing the overall vision and strategy • Establishing shared measurement • Aligning activities and resources • Building public will • Advancing policy • Securing resources and funding
Field catalyst	Deploys different capabilities, quietly influencing and augmenting the field's efforts to achieve population-level change.	• Research & evaluation • Build public awareness • Assess the field's strengths and weaknesses • Advance policy • Contribute technical support to direct-service providers • Collect, analyze, and share data

[14] Table in Cabaj, M. 2021. *Evaluating the Results of Intermediary Organisations: A paper for intermediaries in Australia*, adapting Hussein, T., Plummer, M. & Bl. Breen. 2018. How Field Catalysts Galvanize Social Change. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Winter.

These intermediaries have been assessed as making a difference to place-based community-led work by contributing to (rather than driving) results in breaking complex cycles of disadvantage.[15]

In particular, the Alliance's experience is that place-based backbones are essential facilitators and connectors in the local community, as they are able to bring divergent individuals and groups together to share and balance power among the people and organisations present. Independence and neutrality are critical factors:

> *We made a decision that when we work together, it's 'no ego, no logo'. Leave your ego and your agenda at the door, if you are part of our collective.*

Community readiness and trust

'Buy-in' – being a whole-hearted willingness by a community to commit to an initiative - is a crucial precondition for the success of place-based community-led initiatives.[16] Significant progress in creating sustainable community-level change will not be made unless people who live and work in the community are deeply invested in place-based solutions.

Community readiness takes time to develop. Across a range of measures – leadership, adoption of collaborative approaches, community cohesion, measurement and innovation – community readiness will develop at its own pace over time. Early signs of readiness may include a catalyst for people coming together, the emergence of a local voice or champion for a particular issue, and an early developing awareness about collaborative responses. Over time this may progress to people becoming more open to working together, and community conversations progressing with diverse voices from a range of sectors.[17]

It will take time for communities to trust and want to build relationships with external organisations, some of which may be viewed with suspicion for very good reasons. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, for example, which have been damaged by the actions of governments, churches and service providers, may not

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[15] Cabaj, M. 2021. Op. cit.

[16] See, for example, Crew, M, 2020, *The Effectiveness of Place-Based Programmes and Campaigns in Improving Outcomes for Children A Literature Review: A National Literacy Trust Research Report* National Literacy Trust, London; Crimeen, A., Bernstein, M., Zapart, S. & F. Haigh. 2017 *Place-based Interventions : A Realist Informed Literature Review*, Centre for Health Equity Training, Research and Evaluation (CHETRE), South Western Sydney Local Health District and UNSW Australia: Liverpool.

[17] The change cycle is detailed by Collaboration for Impact at Change Cycle | Platform C.

immediately want to enter into a relationship of trust with those institutions. These experiences are by no means limited to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and may apply as strongly to other communities facing complex structural challenges.

The building of trust takes a very long time, but it is a critical pre-condition for place-based community-led work. Trust helps to mobilise and build momentum for change; it opens the doors to enable other actors to understand what change needs to occur; and it ultimately enables the needs of the community to be met.

Trust is built through sitting with and listening to the community:

> *But I also feel like trust is one of those things that it can be lost, it can be harmed, and sometimes there's rebuilding of trust. But I would definitely say we're at the stage now where, particularly in those key suburbs that were really deeply engaged with. There's their strong, trusting relationships with community members. There's been a lot, a lot of listening and a lot of data gathered from that listening, particularly in a couple of our key suburbs.*

It is also built from being able to directly address the needs of the community:

> *And this level of buy in of sharing resources, sharing skills, sharing outcomes, sharing forms of measurement, sharing goals together. And community being a part of that, that team as well. So I'd say there's a really, that's probably a key outcome for us, is that there's a real sense of team among, you know, probably about 10 to 15 really core services in the collective. And I think that has also gone a long way in building trust and relationships with local families and community. Because what we're able to address the challenges that families are facing that we're able to address is really times by ten.*

Succession and sustainability

Successful place-based community-led initiatives must have succession and sustainability factored into their planning processes.

