
The language and practice of place-based and community-led change in Australia: Building a shared understanding

Introduction

Collective Impact and community-led approaches have been increasingly adopted and applied by Australian governments recently, reflecting a desire to engage and work with the public differently. The uptake of these approaches signals a paradigm shift from government “doing policy and programs for, or to, people” towards partnering with, enabling and empowering communities. The Albanese Government’s recently announced Australian Public Service (APS) reform agenda, which builds on the Thodey Review, aims, among other things, to reshape the relationship of the APS to communities and others.

Collective Impact principles grew out of a recognition and evidence in North America that collaboration is necessary to resolve complex problems that span sectors or require a fundamental shift in thinking and underlying structures. It is noted that many First Nations people say these approaches reflect how they have worked for thousands of years. Proponents state that only by working together and considering all perspectives, and the system, can transformation occur.

The argument for community-led approaches is that those with lived experience of disadvantage are best placed to determine new ways of approaching those challenges. That the answers to complex challenges will not be found or written in Canberra or capital cities, the answers are in each community (and will require collective effort to shift). It also seeks to empower and amplify voices that have not historically been heard, particularly First Nations voices. A key explanation for this approach is that policy, programs or reform initiatives that don’t consider the perspectives or understand the context and needs of those they are intended to support, will be less effective.

Purpose

This paper reflects on four distinct approaches and frameworks that are being used to describe place-based and community-led change and reform. It draws on Collaboration for Impact’s (CFI) experience as the implementation partner supporting the Stronger Places, Stronger People (SPSP) initiative and the views and experiences of SPSP partners. Stronger Places, Stronger People is a community-led, Collective Impact initiative stewarded by commonwealth government in partnership with 10 communities, and States and Territory governments.¹ Participants at the SPSP Government Learning Event in June 2022 identified that this paper, which seeks to support shared use and understanding of these terms, would provide helpful clarity as an enabler of the work.

With the growth of place-based initiatives, similar terms are often being used to describe approaches and concepts that can be different in intent, or in practice. This paper aims to support an enhanced understanding of the intentions and ways of working of four different approaches or frameworks:²

- Community-led
- Place-based
- Place-focused
- Collective Impact

With a shared understanding of the ways of working required for each approach to be successful, we can better consider the skills, capabilities and authorising environment³ required to sustain and strengthen those ways of working.

¹ The Department of Social Services provides \$35m (2019 – 2024) for the first phase of the initiative, with co-funding by States and Territories. <https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-programs-services/stronger-places-stronger-people>

² The first three terms describe an approach. Collective Impact sets out a particular framework for its approach. For ease in this paper, we refer to approaches throughout to refer to all four terms and ways of working.

³ The ‘authorising environment’ refers to the actors that either provide legitimacy and support, or create barriers and veto, a proposed action. See Professor Mark Moore’s approach to Public Value in <https://anzsog.edu.au/research-insights-and-resources/research/where-to-for-public-value-taking-stock-and-moving-on/>

Methodology and scope

The paper starts with an overview of why these four approaches are increasingly seen as effective ways of addressing issues and driving meaningful change. It then sets out existing definitions of the four approaches, noting that the practice and language is constantly evolving. Before analysing emerging distinctions between the ways of working and the intent of these approaches, as well as possible revisions to definitions. Expanding and adapting work done to date, a set of principles for community-led initiatives is proposed, the nuances between place-based programs and place-based partnerships are explored and a typology is provided.

The analysis is based on CFI's practice, observations and engagement with the SPSP initiative since 2018, and our broader practice supporting Collective Impact and place-based approaches in Australia.

There is a rich body of place-based work at the state level, particularly in Victoria and Queensland, and examples initiated by actors other than the public sector. However, this paper focuses on examples and practice of Commonwealth government initiatives and programs.

"Ways of working" in this paper means how governments, communities and other actors interact to define goals, design, deliver, fund and measure outcomes in an initiative or program. "Communities" is used here to capture a diverse cross-section of individuals in a place with differing professional and personal roles, backgrounds and identities.

