



## Place-based approaches: Lessons from and for Australian federal public policy

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Governments worldwide play a crucial role in funding, developing and implementing place-based approaches. Despite this, there remains a lack of research focused on public policies related to place-based approaches. In this policy brief, we present our findings from an [analysis](#) of Australian federal policies related to place-based approaches.<sup>[1]</sup> Based on lessons *from* public policy, we have developed lessons *for* public policy which suggest that the Australian government could:

- Promote consistency in the conceptualisation of place-based approaches
- Employ an active role in trust building
- Advance the creation of a supportive policy environment
- Embed learning across place-based approaches

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See page 5



## Why does it matter?

Place-based approaches are increasingly applied to solve complex social problems, like educational inequities and unemployment that result from entrenched disadvantage. Public policy is central to the successful implementation of place-based approaches, influencing their conceptualisation, governance, development, implementation, and evaluation. Despite the crucial role they play, there has been limited research on governments and their public policies related to place-based approaches.

## What did we do?

We reviewed Australian federal government public policies related to place-based approaches to explore:

1. the definitions, conceptualisations, and characteristics of place-based approaches in public policy;
2. the government's perception and communication of its role in place-based approaches; and
3. the extent to which government public policy reflects the necessary conditions for successful place-based governance.<sup>[2]</sup>

We performed a search using the keywords 'place-based' or 'place based' in government department search engines and Google, to locate federal government policy documents related to place-based approaches. We selected the documents using a pre-defined inclusion criteria. We then analysed the documents using our Theory of Systems Change<sup>[3]</sup> and the framework method.<sup>[4]</sup>

More details on the identification and analysis of public policies are available in this [publication](#).<sup>[1]</sup>

## What did we find?

### ***1. Definitions, conceptualisations, and characteristics of place-based approaches***

Out of the 67 policy documents we analysed, only eight provided an explicit definition of place-based approaches. However, we found there was consistency in the characteristics that were commonly associated with place-based approaches, which included:

- collaboration between multiple stakeholders involved in the initiative;
- involving the community in decision making;
- responsiveness to community priorities, needs, or issues;
- 'understanding the place' and valuing local knowledge;
- addressing complex issues in a specific geographic location; and
- alignment across existing place-based approaches, and alignment between those involved in them in the form of a shared vision.

### ***2. Government's perception and communication of its role in place-based approaches***

Our analysis revealed that the primary functions of the federal government in place-based were concentrated in three key areas:

- the allocation of funding and resources;
- establishing effective partnerships with local communities; and
- creating supportive policy environments.

In addition to these core responsibilities, the government also undertook additional roles including the brokering of relationships<sup>[5]</sup>, which in one case involved building trust and fostering connections, and investing in building capacity.<sup>[6]</sup>



### 3. Government public policy and the necessary conditions for successful place-based governance

Marsh and colleagues<sup>[2]</sup> outline three interconnected criteria for successful place-based governance:

- *localised context*, which necessitates responses that are 'contextualised to 'local' individual needs and/or community circumstances';
- *embedded learning*, in which continuous improvement and processes of 'reciprocal, pragmatic, adaptive and experiential' learning are embedded in the design of place-based design; and
- *reciprocal accountability*, which entails 'a justification of local results against local targets set in the context of priorities determined by the centre'.<sup>[2, p.445]</sup>

From these criteria, localised context was the most represented across the policy documents and reciprocal accountability the least.

#### What are our suggestions for public policy?

The evidence suggests that the Australian government is pursuing a hybrid approach that acknowledges the significance of both *top-down* (centrally mandated) and *bottom-up* (community-driven) processes in the success of place-based approaches. However, our document analysis revealed a distinct emphasis on facilitating bottom-up processes, often overshadowing the essential role of top-down implementation.

Prior research highlights the potential risks associated with an overemphasis on bottom-up strategies, including:

- a potential waning in the government's interest in place-based approaches<sup>[7,8]</sup>; and
- the disproportionate 'burden' placed on communities experiencing disadvantage to design, implement, and evaluate place-based approaches which may exceed their capacities.

Based on findings, we present key recommendations for public policy that could contribute to a more balanced integration of top-down and bottom-up processes in place-based approaches.



