

Place-based initiatives in Australia: An overview



About ARACY

ARACY – Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth seeks to catalyse change by bringing people and knowledge together for the benefit of children and young people in Australia.

We believe that all children and young people should have the opportunity to thrive.

We strive to achieve this by advocating for evidence-based policy and practice, focusing on prevention and early intervention. Our consultations with over 4000 children and young people, their families, and experts have shown us what wellbeing means to them: to be loved, valued, and safe; to have material basics; to be physically and mentally healthy; to be learning; to be participating; and to have a positive sense of identity and culture. These six domains are reflected in ARACY's wellbeing framework for children and young people — [the Nest](#).

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Introduction

This paper gives a brief overview of the most recent evidence and thinking on place-based approaches to tackling complex social issues. It includes emerging and grey literature to capture the lessons being learned in the many place-based initiatives across Australia, along with an overview of the national place-based landscape.

The paper is intended to provide food for thought on the opportunities presented by current government interest in place-based approaches. Going forward there is the opportunity to learn from those who have gone before us and establish the aspirations, principles, expectations, and ways of working that will give our joint endeavours the best chance of success. From the known to the newly emerging, this paper outlines the key considerations that we would be wise to examine and address in the founding stages of any new place-based work.

Why Place-based Initiatives

Every year millions of dollars are spent by governments, philanthropies, community organisations and the private sector, in areas such as education, health, social services, and care. In some communities and for some families, these investments make the essential difference in ensuring their children have the best start in life and can do well throughout childhood and adolescence.

For some, however, inequity and disadvantage remain entrenched and growing. Of greatest concern is disadvantage linked to place. Families find it harder to get the supports they need when their community is also suffering. Intergenerational disadvantage deepens and compounds, becoming multi-faceted and commonplace.

The ten most disadvantaged locations across Victoria in 2015 remained the most disadvantaged six years later in 2021. In NSW, nine of the ten most disadvantaged locations had not shifted in those six years. Eight of the top ten in Queensland and 19 of the top 20 in South Australia in 2021 were also highly disadvantaged in 2015 (Dropping Off the Edge 2021).

The evidence base for tackling this entrenched disadvantage points to common solutions (Moore, 2014) - tailored, localised, and collaborative, taking account of local context and community aspirations. For sound reasons, place-based approaches have become a go-to for successive governments looking to solve the wicked problems of long term, compounding social disadvantage and its myriad impacts on wellbeing.

However, the popularity of place-based working has created unintended consequences of its own, including causing inadvertent competition for resources and participants and burnout among community leaders.

Researchers and evaluators continue to identify common elements that can help set a place-based initiative up for success. Increasingly, this has involved applying systems thinking, as part of unpicking the complex systemic interactions that hold prevailing conditions in place, and as a way of deepening our understanding of how relational capital, power dynamics and even our ideas of what comprises “community” inform and affect the work we share.

Progressively more sophisticated evaluation approaches seek out the “green shoots” and changes to enabling conditions and architecture that signal progress, allowing these to be supported and grown.

What we now know

Place-based approaches to entrenched social disadvantage have been underway internationally and in Australia for decades. Many have achieved significant impact in reducing intergenerational community disadvantage.

The Commonwealth Government remains deeply committed to place-based approaches, with the first stages of a new National Centre for Place-Based Collaboration (Nexus Centre) underway.

Thanks to the large body of research seeking to analyse the common pitfalls and success factors of place-based working, place-based initiatives and their funders have a pool of knowledge to draw on wherever they may be in their journey.

Recent valuable publications on “what works” in place-based approaches include:

- *Where are we? Place-based approaches to tackling community challenges in Australia* (Equity Economics, commissioned by Paul Ramsay Foundation, 2022)
- *Place-based approaches to building the ECD ecosystem: Opportunities and benefits* (Centre for Policy Development, 2022)
- *What works for place-based approaches in Victoria. Part 1: A review of the literature and Part 2: A review of practice* (Jesuit Social Services’ Centre for Just Places, RMIT University and Centre for Community Child Health (MCRI) for the Victorian Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, 2022)
- *Core care conditions for children and families: Implications for integrated child and family services* (TG Moore for Social Ventures Australia, 2021)
- *Community governance and place-based initiatives: Fruitful frameworks and directions* (J Lewis, CoLab Evidence Report, 2019)

Most place-based initiatives now appreciate the need for sustained long term funding, preferably flexible; the value of building strong relationships and recognising community strengths; the community governance and capacity-building that creates ownership and impetus; and the importance of deeply understanding local contexts, priorities and perspectives.

Many also know all too well the fine balance between taking the necessary time and resources to do these things, and the need for quick wins to maintain momentum and interest, and to feed the reporting machines associated with the often short term funding they receive.

