What Works for Place-Based Approaches in Victoria: Key findings from practice

Background and aims

This research* has been funded by the Place-Based Reform and Delivery branch of the Victorian Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions to consolidate and review evidence on what works for place-based approaches (PBAs) in the Victorian context. The main objectives of the project were to increase understanding of the effectiveness of PBAs, make this evidence available to decision-makers, practitioners and funders, and improve the wellbeing of Victorian communities.

The project consisted of two parts: Part 1, a meta-synthesis of existing literature on PBAs; and Part 2, an examination of PBA case studies and practice across Victoria. This report synthesises the key findings for Part 2, focusing on five selected case studies of PBAs. These case studies were chosen to better understand what elements contribute to successful establishment, consolidation, longevity and eventual outcomes for PBAs in Victoria and whether these are consistent across case studies. Interviews were conducted with practitioners delivering initiatives and policy makers both nationally and in Victoria.

The analysis of these case studies is informed by the findings and gaps identified in the literature (see Part 1) and offers insights and evidence to increase understandings of enabling conditions and barriers for success for PBAs in Victoria.

Defining place-based approaches

We define a **place-based approach (PBA)** as:

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]

The Victorian Government's framework for PBAs[2] is consistent with this definition and involves shared decision-making between government, local people and organisations in development and implementation of programs and initiatives.

PBAs seek to create systemic change and work towards shared long-term outcomes and usually involve whole-of-government responses to deal with complex and challenging issues, such as persistent disadvantage. This is particularly relevant given findings from *Dropping off the Edge 2021* that show that 5% of locations in Victoria accounted for 29% of greatest disadvantage.[3]

Place-based approaches and initiatives in Victoria

Across Victoria there are a wide range of PBAs differing in their approach, forms, scale, areas of focus, and involvement with different levels of government. Located in both urban and regional Victoria, these initiatives focus mainly on health and wellbeing, education and training, and children and early years.
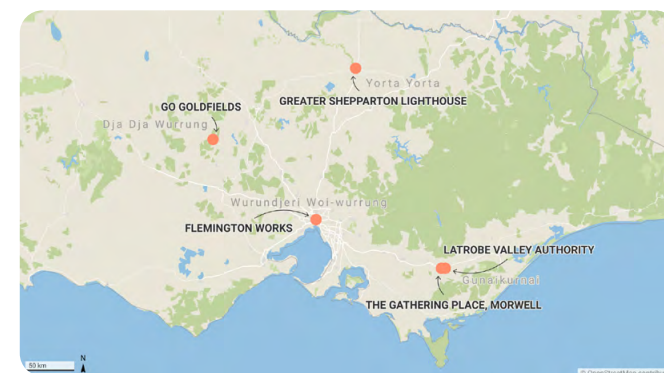
Many PBAs have involvement in some capacity from the Victorian Government, and sometimes from several government departments. Local government is also commonly involved in PBAs, providing 'backbone' support or acting as a 'backbone organisation'. Philanthropy, external agencies and consultancies are also active in this space, playing an influential role in the design, implementation, and evaluation of many initiatives. These organisations hold, create, test and disseminate knowledge and skills around implementing place-based methods and practices.

Selected place-based initiatives in Victoria

For this project, five case studies were selected to represent a range of PBAs across different parts of Victoria. These are: Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project, Go Goldfields, Flemington Works (Community Revitalisation), Latrobe Valley Authority (LVA), and a case study of First Nations-led, place-based approaches with a focus on The Gathering Place in Morwell.

Figure 1: Location of case studies

Key findings

Each case study provides insights into what is working and not working well for PBAs as they act to affect change in their communities. Each demonstrates many of the principles and conditions required for success in PBAs, for example:

- Adopting a strengths-based approach;
- A focus on equity;
- Effective leadership and governance models;
- A commitment to listen to and work in genuine partnership with communities;
- Long-term flexible funding and resourcing to improve capacity strengthening; and
- Well resourced, designed and rigorous evaluation and learning processes.