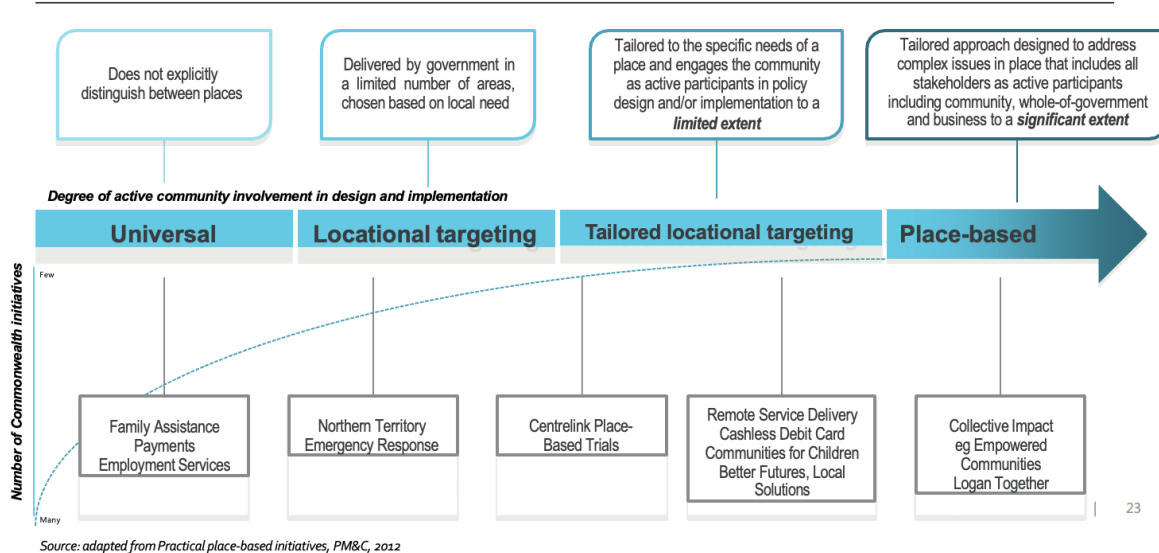
Place-based, Collective Impact, Community-led – why use these approaches?

Governments at all levels have, for many decades, often organised policy, programs, and initiatives around a geographical area to meet a range of objectives. Key reasons include to:

- **Enhance efficiency** in the use of government resources by seeking to align services, infrastructure or funding streams by geographical location
- **Enhance effectiveness** of government programs by enabling how it is delivered to be tailored to reflect local needs in the hopes of stronger outcomes
- **Foster inclusion** of voices of communities experiencing disadvantage by using place as an organising principle for community engagement
- **Address systemic challenges** by using a defined place (community or region) to consider the range of ways people experience social, economic, and physical disadvantage, and how these interact.

The terms 'place-based', or 'place-focused' have been used by governments to refer to a broad range of policies, programs and initiatives. The degree to which place is or has been core to these approaches, are varied – as demonstrated in the spectrum below.⁴

⁴ Reddel, T. (2022) adapted from Practical place-based initiatives, PM&C, 2012, in PBAs in Australia – lessons learnt (or not) from our recent history. Presentation at SPSP Government Learning Event, 22 June 22.



The appropriate ways of working in and with place will largely depend on the objectives of the initiative, as well as the circumstances of each location.

Existing definitions

Place-focused

Refers to initiatives that use geography to target or coordinate services, funds, or infrastructure. For example, locational targeting in the spectrum above could be an example of place-focused. The Victorian Government definition is:

*Place-focused approaches plan and adapt government services and infrastructure to ensure they are meeting local needs. Government listens to community to adapt how we do our business, but ultimately, has control over the objectives, scope and implementation.*⁵

Place-based

Definitions of place-based include references to the way of working with people in that place as “shared” and are long-term in nature. Implicit in these definitions is that by working with people “in place”, the most disadvantaged are included and the approach therefore is addressing inequity.

*A place-based approach is 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.*⁶

Place-based approaches target the specific circumstances of a place and engage local people as active participants in development and implementation, requiring government to share decision-making. Place-based approaches can complement the bigger picture of services and infrastructure. They engage with issues and opportunities that are driven by complex, intersecting local factors

⁵ Victoria, State Government (2020) A framework for place-based approaches. The start of a conversation about working differently for better outcomes. Accessed from <https://www.vic.gov.au/working-together-place#the-framework>

⁶ Dart, J. (2018) *Place-based Evaluation Framework. A guide for evaluation of place-based approaches in Australia* Prepared for the Queensland Government Department of Communities, Disability Services and Seniors (DCDSS), the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS), and Logan Together.

and requiring a cross-sectoral or long-term response.⁷

consisting of five conditions: a common agenda; continuous communication; mutually reinforcing activities; backbone support; and shared measurement.⁸