What we are still learning

Place-based approaches by their nature are long term and developmental. It is no surprise that even decades down the track, we are still learning. Along with the elements needed for success, there is an equally important body of knowledge developing about what *not* to do. In this section, we examine some of the unintended consequences emerging as place-based approaches grow in use.

Crowded fields

In seeking to tackle “the Roeburn problem” of fragmented services with little to no alignment, many place-based initiatives have inadvertently fallen into the same trap. As far back as 2004, a case study of place-based initiatives in Western Sydney identified some 36 separate programs spanning 13 different government departments (Randolph, 2004).

An AIFS Family Matters article from 2010 commenting on Randolph’s study was prompted to observe “the use of a place-based approach does not necessarily automatically mean better coordination and integration across different spheres of social policy” (AIFS, 2010).

The AIFS article's authors suggested this might reflect the "relatively recent emergence of place-based approaches and the lack of a coherent overarching framework to guide their implementation" (AIFS, 2010). However, several frameworks and more than a decade later it appears these lessons are still being learned.

Our mapping of place-based initiative sites (p.4) shows that in many cases overlaps, duplication and subsequent role confusion continue to proliferate. The second map, of Queensland, shows that the picture becomes even more complicated when place-based approaches led at the state or territory level are factored in.

With all best intentions, multiple actors are seeking to apply place-based approaches in the same or overlapping geographical areas, frequently without the dedicated coordination and alignment that is typically assumed to be a hallmark of this way of working.

A 2016 review conducted by the Children and Youth Area Partnership in Gippsland, Victoria, found nearly 50 place-based partnerships and alliances that each sought positive impact on vulnerable families, children and young people. A conservative estimate of state government funding placed its investment close to \$4m. A total of 33 full time equivalent (FTE) staff were spread among the different organisation, and participants in various groups estimated they spent more the 4,600 hours in the nearly 300 meetings per year.

Burnout of leaders and participants

Underneath these numbers lie a very real impost on not only the time of these participants, spread across communities, levels of government, and NGOs, but their energy, enthusiasm and commitment.

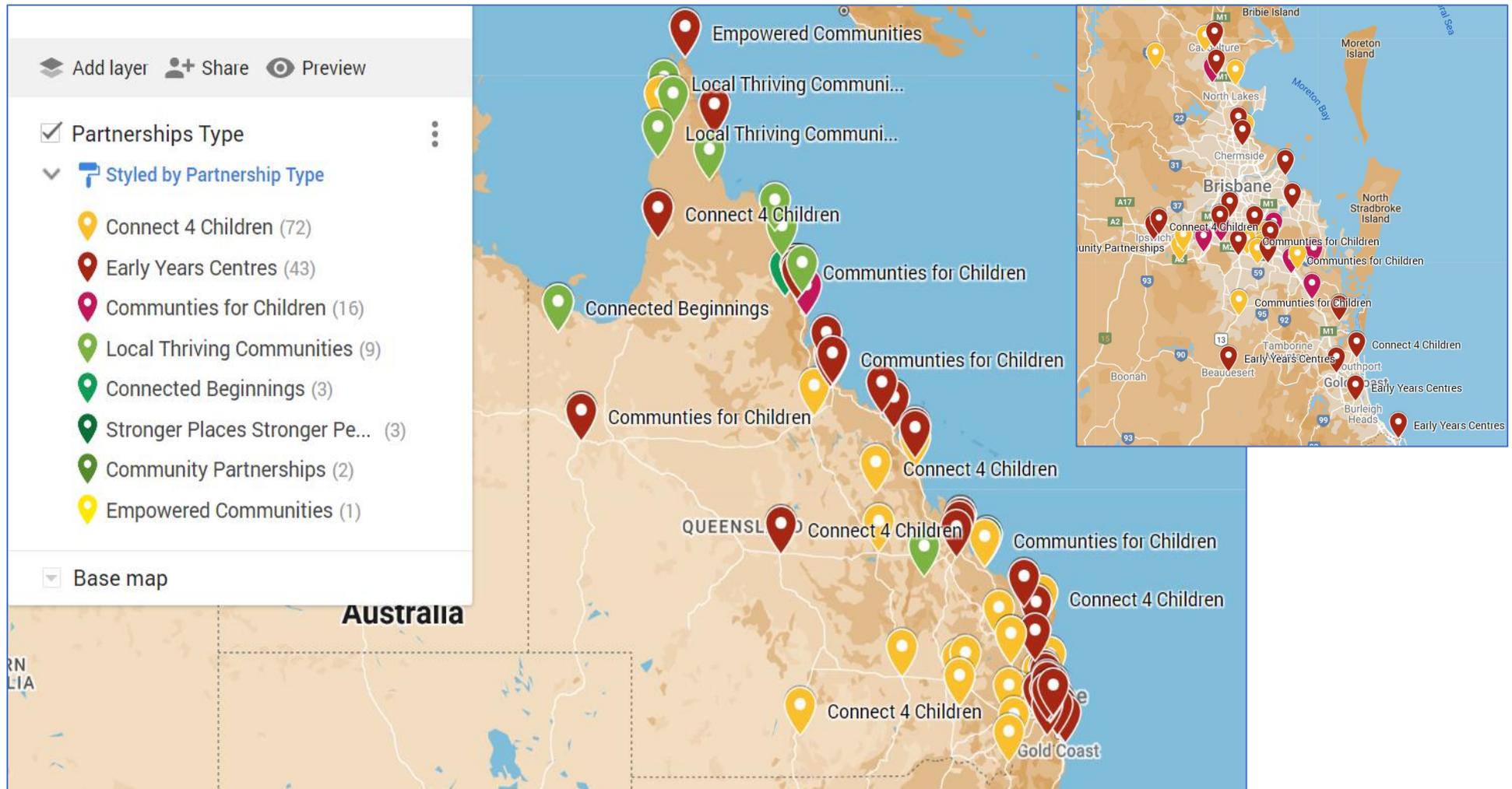
While little published research has investigated this issue, the issue appears to be greater for First Nations community leaders, members and organisations. Many place-based initiatives are working in areas with high populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, along with other priority populations such as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) and refugee populations. Community groups made up of and serving these populations may find themselves in a paradox of having little real power, but being frequently invited to the table to provide their expertise and connections, often without reimbursement (eg, Hunt, 2013).