The funding arrangements needed to sustain this work are generally more complex than that required for mainstream services. Place-based community-led work seeks long-term, structural and philosophical change and this requires time, energy and significant emotional investment from many parties over a sustained period.

In Australia at present, some philanthropic organisations see themselves as holding the risk of funding a new venture by providing long-term funding up front. For example, one organisation has provided a community with untied and flexible funding for five years. This enables the initiative to draw in other sources of funding and support new funders to join the work.

Part of the role of philanthropy, in cases like these, is to hold the risk long enough to obtain evidence that the initiative works and to showcase it to government. Nevertheless, governments play a vital role in place-based community-led initiatives for a number of reasons: they can be sources of significant funding; they can pull important policy levers; and they have a responsibility to actively pursue the wellbeing of people and their communities.

Under current commissioning arrangements, programs and initiatives are usually funded on a short-term basis and while many produce promising outcomes, they may not result in lasting changes due to discontinued funding, or ad hoc extensions for as short as six to 12 months. A shift to longer-term funding arrangements is imperative to match the time taken for place-based community-led initiatives to see the impact that communities seek.

Capability focus

Organisations often take a deficits-focused approach to understanding the communities they are working with, but better understanding of the capabilities of communities is needed for place-based community-led work.[18]

The capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen[19] and Martha Nussbaum[20] is a productive and effective way to respond to complex social issues. The approach identifies and harnesses people's fundamental capabilities, focusing on what people

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[18] Lang et al note in their analysis of UK community-led supported housing that understanding the intricacies of social capital adds value. Mapping social capital includes the documentation of the positive and constructive network of resources that support and maintain community-led place-based initiatives. Lang, R., Chatterton, P., & D. Mullins. 2019. Grassroots innovations in community-led housing in England: the role and evolution of intermediaries *International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development* 12, 1.

[19] Sen, A. 1999. *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 87 as cited in S. Deneulin & L. Shahani (eds) 2009, *An Introduction to the Human Development and Capability Approach*, Earthscan, IDRC, Ottawa.

[20] Nussbaum, M. 2011. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, Belknap Press, Cambridge MA.

can be rather than their limitations and problems. The freedom for a community to achieve wellbeing is a moral right and is understood in terms of people choosing opportunities for doing and being what they have reason to value. This approach should guide capacity building and how change is measured.

A starting point should be an appreciation of the existing capacity within a community. Place-based community-led work has the potential to identify and harness the skills and assets that exist within a local area and to pool expertise and talent.

Building capabilities should focus on opportunity, choice, agency and enabling environments (freedom). Strengthening capacity locally should centre on listening to community, seeing what answers, solutions, expertise and cultural traditions they bring to the initiative, and leveraging existing resources available within community:

> *Capacity building isn't necessarily me going, I'm going to build your capacity. It's 'let's look at what people already have' because a community have the answer. And it's up to us to kind of orchestrate the space, to build capacity, but also to get services to listen to that and say: Okay, this is what people actually want.*

Systems leadership

Place-based initiatives need a different style to traditional top-down models of leadership. This includes: willingness to work collaboratively and consciously in ways which build a sense of connection within community; awareness of the complex ways in which community is transformed by new ways of working; and willingness to adapt to community needs.[21]

To work within an initiative that inverts traditional power dynamics and seeks reform of many systems simultaneously, we need to shift what is viewed as good leadership. Collaboration for Impact and others are working to articulate and develop an understanding of what this looks like – how to develop leaders that can support

[21] Crew. 2020. Op. cit.; Crimeen et. al. 2017. Op. cit.; Escandon. S. 2010. Theoretical Versus Grass-Roots Development of a Community Partnership *The Qualitative Report* 15, 1, January: 142-155; Graves, D. 2011. *Exploring Schools as Community Hubs: Investigating application of the community hub model in context of the closure of Athabasca School, Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada and other small schools;* Martiskainen, M. 2017. The role of community leadership in the development of grassroots innovations *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* 22, March: 78-89.

systems changes - and how to build the capabilities of communities and organisations in systems leadership.[22]

Getting this right, and making sure that this new leadership style is adopted and modelled by leaders in place-based initiatives, will help to diffuse a collaborative approach throughout initiatives and influence their culture.

