

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

The current context for place-based approaches

In recent years Victorians have endured difficult times with catastrophic summer bushfires (2019-2020), floods and the COVID-19 pandemic with its associated impacts including local and regional lockdowns, school closures, unemployment, changed migration patterns, financial distress, increased family violence, and impacts on mental health. This has occurred in the context of a rapidly changing climate with higher temperatures, more frequent and extreme weather events, greater risk of bushfires, floods and sea-level rises, all which will have disproportionate impacts on people living with socioeconomic disadvantage. This brings place to the forefront of thinking about responses to crisis, recovery, transition and understandings of belonging.

Public policy is designed to ensure the strategic use of resources to solve problems¹ but also to create public value across social, economic and environmental challenges.^{2,3} Improving quality of life is also a recognised objective of public policy adopted by leading international agencies such as the OECD and World Bank.

There is a resurgence in the development of wellbeing economies that are broader than traditional economic measurement.⁴ These models argue that public policy and spending should be guided by improvements in population wellbeing and are closely tied to local democracy and inclusion.

In the Australian policy setting, place-based approaches (PBAs) are being utilised to meet similar aims, linking community empowerment to improved social, economic, and (less commonly) environmental outcomes.^{5,6}

Aims and approach of the project

To consolidate and draw on existing knowledge about PBAs, a meta-synthesis approach was used to summarise key findings selected from reviews, authoritative summaries, reports and articles sourced through the academic and grey literature, along with recommendations from the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions Oversight Committee, Project Team and Advisory Group.

The aims of the meta-synthesis were to identify elements of PBAs that enable success across the lifetime of initiatives, factors that influence effectiveness, including barriers, the role of government in influencing effective and successful partnerships, and economic return on investment. Key findings are summarised below according to major themes followed by discussion of gaps in the existing evidence.



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.⁷

The Victorian Government's framework for PBAs is consistent with this definition and involves shared decision-making between government, local people and organisations in development and implementation of programs and initiatives.⁸

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.⁹

The Victorian Government framework for place-based approaches distinguishes between place-based and placed focused approaches. **Place-focused approaches** involve planning and adapting government services. They differ from PBAs in that they have only limited community involvement in decision-making and government has ultimate control of the objectives, scope and implementation. A good example of a place-focused approach would be community consultation in the removal of level-crossings.¹⁰

Essential features for successful place-based approaches

The review of literature identified several key features of successful PBAs. These included:

- **Strong focus on place** recognising local histories that affect how people emotionally connect to a place and their sense of identity within communities.
- **Commitment to promoting equity** and embedding this in all stages and activities, including understanding of the history of places and acknowledging that systems and policies can reinforce existing inequities unless addressed in PBAs.
- **Commitment to power-sharing and self-determination** including prioritising First Nations understandings of place, learning from First Nations ways of working in place, enabling First Nations people to decide and design governance structures and supporting Indigenous data sovereignty. Principles of self-determination should be included in all stages and activities of PBAs.
- **Adopt a strengths-based lens** when working with communities to understand self-identified strengths, rather than relying on deficit-based narratives. Stigma and paternalism come from deficit-based models and often ignore the lived experiences of residents.
- **Articulate a theory of change** describing how a PBA will lead to proposed desired outcomes and acknowledge socioeconomic factors, power, agency and the places where people are born, live, learn, work, play and age all affect a wide range of wellbeing outcomes.
- **Based on principles of good governance** including legitimacy to govern, transparency and visibility of decision-making, accountability, inclusiveness of all stakeholders, fairness, integration and coordination across governance levels, capability to effectively deliver, and adaptability in decision-making with associated responsive and reflective learning.

- **Shift from managerial, transactional service-delivery approaches to 'movement building'** demonstrating deep listening of local lived experiences and matched deep hearing that address community-defined priorities and not an approach that focuses only on program management and service delivery/coordination.
- **Understand that collaborative systems change takes time** to build trust, deeply listen to lived experiences and achieve long-term change in communities. Building trust is especially important if trust has been violated in the past (e.g., previous interventions).



Governance and place-based approaches

The review of literature revealed six key elements of governance in relation to PBAs. These elements are summarised below:

Effective power-sharing

- **Developing shared power should begin with deep listening**, enabling the community to tell its story. Long term co-design and co-production processes can enable power-sharing and strengthen capacity in government and communities.
- **Shared power should occur across the lifespan of a PBA** and not just as consultation or tokenistic engagement during development, which undermines the legitimacy of a PBA.
- **Power-sharing is critical to support First Nations self-determination** and much can be learnt from First Nations-led PBAs who demonstrate genuine devolution of decision-making power.

Inclusive and diverse

- **PBAs need diverse and inclusive governance** matched with recruitment strategies that prioritise diversity, flexible meeting times, and formalised and broad membership. This should also include respect and reflection on community readiness and capacity building in the early stages of planning.

Governance structures

- **Clear vision, mission and theory of change are essential for consensus building** and should be based on a multi-level framework tailored to local needs rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.
- **Formalised, clear and appropriate governance is critical for trust** and requires formalisation of roles, defined relationships between organisations and formal, accountable, and long-term commitments to the PBA.
- **Establishing mechanisms for sharing information between agencies, organisations and tiers of government is key in PBAs.** A backbone or lead organisation (commonly used in collective impact approaches) can play this role supporting logistics, administration and communication between partners and stakeholders.
- **Many types of governance structures exist in PBAs** and in all typologies, multiple tiers of government are critical to success of initiatives.
- **Organisational changes and staff turnover within organisations (including government) risk PBA success** and are linked to changing governance arrangements and processes.
- **Participation in governance processes requires funding** and requires significant time, resources and organisational infrastructure.

