Place-based approaches: Understanding the elements of success to help inform future policy design

DEWR Local Jobs Stakeholder Consultation Summary of findings

Contents

Purpose of consultations

This initial consultation aimed to identify **successful elements** of existing place-based services and further our understanding of the **different ways these elements** can be delivered. This will help identify and ensure that best practice place-based policy design principles are embedded in any further reform of the Local Jobs Program and more generally in employment services.

Process

In the last quarter of 2023, the department held bilateral discussions and structured workshops with a wide variety of stakeholders. Stakeholders included:

- organisations currently involved in or delivering place-based programs (not restricted to employment programs).
- organisations with a research or academic interest in place-based program, community capacity building and governance structures.
- business and industry representatives.
- state and local government representatives.

Four workshops, delivered in collaboration with the Nexus Centre Foundation Partner, were held in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth. Participants in the workshop were provided with a primer document ahead of time to facilitate these workshops. The primer can be found at Attachment A.

During these workshops it was evident that it would be beneficial to hold specific workshop/s on how to measure the impact and undertake evaluations of place-based programs. This will see further consultations occur in 2024. Additional consultation is also planned for industry and business stakeholders.

Key Findings

Place-based approaches are already operating across Australia in many communities and tackling a broad range of issues. Stakeholders were generous in offering their views and experiences in how they saw place-based approaches bringing people within communities together to address often complex issues.

Critical elements for success

Stakeholders identified a number of critical elements they had found when designing and implementing place-based initiatives. They noted that there was a degree of interdependence between these elements. It was clear that the uniqueness of a community (strengths, assets, challenges, and goals) and engaging openly and credibly with people were vital to build a strong foundation for success.

The elements that were consistently noted are summarised below.

Community voice is valued

Stakeholders agreed on the importance of valuing community voice and its role in framing issues, responding to community needs and ensuring representation in decision making. A community voice includes a choice on what, why and when programs are introduced into a community rather than retrofitting an initiative to community. It includes the right for a community to decline to have a program occur if they feel the time is not right, the community is not ready, an initiative is duplicative and/or does not address the goals of a community. An ongoing partnership with the

community is needed through the design, implementation, and ongoing delivery of the initiative. Working with local leaders and influencers, and engaging community as active partners builds trust and belief that the community voice was being valued. This is a common thread through current research findings on place-based approaches.

Purpose

A place-based approach needs a clear purpose and a **shared ambition for the community**. Stakeholders stressed that this supported the ability to focus often scarce resources and minimised duplication of services. A clear purpose also helps manage community expectations and works to maintain trust and shared understanding.

Flexibility

It is important to avoid pre-packaged solutions and ensure there is flexibility to allow an initiative to be able to be directly relevant and responsive to the needs of a place. Flexibility in the design and implementation allows initiatives to adapt if shared outcomes are not being achieved. Flexibility also adds to a program's ability to be seen as listening to community, building the social capital between participants and those delivering programs.

Role for existing resources and structures

It is important to map and consider existing structures or groups. Stakeholders advocate using local intelligence to identify existing networks, resources, and social capital that can be used to guide both program development and implementation. This also allows for respectful consideration and use, where appropriate, of community groups or governance structures. Using existing structures can be seen as **meeting the community on their terms** and with respect to existing investments. It was acknowledged that existing structures are not always appropriate and a decision to not use a structure is sometimes equally important. This can reflect the differences in capability that exist across communities.

Socialisation and establishment take time

Stakeholders were universally clear in the **time investment** required to establish a successful place-based service. The need to embed the concept of a program, the time to build relationships and linkages across the community and start to earn trust were fundamental requirements. This means that initial uptake or delivery of outcomes may be slow. This phase however was seen as pivotal to building the ability to work with the community, understand the operating 'ecosystem' and to enable collaboration with and to leverage other programs.

Feedback and accountability

Appropriate governance structures allow the community to continue to have a voice and hold a program to account. It is important that the governance structure provides a conduit for the sharing of ideas and issues and escalating ideas to where action is possible. Stakeholders noted that reporting lines differed considerably depending on the program and source of authority and funding. **An open and transparent approach** to community engagement through governance models was vital to ensure accountability to the community.

Delivering elements

The richness of experience shared by stakeholders highlighted that there was **no singular way** in which a place-based program should be delivered. Provided that the elements were captured and

supported, there was agreement that both government and non-government stakeholders have the potential to lead and deliver place-based services.

Specific issues that were discussed included:

Governance

A clear and well documented governance structure was considered critical to deliver the elements of community voice, purpose and accountability. Transparent governance structures also encouraged continued community engagement and helped to minimise risks. Good governance enables the community to be able to participate in, influence and where appropriate share program decision-making responsibilities. Governance that included an agreed mechanism to connect into levels of government on a regular basis to share issues and ideas and drive further action, was seen as being particularly useful.

Clear and well-developed governance had a direct correlation with the degree of localised decision making that stakeholders felt comfortable to endorse. There was recognition that good governance evolves and requires investment in building capability of people, government, and community.

Backbone organisations

There was a lack of consensus on whether backbone structures improved delivery and outcomes of place-based approaches. Stakeholders noted many programs operate without these and that there may not always be a need. The degree of maturity and longevity of a program was a factor that was reported to reduce the need for a backbone support organisation. It was noted that there may be a benefit from these structures at the start of a program to coordinate and communicate learnings amongst participants and also with funders.

Stakeholders viewed that backbone services can be delivered by both government and non-government agencies, provided there was sufficient **trust** established within a community. Encouraging and leveraging knowledge and experience between programs was a positive outcome, however some viewed this as occurring in the absence of a backbone organisation. Stakeholders noted that understanding the offering from a backbone service would be important to uptake. Some expressed concerns that backbone structures may be seen as 'bureaucratic structures' that were focused on enforcing ways of operating and engaging that could inadvertently stifle local flexibility and generate time and resource imposts that did not deliver value.

Role of government

Government – which included all levels of government – was considered too often to be slow to respond, rigid in their approach and failing to genuinely listen to community needs. Most stakeholders agreed that these perceptions can be changed. Change required concerted effort, time, and more deliberate engagement. There were noted concerns that community may not trust government and that partnering with a delivery organisation to earn trust and be invited into region can be powerful in early advocacy of an initiative.

Government does have a powerful role to play in coordinating activities and resources across and within levels of government. Thes support to **integrate service delivery** within a place-based approach is a unique role that government can play. Stakeholders were clear that governments need to facilitate their own internal networking and breaking down of silos before asking community to change.

Funding and procurement

Stakeholders had a **variety of funding and procurement experiences** depending on the program they were involved in. For those where government funding and procurement was utilised rigidity and short termism were raised as issues. Short funding cycles and the artificial drivers that contracts could create were seen to inhibit the ability to deliver place-based community led programs. Stakeholders raised that a lack of funding certainty meant programs were not seen as enduring and could not adapt as community needs changed, thus inhibiting building sustainable change over time. Some stakeholders noted that they chose to not engage with government funding as the costs, risks and long lead times were not aligned with their delivery model. Some stakeholders mentioned that funding consistency underpins trust and credibility of government.

Evaluation and measuring success

All workshops agreed that it would be beneficial to have separate dedicated sessions on how to measure success. There was consensus that measuring impact and **evaluation was critical** but that current approaches did not always successfully or accurately measure impact. This will be further explored and options for improving place-based evaluation will be pursued during further consultations in 2024.