Good governance

Good governance is vital to the good functioning of place-based community-led initiatives. Currently, there are no specific guidelines for how best to initiate, construct and maintain an 'optimal' governance model.

In the Alliance members' experience, different governance models are appropriate for different circumstances and communities. However, key elements include agreed decision-making protocols, and transparent management and administrative arrangements, which are all conducive to a good sense of partnership and the building of trust. Governance agreements should also be structured in a way that enhances the consultative and collaborative spirit of place-based initiatives.[23]

Governance processes need to embody and reflect cultural authority and align local or traditional approaches. Examples from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities include Tribal Councils, Land Councils, Women's Councils and Elders Groups.

Data to inform action and reflection

Data-driven decision making can be an important part of place-based community-led work, helping communities to identify issues and make decisions about solutions and to measure their effectiveness. Capacity and capability development is needed and service delivery and government partners, as well as intermediaries, can and should have an important role in building that.

Availability of and access to data is a critical aspect of this. Building a sense of partnership and ownership over the data that will be used to direct the place-based

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[22] Craven, L. 2022. *Three trends on the horizon for place-based change in 2022* Collaboration for Impact.
[23] NHS. 2021. *Thriving places: Guidance on the development of place-based partnerships as part of statutory integrated care systems*, NHS, London.

work should be a cornerstone of operation[24] and initiatives should have protocols for the collection of data and transparency around data and information sharing.[25]

Access to data is empowering for communities. It allows them to conduct their own analysis, based on their own priorities. It is important for communities to have access to original data and not just to interpretation of data. Community priorities and analysis may differ from that of the original data custodian. Whatever form it is in, data has to be meaningful and comprehensive to communities and allow for outcomes and impacts to be captured and shared.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data sovereignty is also an important lens on this issue. This is the vital 'right of Indigenous people to govern the collection, ownership and application of data about Indigenous communities, peoples, lands, and resources.'[26] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led data collection, management, analysis and interpretation is an important component of evidence-based decision-making and an essential part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led place-based work.[27]

Walter et. al. summarise the current state of data sources on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as primarily including 'blaming, aggregate, decontextualised, deficit and restricted' collections and analysis. By comparison, data should inform a 'comprehensive, nuanced narrative', recognise cultural diversity, address priorities rather than problems and be accessible.[28]

Evaluation and outcomes measurement

Evaluation and the tracking of outcomes is widely acknowledged by researchers and practitioners to be an important undertaking for all place-based initiatives. Less consensus exists, however, on optimal approaches to evaluation.

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[24] Graves 2011. Op. Cit.

[25] Australian Public Service Commission. 2021. *Tacking Wicked Problems: A Public Policy Perspective* APSC, Canberra; Wilks, S., Lahausse, J., & B. Edwards. 2015. *Commonwealth Place-Based Service Delivery Initiatives Key Learnings Project* Prepared for the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, AIFS, Melbourne.

[26] Bodkin-Andrews, G., Walter, M., Lee, V., Kukutai, T. & R. Lovett. 2019. *Delivering Indigenous Data Sovereignty* Presentation to the 2019 Indigenous Research Conference.

[27] Jesuit Social Services. 2022. Op. cit.

[28] Walter, M., Lovett, R., Maher, B., Williamson, B., Prehn, J, Bodkin-Andrews, G. & V. Lee. 2020. Indigenous data sovereignty in the era of big data and open data. *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 56(2):143–156.

Alliance members are developing their own frameworks for tracking the outcomes of place-based initiatives in which they are a partner, and we are aware that a number of communities are also developing their own place-based change collaboration framework.