The case studies and their key narratives emerging from this research are synthesised in Table 1. The dominant themes and issues cutting across the case studies are summarised below.

Adequate, ongoing and flexible funding

Across the case studies a common theme was the importance of long-term, flexible, and appropriate resourcing to allow initiatives to consolidate their activities, relationships, and processes past initial establishment phases. Evidence indicates that many PBAs struggle when they do not effectively address sustainability (see Part 1).

Precarity of short-term funding cycles, or insecure funding affected all case study initiatives highlighted in this research. This uncertainty around funding creates a significant mismatch with the long-term commitment required to address complex causes of disadvantage as is highlighted by **The Gathering Place.** This was also felt in **Go Goldfields**, which seeks to address community-wide challenges but is constrained by short-term funding tied to the ability to show 'impact' over a short 2-3 year time frame.

In contrast, appropriate resourcing allowed the **LVA** to establish the foundations for their work, attract experienced and qualified staff to build their team and embed critical data collection and evaluation processes. Initial funding also gave the **LVA** the ability to 'be creative' in their work, to work in agile ways that allowed them to quickly build trusting and effective relationships between different sectors of the community and government. This was essential for their success in implementing change at the community level.

The importance of 'flexible' funding is also illustrated in the case of **Lighthouse** who received state government funding that was not contingent on pre-defined outcomes and/or outputs defined by government. This has meant that **Lighthouse** have been able to set goals prioritised by its community, and are able to work toward meeting outcomes aligned with their community's strengths and capabilities.

Trusted and effective relationships

The importance of robust relationships was highlighted across two domains; initiatives' relationships with government, and initiatives' relationships with communities.

Relationships with government

Effective relationships with government departments and agencies are essential in enabling PBAs to achieve their goals. The willingness and a commitment from government to work in tailored and flexible ways to build these relationships was a common requirement across all case studies. This readiness from government to work in partnership reflects the longer-term vision required to support PBAs. Developing effective governance processes to ensure consistency and certainty around government's relationship with PBAs is important. PBAs can provide a very important space through which relationships of trust can be built between government decision-makers and community members.

Changes in government bureaucracies and staffing can disrupt these processes of relationship building which are often conditions of success for PBAs. This was emphasised by all case studies. Turnover of staff can also lead to the loss of institutional knowledge both within PBAs and within government. Considering the unique and ongoing nature of place-based work, it is important that this context specific institutional knowledge informs decision-making. Understanding this context and developing processes to share this knowledge over time as staff change is important. This helps to avoid reinventing the wheel as new personnel come on board. This highlights the importance of developing a culture of learning, monitoring and evaluation which, if well designed, can record valuable knowledge about change processes over time. Changes to staffing and personnel does not have to mean a loss of institutional knowledge if effective knowledge sharing and capacity building processes are established early.

Relationships with community

Collaborative work begins with building community trust through deep listening and learning, then demonstrating the capacity to act on that learning. For the **LVA**, acting on learning was a key way in which relationships with the Gippsland community were forged. Acting on local priorities quickly was critical to overcoming or navigating any apprehension or mistrust that some community members felt towards government.

In **Flemington Works**, strong relationships with local communities developed through effective co-design processes, allowed agile and innovative work to come together quickly to meet urgent needs. Their creative and quick response to the Covid-19 lockdowns through facilitating the establishment of a catering enterprise that could deliver culturally appropriate food by locals to locals is testament to this. For **Lighthouse**, leveraging strong relationships with philanthropic funders, local businesses, service clubs, and individuals is essential to their ongoing work in securing funding, and in delivering its programs supported by a strong volunteer base.

Listening to lived experience is essential for policy makers and can ensure the most efficient use of government funding, and design of service systems that are responsive to community needs and priorities. This is clearly illustrated by **The Gathering Place** where culturally appropriate solutions to local complexity are best delivered in partnership with those who know the community.

From place-based to systems change

Across the case studies it is evident that initiatives have a detailed understanding of the complex and intersecting nature of the issues they seek to address. There is recognition that in order to address complex challenges around improving employment or early learning outcomes for example, multi-level and coordinated responses are needed. This requires a systems lens and a whole-of-government approach to policy and decision-making. While many place-based approaches are shifting their thinking towards systems change, they are constrained without the necessary support from government and other key stakeholders.

