

READY COMMUNITIES  
WHITE PAPER AND IMPACT REPORT 2025:

# A Case for Regional Readiness









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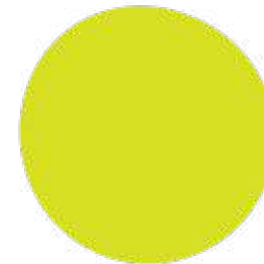
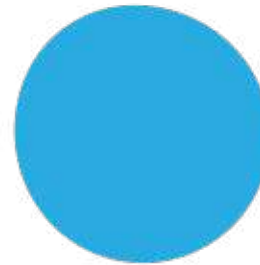
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# FOREWORD

The *Ready Communities* place-based program and the Social Impact in the Regions conference were initiated by Kerry Grace and Dr. Chad Renando in response to four conditions:

- A need to address regional inequality;
- A need for a structured, data-driven approach for place-based readiness;
- A need for a systems approach to the persistence of systemic and embedded challenges; and
- A need to balance the continued investment in impact at the expense of enabling conditions.

*Ready Communities* provides a scaffolding to support regional communities to realise their aspirations. The framework spans outcomes across community development

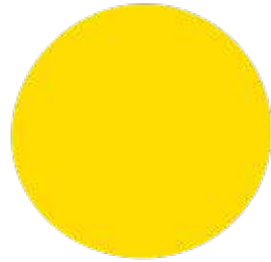
and economic development for systemic impact. The Social Impact in the Regions conference acts as a catalyst to focus attention, raise awareness, and advance national and global progress towards collective impact in regional communities.

The approach is based on a premise that a focus on enabling conditions in a community contributes to long-term systemic impact. These enabling conditions are defined as increased clarity and understanding, greater connection and connectivity, improved capability and capacity, deeper collaboration for purpose, and further advocacy and promotion. This position was put into practice in 2024 in Kempsey, NSW with the Ready Macleay program and the second annual Social Impact in the Regions conference. In the first ten months of engagement, the approach:

- Generated over \$348K in the local economy
- Activated \$80K in value of latent resources including funding and time
- Activated a disused retail space in the Central Business District (CBD)
- Activated empty shops throughout the Kempsey CBD
- Delivered over 1,000 community engagement hours in the local community
- Strengthened partnerships between not for profits and the business community resulting in initiatives such as NAIDOC Week celebration and a shop local program
- Mapped \$68M funding across the region, 77 potential initiatives with follow-on support for implementation, and 38 policies, strategies and funds applicable to the program themes
- Facilitated 24,345 unique connections with 279 individuals through Ready Macleay, and 14,297 unique connections with an additional 133 individuals through Social Impact in the Regions.

Insights from the first year of the program informed the development of the Readiness Index which will form the basis for expanding the approach in 2025 in Grafton, NSW and the third annual Social Impact in the Regions conference while continuing to support the continued support in Year Two of Ready Macleay in Kempsey, NSW.





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper is structured around a call to action, first describing the underlying conditions for change, followed by a case study from the Year One Ready Macleay program highlighting how those conditions result in impact, and concluding with lessons learned and recommendations moving forward.

## PART A

Making the case  
for Readiness and  
Place-based design

## PART B

Ready Macleay:  
What happened

## PART C

Lessons learnt  
and what's next

The **audience** for this paper is broad. It is intended as an explainer for **general community members** who might be participants in a place-based change program. Emerging and experienced **community change practitioners** across economic and community development disciplines might benefit from perspectives to apply to their work. **Government policy makers** and **industry body advocates** can use the information to inform future policy positions. **Funders** and **philanthropic organisations** can consider the information as part of their future investment and financial support decisions.

We acknowledge that this report is part of a wider body of work that builds on the exceptional efforts of others, and we hope to contribute to the work of those to come both in Australia and in place-making efforts around the world. Feedback and contributions are encouraged and welcome as we collectively advance the development of the place-based movement.

## PART A Making the case for Readiness and Place-based design

The **first section** of this report proposes a definition of readiness in the context of regional communities through the lens of practice paradigms that facilitate change within regional development, economic development and community development. The paper explores the nuances of what can become competing ecosystems and the emergence (and re-ignition) of theories such as place-based practice and collective impact.

We build the case for community readiness over problem solving, setting the discussion in a review of place-based frameworks in Australia and expected features of place-based programs. A place-based theory of change sets the underlying drivers for change and applied through mapping, clustering, activation, initiatives, major events, and leadership development. The section concludes with an overview of the Readiness Index as both an assessment tool and an outcomes evaluation framework.

## PART B Ready Macleay: What happened

The **second section** explores the application of the *Ready Communities* program in 2024 through a review of outcomes and impact from the 2024 Ready Macleay pilot program and the 2024 Social Impact in the Regions conference.

## PART C Lessons learnt and what's next

**Section three** highlights the lessons learned and recommendations as a call for change. The report calls for the investment in the underlying conditions that contribute to community readiness that can be further leveraged for impact - an investment in 'the space between'.

## CONSIDERATIONS

This paper is intended as a contribution to the evolving conversation on place-based development in Australia. It offers insights drawn from the experience of delivering the *Ready Communities* program, with a focus on the pilot implementation in the Macleay Valley. While the perspectives and reflections shared are grounded in practice, they represent only one view among many in a rich and growing field. We acknowledge the exceptional work of other practitioners, researchers, and communities who have been shaping place-based approaches for decades. We offer this paper in the spirit of learning, humility, and collective advancement.

*Ready Communities* is presented here not as a definitive solution, but as a live example of what can emerge when structure and flexibility are brought together to support local readiness. We hope the learnings shared are useful to others—whether to inform, challenge, or inspire their own approaches. We recognise that

every region is different, and there is no single blueprint for effective place-based change. We welcome dialogue, critique, and collaboration as we continue to refine our own practice and contribute to a broader movement of locally led, system-informed regional development.

We also note that outcomes and impacts presented in this paper are, at this stage, partly anecdotal. The development of the Readiness Index aims to strengthen our ability to evaluate







change in real time, provide more rigorous feedback loops, and share learning across contexts. One year is a short time in the life cycle of systemic change. While early indicators are encouraging, we remain committed to long-term engagement and continuous improvement in both practice and measurement.

Each year the Ready Communities white paper and impact report will include a focus on the current state of a topic related to place-based development, a reflection on *Ready Communities* implementation, and considerations for the future based on learning. This first report is focused on the history and overall approach to place-based development to raise awareness and establish a common understanding. Our intent is to collectively and humbly learn, share in the spirit of giving, and lead for collaborative advocacy. Released in the first half of each year, the report will act as an annual review at a point in time to be tested and advanced each September through the Social Impact in the regions conference with insights collected to inform the next year's review.

The white paper and impact report will also track contribution towards addressing systemic challenges aligned to themes that emerge each year. In 2024, the themes from Ready Macleay were housing and infrastructure, youth pathways, CBD activation, agricultural communities and creative industries. The report documents findings in each area relevant to the host community and the application throughout Ready Macleay and Social Impact in the Regions 2024. The insights are being carried through to apply to Ready Grafton in 2025 through existing and emerging themes.

The insights from 2024 outlined in this paper have informed the Ready Communities 2025/26 focus to develop regional readiness in Australian communities:

#### Clarity

- Develop a greater shared understanding of regional readiness and place-based practice

#### Connection

- Embed sustainable connections between Ready Communities and Social Impact in the Regions alumni

#### Capability and Capacity

- Build skills in local leaders engaged in place-based change
- Develop and measure enabling factors that lead to long-term impact
- Raise awareness for the need to secure increased investment into 'the space between'

#### Collaboration

- Address systemic challenges and opportunities in focus areas that matter to regional communities

#### Advocacy and Promotion

- Amplify the impact of new insights through research, reports, and the Social Impact in the Regions conference



PART A:

# Community readiness and place-based design





# PART A:

## Community readiness and place-based design

**Part A** establishes the foundational concepts and rationale behind the *Ready Communities* approach. It introduces **community readiness** as a distinct, enabling condition for sustainable change – positioned alongside, but not the same as, resilience or wellbeing. Readiness is defined as a community's capacity and willingness to engage with change in proactive, collaborative, and informed ways.

The section builds a case for focusing on **regional communities**, citing systemic inequalities and missed opportunities due to fragmented or deficit-based models. The report introduces the idea of “*the space between*” – the often invisible social infrastructure (trust, coordination, leadership) needed to enable lasting systemic change. The *Ready Communities* framework serves as scaffolding for this space, enabling local initiatives to emerge and thrive.

Part A also reviews **place-based development frameworks** used in Australia, highlighting their diversity, common features, and limitations. It warns against rigid, prescriptive use of frameworks, advocating instead for adaptive, context-sensitive application that values community voice and avoids extractive practices.

Key elements of the *Ready Communities* program are outlined—with **mapping, initial engagement, focus areas, activations, initiatives, leadership development, catalytic events, and evaluation**. These elements work in concert to support locally-led change processes grounded in both lived experience and data.

Finally, the section introduces the **Readiness Index**, a tool to measure enabling conditions across five factors:

1. **Clarity & Understanding**
2. **Connection & Connectivity**
3. **Capability & Capacity**
4. **Collaboration for Purpose**
5. **Advocacy & Promotion**

These five factors serve both as program design anchors and evaluation metrics to guide and assess place-based transformation.



# 1.1 A NEED FOR REGIONS AND READINESS

## WHY READINESS

'Readiness' is used to describe a community's capability and capacity for self-determination in preparation for change. Readiness is distinct from and complementary with other terms to describe communities.

**Community wellbeing**, related to community health and liveability, is a subjective assessment of diverse factors including financial, education, employment, housing, and environmental determinants<sup>1 2 3</sup>. It is a community's response to how 'good' life is now and in the future. Subjective wellbeing is difficult to measure and there is good work being done in developing national, state-based, and sectoral wellbeing assessments including the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index<sup>4</sup> and the Australian National Development Index<sup>5</sup>.

**Community resilience**, also closely aligned with readiness, is "the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to

- 1 How's Life? 2013: *Measuring Well-Being*, ed. by OECD, 1. Aufl (OECD Paris, 2013).
- 2 Sara Alidoust, Nikita Gleeson, and Fahimeh Khalaj, 'A Systematic Review of Planning Policies for Community Wellbeing', *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability*, 17.4 (2024), pp. 577–95, doi:10.1080/17549175.2022.2071971.
- 3 Katherine Pontifex, 'A Wellbeing Index for South Australia', *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, 34.3 (2023), pp. 667–70, doi:10.1002/hpja.731.
- 4 Australian unity, 'The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index | Australian Unity', 2025 [www.australianunity.com.au/about-us/wellbeing-index](http://www.australianunity.com.au/about-us/wellbeing-index)
- 5 ANDI, 'Australian National Development Index - ANDI', *Australian National Development Index - ANDI*, 2025 [www.andi.org.au](http://www.andi.org.au)



thrive in an environment characterised by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise<sup>6</sup>. It describes how well a community can bounce back when things go wrong and adapt to change. However, the term resilience can have connotations of being resistant to change and returning to a past state that may be detrimental or not realistic<sup>7</sup>. Resilience can also be weaponised to not fix the issues that contribute to a community needing to be resilient in the first place<sup>8</sup>. Resilience frameworks in Australia focus on emergency and disaster preparedness and response such as through the Future Drought Fund's Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hubs<sup>10</sup> and through the federal government's National Emergency Management Agency<sup>11</sup>.

Community Readiness has been described as a "relative level of acceptance ... of decision-making activity"<sup>12</sup> and the "degree to which a community is willing and prepared to take action on an issue"<sup>13</sup>. Inherent to the notion of being 'ready' is a sense of a state of being prepared and has been described in stages of waiting, impasse, catalytic, growth, and sustain and renew<sup>14</sup>. Community readiness is

often used in the context of change such as industry transition<sup>15</sup> and community change programs<sup>16</sup>.

Change is a given in regional communities. Change can be inflicted from unexpected external forces or arise from internal agency. Change might be immediate and reactive, or gradual and planned. Change can affect different parts of the community in different ways or be experienced as a collective whole. Change can be both unwanted and desired, depending on a person's perspective. Readiness focuses on the conditions that better enable a community to realise change.

## WHY REGIONS



**"Disadvantage is a complex problem which no single policy, government department, organisation or entity can solve."**

The Hon. Amanda Rishworth,  
Minister for Social Services  
2022-25<sup>18</sup>

*"Fragmented approaches and silos"*

- 6 Joshua Hightree and others, 'Themes in Community Resilience: A Meta-Synthesis of 16 Years of Idaho Community Reviews', *Community Development*, 49.1 (2018), pp. 65–82, doi:10.1080/15575330.2017.1393438.
- 7 Sandra Derissen, Martin F. Quaas, and Stefan Baumgärtner, 'The Relationship between Resilience and Sustainability of Ecological-Economic Systems', *Ecological Economics*, 70.6 (2011), pp. 1121–28, doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2011.01.003.
- 8 Brian Walker and others, 'Resilience, Adaptability and Transformability in Social-Ecological Systems', *Ecology and Society*, 9.2 (2004), p. art5, doi:10.5751/ES-00650-090205.
- 9 Maria Kaika, 'Don't Call Me Resilient Again!': The New Urban Agenda as Immunology ... or ... What Happens When Communities Refuse to Be Vaccinated with "Smart Cities" and Indicators', *Environment and Urbanization*, 29.1 (2017), pp. 89–102, doi:10.1177/0956247816684763.
- 10 DAFF, 'Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hubs - DAFF', 21 January 2025 [www.agriculture.gov.au/agriculture-land/farm-food-drought/drought/future-drought-fund/research-adoption-program/adoption-innovation-hubs](http://www.agriculture.gov.au/agriculture-land/farm-food-drought/drought/future-drought-fund/research-adoption-program/adoption-innovation-hubs).
- 11 NEMA, 'NEMA', 2025 <<https://www.nema.gov.au/>>.
- 12 Joseph F. Donnermeyer and others, 'Community Readiness and Prevention Programs', *Community Development Society Journal*, 28.1 (1997), pp. 65–83 (p. 68), doi:10.1080/15575339709489795.
- 13 E. R. Oetting and others, *Community Readiness for Community Change: Tri-Ethnic Center Community Readiness Handbook*, 2nd edn (Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research, 2014).
- 14 Richard C. Harwood, Kathleen FitzGerald, and D. Neil Richardson, *Community Rhythms: Five Stages of Community Life* (Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 1999), p. 36 <<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5602cde4e4b04430b90a97fd/t/56afa385b09f95bfoe12088e/h4543512>>.