A range of techniques are important in this work, including qualitative techniques which have the potential to provide rich data on process, including the formation and operation of collectives, and the development of a common vision or strategy, and outcomes. They can also provide important information on community and institutional experiences, and interrogation of big data can signpost communities towards strength-building activities by identifying key milestones likely to reduce inequity. For example, a threshold can identify where a community may need to rally special efforts to lift activity prior to a crisis point being reached or deteriorating further.

Evaluation should be for learning, improvement and policy design as well as demonstrating impact. Evaluation of place-based initiatives should be less about auditing and enumeration and focused more on exploration, 'not simply instruments of accountability.'[29] Learning, collaboration, and expectations of experimentation also feature as important facets of place-based initiative experience. Evaluation results should be an opportunity for refinement and improvement, rather than an end-point or basis for indictment.[30]

[29] Burstein, M. & E. Tolley. 2011. *Exploring the effectiveness of place-based program evaluations* Report prepared for the Policy Research Initiative.

[30] Graves. 2011. Op. cit.

Barriers and enablers

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.

Governments, non-government organisations and philanthropists have overlapping roles in supporting the development of these enablers.

Organisational internal readiness and mindset shifts

Existing barrier: *Many organisations across the place-based ecosystem are not ready for a new way of working.*

Transformation to enabler: *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.*

Organisations seeking to be partners in place-based community-led work need to be ready to engage. They have to arrive with the full weight of the organisation behind them, to work with the community in front of them. The Alliance members have reflected on this in our own organisations, but believe that these principles apply equally to government, philanthropic and other organisations seeking to engage in place-based work.

The motivation for involvement must be genuine – motivation that can overcome the challenges associated with shifting to a new way of working. Organisations need support at Minister or Board and Executive levels to provide the right authorising environment. They need to be able to maintain that support and sit through any

discomfort in the absence of immediate evidence of success, noting the very long timescale of addressing complex disadvantage with multiple actors. A strong internal champion over many years can assist in this process. Crucially, they need to be able to commit resources and funding to support slow, intensive work over a number of years.

Organisational internal readiness also extends beyond support from the Minister/Board and Executive to other aspects of the way many organisations run. For example, guidelines around intellectual property and branding need to be revised to essentially 'give away' what is generally tightly held in other circumstances.

For smaller organisations, internal alignment is much easier to manage, but convincing funders of the virtues of place-based work can be difficult, particularly when trying to describe and quantify impact. This is a challenge for organisations of all sizes but is particularly sharp for small organisations which may not be able to cross-subsidise their place-based work with other sources of funding.

Organisations also have to focus on their own capability for place-based community-led work. The complex and adaptive nature of this work means that it is difficult to attract and retain staff that have the right skill sets, including innovation capability. This is particularly acute in remote communities and in a competitive labour market with shortages in the social work and community development sectors.

Part of achieving internal organisational readiness is to undertake mindset shifts.

'Collaboration' is frequently spoken about by government and non-government organisations, but reward structures usually incentivise a 'saviour' mentality rather than genuine grassroots community engagement. The generation of new 'announceables' is generally rewarded above the time-consuming activities of participating in community-led practices.

We want to challenge all partners in place-based work to think about how we incentivise it among our own staff members as well as throughout the human services system, including by how we measure outcomes, determine KPIs, and design or participate in commissioning processes.

This mindset shift might look something like:[31]

Understanding of …	From …		To …
Place	Simple	→	Complex
Focus	Means	→	Ends
Timeframe	Short	→	Long
Expertise	Narrow	→	Broad
Systems	Mechanical	→	Social
Orientation	Analytic	→	Synthetic
Relationships	Transactional	→	Collaborative
Evaluation	Summative	→	Developmental
Planning	Blueprint	→	Emergent

Systems-level considerations

Existing barrier: *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.*

Transformation to enabler: *A 'connecting middle' is required to translate on-the-ground expertise to those setting the rules and back again.*

Place-based community-led initiatives are a necessary but not sufficient part of the answer to entrenched disadvantage.

They can make significant gains at the community level, but cannot change underlying, deeply embedded systems-level settings such as policies, program designs and institutional structures. Across the country, different individual place-based initiatives within different individual communities strike the same systemic barriers time and time again.