Collective Impact

Is an approach to resolving complex social, economic and environmental problems that requires multiple actors to work together. There is no specific reference to place, however the emphasis on mutually reinforcing activities, its uptake by communities and existence of a backbone team may be interpreted as implying a bounded location. However, the approach may inform change initiatives that aren't place-based (see below). The term was coined and defined in 2011 as:

Collective Impact is a collaborative approach to addressing complex social issues,

Collective Impact is a framework with five conditions and thus more tightly defined than the other three terms in this paper. Practitioners have expanded and elaborated on this early articulation to develop principles of practice, pre-conditions and phases. As practice has deepened and broadened, the articulation of the framework has evolved. The Tamarack Institute has drawn on lessons and limitations to develop Collective Impact 3.0, which builds on the first framing. An overarching focus on movement building has been added, and the five conditions refined, as shown in the table below.⁹

Collective Impact: 5 Conditions	
From (CI)	To (CI 3.0)
Common agenda	Community aspiration
Shared measurement	Strategic learning
Mutually reinforcing activities	High leverage activities
Continuous communication	Inclusive community engagement
Backbone	Containers for change

Community-led

As with 'place-based', there are a range of degrees to which communities engage with and have decision-making power within an initiative.

The below definitions demonstrate just two of the different perspectives, one emphasising community being empowered and the other community making decisions.

A Community-Led approach uses the practices of empowerment, mutual learning and consensus building to create bottom-up, citizen-driven change.¹⁰

Community change is considered to be Community-Led when: 1) The community holds the power and makes key decisions 2) A large and diverse number of community members are involved in supporting, taking

⁷ Victorian Government (2020), as above.

⁸ Kania, J. & Kramer, M. (2011) *Collective Impact*. Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter.

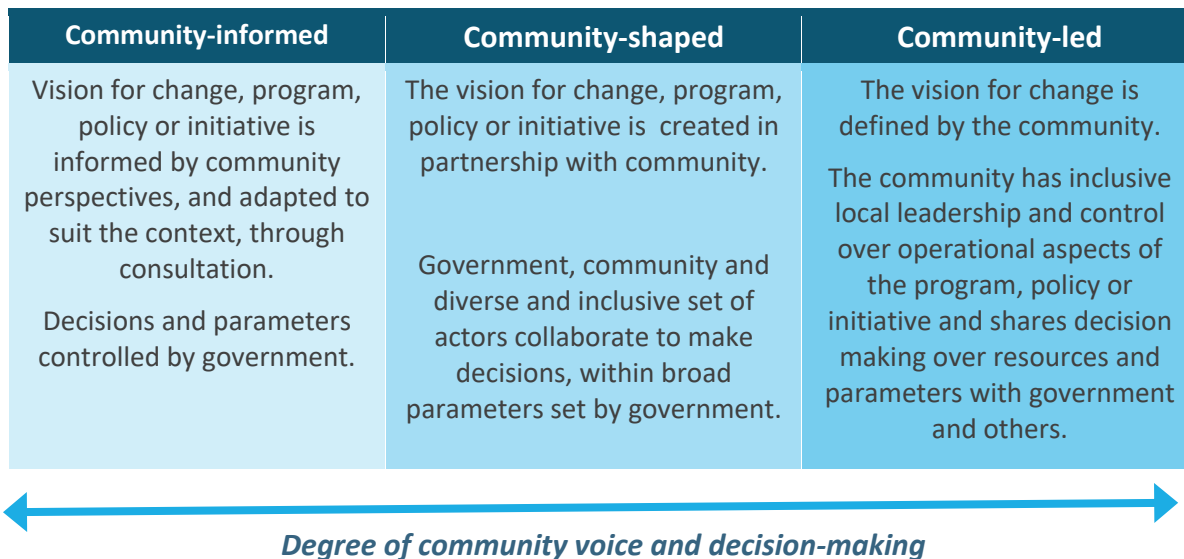
⁹ Tamarack Institute (2016) *Collective Impact 3.0 An evolving framework for community change*. Accessed from <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library>

¹⁰ Kolosy, K. (2020, July 7). *Clarifying the EU jargon: what does "community led" really mean?* Accessed from LDnet: <https://ldnet.eu/what-does-community-led-really-mean/>

action, and decision-making for the work conducted by the community.¹¹

Minister and Cabinet place-based spectrum above, and observations of practice in Australia.

A continuum of the degrees of community voice and decision-making is proposed, culminating in a definition of community-led. This builds on a scale developed by Tamarack Institute,¹² the Prime



Distinctions and gaps

Three key observations emerge from analysis of the existing definitions, and how these four terms are being used in discussions and applied in practice by actors in the rapidly evolving place-based ecosystem.