#### **Suggestion 1. Promoting consistency in conceptualisation of place-based approaches:**

One of the policy documents we examined hinted that the government 'could play a greater role in coordinating and communicating place-based policy'.<sup>[9, p.4]</sup> This could be achieved through promoting consistency in the conceptualisation of place-based approaches within and across departments, as well as between the sectors and stakeholders actively engaged in these approaches across Australia. We propose that an effective way to achieve this could be to draw on this conceptualisation based on the defining characteristics of place-based approaches as identified in our document analysis:

*Place-based approaches are collaborative programs, interventions, or initiatives in which multiple stakeholders, united by a common vision, draw on the skills, knowledge and experience of local people to address complex issues within a specific geographic location. Recognising and leveraging the*





*influence of 'place' on population outcomes, place-based approaches are context-dependent, responsive to the shifting needs and priorities of the places in which they are implemented and include 'people in place' and/or local organisations in decision-making.*

Establishing this level of consistency could assist in formulating a comprehensive national public policy framework for place-based approaches.



**Suggestion 2. Employing an active role in trust building:**

A 'lack of trust in national institutions'<sup>[10]</sup> poses a significant barrier to the successful implementation of place-based approaches. Yet the role of government in building trust and fostering relationships were seldom emphasised throughout the documents we analysed.

Research suggests that facilitating trusting relationships is:

- a key strategy for improving a collaborative and/or joined-up culture;<sup>[11]</sup>
- a core enabler for successfully engaging communities in place-based approaches;<sup>[12]</sup>
- one of the fundamental mechanisms for scaling up complex community interventions.<sup>[13]</sup>

Therefore, the government could consider:

- employing a more active role as a broker, cultivating trusting relationships within and across place-based initiatives; and
- allocating sufficient funding and time to support and build relationships among the various stakeholders involved in place-based approaches.

A successful example of trust building can be seen in the Victorian place-based Community Revitalisation initiative:

A team of Victorian government public servants undertook a dual role of a community partner in a place-based program and intermediary between the government and the community. The team adopted a 'learnings-orientated' approach utilising various reflective practices.<sup>[14]</sup> They had a longer funding cycle available to support relationship development and trust-building. This '*helped to build trust between government and sites by breaking down traditional power dynamics and demonstrating that government is willing to listen*'.

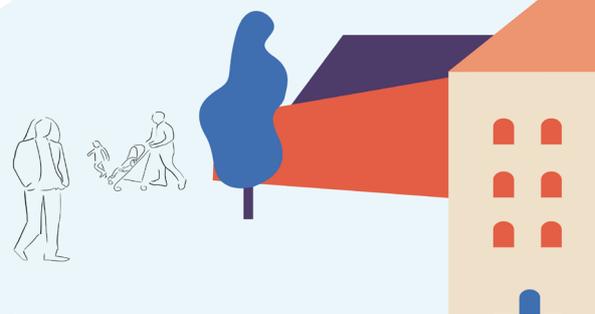
[14, p.50]



**Suggestion 3. Advancing the creation of a supportive policy environment:**

In the documents we analysed, the government acknowledged its role in cultivating a policy environment place-based approaches. However, these documents lack concrete strategies or detailed plans on how that could be achieved. Therefore, the government might consider providing more specific guidance on:

- the governance arrangements that most effectively encourage reciprocal accountability and local decision-making; and
- the processes, procedures, and structures that enable communities to design, drive, and implement place-based approaches.



As an initial step towards creating a more supportive policy environment, the government could:

- develop a national public policy framework for place-based approaches<sup>[15]</sup> setting a precedent for creating a consistent approach to support place-based approaches in Australia; and
- improve efforts for horizontal integration and alignment across sectors by actively fostering intersectoral relationships and developing public policies that are aligned across sectors to more efficiently and effectively support place-based approaches.



**Suggestion 4. Embedding learning across place-based approaches:**

Continuous, adaptive, and experiential learning is a key ingredient for successful place-based governance. To facilitate a more systematic implementation of such learning in the design and delivery of place-based approaches, governments could establish monitoring mechanisms and data sharing protocols within and across departments, as well as amongst sectors and other stakeholders involved in place-based approaches (e.g., researchers, practitioners, community members). In addition, governments could focus on the development and implementation of *adaptive policies*. These policies, which are flexible and responsive to change, align with the characteristics of place-based approaches and are typically more effective in supporting processes of continuous, adaptive learning.<sup>[16]</sup>

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**About Pathways in Place**

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The Program teams are each leading one of two complementary streams:

1. Early learning and development pathways (children and youth 0-15 y.o.), led by Griffith University in Logan (Queensland, Australia).
2. Pathways through education to employment (youth 15-24 y.o.), led by Victoria University in Brimbank (Victoria, Australia).



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