[31] Prepared by United Way. 2022.

Place-based community-led initiatives can support communities to make changes in local settings and structures, to benefit individuals and families. For example, many have vastly improved individuals' and families' access to services through smoother pathways to support. However, those individuals and families' outcomes are still significantly constrained by systemic factors, in particular the rationed nature of those services, the silos and fragmentation of the service system, poverty due to inadequate income support payments, and the severe lack of social and affordable housing.

A different type of system change is needed to complement place-based community-led work. This would combine insights from people on 'the ground' (such as community members, people with lived experience and practitioners) with insights from people setting 'the rules' (for example policy makers, commissioners and researchers) to drive change at the systems level.[32]

The Alliance sees the possibility for the Nexus Centre to act a 'connecting middle' - by gathering insights from the existing suite of place-based community-led initiatives around the country, and connecting them with other insights, to generate systems-level change.

Long-term commitment, financial and non-financial

Existing barrier: *Current funding does not reflect the work being done and that is required to be done in place-based community-led initiatives.*

Transformation to enabler: *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.*

Short timeframes, for financial and non-financial commitments alike, have consistently been an impediment to place-based community-led work. Long-term,

[32] This idea is being advanced through work undertaken by The Possibility Partnership, a collaboration of non-government organisations dedicated to reform of the human services system.

adequate funding is the most pressing need for the sustainability of such initiatives moving forward. A lack of commitment often manifests as a constant need to reassure funders, identify new sources of funding, and breaking trust and relationships with the community as resources wax and wane.

Sourcing long term capital capable of addressing the level of disadvantage in many communities remains a significant and persistent barrier to change:

> *'…the funding we receive has never been reflective of the long-term, intensive and slow work required…and the adoption of this way of working. So, for us, it's a key risk to the work and it's something that we have prioritised needing to address and we really would like…funding bodies to recognise just how resource intensive this is.'*

A lack of generalised awareness and understanding of the scale of disadvantage across Australia also presents a challenge for projects and ventures of this kind.[33]

On the part of government and philanthropic funders, funding models should match the work that is required, the way it needs to be performed and the realistic timeframes required. The deep place-based community-led work that is the subject of this paper requires long-term funding cycles with appropriate evaluation points along the way, with long-term commitments provided up front.

Place-based initiatives often require a prolonged establishment phase to set up the preconditions for change. Funders should invest in the foundational stages of this work, including supporting the development of community readiness and funding expert supports to work alongside community in the early phase. They should be comfortable funding preconditions and enabling factors, including the building of trust and development of relationships. Funding for capacity building (skills development, evaluation, data sharing) is also vital.

Importantly, we need to re-contextualise thinking about funding. There is already significant investment in many communities experiencing disadvantage, but its

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[33] Ten20 notes in its environmental scan of the initiatives "*there is a limited pool of funders who have understanding, capacity, resource and/or appetite to engage in a way for the work to progress. Many initiatives are therefore struggling to maintain and/or grow sustainable funding streams*". ten20. 2019. *Funding Community-Led Place Based Practice Report* prepared with Logan Together, Go Goldfields, Connecting Community for Kids, The Hive, Sanderson Alliance, Maranguka Community Hub, Social Ventures Australia and the Australian Centre for Social Innovation, May.

delivery is fragmented, siloed and not in areas that the community wants – usually, more money is not needed, but rather better design and delivery of existing funds.

As discussed above, if **organisational internal readiness** characteristics are not present, it is difficult for organisations to retain interest and commitment to place-based work over the longer-term.

On the part of service providers, this means making an explicit commitment to being present in selected communities over the same timeframe. This commitment has to remain even when processes take a long time, run counter to expectations, fluctuate in intensity or perceived successes and do not have obviously quantifiable outcomes over the short-medium term. In addition, long-term commitment is vital for building trust, the absence of which is a major barrier to place-based work.