A key challenge is how PBAs navigate their role in a systems change process which varied across each initiative. The **LVA**, as a government office, is well situated to pursue systems change and indeed its establishment reflects a change in the way is which government engages in working in place. With **Lighthouse**, in recognising the complexity of issues faced by residents in their region, there has been a call for better policy alignment, to ensure that federal and state policy that impact locals supports the work of the initiative.

This is also reflected in **Go Goldfields** where traditional government funding models limit opportunities for innovative and collaborative decision-making. Government agencies and departments directly involved with **Go Goldfields** also recognise these challenges such as the mismatch between centralised decision-making and the need to prioritise and include local expertise and lived experience. This highlights the need for new innovative funding and program planning approaches that work across government silos and value the expertise of community partners.

Flemington Works has had success in working towards local systems change in their work with Moonee Valley City Council (MVCC) around their social procurement guidelines, labour hire and recruitment practices. Changes including the simplification of position descriptions and interview processes at MVCC, and requirements for council contractors to meet minimum social procurement levels aim to make the systems that structure local employment more accessible for participants and others in the community often excluded from economic participation.

Across many collective impact initiatives, there is a shift towards focusing on systems change or systems thinking. This reflects a broader movement within the field, to critically reflect on methods and practices and adapt to a systems change approach (see Part 1).

Work towards systems change by case study initiatives included advocacy to ensure that federal and state policy that impact locals supports the work of the initiative, and working with partners to create change in systems like social procurement policies, labour hire and recruitment policies. Case study initiatives were also able to take a 'joined up' approach to tackling complex public policy issues, building on the long-term commitment of stakeholders from across philanthropy, communities and government. This new way of working signals the beginning of system change, and is based on the acknowledgement that no single government department, or policy intervention, can tackle the causes of inequities and disadvantage.

Evaluation and measuring outcomes and impact

Monitoring, evaluation, learning and accountability (MELA) are essential processes required to understand, measure and improve on outcomes and impacts of PBAs. The selected case studies highlight a number of innovative approaches to measuring change, that is representative, captures more than indicators of disadvantage, and can speak to intersecting and complex issues. This includes gathering different metrics and stories to understand where projects are leveraging or starting to see change. Measuring success and impact is a challenging and complex task for PBAs (see Part 1).

Flexibility and agility from different stakeholders, including government, underpins innovation and progress in the area of MELA. Building the capacity and skills for ongoing learning is crucial to the success of PBAs. If the true value and impact of PBAs are to be captured and learned from, then more time and resources are required to support this work.

Beyond 'the problem fix' narrative

Countering narratives about place that focus on 'problems to fix' was a common theme across all case studies. Narratives of disadvantage and deficit can stigmatise the places and communities in which they work. Listening to and drawing on the voices and lived experience of community members focuses attention on the strengths, desires and opportunities within a community and is key to empowerment and power-sharing.