Funding and support

- **Sustainable, flexible and adequate resourcing is a key enabler of effective PBAs.**
- **Authority to direct funding and resource allocation must align with shared decision-making.** Inflexibility in government financial systems are barriers to flexibility in PBAs.
- **Governance processes and evaluation require appropriate resourcing across the lifetime of a PBA** and include compensation for participation on boards committees and time spent on administration and funding applications. This is important to long-term engagement, power balances and cooperation.

Government roles and responsibilities

- **Government needs to move from a model of service delivery and contract management for PBAs to a model that embraces systems thinking,** flexibility, continual learning and collaboration with senior-level leadership support (e.g., Minister) without fear of failure, so that government is more effectively supporting and enabling initiatives and not shaping them.
- **Lack of policy coherence** and complexity across tiers of government and departments can be difficult to navigate for PBAs and can erode community trust. PBAs are most successful when they are led by community, have clear lines of accountability and/or in partnership with government.

Leadership

- **Leadership, interpersonal skills and mindsets are fundamental to effective PBAs** and include communication, facilitation, mediation, partnership skills, empathy and cultural competence. In government roles, leadership skills include whole-of-government thinking and comfort with sharing power.
- **Capacity strengthening within government** including consensus building through agenda setting and policy development, strategic capacity and whole-of government thinking. Implementation capacity needs to be supported with appropriate budgets and collaborative decision-making should support integration of social justice and ecological principles.
- **Capacity strengthening within communities** including building the competency of a community to develop governance structures, training on methods and processes of relevance to a PBA across its lifespan, development of shared use of language and avoidance of jargon which can be exclusionary.



Monitoring, evaluation, learning and accountability

- **Consistent, rigorous monitoring and evaluation grounded in a theory of change needs to be planned from the beginning** with sufficient funding that is flexible and continuous across the lifespan of a PBA.
- **Ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and learning across the lifespan of PBAs is necessary.** Informed by a clear understanding of what is trying to be achieved, this may be adapted if outcomes are not meeting people's needs.
- **Short, medium and long-term impacts of PBAs should be monitored,** as short-term population level changes are unrealistic. Long-term outcomes for complex problems take up to 10-20 years to become evident.
- **Mixed methods approaches are encouraged in evaluation** (qualitative and quantitative), linked to adaptive participatory action research to improve effectiveness of evaluations, connecting process and outcome (not output) evaluation.
- **Combine regular data collection, research evidence and community knowledge** to build understanding and collaboratively inform priorities and desired outcomes for a PBA. This data should also be combined with research evidence for strategy development.
- **Use of validated evaluation measures supported by training and research tools.** Important to be informed by an equity lens and align with holistic understandings of health and wellbeing, particularly with First Nations, supporting deep listening/hearing and the development of trust

- **Need for research-practitioner partnerships and greater investment in on-going evaluation processes.** A lack of long-term investment continues to be a barrier to understanding causality, impact and benefits
- **Adequate funding to support monitoring, evaluation, reflection and learning is essential.** Even in well-resourced PBAs there is only a limited amount of funding for evaluation with most being directed into data collection and less for analysis and interpretation of PBA outcome data. Consequently, evaluation is often based on secondary data collection, disempowering community contributions to data collection and community narratives.
- **Fostering a learning approach enables reflection on progress and opportunities to incorporate lessons into practice,** supporting flexible and continuous learning and improvement over the PBA lifecycle and not only at the completion stages.
- **Working with First Nations people to support data sovereignty.** First Nations people need to be involved from the outset in the design and collection of official social statistics to ensure data is appropriate and meaningful and that Indigenous data sources have prominence and validation alongside culturally relevant and appropriate government data.

Cost effectiveness and social return on investment

- **Few PBA studies include economic evaluation** (e.g. cost-effectiveness assessment) and it is a notable gap in the literature. There are some studies addressing economic evaluation methods with some examples of outcome measurements associated with built environment interventions. Some innovative approaches are also emerging around theory of value creation.
- **Economic evaluation doesn't tell the whole story** and mixed methods are needed to comprehensively understand impact and outcomes of PBAs.



Gaps in existing knowledge

- 1. Governance models and effectiveness:** More research is needed to better understand the range of governance models used in PBAs. This includes more research on how PBA outcomes and community engagement are influenced by different governance models, and the influence of different tiers of government and diverse policy approaches.
- 2. Evaluation methods supported by theories, evidence and data:** Theories of change are often not developed or included in PBA evaluations, making it difficult to determine factors that influence successful outcomes. More rigour is needed in qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods, and there is scarce evidence around economic measures and longer-term evaluation outcomes. Econometric approaches are rare in PBA evaluations and improved evaluation requires capacity building support and provision of research tools and training.
- 3. First Nations ways of working in place and governance models:** This includes how First Nations- led PBAs develop different governance models and the strategies and processes used to engage First Nations communities.
- 4. Critical interrogation of PBAs:** A critical interrogation of PBAs including rationale or drivers behind different approaches could improve knowledge of PBA limitations, intersections between PBAs and other relevant government policies, and how this knowledge can be used within and across policy portfolios.
- 5. Community engagement and participation methods:** PBAs can be confused with implementing service reform in place. They are not the same thing. PBAs must be informed by clear principles which focus on engaging with lived experiences that shape and inform decision-making. Further research is required to understand the effectiveness of different methods and strategies for participatory decision-making in different contexts. This includes strategies that support diverse knowledges in the development of PBAs across their lifespan and measuring success from a community perspective.
- 6. Endemic policy 'forgetfulness' and influence of prevailing political and social ideologies:** A review of policy over time reveals a continued history of experimentation and reinvention of 'new' approaches based on political/social ideologies with little reflection or learning from past experiences.

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