- 15 Nurmawiyi and R. Kurniawan, 'Deriving the Community Readiness Index in Facing the Industrial Revolution 4.0 in Indonesia', *Journal of Physics: Conference Series*, 1863.1 (2021), p. 012019, doi:10.1088/1742-6596/1863/1/012019.
- 16 Norman Walzer and Sam M. Cordes, 'Overview of Innovative Community Change Programs', *Community Development*, 43.1 (2012), pp. 2–11, doi:10.1080/15575330.2011.653979.
- 17 Fiona C. Burgemeister and others, 'Implementation of Evidence-Based Programs within an Australian Place-Based Initiative for Children: A Qualitative Study', *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 32.2 (2023), pp. 357–72, doi:10.1007/s10826-021-02191-z.
- 18 Amanda Rishworth, 'Budget Empowers Local Leaders to Tackle Disadvantage | Department of Social Services Ministers', 10 May 2023 [www.ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/11171](http://www.ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/11171)

**“Fragmented approaches and silos have all contributed to the challenge we experience today”**

Liz Ritchie,  
CEO Regional Australia Institute<sup>19</sup>

Few would dispute that regional communities face systemic inequalities shaped by geographic distance, smaller populations, and reduced access to services, capital, and decision-making networks. There is a seemingly endless list of indicators that are cited to reflect regional need, including household income, unemployment and underemployment, education completion and participation, life expectancy and access to health professionals, Internet access, housing availability, transport access and costs, workforce availability, and access to business growth support and capital.

However, statistics do not tell the whole story of the cross section of lifestyle, liveability, and demographic mix in regional communities. An emphasis on one or two indicators can hide the inherent crossover of economic development and community development portfolios. Numbers alone do not define the future of regional communities. Instead, they highlight the urgency and importance of investing in regional development to build resilient, inclusive, and thriving communities while capitalising on strengths that make regions a competitive advantage.

Regional areas possess unique assets: deep social ties, strong place identity, resourcefulness born of necessity, and rich local knowledge. These characteristics form the foundation for a different kind of development - one that builds social infrastructure, strengthens local leadership, and fosters conditions that enable communities to overcome embedded barriers. By focusing on enabling conditions such as collaboration, innovation, and inclusive governance, regional development

can move beyond deficit narratives and unlock the potential that already exists within communities.

## SCAFFOLDING AND ‘THE SPACE BETWEEN’

There is a concept in regional development and placemaking of the importance of supporting “the space between”, the enabling conditions that facilitates systemic change. While physical infrastructure like buildings or hubs, investment in new industries, or targeted programs for specific groups such as youth or disadvantaged communities are critical elements of regional development, they can be considered the “hardware” of a region. These are the tangible assets and initiatives that communities can see and touch. The space between represents the unseen and often unfunded conditions that not only enable both long-term impact of external investments and facilitate community-led initiatives.

The space between was used in a review describing the establishment of decentralised governance in India, with insights relevant to Australian rural communities<sup>20</sup>. The review outlines how local governance increases the effectiveness of rural development efforts by making activities more relevant and responsive to local needs and conditions, allows greater flexibility in implementation, and provides a means of coordination of local and external agencies involved at the regional or local levels. Essential to local governance is the



<sup>19</sup> Liz Ritchie, ‘Liz Ritchie - Address to National Press Club’, Regional Australia Institute, 24 May 2023 [www.regionalaustralia.org.au/Web/Web/Media/News/2023/Liz\\_Ritchie\\_Address\\_to\\_National\\_Press\\_Club.aspx](http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/Web/Web/Media/News/2023/Liz_Ritchie_Address_to_National_Press_Club.aspx)

<sup>20</sup> Aruna Kumar Monditoka, ‘Decentralization, Civil Society and Panchayats: An Overview’, in *Decentralised Governance in Tribal India: Negotiating Space between the State, Community and Civil Society*, 1st edn (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 25–69, doi:10.5848/CSP2095.00002.





development of community, or civil society, that acts as a collective to represents the individual to outside institutions such as government or industry. To be effective and sustained, such a community requires structure, which raises the question as to how this structure is established, whose interests are represented, and how those interests are formed, communicated, and mobilised.

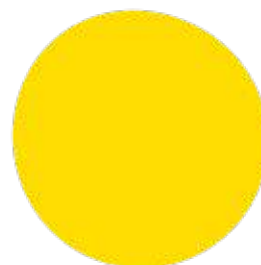
The forming of the structure is referred to as the space between, the scaffolding that supports the creation of something new. The support for the social infrastructure is not permanent but also needs to remain long enough for the local infrastructure to be established. This raises the question as to who might be involved in providing this scaffolding and supporting the space between.

Government and industry are involved, but if they are the primary contributor there can be challenges with government developing community that represents the individual to government – in effect creating an intermediary to itself. There can also be a challenge with the forming of community being influenced by political or commercial bias of those creating the structure. Others involved in establishing community structure for long-term change include non-government organisations (NGOs) such as large philanthropic foundations or local community foundations, acknowledging these may also have a specific focus based on their funding mandates such as youth, Indigenous, or environmental impacts that may exclude other areas of impact. Service providers and other intermediaries play a role but may be limited by capacity and a need for continued funding will likely influence the nature of their support.

The question as to who supports the space between is not 'either/or' but 'yes/and'. The *Ready Communities* approach is designed to provide an interface for multiple

supporting institutions to contribute to the development of the space between. It does this through a practical and adaptable framework that acts as scaffolding around community-led efforts and initiatives. This scaffolding is made up of deliberate and structured processes, such as community mapping, the formation of focus clusters, and the facilitation of activation initiatives.

The framework is not the outcome or what creates the impact. Rather, it provides the supportive structure and processes that allow outcomes and impact to emerge from within the community itself. The *Ready Communities* framework helps communities clarify their priorities, connect across sectors and groups, build capability and capacity, collaborate with purpose, and promote their readiness to embrace opportunities and investment. In doing so, it strengthens the "space between" - the critical yet often intangible factors that underpin sustainable and systemic change.





## 1.2 STARTING WITH A BASE OF PLACE

**“Australia must take the opportunity to make a game-changing shift to using place-based approaches alongside broad-based policies and programs to address big social, economic and environmental challenges facing the nation.”<sup>21</sup>**

“Where Are We? Place-Based Approaches to Tackling Community Challenges in Australia”

Placemaking is “a focus on public space and human activity – what happens in these spaces, why, how, and with and by whom, and not”<sup>22</sup>. Far from a new concept, the notion of “placemaking” emerged out of feelings of “placelessness” in the 50s that resulted from the expansion of top-down planning that was seen to sacrifice identity and community for utility<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> L Geatches, C Preston, and A Putnis, *Where Are We? Place-Based Approaches to Tackling Community Challenges in Australia* (Paul Ramsay Foundation, 2023), p. 81 [www.cdn.prod.website-files.com/62b998c0c9af9f65bba26051/649bc20d41688afed4256ef9\\_PRF%20EE%20Where%20Are%20We%202023%20V4%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.cdn.prod.website-files.com/62b998c0c9af9f65bba26051/649bc20d41688afed4256ef9_PRF%20EE%20Where%20Are%20We%202023%20V4%20FINAL.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> *The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking*, ed. by Cara Courage and others, 1st edition (Routledge, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Courage and others, *The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking: Place and Placelessness Revisited*, ed. by Robert Freestone and Edgar Liu, 1st edition (Routledge, 2016).





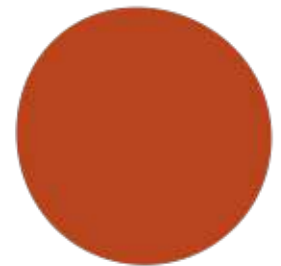
Ecosystem as a concept is related to placemaking, initially applied to the natural environment in the 1930s<sup>24</sup> and later expanded through the late 1980s to the interconnected nature of human and social systems including ecosystems of individual organisations<sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup> <sup>27</sup> and the broader economic and social environment in which the organisations operate<sup>28</sup> <sup>29</sup>. The notion of an ecosystem and the related concept of clusters emphasise the interactions that form around a type of role (e.g., entrepreneur ecosystem), a demographic (e.g., youth ecosystem) or industry or area of impact (e.g., agriculture, homelessness)<sup>30</sup> <sup>31</sup> <sup>32</sup>.

The ecosystem concept acknowledged the interconnected nature of a region as a system and provided categorisation of the various elements, inputs, and outputs and opportunity for evaluation<sup>33</sup>.

These concepts are important as they define the basis on which development is applied. Placemaking tends to focus on social disadvantage and can ignore economic diversification and investment attraction. The inherent emphasis of

ecosystems on the success of a focal point such as innovation or entrepreneurship can neglect marginalised community groups and accelerate inequality that is a byproduct of most innovation activities<sup>34</sup> <sup>35</sup> <sup>36</sup>. There is a need to start with a basis of place that is inclusive of both social disadvantage and economic diversification.

There is a growing field of frameworks and initiatives for rural communities referred to as “place-based development”. These frameworks provide “collaborative, long-term approaches to build thriving communities delivered in a defined geographic location ideally characterised by partnering and shared design, shared stewardship, and shared accountability for outcomes and impacts.”<sup>37</sup> These frameworks focus attention, provide structure, engage community, and measure impact and progress. While each community is unique, place-based frameworks incorporate common change methodologies and acknowledge challenges that are systemic and shared among communities.



- 24 A. G. Tansley, 'The Use and Abuse of Vegetational Concepts and Terms', *Ecology*, 16.3 (1935), pp. 284–307, doi:10.2307/1930070.
- 25 Glenn Carroll, *Ecological Models of Organizations* (Ballinger Publishing Company, 1988).
- 26 John Freeman and Michael T. Hannan, *Organizational Ecology*, 1st edition (\*Harvard University Press, 1993).
- 27 Deog-Seong Oh and others, 'Innovation Ecosystems: A Critical Examination', *Technovation*, 54 (2016), pp. 1–6, doi:10.1016/j.technovation.2016.02.004.
- 28 J. F. Moore, 'Predators and Prey: A New Ecology of Competition', *Harvard Business Review*, 71.3 (1993), pp. 75–86.
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- 30 G Chadwick, *A Systems View of Planning: Towards a Theory of the Urban and Regional Planning Process* (Elsevier Science & Technology Books, 1971).
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- 32 Ricardo J. Rabelo and Peter Bernus, 'A Holistic Model of Building Innovation Ecosystems', *IFAC-PapersOnLine*, 48.3 (2015), pp. 2250–57, doi:10.1016/j.ifacol.2015.06.423.
- 33 Erik Stam and Andrew van de Ven, 'Entrepreneurial Ecosystems A Systems Perspective' (Utrecht School of Economics, 2018).

- 34 Thanos Fragkandreas, 'Three Decades of Research on Innovation and Inequality: Causal Scenarios, Explanatory Factors and Suggestions', *Prometheus*, 38.2 (2022), doi:10.13169/prometheus.38.2.0147.
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# MAPPING PLACE-BASED INITIATIVES IN AUSTRALIA

In 2024, we mapped indicative place-based programs in Australia. We identified 34 programs across 192 locations, including 75 Communities for Children Facilitating Partners Program locations<sup>38</sup>, 40 Connected Beginnings program locations<sup>39</sup>, 11 Our Place locations<sup>40</sup>, 11 Queensland Connects locations<sup>41</sup>, and 8 Investing in Rural Community Futures (IRCF) program<sup>42</sup> locations. The mapping builds on recent focus on place-based development including from the Paul Ramsey Foundation<sup>43</sup>, QCOSS<sup>44</sup>, and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth<sup>45</sup> and the recent national collaborative structure PLACE (Partnerships for Local Action and Community Empowerment)<sup>46</sup>.

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- 40 Our Place, 'Our Place - Education Is the Key to the Door', *Our Place - Education Is the Key to the Door*, 2020 <https://ourplace.org.au>.
- 41 Char-lee Moyle and others, *Queensland Connects: Accelerating Queensland's Innovation-Driven Entrepreneurs* (Queensland University of technology, 2019), p. 25 [www.eprints.qut.edu.au/131590](http://www.eprints.qut.edu.au/131590).
- 42 FRRR, 'Investing in Rural Community Futures | IRCF Home', 2025 [www.ircf.frrr.org.au](http://www.ircf.frrr.org.au).
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- 46 Australian Government Department of Social Services, 'Partnerships for Local Action and Community Empowerment (PLACE)', *Partnerships for Local Action and Community Empowerment (PLACE)*, October 2024 [www.dss.gov.au/place-based-collaboration](http://www.dss.gov.au/place-based-collaboration).