Commissioning and funding of services

Existing barrier: *Current commissioning and funding processes do not support place-based community-led work.*

Transformation to enabler: *Co-commissioning processes would allow all actors in the place-based ecosystem to design and implement new approaches.*

Governments have a significant role to play in the development and success of place-based community-led initiatives through their power to commission and fund services. It is very encouraging to see governments starting to think about the supporting infrastructure needed for developing such initiatives, including through funding various intermediary organisations and the Federal Government's investment in the Nexus Centre Foundation Partner.

However, government interest in and funding of these initiatives is piecemeal. Communities need resources to be able to self-organise and engage in place-based work and we have seen an increase in 'backbone' or 'connector' functions to provide this necessary capacity. These are funded via various mechanisms, with limited transparency or consistency of commissioning approach. This can sometimes result in conflicting or overlapping activities in some communities, with others lacking any place-based investment at all. In addition, there is increasing interest from funders such as philanthropists and Government to fund place-based work. However, there is

no coherent or equitable pathway to bridge these available funding opportunities with the various entities supporting local communities.

Most government funding and commissioning, of course, is not for place-based community-led work. In that case, the objectives of a place-based initiative that is grappling with changes across multiple policy systems are even more at odds with funding arrangements on different timelines, with specific purposes, and varying reporting frameworks. Place-based initiatives are compelled to do their best to 'stitch this together' – that is, to bring together multiple fragmented systems for the benefit of a community – but it is hard work.

As this work develops, with goodwill between government and non-government organisations, the relationship between governments and service providers is shifting from a funder/provider relationship to a collaborative relationship with shared responsibility for a different way of working with communities. Governments are increasingly engaging as learning partners, as a long-term commitment in this regard is just as essential as their funding role.

Competition in human services

Existing barrier: *Competition within the human services system is getting in the way of place-based work.*

Transformation to enabler: *A reduction in competitive approaches – led by government and non-government organisations – will help to transform the human services system and create an environment that supports place-based work.*

We need to shift away from competition in human services. This means shifting away from government commissioning processes that mandate competitive tendering, from service providers withholding their intellectual property in order to gain competitive advantage, and from philanthropists being motivated solely by public recognition.

Australia's human services system has been marketised over a number of decades and services are now generally contracted out by governments to service provider organisations. These organisations and their work have been drawn within the orbit of Australia's National Competition Policy and now interact with each other in

competitive ways, including protection of intellectual property and other forms of advantage in tendering processes.

The drive for self-perpetuation inherent in these practices – while often made in good faith and with the belief that their own services are high quality and promoting good outcomes – has unintended consequences for the people we are trying to help. This is particularly true in place-based work because it inhibits agencies joining together in collaboration and setting aside differences for the sake of genuinely supporting the local community.

Alongside these overtly competitive considerations are the differences between organisations' priorities, goals and standard processes, which can also form interruptions to collaborative ways of working.

When agencies are able to overcome this, great things can be achieved. A successful approach involves a 'no ego, no logo' commitment to ensuring the right stakeholders are involved and enough time is allowed for stakeholders to create a common vision and strategy. Underpinning this is the need for organisations and service providers to let go of any competing priorities to enable genuine, collaborative partnerships:

> *'This is the first framework I've ever seen successfully get organisations to put down competing interest. And we've actually got this motto, which we established right early in, in the path, and it was leave your logo at the door. And so, and that's been really successful for us. And we really just keep orienting back to what are we here for? What are we here for, and it's about that child, and it's about that family. And so any, even if there is a conflict, or that arises, it's always dealt with in the context of that vision.'*

Many of the Alliance agencies have adopted a principle of non-competition with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).

Data sharing and access

Existing barrier: *Data sharing efforts are minimal and this is holding communities back from describing and analysing local issues and responses.*

Transformation to enabler: *We need governments and non-government organisations 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.*

Data sharing and access remains a vital missing piece in the place-based ecosystem that requires resolution. This is an issue both for government and non-government stakeholders. Governments (federal and state) hold the majority of data and are often risk-averse about sharing it. Service providers and other organisations also hold data and can also be unwilling to share, sometimes prevented by barriers such as different data systems and privacy risks, or sometimes cautious about sharing their intellectual property. Overcoming this aversion is critical to enabling the development of strong place-based initiatives around the country.