1. Terms are conflated

The four terms tend to be conflated. This interchangeability of terms arises from a lack of shared understanding of the differences in approach and because they are often used together in practice. However, it is useful to actively consider in each context, whether and how each of these specific approaches are being applied, for example:

- Applying a place-based approach doesn't necessarily mean that the five Collective Impact principles are being used.
- An initiative may be place-based and use Collective Impact principles, but not be community-led. That is, the vision and decisions are not being made by the community (rather by service providers and/or governments).
- There are community-led initiatives which do not have place as an organising principle – such as the #MeToo movement or the Uluru Statement from the Heart.
- Not all Collective Impact approaches are community-led, for example, environmental movements. As outlined above, there is a spectrum of community engagement from input and consultation through to decision-making.

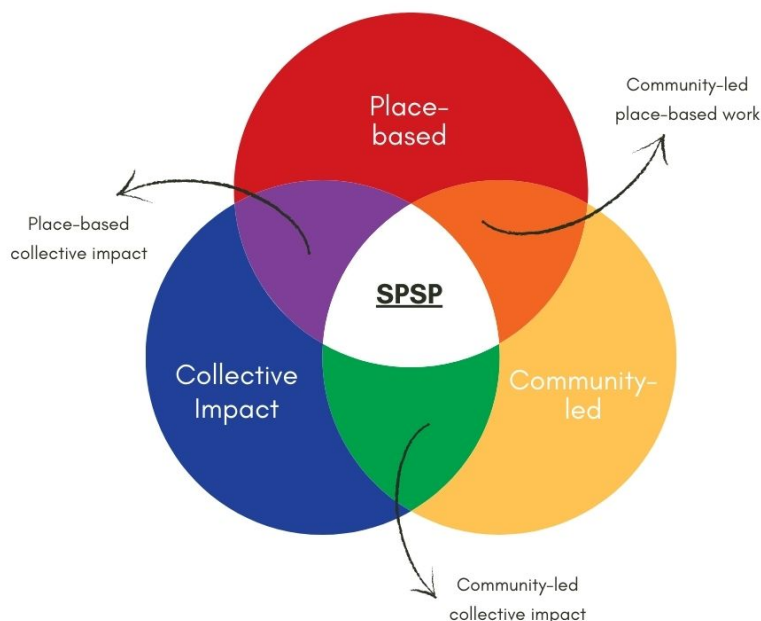
¹¹ Wessells, M. G. (2018). *A guide for supporting community-led child protection processes*. New York, NY: Child Resilience Alliance. Referenced in Tamarack Institute (2020).

¹² Tamarack Institute (2020) *Understanding Community-led approaches to community change*, Attygalle, Lisa. Accessed from <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library>. We note that the community-owned definition provided is perhaps not feasible in the current Australian context.

CFI's experience in the last decade is that the majority of Collective Impact work has not been community-led but driven by governments at all levels, as well as service providers and parts of the service system.

between them to understand and support the different kinds of change being called for by governments and community. The graphic below shows one example of where the three terms are co-existing in practice; in the Stronger Places, Stronger People initiative.

While in practice these terms may be used interchangeably, our view is that we need more precision in the distinctions and relationships



2. The importance of new ways of working is underspecified

While many of the definitions canvassed above include reference to collaboration or “sharing” responsibility for different components of a desired change, they are vague about what that looks like in practice.

At the same time, our experience is that the *shape* and *function* of collaborative arrangements (“ways of working”) is a key differentiator between approaches. In particular, definitions could be clearer on the governance arrangements and decision-making structures required to effectively implement each approach to change.

This includes how initiatives are structured to promote equity and representation, and questions about who decides:

- Which locations need or are the site of a place-focused or place-based approach, and which parts of the community should be the focus to advance equity
- If a partnership with government/s is established to support community-led change
- What is the primary language used for meetings
- That an initiative should be in a specific location
- That a common agenda has been jointly developed and agreed
- The indicators and goals in a shared measurement system
- How funds and resources are used
- Who holds accountability for outcomes
- When to adapt and iterate ways of working, or modes of service delivery

- What is the focus of change (government agenda or community agenda)
- Who is funded as a backbone team
- How a backbone team is structured and recruited

While clearly, the detail would depend on the context and the actors, framing who holds power in each of these approaches would be helpful. For example, the Wessell's definition of community-led specifically states that power and decision-making are held by the community. While "community-driven" in the Tamarack Institute spectrum provides that community and government collaborate to make decisions.