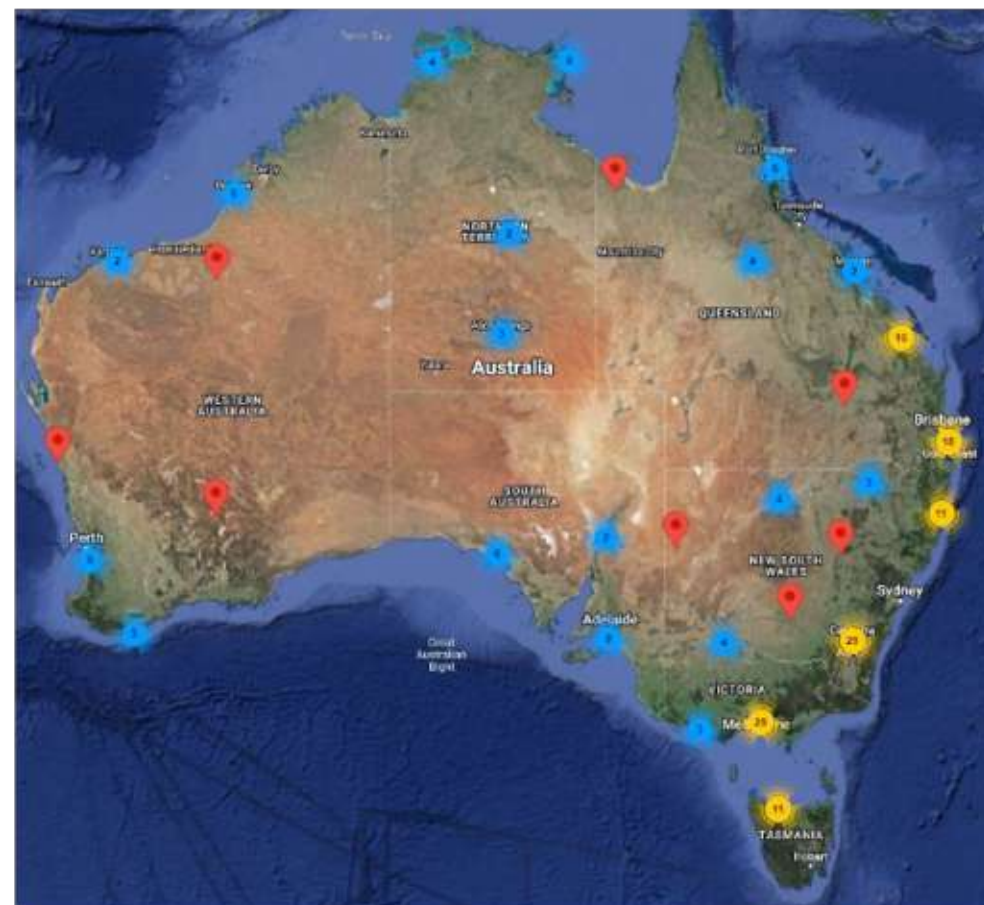


Figure 1 Map of place-based initiatives in Australia - March 2024

Most of the programs focus on one or both of two impact areas: youth and families, and Indigenous communities. The Community Plate is unique in its focus on food and healthy communities and Queensland Connects focused on entrepreneur ecosystems. A smaller number take an overall community impact approach without explicitly stating an impact mandate, such as the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal's (FRRR) 5-year Investing in Rural Community Futures (IRCF) Program. The IRCF is also unique in providing funding to initiatives around four focus areas of People, Efficiencies, Systems, and Strategies.





Some programs are explicitly stated as a partnership such as Cairns South Together and Mission Australia as the backbone while others such as the Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project reference supports but no other external backbone structure. Some programs explicitly reference a founding event such as It Takes a Town launching with support from the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation the same weekend as the flooding from Cyclone

Debbie in the postcode 2484 region. Others such as The

Hive emerged from a mission to support all children to thrive in the postcode 2770 region. Some programs are based on a national framework, such as the federal government's Stronger Places, Stronger People 10-year program in ten regions, whereas others are entirely community-led grassroots movements like One Community Together in Clarence Plains, Tasmania.

The body of knowledge for place-based approaches has been building over the past decade through various convenings with a few examples being the Centre for Community Child Health 2012 Place-based Initiatives Transforming Communities Proceedings from the Place-based Approaches Roundtable in Melbourne<sup>47</sup>, a 2018 Creating Thriving Communities roundtable in Townsville<sup>48</sup>, and the annual ChangeFest conference that started in 2018<sup>49</sup>. It should also be noted that the recent profile of place-based development builds on a rich history of related work of clusters, constellations, and public-private partnerships. In 2010, Professor John Tomaney wrote about the then-emerging trend of Place-Based Approaches

47 Centre for Community Child Health, *Place-Based Initiatives Transforming Communities* (Centre for Community Child Health, 2012), p. 24 [www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccch/CCCH\\_Place-based\\_initiatives\\_report.pdf](http://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccch/CCCH_Place-based_initiatives_report.pdf)

48 QCOS, *Creating Thriving Communities in Queensland, 2018* [issuu.com/qcos/docs/creating\\_thriving\\_communities\\_tow](http://issuu.com/qcos/docs/creating_thriving_communities_tow)

49 ChangeFest, 'ChangeFest | Australia's National Movement for Community Led Systems Change', ChangeFest | Australia's National Movement for Community Led Systems Change, 2025 [www.changefest.com.au](http://www.changefest.com.au)

to Regional Development: Global Trends and Australian Implications in response to the *Commitment to Regional Australia* document out of the Federal Election that identified "place-based thinking" and "localism" among the solutions to the challenges facing Australia<sup>50</sup>.

A 2014 paper outlined *what we know about place-based approaches to support children's wellbeing* and provides an excellent overview from the 1970s along with a cross-section of analysis across countries<sup>51</sup>. Others in the Australian context include Dr Jim Cavaye's work in rural social capital<sup>52</sup> and Dr Geoff Woolcock's work in conceptualising community resilience and more recently, the Australian National Development Index<sup>53</sup>.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) released their 2023 report *Place-based Initiatives in Australia: An overview* that includes a map of programs and a caution on the growth in place-based programs<sup>54</sup>. The report notes the risks of "overlap, duplication and subsequent role confusion", programs "competing for staff and even for funding", "multiple actors seeking to apply place-based approaches in the same or overlapping geographical areas, frequently without the dedicated coordination and alignment", and "perceptions of initiatives spending too much time on talking without resolutions or action drive down energy and participation [eroding faith in] the initiative's goals and processes and in the broader ideas of co-design and community empowerment".

Acknowledging the impact of program overlap noted in the ARACY report, there is value in the diversity of programs and the opportunity for collective learning. It is encouraging to see a growing appetite among Australian philanthropy and government agencies for knowledge sharing and collective learning.

50 John Tomaney, *Place-Based Approaches to Regional Development: Global Trends and Australian Implications* (Australian Business Foundation, 2010).

51 T. G. Moore and others, 'The Evidence: What We Know about Place-Based Approaches to Support Children's Wellbeing', 2014.

52 Social Capital: A Commentary on Issues, Understanding and Measurement, 2004 [pascalobservatory.org/sites/default/files/scribd/cavaye.pdf](http://pascalobservatory.org/sites/default/files/scribd/cavaye.pdf)

53 ANDI, 'Australian National Development Index - ANDI'.

54 ARACY, *Place-Based Initiatives in Australia an Overview*.

# APPROACHES TO PLACE-BASED CHANGE

## Framework consideration

Place-based programs use frameworks for consistency of outcomes, scalability across communities, and continued evolution based on feedback.

Place-based frameworks are configuration of principles, processes, theories, and features that describe standardised approaches to place-based change. Frameworks help us make sense of complex situations and invisible concepts. They provide a shared language, enable replication of what works and correction for what doesn't, and create a structure to bring resources together in a shared direction.

However, frameworks also come with caveats.

First, while frameworks are helpful in describing and informing reality, there is a risk that they will become a reality at the expense of the situation they describe. Frameworks can sometimes impose roles that don't align with how government or business actually function in a specific context. Approaches to clusters that worked a decade ago may not apply to changes in communication, technology, and social structures. A backbone structure from a collective impact framework may be imposed on a community that already has suitable collaborative structures.

Second, there is a risk that frameworks become an ideology or religion by those who facilitate their delivery. Frameworks can be positioned like religious denominations, where following one approach precludes the use of another. Those implementing the framework can do so with a zeal that places greater importance on the framework than the outcome it is designed to achieve. Feedback from the community that does not support the framework gets rejected or changed to align with the framework rather than the framework adapting to the feedback.

Statements such as “the map is not the territory”, “the use of frameworks as dogma”, and “over-simplifying complexity” popularise the critique of an overreliance on frameworks.

A third point is that it can be tempting to do away with frameworks altogether in favour of top-down, directive approaches by a single institution. There is a case for non-collaborative approaches in times of emergency or crisis, when dealing with low uncertainty and major physical, financial, and regulatory infrastructure. However, if a top-down approach is used by default, then every situation is a perpetual crisis. Such directive approaches are not sustainable, particularly where there are multiple systemic, embedded, long-term, and complex challenges. Collaborative change models can augment and align directive approaches even in a crisis.

Fourth, the standardisation of a framework can inhibit creativity, stifle the voice of community, create barriers from a framework's exclusive language, and provide a veneer of legitimacy<sup>55</sup>. This is particularly the case when the framework is being implemented by an institution with a power imbalance such as a local government.

Finally, a framework is not necessary for outcomes. Communities were changing and adapting long before someone came up with a model. However, the application of one or more frameworks helps share lessons from others, manage risks, and avoid pitfalls.



<sup>55</sup> Crystal Legacy and others, “‘Shared Language’ Or ‘Straitjacket’? The Hidden Costs of Legitimising Participation Through Standardised Frameworks”, *Planning Theory & Practice*, 24.3 (2023), pp. 325–41, doi:10.1080/14649357.2023.2214530.



## Framework examples

References to place-based overviews include the Paul Ramsay Foundation<sup>56</sup> and the Australian Institute of Family Studies<sup>57</sup>. Examples of frameworks for place-based change in the Australian context include:

**Public-Private Partnerships (PPP):** Often applied in infrastructure: World Bank country profile for Australia<sup>58</sup>; Performance of PPPs and Traditional Procurement in Australia 2010 industry body report<sup>59</sup>.

**Clusters:** Collaborative groups working towards an outcome; examples include TCI Oceania industry body for Australia<sup>60</sup>; Clustering lessons from Australia 2020 post<sup>61</sup>; cluster examples for the Square Kilometre Array<sup>62</sup>, food and agribusiness<sup>63</sup>, hydrogen<sup>64</sup>, and climate<sup>65</sup>.

**Precincts:** Multifunction geographic centre of activity, often with a focus such as circular economy<sup>66</sup>, state-based



innovation (NSW<sup>67</sup>, QLD<sup>68</sup>, VIC<sup>69</sup>, SA<sup>70</sup>, WA<sup>71</sup>, TAS<sup>72</sup>, National<sup>73</sup>), real estate and property<sup>74</sup> and green buildings<sup>75</sup>, health<sup>76</sup>, and a CSIRO overview of Australian global precincts<sup>77</sup>.

**Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD):** A strengths-based mapping and convening approach; examples include a 2018 Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience case study<sup>78</sup>, a 2021 Gladstone Regional Council case study<sup>79</sup>, an overview on Community Door<sup>80</sup>, and the peak network for ABCD Asia Pacific<sup>81</sup>.

**Participatory action research (PAR):** An approach to research that emphasises participation by those being researched and most impacted. Australian references

56 Geatches, Preston, and Putnis, *Where Are We? Place-Based Approaches to Tackling Community Challenges in Australia*.

57 Sez Wilks, Julie Lahausse, and Ben Edwards, *Commonwealth Place-Based Service Delivery Initiatives: Key Learnings Project* (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015).

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68 Queensland Government, *A Place to Innovate: Queensland Innovation Precincts and Places Strategy 2022 - 2032*, 2022 [https://advance.qld.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/1875926/precincts-and-places-strategy.pdf](https://advance.qld.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0011/1875926/precincts-and-places-strategy.pdf).

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71 WA Government, 'Western Australia's Science and Innovation Precincts Prospectus 2023', *www.Vic.Gov.Au/Priority-Precincts*, 2023 [www.wa.gov.au/government/publications/western-australias-science-and-innovation-precincts-prospectus-2023](http://www.wa.gov.au/government/publications/western-australias-science-and-innovation-precincts-prospectus-2023).

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73 Transport Department of Infrastructure, 'Regional Precincts and Partnerships Program' (Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, 18 February 2025) [www.infrastructure.gov.au/territories-regions-cities/regional-australia/regional-and-community-programs/regional-precincts-and-partnerships-program](http://www.infrastructure.gov.au/territories-regions-cities/regional-australia/regional-and-community-programs/regional-precincts-and-partnerships-program).

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75 Green Building Council of Australia, 'Placemaking and Precincts', *Placemaking and Precincts*, 2024 [www.gbca.au/course-event/placemaking-and-precincts](http://www.gbca.au/course-event/placemaking-and-precincts).

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77 CSIRO, 'Global Precincts and National Centres', *Global Precincts and National Centres* (CSIRO, 2025) [www.csiro.au/en/work-with-us/use-our-labs-facilities/global-precincts](http://www.csiro.au/en/work-with-us/use-our-labs-facilities/global-precincts).