The existence of high-profile collaborations like the (CIC) Community Indicators Consortium in the United States provide a useful example for Australia. The CIC is a collaboration of several bodies including research agencies, policy makers and planners. In conjunction with the OECD, this consortium is seeking to: resolve how communities might be better supported to understand community-level data; identify the workforce development planning needs required; and develop appropriate protocols for experts and professionals to constructively share intelligence on progress towards community-based indicators. Community Indicators Victoria represents the most comprehensive effort in Australia to provide comparable data on community-level outcomes, yet in many respects this remains a self-contained project which has not been adopted more broadly.[34]

As organisations interested in place-based community-led work, and particularly work that partners with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, we

[34] Davern, M. 2015. *Get to know more about an indicators project: Community Indicators Victoria*, Webinar, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health.

advocate for protocols that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data sovereignty and commit to interrogate our own research and data collection practices to ensure alignment with the data needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Evidence from evaluation and outcomes measurement

Existing barrier: *Measuring the outcomes of place-based work is complex and mired in outdated ideas about what constitutes 'evidence'.*

Transformation to enabler: *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.*

Measuring the outcomes of place-based initiatives is complex and the evidence base for place-based work in Australia is still emerging. Given the timescale of place-based work, it takes time for outcomes to be observed. It can also be difficult to attribute change to any particular initiative, given the complexity of the issues being addressed and the multilayered responses that are part of place-based work. The impact of a place-based initiative also may fluctuate across the years of its operation, as the investment of time and effort shifts in keeping with the changing needs of the community.

> *'The evidence base … in Australia is still very mixed, for numerous reasons (typically long-term projects and it takes a while for impact to be observed, difficult to attribute change….) Investment in rigorous and developmental/embedded evaluation of place-based approaches can help initiatives identify what works, for whom, and under what circumstances - contributing to the wider evidence base for CI/PBA approaches.'*

This is an emerging area of practice and expertise and organisations are investing in its development. However, it is difficult to convince funders to invest in place-based work in the absence of strong, population-level evidence about changes.

We need to find new ways of assessing the success of place-based work that take into account progress indicators that show the foundations for good place-based work are being set down. We also need to focus on evaluation as a method for learning and improvement as well as demonstrating impact.

We also note that outcomes measurement is expensive and not generally given investment by program funders. While large organisations can invest some of their own resources in this work, smaller organisations are at a disadvantage.

Policy and service delivery institutional amnesia

Existing barrier: *Government and non-government organisations 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.*

Transformation to enabler: *We need to consider, assess and share sources of information about existing and historical place-based work.*

Whilst there is now recognition of the need to scale place-based work, to date there has been limited visibility and codification of the work at national level.

There is a historical pattern of organisations (government and non-government) starting from scratch with a 'new' idea without considering the history of place-based work and extant examples to learn from. Learnings from past and existing place-based initiatives should be brought together.

Intermediary organisations are stepping in by developing tools, resources and capacity building activities, including the publicly available national resource hub, Platform C.[35] However, these intermediaries are often hindered by inadequate funding

[35] Created by Collaboration for Impact in partnership with the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal, Federal Department of Social Services, Paul Ramsay Foundation, Dusseldorp Forum, The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, and Clear Horizon.

for field-building activities such as these, with fee-for-service or contract-based work often driving the codification.

Place-based work alignment across portfolios

Existing barrier: *The field of place-based work tends to be narrowly held within government departments with responsibility for social services and human service delivery organisations.*

Transformation to enabler: *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.*

It is imperative that an understanding of place-based work be shared across policy areas and academic disciplines. As long as it remains a social services policy issue, it will not be widely understood and implemented. Health, education, housing, justice, employment, planning and many other policy areas need to be brought into discussions about place-based work. The vision and goals of many place-based community-led initiatives intersect with outcomes across these policy areas, as do the challenges and concerns that are pinpointed as the focus for change.