3. It's all a matter of degree and perspective

Even where all actors agree that a particular approach exists in relation to an initiative, there will be nuance in how actors, or cohorts of actors, talk and think about particular components or principles based on their perspective and role.

With regards to SPSP for example, our experience is that backbone teams tend to talk about power and decision-making, while government partners often focus on the community agenda to which they can align funding, and service providers emphasise coordination and integration of services. This may be about emphasising different aspects of the approach rather than having different understandings of the approach in its entirety.

In the case of Collective Impact, it is possible to assess if the five conditions exist regardless of how different actors may interpret the approach in a particular context. The SPSP progress mapping process and tool provides this assessment, as well as annual metrics on the practice of Collective Impact.

Toward community-led principles

Having a framework or set of principles for "community-led" may provide a similar helpful

reference for assessment. Expanding on and adapting work developed in other contexts,¹³ the elements that must be present to constitute community-led, could look something like the below 7 principles:

1. Overarching parameters and **objectives jointly set** by governments and community (often with service providers/NGOs, and business, philanthropy, corporate sectors etc)
2. An **agenda** or priorities are developed by whole-of-community, for example through generative processes and ensuring equal access to data and information.
3. **Governance structures** create equity, draw on local knowledge and are representative of the community. These structures enable strategic decisions about use of resources, governance mechanisms and reporting and measurement to be shared between government, community and others.
4. **Community leadership** structures drive day to day operational decisions, including the primary language of communication with partners.
5. **Consciously building ways to work collaboratively** across diverse sectors, government, community, and people. This includes understanding and working with formal and informal roles, power dynamics, mindsets and assumptions.
6. Commitment to, and action towards, **aligning funding to community priorities**, set out in a community agenda
7. **Accountability** for change, early instances of impact and outcomes are shared between community and governments (and ideally service providers).

Applying these principles in practice would require actors to operate in a shared "middle space". CFI's Deep Collaboration approach includes an "intercultural framework"¹⁴ in which the space for different cultural groups to come together is depicted as a riverbed. This shared space enables groups to collaborate, innovate and exercise shared power around a common agenda, without having to

¹³ Tamarack Institute (2020) in Canada building on work by Torjman 2012 and Wessells 2018 and Inspiring Communities in NZ. https://inspiringcommunities.org.nz/ic_resource/what-is-community-led-development/

¹⁴ Developed by Mark Yettica-Paulson.

sacrifice their own values or identities (depicted on the riverbanks).¹⁵ The governance structures and

collaborative ways of working outlined above support a space for shared learning and reflection

Place-based partnerships and place-based programs are different

Combining the three observations above, a typology is proposed which sets out the degree to which a sample of Commonwealth government initiatives are aligned with place-based, Collective Impact and community-led approaches. These are set out in the table below.

A more detailed table that describes the roles of government partners against the proposed community-led principles, for each of these types is at Annex 1.

	Partnerships	Programs	Funding & programs
Place	Place-based	Place-based	Place-focused
Collective Impact	Yes	Yes, partly 3/5 conditions	No
Community (TI spectrum)	Community-led	Community-shaped	Community-informed
Example	SPSP	Connected Beginnings	Communities for Children
Intention of initiative	To empower and support whole of community to lead their agenda, through shared decision-making on design, delivery and accountability. Systems approach is key.	To increase school readiness for Aboriginal children through place-based grants and support focused on early childhood services.	To target delivery of services for families and children to fill gaps to better meet government objectives and community needs, while strengthening the service system (for example through referral pathways and joint planning).

¹⁵ Aunty Pat Brahim also talked of a similar concept at the SPSP Learning Event in Adelaide, May 2022.

How can Commonwealth Government partners support community-led approaches when there are multiple place-based initiatives or programs in the same place?

SPSP partners have flagged the challenges involved where governments are funding numerous place-based initiatives or programs in one location.¹⁶ Challenges stem from aligning the different intent and ways of working of these initiatives. The Department of Social Services (as steward of the SPSP initiative) and backbone teams supported by SPSP have experienced this challenge in three ways:

1. The Department of Social Services (DSS) engages with a community that has no existing backbone team to explore its interest in the SPSP partnership offer. (Place-focused programs are often being funded and the community is clear the SPSP partnership offer is different).
2. DSS is supporting a backbone team and either 1) a new place-based or place-focused program expresses interest in implementing in that place. Or 2) the backbone team expresses interest in also benefiting from a place-based or place-focused program.
3. DSS is exploring with a community the potential to partner through SPSP, and that community already has a backbone team and/or is engaging with a place-based initiative, the partnership however is either not whole of community or not community-led.