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**Social or Living Labs:** Mission-focused co-creation and open innovation approaches to community and social change. Australian expressions include research programs at Monash<sup>87</sup>, CSIRO urban labs<sup>88</sup>, Western Sydney University<sup>89</sup>, Swinburne<sup>90</sup>, QUT<sup>91</sup>, RMIT<sup>92</sup>, University of Melbourne<sup>93</sup>, Victoria University<sup>94</sup>, Edith Cowan University<sup>95</sup>, University of Newcastle<sup>96</sup>, UNSW<sup>97</sup>, and Swinburne<sup>98</sup>. Other place-specific labs

include the City of Casey VIC<sup>99</sup>, Northern Rivers NSW<sup>100</sup>, and the Adelaide Living Lab Toolkit from the Low Carbon CRC<sup>101</sup>. Also to note the 2019 chapter on The role of Fab Labs and Living Labs for Economic Development of Regional Australia<sup>102</sup>.

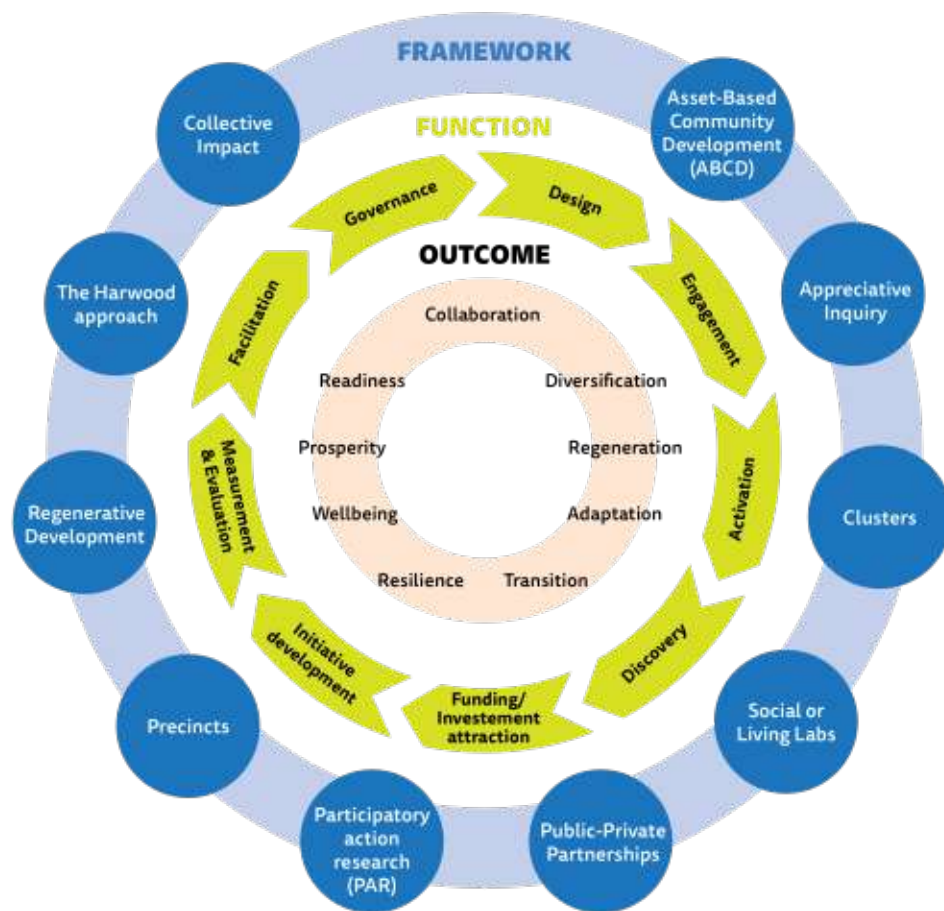
**The Harwood approach:** a community-focused approach that emphasises civic faith, turning outward, change through ripples and includes an index of five stages of community life<sup>103</sup>. The approach provided training in Australia in 2014<sup>104</sup> and innovation labs in 2017<sup>105</sup>, was used by Blue Mountain City Council in 2016<sup>106</sup>, was applied in the FRRR IRCF program as highlighted in the 2024 impact report<sup>107</sup>, and has a dedicated team in Australia<sup>108</sup>.

**Regenerative Development:** A broad inclusion of concepts emphasising sustainable practice, examples developed by US-based Regensis<sup>109</sup> and England-based Doughnut Economics<sup>110</sup>. Related applications included South Australia's National Centre for Social Innovation<sup>111</sup>, Regen Melbourne<sup>112</sup>, and Regen Sydney<sup>113</sup>.

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- 110 DEAL, 'Doughnut Economics Action Lab', 2025 [www.doughnuteconomics.org](http://www.doughnuteconomics.org).
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- 112 Regen Melbourne, 'Regen Melbourne | Reimagining and Remaking Melbourne, Together', *Regen Melbourne*, 2025 [www.regen.melbourne](http://www.regen.melbourne).
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**Figure 2** A review of place-based frameworks

The diagram above does not comprehensively list frameworks, functions, and outcomes. Attempts to show which functions are used in which frameworks are problematic, given that they are shared across frameworks. The reality is that there is unlikely to be a 'pure' application. Programs such as the federal Department of Social Services Stronger Places, Stronger People<sup>114</sup>, the philanthropic FRRR

114 Department of Social Services, 'Stronger Places, Stronger People | Department of Social Services', *Stronger Places, Stronger People* | Department of Social Services, 2024 [www.dss.gov.au/stronger-places-stronger-people](http://www.dss.gov.au/stronger-places-stronger-people).

Investing in Rural Community Futures Program<sup>115</sup>, and the *Ready Communities* program<sup>116</sup> adapt frameworks in a structured approach based on community needs.

## A focus on collective impact

Place-based initiatives focused on integrating social services to build the capabilities of service users were particularly enamoured with the collective impact approach first described by John Kania and Mark Kramer in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* in 2011<sup>117</sup>. The approach enjoyed increased attention through the 2010s, coinciding with more overt government attention on locational disadvantage<sup>118 119 120</sup>. Collective impact has been applied towards challenges such as early childhood development, the development of entrepreneurial ecosystems and social impact firms, health-related impacts such as disease and well-being, place-based transformation, and environmental impacts, including climate response and decarbonisation.



115 FRRR, 'Investing in Rural Community Futures | IRCF Home'.

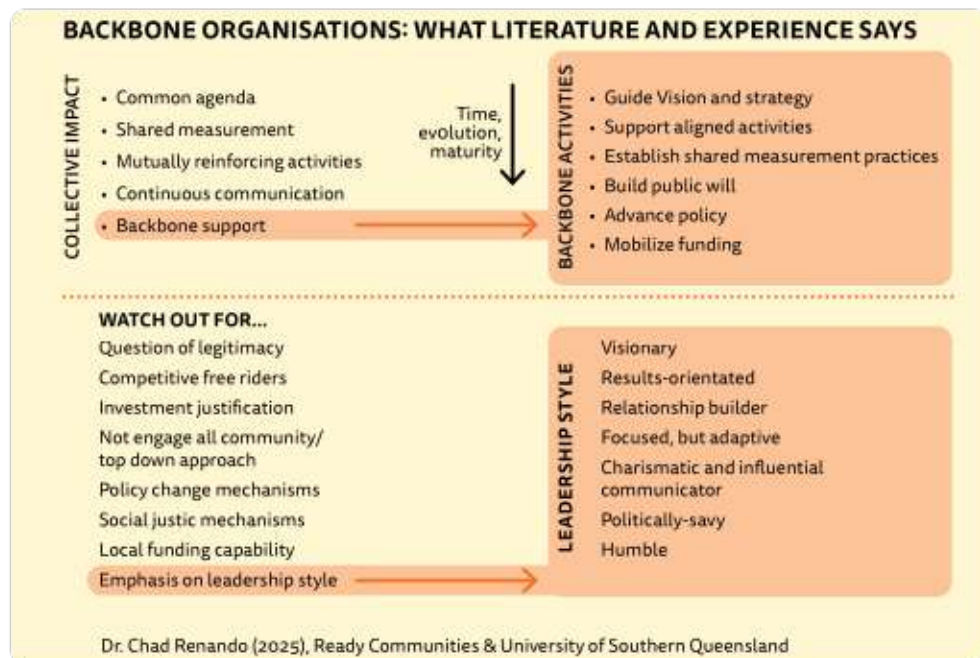
116 Ready Communities, 'Ready Communities – A Place to Prosper', *Ready Communities – A Place to Prosper*, 2025 [www.readycommunities.com.au](http://www.readycommunities.com.au).

117 J Kania and M Kramer, 'Collective Impact', *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 9.1 (2011), pp. 36–41.

118 Aaron Hart and Julie Connolly, 'Commonwealth Place-based Policies for Addressing Geographically Concentrated Disadvantage: A Typology and Critical Analysis', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 81.1 (2022), pp. 145–62, doi:10.1111/1467-8500.12498.

119 Geoff Woolcock, 'Shredding the Evidence: Whose Collective Impact Are We Talking About?', in *Perspectives on Community Well-Being*, ed. by Youngwha Kee, Seung Jong Lee, and Rhonda Phillips, Community Quality-of-Life and Well-Being (Springer International Publishing, 2019), pp. 59–68, doi:10.1007/978-3-030-15115-7.

120 Mark Cabaj and Liz Weaver, 'Collective Impact 3.0: An Evolving Framework for Community Change', *Tamarack Institute*, 2016 [www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Events/Multi-Day%20Events/Community%20Change%20Institute%20-%20CCI/2016%20CCI%20Toronto/CCI\\_Publications/Collective%20Impact%203.0%20Liz%20Weaver%20Mark%20Cabaj%20Paper.pdf?hsLang=en-us&\\_gl=1\\*1nvzfr4\\*\\_up\\*MQ.\\*\\_gs\\*MQ.\\_&gclid=Cj0KCQjwac0BhDARIsAC262v0AiBjClymYlurapFwFXzQRFgUn30Xmo4epjlrU-raQofgh5fmH8aAtI9EALw\\_wcB](http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Events/Multi-Day%20Events/Community%20Change%20Institute%20-%20CCI/2016%20CCI%20Toronto/CCI_Publications/Collective%20Impact%203.0%20Liz%20Weaver%20Mark%20Cabaj%20Paper.pdf?hsLang=en-us&_gl=1*1nvzfr4*_up*MQ.*_gs*MQ._&gclid=Cj0KCQjwac0BhDARIsAC262v0AiBjClymYlurapFwFXzQRFgUn30Xmo4epjlrU-raQofgh5fmH8aAtI9EALw_wcB).



**Figure 3** Collective impact and backbone organisation overview

The approach proposes **five conditions** that contribute to the success of collaborative efforts:

1. **Common agenda** - organisations involved align around a common purpose and related outcomes.
2. **Shared measurement** - there is a shared understanding, management, and reporting of data, key indicators, and contribution to outcomes and impact
3. **Mutually reinforcing activities** - The activities of each organisation support (and do not work in opposition to) the activities of other organisations in the collective.

4. **Continuous communication** - There are some forms of continuous communication, including regularly scheduled meetings and other shared digital platforms.
5. **Backbone support** - a structure focused on coordinating, facilitating, and leading the collective impact outcomes

The **backbone** has six further **functions**, designed to:

1. Guide vision and strategy;
2. Support aligned activities;
3. Establish shared measurement practices;
4. Build public will;
5. Advance policy; and
6. Mobilize funding

A **backbone structure** can be a loosely formed committee, a dedicated special-purpose organisation, a public agency such as a government department, or a primary funder such as a philanthropic foundation or corporation. Each structure has pros and cons depending on the context. A backbone can also be in transition; for example, where a government or primary funding agency auspices the development of a backbone as it transitions from a public agency or primary funder to a special-purpose organisation. Backbones can include a steering committee, a data or research partner, a leadership and operational team, and a number of working groups.



# BACKBONE ORGANISATIONS

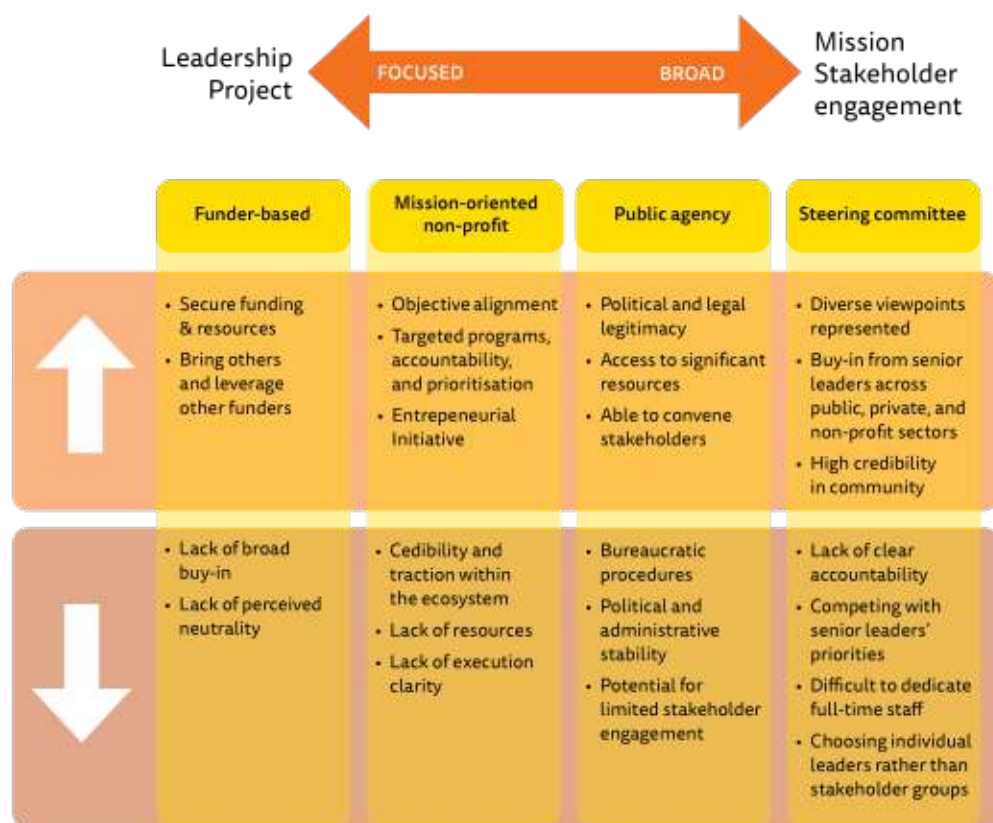


Figure 4 Backbone organisation structure considerations <sup>121</sup>

While adaptable, collective impact also comes with stipulations and caveats. Collective impact requires good faith engagement by key roles, sufficient and sustained support for the backbone, a degree of clarity and focus on the central

challenge(s), and a shared need for change.