At present, responsibility for place-based work at the Federal level resides mainly with the Department of Social Services. Transitioning it to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet would ensure that it is able to better reach and influence other government departments and be better understood as a policy and budget priority.

Recommendations

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. The Alliance welcomes initiatives like the Stronger Places, Stronger People program and the establishment of a National Centre for Place-Based Collaboration, which create a prime opportunity to provide much-needed infrastructure.

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.

Appendix 1 Examples of Alliance contributions to place-based community-led initiatives

The Hive (United Way)

The Hive has been operating in the Mount Druitt area since 2015 and is the backbone organisation of a place-based, collective impact initiative with the goal of seeing all children in Mount Druitt start school well, with equal opportunity. The Hive is a part of United Way Australia and works with over 30 organisations in the Mount Druitt area to support the provision of a range of evidence-based initiatives that assist in early childhood development.

Mount Druitt covers 12 suburbs in Sydney's West, most of these suburbs are in the 2-3% of most disadvantaged suburbs in Australia. The number of children 'at risk of significant harm' is more than double the NSW average with 1 in 3 children in Mount Druitt considered developmentally vulnerable when they start school, compared to 1 in 5 nationally. Lack of coordination between services, their failure to meet community needs and a siloed approach from services has been a persistent limitation to addressing these problems.

Children in Mount Druitt are supported by the Hive through health and early learning initiatives. These initiatives aim to address gaps in access to high-quality preschool programs and close health and development gaps for local children.

The Hive takes both a place-based approach, which allows it to respond to the needs of the community it serves and a collective impact approach, which enables partners to maximise their impact and deliver valuable services to the community. The combination of these approaches and its focus on advocacy for system-level change has seen a dramatic improvement to the quality of ECECs in Mt Druitt, more children accessing early learning, as well as health services adopting a place-based approach to child development checks.

Becoming U (Uniting NSW.ACT)

Becoming U is a place-based initiative delivered by Uniting on the Mid-North Coast of NSW. The aim of the initiative is to empower young people aged 8-18 to unleash their potential and use it to thrive. Beginning in 2019, Becoming U began without a pre-determined project in mind and listened to the community, letting them lead the collaboration and following the ethos of working 'with' not 'for' community. Ideas that the community had for change included more youth mentoring, better transport options and spaces for young people to see youth in the area succeed and reach their full potential.

Five co-designed projects came out of the listening phase in storytelling, mentoring, career experiences, sport and fitness activities and youth grants to help remove financial barriers for young people. So far there has been continual development of the project allowing for opportunities such as youth to youth mentoring, establishment of a youth advisory council and many positive outcomes and experiences for young people. A range of testimonials, outcomes and inspiring stories from students in the region can be found on the Becoming U website here.

Communities of Focus, Cairns South Together (Mission Australia)

Communities of Focus is Mission Australia's place-based systems change approach, bringing together people in communities experiencing complex place-based challenges to stimulate local leadership and decision making. By coordinating collective action and addressing systematic drivers of disadvantage, Mission Australia aims to catalyse sustainable positive change.

Communities of Focus is partnered with Cairns South Together to deliver the backbone support to the collective impact movement in Far North Queensland. Established in 2020, Cairns South Together's community-led Steering Group shares the vision for *Happy and healthy young people contributing to a brighter future for Cairns South*.

A strong early focus on shared data has enabled Cairn South Together to co-create a community plan to respond to the challenges faced by children in their first 1,000 days of life and young people in the transition towards independence from age 8-14. Five Collaborative Working Clusters bringing together lived experience and knowledge expertise are working together through co-design, with progress including:

- Service integration initiatives that have resulted in an increased service presence in the suburbs of Cairns South and the Hambledon House community centre.
- Regular communication to parents, services, schools and community to improve understanding about the importance of the first 1,000 days.
- Co-designed parent support-seeking resources.
- Youth voice to inform a focus on activities for young people in the Cairns South corridor.
- Community skill and development programs.

Further information on Cairns South Together and Communities of Focus can be found at www.cairnssouthtogether.org.au

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*.