# Understanding place-based approaches

## What are place-based approaches?

There are many ways of working in a ‘place-based’ way. Generally speaking, place-based *work* involves a focus on local needs, local solutions, and the unique attributes of a place. Several areas of policy and practice have adopted a place-based focus, including efforts to build neighbourhood cohesion; to improve facilities, the built environment, and economic opportunities in a region; to tailor operational structures and services to centre on regional or local perspectives; and innovative service structures that integrate or collocate services in localised areas. Community development has long held a focus on local needs and strengths and the importance and uniqueness of place.

*Place-based approaches*, also known as area-based initiatives or interventions, are a kind of place-based work with a long history of innovation in Australia and overseas[[1]](#footnote-2). Place-based approaches are collaborative endeavours which seek to create systemic change by bringing together efforts across the community to work towards shared long-term outcomes. Place-based approaches have been used to address community need by harnessing the vision, resources and opportunities of community.

Department of Communities, Disability Services and Seniors (Queensland Government) have adopted the following definition:

*“Place-based approaches are collaborative, long-term approaches 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. Place-based approaches are often used to respond to complex, interrelated or challenging issues—such as to address social issues impacting those experiencing, or at risk of, disadvantage, or for natural disasters.”*

**Link:** Framework for Place-Based Approaches, Department of Communities, Disability Services and Seniors
<https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/industry-partners/place-based-approaches>

Place-based approaches tend to have the following features:

* a focus on the local level
* a shared, long-term vision and commitment to outcomes
* working differently together across the community
* governance at a local level
* broad engagement with the community
* experimentation, prototyping, and action learning.

Place-based approaches can range from small, locally resourced efforts, through to large actions involving multiple levels of government, business and community sectors. Place-based collective impact initiatives are one kind of place-based approaches at the more intensive end of a continuum. We explore the continuum on our website: https://www.qcoss.org.au/contents-page-for-place-based-approach-and-toolkit/continuum-of-place-based-approaches/.

## Why do we need place-based approaches?

Place-based approaches are one way of working in place that empowers the broader community to collaborate and respond to their own unique challenges through locally tailored systems. Place-based approaches foster strong community partnerships, place-based planning and action, and flexible systems and responses. They employ systems thinking, which create opportunities for novel, collaborative efforts cross-community, cross-sector and cross-governments. They seek to embed devolved decision-making and support public service innovation, and enable civic empowerment, participation and discourse in communities where citizens may be despondent and disengaged.

A place-focus provides a helpful lens for looking at and interpreting systemic issues and creating locally-led solutions. Places are unique in their strengths and the barriers they face. For example, the experience of living in a mining town differs to that of people in remote Aboriginal communities, which differs again from the experience of young people in a regional area.

In some communities, people experience much higher levels of disadvantage. The *Dropping of the Edge* *Report* found thatthe experience of disadvantage tends to concentrate in a small number of locations, and that such disadvantage tends to persist over time[[2]](#footnote-3). People living in locations of concentrated disadvantage tend to experience challenges that are generally interrelated and often become intergenerational.

Places have unique physical, historical, cultural, social and environmental characteristics, which can support or deter communities from achieving their vision for a better life. For example, some locations have lower employment opportunities, lower quality, quantity and diversity of education, housing, health services, a lack of affordable essential services, and a lack of infrastructure or support for community safety, public transport, and recreation. Some communities experience higher levels of disconnection, exclusion and isolation, and lower levels of civic participation. A place-based approach to working can support a whole of government, cross-sector and whole-of-community commitment to improve experiences for people living in these places.

Historically, place-based approaches have sought to overcome complex systemic issues, also known as ‘wicked problems’, affecting people on the margins. While well-intentioned, current structures do not always meet peoples’ needs. They may even contribute to deepening social exclusion and disadvantage and limit the ability of communities to respond to and resolve complex social issues and create change. Existing systems may entrench issues through:

* investment in solutions that do not address systemic issues
* lack of community input, empowerment and leadership
* fragmentation, siloing, duplication and lack of coordination of services
* short-time horizons for projects and initiatives
* lack of focus on prevention
* rigid grant conditions limiting flexibility or innovation
* constantly reinventing the wheel instead of drawing on learnings.

Systemic issues require a response that extends beyond more service provision[[3]](#footnote-4). For example, in Hopevale, Queensland, 78 different services were provided by 46 different service providers through 44 different funding programs across 22 Queensland government departments to a population of 1,125 people[[4]](#footnote-5). Despite a high level of service provision, people in Hopevale are still experiencing high levels of disadvantage.

While place-based approaches have traditionally focussed on complex systemic barriers, they also have the capacity to inspire change around a variety of themes, not just disadvantage and complexity. As a particular framework for place-based working, a place-based approach can provide communities with an opportunity to work together to achieve outcomes in a range of areas.

## How do place-based approaches generate change?

Place-based approaches can bring about meaningful change in communities, through:

* identifying systemic and place-related causes of social issues
* developing a shared vision
* promoting social inclusion and overcoming social division
* ensuring government policy, systems, programs and services are driven by the aspirations and needs of the local community and environment
* increasing motivation for change
* generating diverse and innovative solutions and alternative ways of thinking and working
* embedding evidence-based, outcomes-focussed approaches and a cycle of learning to monitor impacts
* maximising mix and distribution of resources available in community
* building leadership, capacity and resilience in the community
* developing integration across the service sector
* building partnerships and integrated responses across levels of government and between government and community
* involving industry in influencing social impacts, and creating suitable or value-based work in the community.

The impact of place-based approaches can be difficult to measure because community change is a complex process. Population-level outcomes from systemic approaches can take time to emerge and may be difficult to attribute to any one process. Place-based approaches can be resource intensive and require sustained motivation and investment from multiple stakeholders to be successful.

Nevertheless, place-based approaches in Australian and overseas have demonstrated impacts on community, sector and government dynamics (process) and a range social and health outcomes (impact). These effects depend on the focus of the initiative and include some evidence for improvements over time in social inclusion and cohesion, civic participation, multisector working, physical and mental health, education, employment, and housing.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Factors that contribute to the success of place-based approaches include having a clear rationale for working in place; a systemic analysis of issues and levers for community change; long time-frames and lead times; and broad collaborative working across the community, coupled with a recognition of the barriers to joined-up working.

**Film clip**: #3 *Strengthening our place* vignette - #3 - What have been some opportunities? <https://youtu.be/bUXpzPo7FRE>

1. For a brief history of some Australian place-based approaches see Moore, et al (2014, p. 10), and Reddel (2017, p. 9) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Vinson & Rawsthorne (2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Klein (2004, p. 37) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Queensland Productivity Commission (2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. For some reviews and evidence of impact see Wilks, Lahausse, & Edwards (2015, p. 4), and Crimeen, Bernstein, Zapart, and Haigh (2017, p. 34). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)