Collective impact can be weaponised by top-down institutions using the collaborative model as a pretence for a pre-defined outcome.

Other concerns include activity being a proxy for outcomes, the attraction of free riders seeking to leverage goodwill for competitive advantage, short-term activities lacking long-term systemic change, an inability to mobilise local investment, and a focus that lacks benefit for social inequalities.

The Harwood approach warns about the risk if community is not at the centre of collective impact<sup>122</sup>. Collective impact also requires a leadership style that is both visionary and influential while also reflecting humility.

Leaders of implementing collective impact (Collaboration for Impact) penned an especially considered reflection on collective impact in Australia<sup>123</sup>. In particular, they observed that "the cumulative effect of Australia's historical, structural, and cultural context is that collective impact is framed and practiced with an explicit focus on power" and that "[b]ackbone organisations and other intermediaries, dedicated to aligning and coordinating the work of a collaborative, need skills to help collaborations surface and navigate entrenched power dynamics to transform how both formal and informal power are either enabling or hindering their shared agenda".

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121 Turner, S., Merchant, K., Kania, J. & Martin, E. (2012). Understanding the Value of Backbone Organisations in Collective Impact, Stanford Social Innovation review

122 Richard C Harwood, Putting Community in Collective Impact, 2015 [www.theharwoodinstitute.org/report-catalog/putting-community-in-collective-impact](http://www.theharwoodinstitute.org/report-catalog/putting-community-in-collective-impact).

123 Kerry Graham, Liz Skelton, and Mark Yettica Paulson, 'Power and Collective Impact in Australia' 2021, 2021, doi:10.48558/XMS6-6K45.

Examples of resources available for collective impact in Australia include:

- **Understanding Collective Impact in Australia:** A new approach to interorganizational collaboration<sup>124</sup>: A 2018 research paper highlighting success factors for collective impact based on a review of 20 case studies.
- **Collective Impact literature review**<sup>125</sup>: A 2017 report by Ninti One and Community Works.
- **Stronger Places, Stronger People**<sup>126</sup>: An Australian Government Department of Social Services community-led, partnership initiative designed to improve the lives of children and their families.
- **Vic Health Collective Impact Resource Centre**<sup>127</sup>: A collection of toolkits and guides for collective impact
- **Data and community: How Collective Impact initiatives in Australia use data to support action**<sup>128</sup>: A 2017 report focused on the use of data in the collective impact process.
- **Our Packaging Future A Collective Impact Framework To Achieve The 2025 National Packaging Targets**<sup>129</sup>: A collaborative approach to packaging waste driven by the industry body.
- **Power and Collective Impact in Australia**<sup>130</sup>: A 2021 reflection from Collective Impact's original publisher, Stanford Social Innovation Review

124 Fanny Salgnac and others, 'Understanding Collective Impact in Australia: A New Approach to Interorganizational Collaboration', *Australian Journal of Management*, 43:1 (2018), pp. 91–110, doi:10.1177/0312896217705178.

125 Maria Rodrigues and Steve Fisher, *Collective Impact: A Literature Review*, 2017, p. 40 [www.communityworks.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Collective-Impact-A-Literature-Review-8.pdf](http://www.communityworks.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Collective-Impact-A-Literature-Review-8.pdf).

126 Department of Social Services, 'Stronger Places, Stronger People | Department of Social Services'.

127 Victorian Government, 'The Collective Impact Model | Future Reset', 2023 [www.futurereset.vichealth.vic.gov.au/resources/collective-impact-model](http://www.futurereset.vichealth.vic.gov.au/resources/collective-impact-model).

128 Zoya Gill and C Smith, *Data and Community: How Collective Impact Initiatives in Australia Use Data to Support Action* (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 2017), p. 69 [www.aracy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Collective-Impact-Research-Report-Data-and-Community-How-initiatives-in-Australia-use-data-to-support-action.pdf](http://www.aracy.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Collective-Impact-Research-Report-Data-and-Community-How-initiatives-in-Australia-use-data-to-support-action.pdf).

129 APCO, 'Driving Change with the Collective Impact Model - APCO', 2025 [www.apco.org.au/what-is-collective-impact](http://www.apco.org.au/what-is-collective-impact).

130 Graham, Skelton, and Paulson, 'Power and Collective Impact in Australia'.

- **Let's Talk Collective Impact: Amplifying Your Project's Reach Through Collaboration**<sup>131</sup>: A 2024 overview from the Western Australia Community Impact Hub.
- **Rethinking Community Development: What does Collective Impact offer?**<sup>132</sup>: A 2020 University of South Australia Australian Alliance for Social Enterprise report informed by 36 surveys plus interviews and a roundtable. Findings affirmed the need for guiding principles over a purist approach.
- **Collective impact: Evidence and implications for practice**<sup>133</sup>: A 2017 Australian Institute of Family Studies report for Child Family Community Australia.

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN PLACE PROGRAMS

As we look at new approaches to place-based development, we also consider challenges with regional support that persist in spite of (and in some cases because of) community interventions.

- **The challenge with labels**

It is difficult to have clarity on complex and systemic challenges, much less describe the solutions. Terms such as "social impact", "social enterprise", "innovation ecosystems", "resilience", "readiness", and even "place-making" can be considered abstract to communities focused on immediate and practical issues.

131 Melanie Bainbridge, 'Let's Talk Collective Impact: Amplifying Your Project's Reach Through Collaboration | Western Australia Community Impact Hub', 2024 <<https://communityimpacthub.wa.gov.au/learn-from-others/insights/lets-talk-collective-impact-amplifying-your-project-s-reach-through-collaboration/>>.

132 Tanya Mackay and others, *Rethinking Community Development What Does Collective Impact Offer* (The Australian Alliance for Social Enterprise, 2020), p. 43 <[https://www.lga.sa.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0033/665970/report-lga-collective-impact.pdf](https://www.lga.sa.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0033/665970/report-lga-collective-impact.pdf)>.

133 Jessica Smart, *Collective Impact: Evidence and Implications for Practice* (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2017), p. 24 [www.aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/45\\_collective\\_impact\\_in\\_australia\\_o\\_o.pdf](http://www.aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/45_collective_impact_in_australia_o_o.pdf).



- **Place-making workforce capability and capacity**

Collaborative community leadership requires a specialised form of leadership that may not be addressed in traditional personal development training or experiences. This leadership also requires sustainable funding and legitimacy to build long-term capacity.

- **Data and Measurement**

Measurement of place-based work can be a challenge due to the time between when programs are delivered and impact is realised, risks of unintended consequences unrelated to a given intervention, attribution of what influenced the change, and a lack of accurate and reliable data. These challenges are exasperated by the need for specialised technical capability and resource capacity not available for those involved in place-based change.

- **Impacts instead of underlying conditions**

Initiatives that focus on observable issues such as crime, unemployment, and social and economic disadvantage may only address symptoms and avoid or even reinforce underlying contributing factors. Short-term interventions can also create a false sense of success, with outcomes dropping off when activity stops. Change requires a long enough time frame to build capacity for local change while not so long as to lose the value of an external change process.

- **Extractive nature of the change process**

Change interventions that take information, funds, and attention at the expense of the community can be extractive. This can happen without ill intent as the intermediaries conducting the change are incentivised to justify their role and secure continued funding.

- **Systemic resistance to collaboration**

Culture can be described as “the way we do things around here” and can act as a protection and be resistant to change. Ways of working help a community survive and make them ‘resilient’, but may also prevent change towards beneficial outcomes.

- **Silos and lack of integration of community and economic development**

Systemic change is complex and scarce resources can limit collaboration beyond what is needed for immediate outcomes for a given project or initiative. It can take work in “the space between” to bring together seemingly disparate views across community and economic development.

- **Consultation fatigue**

There would be few communities that would not have some form of engagement, be it an industry or government consultation, a structured place-based program, or an intervention focused on a specific outcome such as decarbonisation, innovation, or industry transition.

- **Process and activity in lieu of outcomes**

The rise of processes and mandated consultation methodologies can create a false sense of outcomes where the successful delivery of a program or completion of a report is seen as successful outcome in spite of or at the expense of community outcomes or impact.

- **Program resistance to feedback**

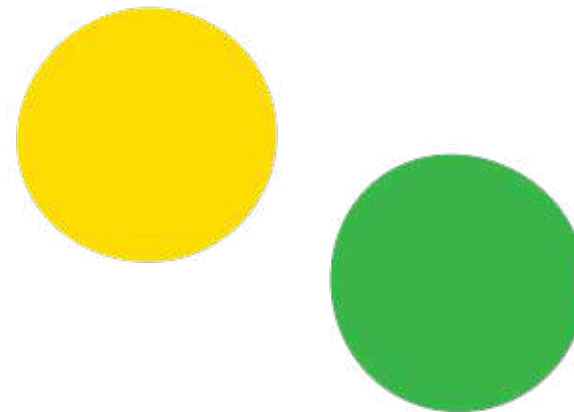
Programs funded by large institutions such as government, corporates, or philanthropy can have an inherent resistance to feedback where results that look like failure are seen to reflect poorly only on the funding institution. This not only prevents program improvement but can create false positives replicated across other program designs.





## 1.3 PLACE-BASED FRAMEWORK PROGRAM ELEMENTS

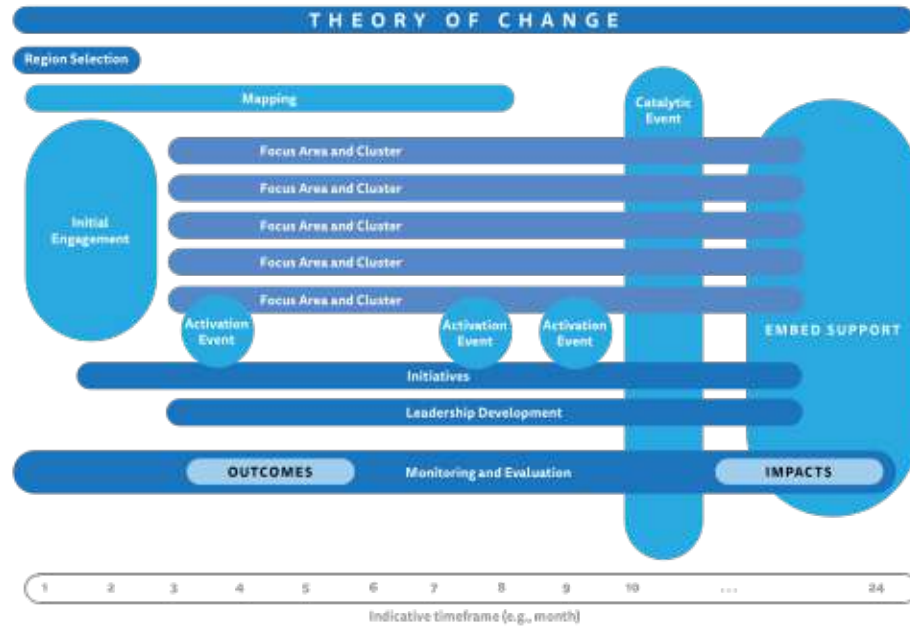
Place-based frameworks provide scaffolding around community change. Programs vary in the structure and format of this scaffolding. To help understand what a community might experience when participating in a place-based engagement, this section describes indicative elements of a place-based framework.





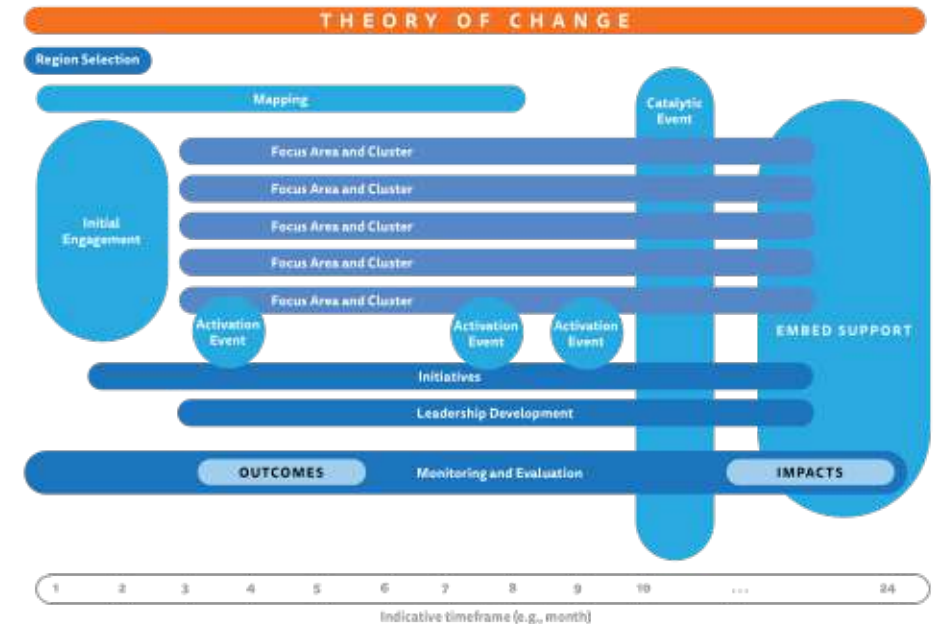
# A PLACE-BASED THEORY OF CHANGE AND PROGRAM LOGIC

## Theory of change



**Figure 5** Place-based program framework elements

The element descriptions are not intended to be exhaustive, as each element is its own a practice area with specialist practitioners. The descriptions are intended to provide a lay-person's overview and a sample of research to act as a reference and support the inclusion in a place-based framework.