Perceptions of initiatives spending too much time on talking without resolutions or action drive down energy and participation. Faith in the initiative's goals and processes can be eroded, along with faith in the broader ideas of co-design and community empowerment. A 2021 Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research discussion paper titled *Codesign in the Indigenous Policy Domain: Risks and opportunities* (Dillon, 2021) notes that if "codesign processes do not meet expectations, trust in public policy and service delivery may fall rather than rise."

Figure 1: Selection of place-based initiatives active across Australia



Figure 2: Commonwealth place-based initiatives mapped with state-led PBIs in Queensland. Pull-out shows activity in and around Brisbane.



Unintended competition

Similar to competition for community members to participate in working groups and leadership structures, different services and initiatives in the same area can find themselves competing for staff and even for funding.

Joint applications for funding tend to rely on relationships and individuals willing to convene and coordinate the necessary partnerships and shared work to apply, and grants and funding streams may or may not support joint working of this type.

Authorising boundaries

Where organisations, initiatives and people are obliged to spend their time and energy on navigating the rules, obligations and requirements of multiple organisations and funding streams, less is left for creating and driving positive change.

In Gippsland, the Children and Youth Area Partnership review found strong consensus among the relevant organisations that the funding that paid for their 33-odd FTE staff could be much better used if it were pooled. Rather than each organisation having 1-2 generalist employees who needed to be able to turn their hands to a little bit of everything, combining their resources could have allowed them to hire dedicated evaluation specialists, communications specialists, First Nations community workers, and many other specialisations that would have greatly strengthened the resource base of the regional child and family field.

However, upon investigation, it became clear that none of the leaders felt they had the authorisation to even agree the idea in principle, let alone begin the work of unpicking the different organisational and funding requirements to enable resource pooling. The opportunity to build a shared and more powerful resource base across the region was lost.

Many good ideas and creative solutions founder on rules and processes, especially when seeking to address social issues that typically cross portfolio and departmental boundaries. Early examination of the authorising environment provides an opportunity to set clear expectations for leaders in place-based initiatives.

In their *Joint Project on Systems Leadership for Child and Youth Wellbeing: Stage 1 Synthesis Report* (2021) Hogan et al note the opportunities and benefits of leaders “being able to work with political leadership and to influence the authorising environment” as well as observing “capabilities and platforms to join up, navigate or broker pathways across systems are under-developed” (Hogan et al, 2021).

Understanding, sharing and devolving power

Early analysis of power in place-based approaches drew on the body of knowledge derived from community engagement and similar areas of work. Bowles & Gintis observed in 2002 that communities work because they are good at enforcing norms, and whether this is a good thing depends on the nature of these norms (via Lewis, 2019).

O’Toole & Burdess (2004) noted that where group membership is the result of individual choices relying on volunteers, the group is likely to be culturally and demographically homogeneous, robbing the work of valuable diversity and potentially leading to insider–outsider distinctions and excluding sections of the community.

“Too much is left to frontline practitioners to weave systems together, who don't have the authority to do so, but they battle on with inconsistent access criteria, assessment and support tools, information-sharing and other organisational barriers.”