The LVA uses a strength-based opportunity focused lens to change the narrative around the economic future of the Gippsland region. Rather that depicting the region as 'a problem to fix', this works instead tells a story of a dynamic and innovative region where change is future-focused. Challenging this narrative to focus on strengths has been important in gaining trust and support for locals.
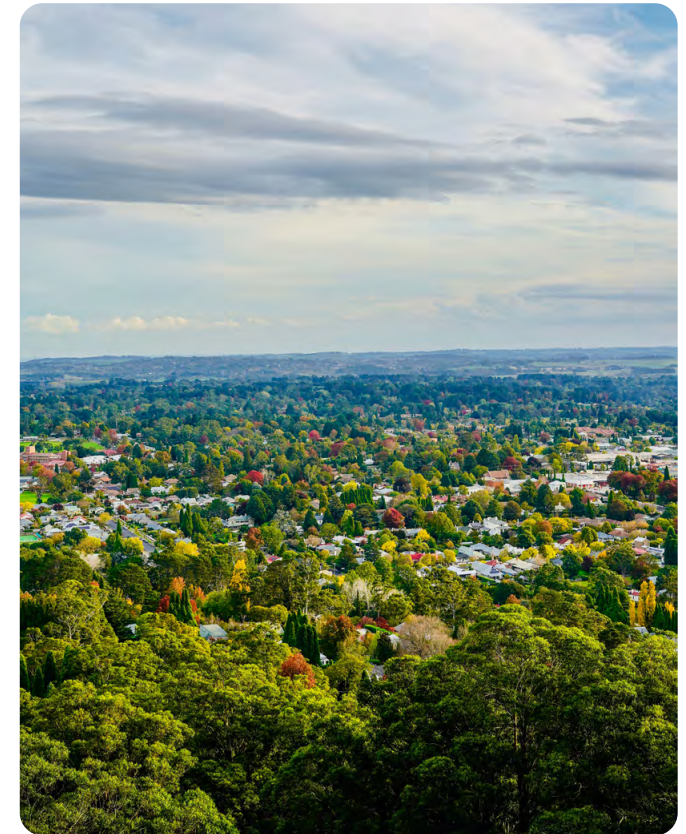
For **Lighthouse,** identifying and drawing upon community strengths, (including social capital, local expertise and local resources) has been essential for their work and has allowed them to create appropriate solutions to context specific issues. Much of their work is supported by committed local volunteers, invested in community strengthening and in challenging narratives of disadvantage and lack of local opportunity.

Learning from First Nations experiences

While the term 'place-based' may not always be used within First Nations-led, community run spaces, the ways of working and engaging with local communities in these spaces often involve similar principles and practices. For example, a key part of First Nations-led place-based work is rejecting damaging deficit narratives and adopting strengths-based approaches that privilege the voices and expertise of First Nations people. First Nations place-based and strengths-based approaches work to create safe and supportive spaces for Aboriginal people to meet up and access services in ways that are culturally appropriate, and advocate for recognition of First Nations lived experience and rights. As with all place-based, community-led work, First Nations-led approaches will differ depending on histories and geographies of place, as well as shifting to meet changing circumstances.

Aboriginal people in Victoria have long fought for self-determination – the right to make decisions about their own lives. Self-determination 'encompasses a spectrum of rights that are necessary for Aboriginal Victorians to achieve economic, social and cultural equity, based on their own values and way of life,[4] and is an important aspect of place-based work. In the context of Treaty and Yoo-rrook truth-telling, the Victorian government is guided by several recent policy frameworks, such as the Self-determination Reform Framework, developed to address systemic racism and engage respectfully with First Nations communities.

Enabling self-determination includes funding arrangements that allow First Nations-led initiatives to be autonomous and make decisions about the best and most effective way to support and meet the needs of their community. Self-determination is also a matter of appropriate, flexible, long-term funding for First Nations-led initiatives to enable the transfer of power and resources back to community. This shift in power enables First Nations-led initiatives the ability to respond to and plan for their communities needs enabling them to lead rather than fit to short-term funding agendas that may be culturally inappropriate or limited.

First Nations-led data collection, management, and interpretation is critical to informing evidenced-based decision-making, and achieving place-based successes. Collecting and reporting data about First Nations communities in a way that is culturally safe, community owned, and allowing for data sovereignty, is an essential and growing part of First Nations-led place-based work. In Victoria, the Kaiela Institute has established the Algabonyah Data and Research Unit to ensure governance and sovereignty over data is kept with local First Nations communities. Evaluation of initiatives also needs to be done in a way that recognises and represents the complexities of cultural ways of working.

Working and learning together in place

This exploration of practice through these five case studies has reinforced many of the findings and evidence from the literature (see Part 1).

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to working in and with communities. While these case studies offer some insights, further work is needed to deepen our understanding of the diversity of practices across PBAs and the range of conditions that enable success. This understanding will improve how government, funders and other stakeholders can support these initiatives and most importantly work to address the systemic challenges they face and seek to change.