A theory of change including the program logic describes the underlying conditions for why change is required, how a program is intended to effect that change, indicate how that change will be observed and measured, show the program boundaries, reflect on what may and may not contribute to that change<sup>134</sup>. It is the hypothesis that is tested to be true by the program delivery. It is a position statement that proposes "With these conditions being true, we believe that our activities will make this change." The delivery of the program then sets out to prove this theory of change.

<sup>134</sup> Sue C. Funnell and Patricia J. Rogers, *Purposeful Program Theory: Effective Use of Theories of Change and Logic Models*, 1st edition (Jossey-Bass, 2011).

As an example of a Theory of Change for a place-based program, Ready Communities exists based on four conditions in regional communities:

- **A need to address regional inequality**

Regional communities face a different set of challenges as compared metro cities. From attracting skilled workers to service access to lacking access to networks, information, resources, and capital, regional communities experience increased challenges.

- **A need for a structured, data-driven approach for place-based readiness**

With the expansion of place-based frameworks comes risks of fragmented approaches, consultation fatigue, extractive and top-down implementations, and lack of sustainability from intermittent funding and inadequate data-driven evaluation. An approach is needed that brings efficiency and best practice from a standard framework alongside adaptability and flexibility from customisation; equally embraces the three perspectives of what can be known through data, what can be observed, and hearing from the lived experience; and aligns efforts of multiple initiatives in a region.

- **Systemic and embedded challenges**

Regional investment silos are expected and natural as a result of targeted mandates from funders and scarce resources of intermediaries and practitioners. However, most challenges in communities are systemic with contributing factors spanning economic development and community development portfolios. Large existential challenges such as industry transition or climate impact preparedness and response requires an integrated approach that touches all of community and spans the economic and community development portfolios.

- **Investment in impact at the expense of enabling conditions**

Investment frequently focuses on impacts such as employment,

education, or infrastructure - tangible impacts that seem easily measured and widely understood. However, a focus on end-impacts can have unintended consequences due to a focus on one impact at the expense of others and there can difficulty in assessing what contributed to the end impact. A further challenge is that a program designed to result in an end impact can neglect building the capacity in community to sustain the impact ongoing. While end impacts are important to be considered, there is also value in developing the enabling conditions that result in the impacts.

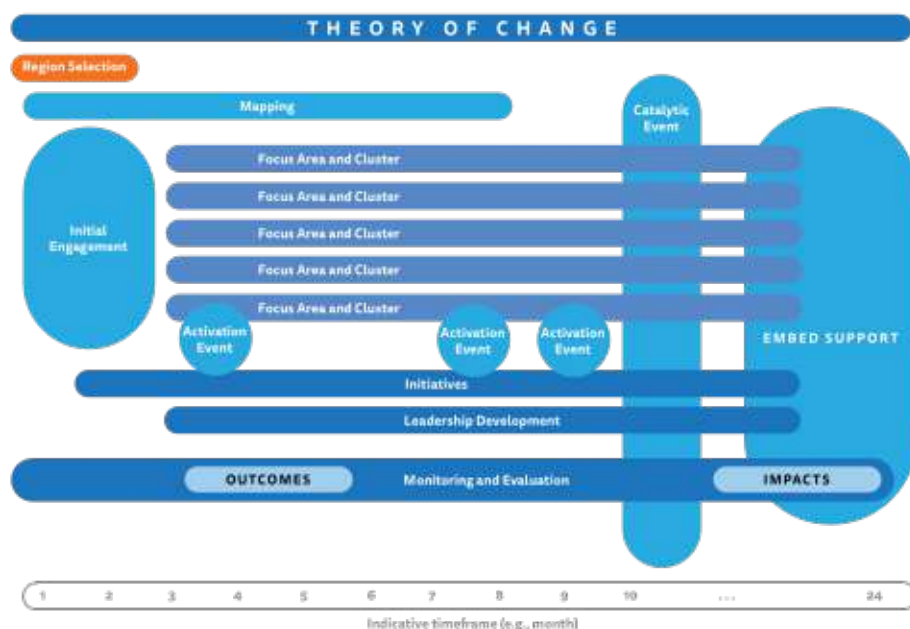
## Program logic

A program logic is a logical description of a program flow from activities to outputs to outcomes to impact. It outlines how a program is intended to work and gives an idea on how a program might be evaluated and outcomes and impacts shared. It also helps to differentiate **outputs** – immediate evidence from program activities such as workshops held or participant numbers; **outcomes** – short – to medium-term benefits from activity participants or service recipients such as increased collaboration or knowledge sharing; and **impacts** – longer-term broad changes that may be influenced by other factors such as employment, investment, or demographic shifts.





## REGION SELECTION



Choosing the regions for place-based work is important to make sure the effort leads to real, lasting change. One key factor is **population size** and **geographic distance**, since different community size and remoteness have different needs and capacities. Smaller towns and more remote communities might need more hands-on support because they have fewer and less access to local resources and a focus on external boundary-spanning, while larger regions closer to capital centres may already have networks that can help drive change.

Another important factor is whether there are **existing or emerging backbone organisations** - local collaborative groups or networks that coordinate and align efforts towards community shared outcomes.

These organisations act as connectors, making sure people and groups work together toward shared goals. A backbone can also act as the custodian for work following the implementation of a place-based program.

It is also critical to **align with what the community is already working toward and existing programs** so that place-based efforts add value instead of duplicating or competing with existing plans. A community where there is a gap in place-based support may require more hands-on effort whereas a community with several intermediaries may require greater support in coordination and alignment. This also includes an assessment of change fatigue and support overload.

Regions will also have different levels of **a clear need**. Considerations in a needs assessment can include an embedded challenge such as relative poverty levels, an acute event such as disaster response, a significant change such as industry transition or decarbonisation, or an immediate opportunity such as a large capital investment.

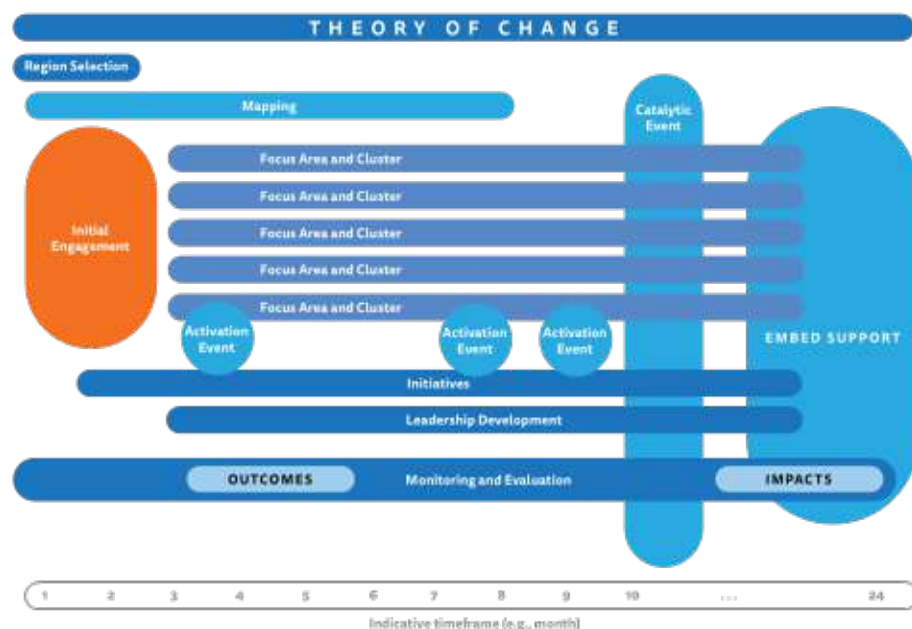
Most important is a community's **willingness for change** and **being invited** into the community. Without engagement from the beginning, there can be a sense that programs are done 'to', 'at', or 'for' communities instead of being done 'with' communities.

Finally, it is important to understand the **geographic boundaries** of the region for a place-based program. Apart from administrative boundaries such as a town, suburb, or Local Government Authority (LGA), a 'region' is considered based on both identity (what people refer to as 'our region') and function. The function of a region is based on the network of trade and commerce, local commuting for jobs and shopping, common access to services, and association of community activities. A region can be considered based on how people travel between areas for work or to access services; businesses hire workers, purchase services, and sell products and services across areas; and governments and people interact economically, socially and culturally across areas<sup>135</sup>.

135 Australian Productivity Commission, *Productivity Commission Study Report: Transitioning Regional Economies*, 2017 [www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/transitioning-regions/report/transitioning-regions-report.pdf](http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/transitioning-regions/report/transitioning-regions-report.pdf)

Finally, boundaries can be defined by the available resources and scope of the place-based program.

## INITIAL ENGAGEMENT



After early conversations at region selection, the initial engagement connects with key roles in a community. These roles are considered social anchors<sup>136</sup> and form part of the social infrastructure that “enhance the quality of life, equity, law and order,

stability and social wellbeing through community support; safety and security; sports; recreation and culture; justice; housing; health and education.”<sup>137</sup>

These stakeholders include representatives from all levels of government (federal, state, and local), business groups such as chambers of commerce and economic development organisations, and regional development authorities (RDAs). Education providers, including schools, universities, Country University Centres, TAFE, and training organisations play a role, along with Traditional Owner groups, community foundations, and neighbourhood centres.

A key part of this engagement is allowing for ‘snowballing’ – where initial conversations lead to new connections and insights. Initial engagement is often through one or two key stakeholder groups and there is value in being ‘sponsored in’ to a community to build more rapid trust. It is also to explore networks outside of the initial sponsor to discover where the sponsors networks might have blind spots.

The strength of being in a community of ‘people like us’ who share common interests, passions, appearances, and networks can also be a limitation if it hides those considered as ‘the other’ who might be otherwise unseen<sup>138</sup>. The initial engagement is designed to begin painting the diverse picture of the geographic, demographic, and interest communities in the region.

Combined with mapping, the initial engagement also identifies potential, emerging, and developed focus areas including where there might be existing informal and formal networks and clusters. These are tested through subsequent conversations to see where patterns emerge and plan later activations. By taking the time to listen and learn from local leaders and organisations, the groundwork is laid for meaningful collaboration.

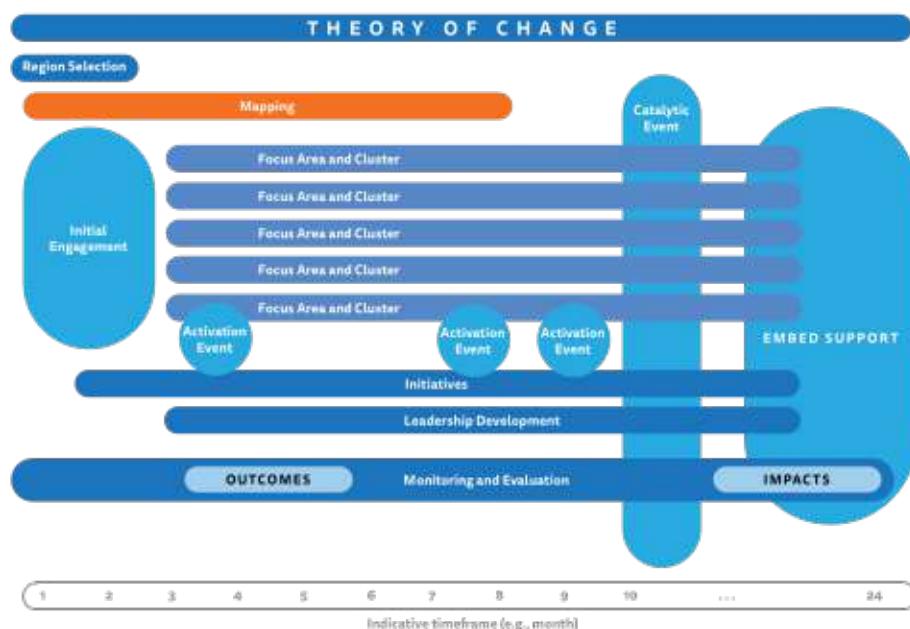
<sup>136</sup> Ruth McAreavey, ‘Finding Rural Community Resilience: Understanding the Role of Anchor Institutions’, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 96 (2022), pp. 227–36, doi:10.1016/j.jrurstud.2022.10.014.

<sup>137</sup> Sharyn Casey, *Establishing Standards for Social Infrastructure* (UQ Boilerhouse Community Engagement Centre, August 2005), p. 26 (p. 6) [www.realoptionsconsulting.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Sharyn-Casey-Establishing-Standards-for-Social-Infrastructure.pdf](http://www.realoptionsconsulting.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Sharyn-Casey-Establishing-Standards-for-Social-Infrastructure.pdf)

<sup>138</sup> Guoping Zhao, ‘Singularity and Community: Levinas and Democracy’, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 48.4 (2016), pp. 346–59, doi:10.1080/00131857.2015.1041008.



# MAPPING



Mapping provides a clear and shared understanding of a community's assets, needs, and opportunities. By visually representing key elements such as local resources, social networks, economic conditions, policies, funding, and geographic factors, mapping helps identify strengths to build upon and gaps that need attention. It supports more informed decision-making, ensuring that interventions are responsive to the unique characteristics of a place rather than applying generic solutions.