Hogan, M, Hatfield-Dodds, L, Barnes, L and Struthers, K (2021)

Leaders can find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being between the structures of the state on the one hand and representing the interests of often quite excluded elements of civil society on the other (Mayer, 2003; Purdue, 2001, 2005, via Lewis, 2019). This tension is especially difficult for new community leaders emerging as a consequence of active community engagement in the development of social capital and community governance.

Many, if not most, place-based initiatives are alive to these concerns and seek to mitigate them through a range of means. The Australian Centre for Social Innovation's Our Town project, for example, includes a strong commitment to seeking out lesser-heard voices and actively surfacing uncomfortable questions.

In their First Nations-focused Deep Collaboration work (2015 – ongoing), Collaboration for Impact identified a key tension First Nations leaders negotiate in collective impact work. Often, non-Indigenous leaders hesitate to use the formal power invested in their roles when working with First Nations leaders. Their reticence significantly increases the weight of expectations placed on First Nations leaders for representation, participation, and expertise, on top of the existing range of requests made for their time, input, consultation, and advice in collaborative efforts.

Collaboration for Impact founders Kerry Graham and Liz Skelton and Deep Collaboration lead Mark Yettica Paulson write in the Stanford Social Innovation Review (2021) that “mobilising different levels and kinds of authority will strengthen First Nations community leadership and scale social impact in institutions and governments.” They note that this work is emergent and tentative, focused largely on building readiness and creating the conditions and safety to allow collaborators to work explicitly on power dynamics and conflict.

Resilient communities have the skills to have tough conversations. They ... are finding ways to connect around a shared vision for the future, one that incorporates different generations and bridges racial, generational and old/new divides. These divides may still exist but communities are finding shared ground amongst these.

Kerry Jones, TACSI systems initiatives director

Known and emerging success factors

A useful summary of “what it takes” comes from the Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership’s *Place Conversations* (2023), a report capturing the outcomes of an event bringing together sixty-five delegates representing diverse organisations engaged in place-based approaches. The summary below both reflects the experience and learning of participants doing the work on the ground, and is highly consistent with the evidence base.

What would it take?



Putting data, evidence, learning to work	Stronger Workforces	Integrated Services	Engaged public, caregivers and communities	Concerted Leadership	Smarter Investment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readily available, access, shared SA2 level data • Integrated system • First Nation focus • Voice of children included • Data leadership and policy • Strength-based data • Data upskilling workforce capabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing skill through capability building training • Local investment in people— valuing the diversity in place • Sharing knowledge Communities of Practice • Fellowships and secondments across the system • Improved succession planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governance restructured to model integration from top to bottom • Strategic and local level leadership • Integrated agency systems (reporting and outcomes) • Workforce and organisational structures that enable feedback loops • Time, empowerment and space for relationships and interagency connections • Sustained funding—intergenerational funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate funding for community participation and engagement • Multi-mode engagement • Engagement focused on strengths • Enabling the sharing and engagement of data • Removing barriers to enable for inclusive engagement • Ensure engagement is not one off with feedback build in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-sectorial shared values and vision • Defining and acknowledging level of leadership • Champions • Rewarding innovation and supporting change • Resources for leadership • Empowering—devaluation of decision making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding that is long term and flexible • Funding that includes adequate resources for evaluation, innovation, capacity building and operations • Time and training for co design • System Stewardships: mentoring and support

Questions to consider in the design phase

- How can we ensure we do not add to the already complex landscape of place?
- What is our attitude to risk and “failing fast / failing forward”? How do we communicate that attitude to our place-based leaders and give them the space and safety to try new ways of doing things?
- What culture, infrastructure and enabling conditions can we put in place now to give our sites the freedom to experiment, adapt and change established systems? What envelope of freedom can we give them across CPD’s “missing middle”?
- How will we understand and surface the underlying power structures in our model and across our sites? What are we prepared to give up and/or share?
- How will we co-define “community” and ensure genuine representation?
- What are we willing to give to foster community engagement and leadership over the long term? Money, resources, control, decision-making, changing the ways we do things in response to feedback?
- How will we jointly manage the associated risks and individually account for them within our own structures?
- How will we understand and describe progress?
- How can we reward progress with further freedoms and scope to adapt systems and ways of working?

In selecting our approach and looking at potential sites, further questions may include:

- What need/s exist in this place that could be better met with our involvement?
- What data are we using, and how are we using it, to reach our conclusions?
- What is already here in terms of community assets, services, systems and strengths?
- What is the readiness and capacity of community to partner in – or lead - this work?
- What value could we add to the system landscape in this place?
- What would our role be?
- What complexity would we add to this landscape?
- What might we displace?

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