Creating spaces where communities can drive change around the issues most important to them is at the heart of what a place-based approach is about. PBAs are characteristically 'bottom-up' and must be led by communities themselves. They must be provided with the necessary resourcing and capacity strengthening to help them to flourish.

Government is presented with a range of key challenges and opportunities in changing the way it works with communities. Developing ongoing flexible funding models and improving policy alignment and coordination to address inequities and community needs were highlighted. Valuing and building on the deep and trusted relationships that PBAs establish and drawing on those community voices and leaders to inform decision-making was also a key message from practice.

Creating more opportunities to learn from each other and across sectors is essential to improve practice and decision-making to avoid 'endemic policy forgetfulness' (see Part 1). Cross-sectoral learning is critical with regard to the present disconnect between the movement of community-led climate change initiatives and other social issue focused PBAs. Overall, the promise and impact of PBAs relies on the ongoing commitment from different levels of government, a range of other stakeholders and a culture of continuous learning with communities.

There is enormous potential to support and learn from the innovative work of PBAs to inform policy decisions and system change to address inequities and build a more just and resilient future in light of key challenges like Covid-19, energy transitions and climate change.

References

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

2. State Government of Victoria. *A framework for place-based approaches: the start of a conversation about working differently for better outcomes.* (State Government of Victoria, Melbourne, 2020).

3. Tanton, R. et al. *Dropping off the edge 2021: Persistent and multilayered disadvantage in Australia.* (Jesuit Social Services, Melbourne, 2021).

4. State Government of Victoria. (2018) *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023.* Melbourne: Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victorian State Government, p. 22.

Table 1: Spotlight on five place-based approaches

Case study	Description	Key narratives
Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project *Yorta Yorta Country*	A collective impact initiative that focuses on improving outcomes for children and young people living in the Greater Shepparton area. Building meaningful partnerships with local organisations and individuals, Lighthouse is able to utilise community strengths, resources and capital to develop local solutions.	• Building trusting relationships with community (deep listening, ongoing and authentic engagement; flexible support provision; investing time; Covid-19 response) • Creating local solutions co-designed with the community to address local challenges • Systemic enablers (flexible funding; power-sharing; policy alignment)
Go Goldfields *Dja Dja Wurrung Country*	A collective impact initiative which brings together local community members and key stakeholders from government and the service sector, to improve outcomes for children, young people and families living in the Central Goldfields Shire.	• Whole of government commitment (inter-departmental investment; long-term focus) • Opportunity for better public policy alignment (initiatives embedded in public policy; policy co-design with community) • Strengthening meaningful engagement and power-sharing (community as experts and equal partners)
Flemington Works *Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country*	A Community Revitalisation site based in the inner-city suburb of Flemington, Melbourne. Focusing on the root causes of unemployment, Flemington Works takes a place-based, systems change approach to support women and young people who are residents of the Flemington Housing Estate access employment opportunities.	• Strengths-based practice at a neighbourhood scale • Power sharing (co-design; partnerships across state and local government) • Community empowered to respond to needs (listening to lived experience; Covid-19 response) • Shifting towards systemic change approach
Latrobe Valley Authority (LVA) *Gunaikurnai Country*	Established in 2016 to support the Latrobe Valley region through a sustainable economic and energy transition ahead of the 2017 closure of the Hazelwood coal fired power station and mine. While a government authority, LVA is embedded in place and has adopted and developed a range of place-based approaches working with communities demonstrating government working differently.	• Government endorsed resourcing and scope for innovation • Enabling conditions to support place-based approaches • Monitoring, evaluation and learning for success • Building and sustaining authentic partnerships • Systems change approach
First Nations-led place-based approaches *Gunaikurnai Country*	This case study draws on a number of First Nations-led, place-based approaches in Victoria in the context of Treaty, Yoo-rrook truth-telling, self-determination and associated government frameworks with a focus on The Gathering Place in Morwell.	• Self-determination • Strengths-based/empowerment framework • Governance and sovereignty over community data • Holistic, culturally-centred practice (listening to lived experience; Covid-19 response)