Mapping involves activities to capture three 'truths' or 'realities' in community<sup>139</sup> <sup>140 141</sup>. The first activity focuses on what some may consider as what is 'real' and can be 'known' from existing data, involving desktop research and data mining of reports, policies, existing maps, statistics, directories, and general web searches relating to the community. The second activity maps what is 'actual' from what can be 'observed' by walking around the community, participating in events, and experiencing the artifacts of culture – or 'the way things are done around here'. The third activity documents the lived experience and of individuals in the community through interviews and conversations.

Each of these realities are mapped and presented to the other perspectives for validation through open conversation. Experiences of community members is considered against data and what is observed. Data is examined to see if it reflects what is seen and heard.

It is important to acknowledge bias that can form through the mapping process both in collecting information and when presenting findings to each perspective. What is mapped will be true for each individual and contrary views from other perspectives can be confronting. The role of mapping is to provide clarity and a shared understanding, identifying how the map might, as the saying goes, "let the truth get in the way of a good story."

Mapping fosters collaboration by creating a common reference point for stakeholders, encouraging collective ownership and coordinated action. Additionally, it allows for tracking changes over time, helping to measure impact and adapt strategies as needed. Mapping needs to be inclusive and representative, avoiding the risk of reinforcing existing power dynamics or overlooking marginalised voices.

<sup>139</sup> Xiaoti Hu, 'Methodological Implications of Critical Realism for Entrepreneurship Research', *Journal of Critical Realism*, 17.2 (2018), pp. 118–39, doi:10.1080/14767430.2018.1454705.

<sup>140</sup> Amber J. Fletcher, 'Applying Critical Realism in Qualitative Research: Methodology Meets Method', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 20.2 (2017), pp. 181–94, doi:10.1080/13645579.2016.1144401.

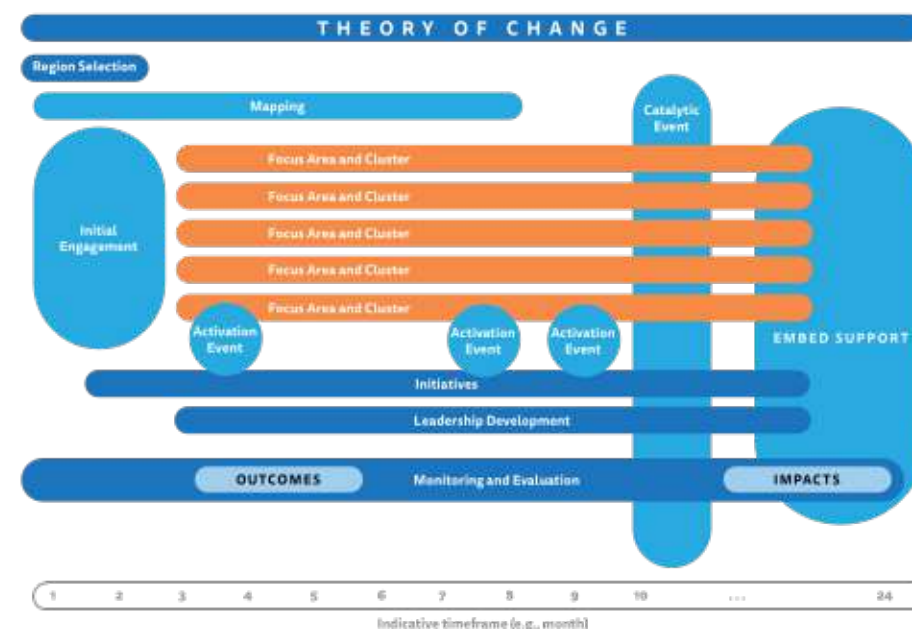
<sup>141</sup> Chad Renando, 'The Role of Innovative Hubs in Building Community Resilience' (University of Southern Queensland, 2020).

Data accuracy and accessibility are also critical – outdated or incomplete information can lead to misguided decisions, while overly complex mapping tools may exclude community members from engaging in the process. Privacy, data sovereignty, and ethical concerns must be addressed, particularly when mapping sensitive issues such as social vulnerabilities. There is a risk that mapping can create a static view of a community, failing to capture its dynamic nature and evolving needs. Over-reliance on mapping without meaningful community engagement can also result in top-down decision-making rather than empowering local action.

Mapping should be approached as an iterative, participatory process that integrates diverse perspectives and remains flexible to change. To avoid being extractive, mapping should also identify one or more custodians of the data who can continue the work after the initial mapping exercise. The custodian of the data needs to be conscious of bias as visualisation of map data in terms of size and position or the intentional inclusion or omission of data can significantly influence community outcomes.



## FOCUS AREAS AND CLUSTERS



Focus areas in place-based programs drive engagement and action around topics including industry sectors (e.g., agriculture, tourism), areas of impact (e.g., climate, health, housing, disadvantage or underrepresentation), or demographic groups (e.g., youth, gender, nationality). These create targeted and relevant conversations that engage people around their areas of interest and passion.

Focus areas help break down complex community challenges into more manageable and actionable themes, making it easier to align resources, expertise, and partnerships. They also allow for greater visibility and momentum, as people with shared interests collaborate more effectively to drive change. Defining focus areas can also attract investment and policy support by demonstrating clear



priorities and measurable outcomes aligned with mandates from funders such as philanthropic foundations and government departments.

Mobilising attention through focus areas and clusters is increasingly relevant in place-based development due to the increase in large, complex challenges with diverse value chains that place transformative pressures on local communities, such as decarbonisation and existential industry transitions<sup>142</sup>. Focus areas combine the collective attention of diverse roles into a common vision, strategy, delivery, and performance<sup>143</sup>. However, an exclusive emphasis on a focus area or cluster that is not part of a more comprehensive place-based change can also marginalise parts of the community or have further unintended social impact consequences<sup>144</sup>. The integrated nature of systemic challenges and opportunities mean that clusters also benefit from collaborative, competitive, and 'coopetitive' interactions of different types of clusters happening in the same place<sup>145</sup>.

Focus areas should remain flexible, inclusive, and responsive to the evolving needs of the community, ensuring they reflect local priorities while being considerate of external drivers and agendas. Focus areas need to be defined enough to attract interest while being broad enough to attract diverse perspectives and avoid reinforcing silos. The number of focus areas should be enough to provide different perspectives while being conscious of trying to achieve more than there is capacity to support. The topics of the focus areas should be different enough to facilitate the cross-section of diverse ideas and bring together disparate groups that highlight the systemic nature of the challenges and opportunities.

The development of focus areas needs to consider that there are likely existing networks and leadership. The development of the focus area is as much about highlighting and developing local leadership as it is realising outcomes. The development of the focus area may result in the establishment of longer-term clusters or be focused on immediate delivery of a set of related initiatives.



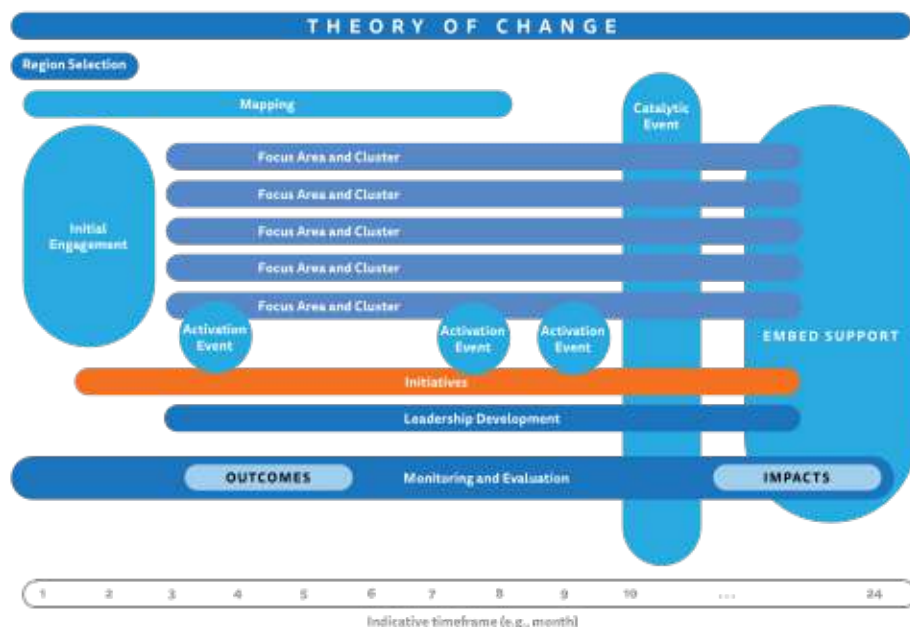
142 Christina E. Hoicka and others, 'Insights to Accelerate Place-Based at Scale Renewable Energy Landscapes: An Analytical Framework to Typify the Emergence of Renewable Energy Clusters along the Energy Value Chain', *Applied Energy*, 377 (2025), p. 124559, doi:10.1016/j.apenergy.2024.124559.

143 'How to Successfully Translate Shared Value Agendas into Action? Evidences from the Case of 21 Invest', in *Rethinking Clusters: Place-Based Value Creation in Sustainability Transitions*, ed. by Silvia Rita Sedita and others, 1st ed. 2021 edition (Springer, 2021).

144 L. Lazzeretti and others, 'Rethinking Clusters. Towards a New Research Agenda for Cluster Research', *European Planning Studies*, 27:10 (2019), pp. 1879–903, doi:10.1080/09654313.2019.1650899.

145 Adriana Fumi Chim-Miki, Rosana L. Coelho Fernandes, and Jefferson Marlon Monticelli, 'Rethinking Cluster under Coopetition Strategy: An Integrative Literature Review and Research Agenda', *Management Review Quarterly*, 2024, doi:10.1007/s11301-024-00434-z.

# INITIATIVES



The development of initiatives in place-based programs is a dynamic process that balances existing efforts, newly identified opportunities, and program-driven activities. Some initiatives may already exist within local policies, community-led projects, or government programs and can be strengthened or aligned through the place-based approach. Mapping and stakeholder engagement reveal these initiatives, allowing the program to build on what is already working rather than duplicating efforts. Other initiatives may emerge directly from the place-based program itself, identified through community conversations, asset mapping, and participatory processes. Finally, initiatives may be linked to the place-based program's own structure, such as pilot projects, demonstration activities, or

partnerships formed around program events, helping to sustain momentum and generate action.

A key consideration in initiative development is the role of funding. When a program provides direct funding, it can act as a strong incentive to mobilise action, but it may also create dependency on the funder, leading to sustainability challenges once the funding ends. Additionally, competition for limited funding can undermine collaboration, as different groups may focus on securing resources rather than working together for broader impact.

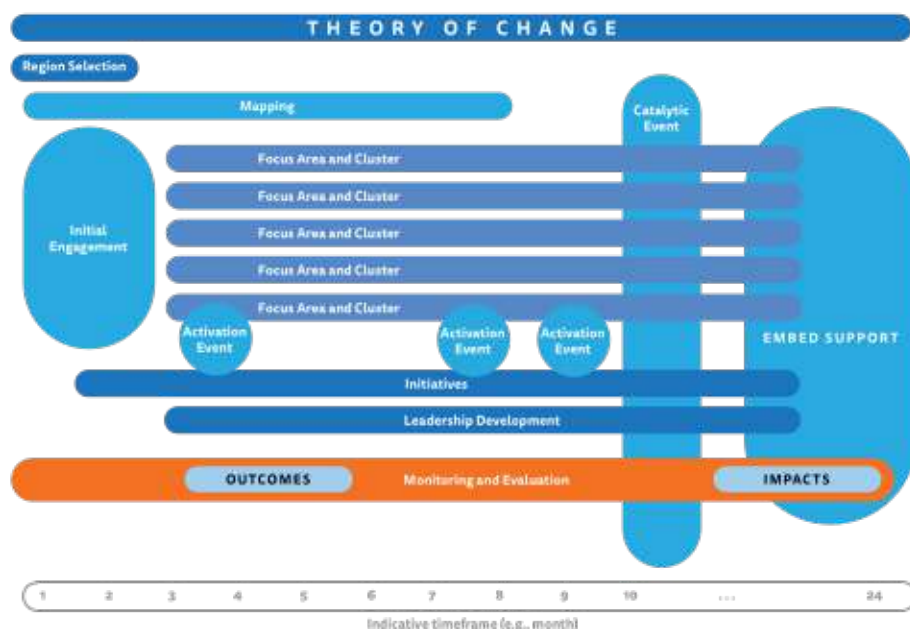
On the other hand, a lack of direct funding within the program can encourage communities to pool resources, collaborate to attract external funding, or develop self-sustaining initiatives. However, this approach also carries risks, as a lack of financial support may lead to frustration if promising initiatives stall due to resource constraints.

A balance is of seed funding, matched contributions, and facilitation of external investment. This is to ensure initiatives are sustainable while mitigating unintended consequences of competitive tensions and dependency to develop the enabling conditions for long-term impact.





# LEADERSHIP



Local ‘wicked’ problems can seem immune to change by centralised top-down approaches, necessitating the development of local leadership<sup>146</sup>. Place-based work requires a collaborative form of leadership that extends beyond traditional approaches<sup>147</sup>. While transformative leadership inspires change and distributive leadership shares power across networks, place-based leadership requires an additional layer of systems thinking and the ability to navigate complexity across diverse stakeholder groups<sup>148 149</sup>.

146 Rob Worrall and Paul Rogers, ‘Place-Based Leadership Development: Scaling up Collective Impact’, *Administration*, 72.2 (2024), pp. 107–29, doi:10.2478/admin-2024-0014.