In the first scenario, DSS can and has worked closely with the community to adhere to the community-led principles outlined above. The expectation in the second scenario, is that there will be an impetus

for new entrants to align with the mechanisms and community-led initiative and ways of working in place.

In the third scenario, there is evidence that the SPSP initiative's ways of working have contributed to strengthening existing aspects of community-led approaches. Or that it has supported communities and government partners to align, integrate and move along the spectrum from community-informed towards community-led.

SPSP's experience is that the governance structures and community-led, Collective Impact ways of working they are embedding, can support governments to ensure that investments in place are aligned to a shared community agenda. This is the case even where investments are place-focused, target specific cohorts or take a particular programmatic lens.

Conclusion

Place-based, Collective Impact and community-led practices and our understanding of them are constantly evolving based on learning from diverse contexts across Australia and elsewhere.

This paper has articulated the nuances in these ways of working, with a focus on the different governance and decision-making structures of each.

To support moving towards a shared understanding of what is required for a community-led approach to be successful, drawing on existing work, a set of principles were proposed for consideration, expansion and elaboration. As a result, further questions have arisen, consideration of which could support a deepening of place-based and community-led practice. These include:

- How do governments work in partnership with communities to support a community-led agenda? What skills, mindsets, capabilities and frameworks would support them to do this?

¹⁶ This is the case for government partners at all three levels, but for the purposes of this paper, and simplicity, we focus here only on commonwealth partners.

- What authorising environments are required for government partners to sustain and strengthen these ways of working?
- What skills and capabilities are required for all actors in the eco-system to work across differences, navigate power and share leadership in the “middle space”?
- What other roles might be required for community-led approaches (to addressing disadvantage) to be effective? For example, independent data brokers to support integrated service and investment mapping?
- What does success in supporting community-led change look like for governments?

The perspectives of the diverse range of actors involved in supporting place-based, Collective Impact and community-led approaches on these questions are vital to the continued evolution of these frameworks and practice.

ANNEX 1: THE DIFFERENT ROLES OF GOVERNMENT IN APPLYING THE COMMUNITY-LED PRINCIPLES

Community-led principles	Government role		
	Partnership	Program	Funding & Program
1 Overarching objectives	Very broad parameters set by government, within which each community defines their objectives. Eg. Address disadvantage affecting children and families.	Objectives defined by government, scope for communities to define priorities within these targets/outcomes. eg. For First Nations children and pregnant women to learn and meet development milestones.	Objectives defined by government, community may be consulted on these.
2 Agenda	Community supported by government to develop their priorities and agenda in collaboration with government and other partners.	Priorities developed by government, delivered by service provider in accordance with program guidelines	Priorities defined by government, with input and consultation with community
3 Governance structures - strategic	Whole of community establishes its preferred local governance mechanism, with government and other representation. Decision-making on strategic approach is shared. Moving towards shared decision-making on use of resources.	Community may inform and be consulted on decisions about approach, use of services. Focus on integrating and aligning services to community need	Decisions about delivery controlled by government.
4 Governance - operational	Decision-making on operational, day to day aspects is shared, led by community.	Funder of program in each site.	Funder of service provider (facilitating partner) in each site.

Community-led principles	Government role		
	Partnership	Program	Funding & Program
5 Collaboration	<p>Cross-sector collaboration with service providers, business, philanthropics and academia encouraged.</p> <p>Governments collaborate with intention to share data, decision-making and power.</p>	Depends on design.	Depends on design.
6 Commitment to align funding to community priorities	<p>Federal government funds backbone team core costs and capacity building support. Co-funding and partnership from state/territory is a pre-condition for a SPSP partnership.</p> <p>Government partners working to align funding to community priorities, and to coordinate across government through investment mapping.</p>	Government funds service coordination through grant mechanism	<p>Funding may be aligned to community priorities as result of consultation. May be coordination with other government funding during consultation/design phase.</p>
7 Monitor, Evaluate, Learn, Accountable	<p>Joint government and community learning about ways of working. Examples of and moving towards joint measurement and accountability for outcomes.</p>	<p>Community shares learning and may help inform design of measures. Government holds accountability and decides on measurement framework.</p>	<p>Government and contracted service providers are accountable.</p>