147 Shiloh Turner and others, *Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact*, 2012.

148 Elizabeth A. Walsh, ‘Collective Impact Through Regenerative Development: Lessons from Green and Healthy Home Repair’, in *Evolving Leadership for Collective Wellbeing: Lessons for Implementing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*, ed. by Seana Lowe Steffen and Jamie Rezmovits, 1st edition (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018).

149 Rob Worrall and Paul Rogers, ‘Place-Based Leadership Development: Scaling up Collective Impact’, *Administration*, 72.2 (2024), pp. 107–29, doi:10.2478/admin-2024-0014.

The specialised need for regional leadership is acknowledged by proven programs including the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation<sup>150</sup> and those delivered by local institutions such as community foundations<sup>151</sup>, Regional Development Australia<sup>152</sup>, and Regional Australia Institute<sup>153</sup>. In addition to leadership required for community change, place-based leadership requires unique practices and skills including a deep understanding of the local context, the ability to bridge different sectors and perspectives, and a focus on long-term, systemic change rather than short-term wins. Effective place-based leaders must also manage tensions between competing interests, foster trust in collaborative efforts, and remain adaptive in response to shifting community dynamics.

A way to describe place-based leadership is through four perspectives on the acorn analogy. One perspective sees the future as a **larger acorn**, where change is growth of what is known. A second perspective sees the future as **multiple acorns**, where change is replicating current services in the same format. A third perspective sees the future as an **oak tree**, with change being transformational into something that may be unknown and involve new forms. A fourth perspective sees the future as a **forest**, enabling self-sustaining large-scale systemic change.

Place-based leadership involves a forest-level perspective. Leaders often come into place-based leadership roles from traditional service delivery positions where they approach change by growing or replicating what may be familiar to them. Rather than growing a bigger service delivery model, replicating services, or even creating a new type of organisation, place-based leadership facilitates the growth of new sustainable systems and services.

150 Chad Renando and Geoff Woolcock, *Australian Rural Leadership Foundation 2022 Impact Report* (Australian Rural Leadership Foundation, 2022) <[https://issuu.com/arlf/docs/arlf\\_impact\\_report\\_2022\\_final-2](https://issuu.com/arlf/docs/arlf_impact_report_2022_final-2)>.

151 RDA Limestone Coast, ‘Limestone Coast Leadership Program’, *Regional Development Australia - Limestone Coast*, 2025 <[www.rdalco.org.au/leadership](http://www.rdalco.org.au/leadership)>.

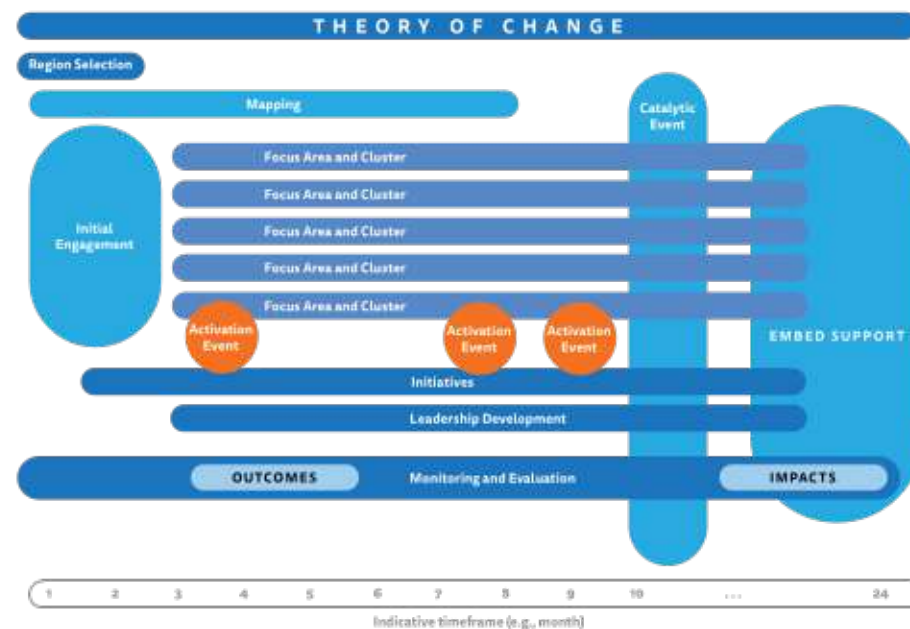
152 RDA Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island, ‘Inspired Leadership 2024 - RDA Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island’, *Regional Development Australia Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island*, 2024 <[www.dahc.com.au/projects/il-2024](http://www.dahc.com.au/projects/il-2024)>.

153 Regional Australia Institute, ‘RAI Executive Education’, *Regional Australia Institute*, 2025 <[www.regionalaustralia.org.au/Web/Web/Education/Executive-Education.aspx](http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/Web/Web/Education/Executive-Education.aspx)>.

Developing this specialised leadership approach cannot be fully achieved through traditional classroom learning or standard professional development. While theoretical knowledge provides a foundation, the real skills required – navigating complex relationships, balancing power dynamics, and leading without formal authority – are gained through experience. Action-based learning, mentorship, and hands-on engagement in collaborative initiatives are essential for developing the nuanced capabilities needed for place-based leadership.

While leadership in place-based design is often seen as collective applied across community and in institutions such as local government or business associations, it is reliant on the individuals who lead in those institutions. Leadership often comes from individuals who may not have positional authority but provide a valuable ‘boundary spanning’ role across the community. These individuals act as what can be known as a ‘keystone species’ in the ecosystem where the presence of the roles help the community thrive<sup>154</sup>. These leaders are typically involved in a number of roles through leadership or advisory positions. Individuals in these roles also present risk in the community in that the loss of the leader can have significant negative impact by breaking connections, exasperated by a lack of recognition and support leading to burnout<sup>155 156</sup>. Place-based approaches need to have tailored and integrated leadership development support that acknowledges the diverse nature of community leadership and provides sufficient resourcing for additional work that may emerge.

## ACTIVATION EVENTS



Activations are community events designed to bring people together around key focus areas, create momentum, and build connections. These events build on each other, with two to three activations leading up to a major catalytic event that solidifies the direction of the work. (In the *Ready Communities* approach, activations events are called Readiness Events).

The whole of the place-based framework can be seen as a community activation, and each focus area is an activation for a specific community of practice. In addition, activation events provide a practical and tangible interface for the broader community to participate. It is through the activations that leadership is

<sup>154</sup> Mr Victor W. Hwang and Mr Greg Horowitz, *The Rainforest: The Secret to Building the Next Silicon Valley*, 1.02 edition (Regenwald, 2012).

<sup>155</sup> Keilee Webb, 'The Relationship of Insufficient Resources to Leadership Burnout in Rural Nonprofit Organizations' (Murray State University, 2023).

<sup>156</sup> Julia Doitchinova and Zornitsa Stoyanova, 'Activation of Local Communities for Development of Rural Areas', *Ekonomika Poljoprivrede*, 61.3 (2014), pp. 661–75, doi:10.5937/ekoPolj1403661D.



identified and developed, solutions are co-created, and momentum builds<sup>157 158</sup>. The activation events act as a nexus or node for different stakeholders to come together for both contribution and to receive feedback. Activations also provide the important bridge between ideas, values, and beliefs versus practical action and behaviour<sup>159</sup>.

Activations can be cumulative for each focus area to develop clusters or integrate existing networks into the place-based program. The format of an activation may be a community event, a networking 'meetup' at a local pub or community space, a workshop, or a closed group meeting.

The first activation is often an introduction to the program, providing an opportunity to test ideas, spark conversations, and identify who is interested. It is a chance to see what resonates with the community and to gather insights on what's already happening locally. This early-stage engagement helps to shape the next steps by revealing potential champions, gaps, and opportunities.

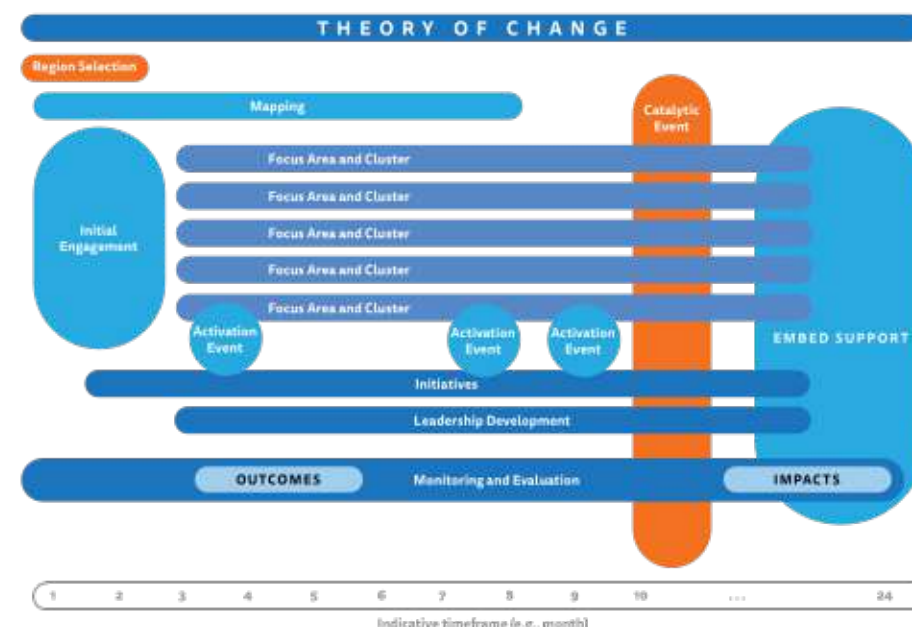
Subsequent activations sharpen the focus, refine ideas and see if a community of practice can emerge around each focus area. At this stage, conversations may shift from broad exploration to more structured discussions about what collective action could look like. Each activation progresses the conversation while expanding the network of participants. This can include a pitch event, where groups present their ideas and start securing resources, whether that's funding, partnerships, or commitments from local organisations. Through subsequent activations a focus area may start taking shape as a dedicated cluster, establishing a more formal identity in the community. The activations also provide opportunities to connect with expertise outside of the community, attract external support, and raise awareness beyond the local network to position the work for long-term impact.

157 Ronnie Lessem, *Community Activation for Integral Development*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2016).

158 Melida D Busch and others, 'Activating Social Change Together: A Qualitative Synthesis of Collaborative Change Research, Evaluation and Design Literature', *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement*, 12.2 (2019), doi:10.5130/ijcre.v12i2.6693.

159 Paschal Sheeran and others, 'Activation Versus Change as a Principle Underlying Intervention Strategies to Promote Health Behaviors', *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 57.3 (2023), pp. 205–15, doi:10.1093/abm/kaaco45.

## A CATALYTIC EVENT



A catalytic event can play a powerful role in mobilising attention and action in place-based work. External forces such as natural disasters, economic shifts, the arrival or withdrawal of investment, or long-term transitions like climate change serve as triggers that bring communities together. These events create a sense of urgency and shared purpose, compelling people to engage in collective problem-solving.

While these moments can unite people around immediate concerns, they often expose the reality that communities may not be fully prepared for these conversations. Many may be engaging in structured collaboration for the first time and without prior experience in working together. Discussions can become reactive rather than strategic. Additionally, if the only point of connection is the external

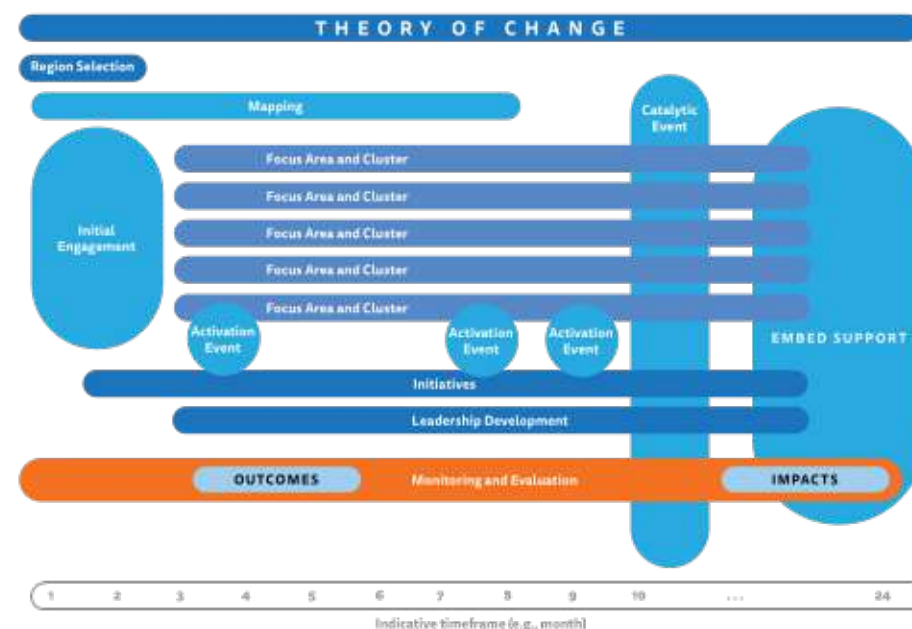
driver - such as disaster recovery or industry transition - engagement may be short-lived, dissipating once the crisis or transition is managed, leaving no lasting framework for continued collaboration and resilience-building.

To counteract this, place-based programs can proactively design their own positive catalytic events to focus attention and sustain momentum. A major event, such as a conference, summit, or regional gathering, provides a structured opportunity for communities to showcase progress, attract investment, and build external connections.

Unlike reactive responses to external crises, these events allow communities to prepare, align their messaging, and take ownership of their narrative. Preparing for a conference can encourage local groups to organise themselves, refine their priorities, and present a compelling vision to external stakeholders.

If repeated annually or biennially, such events can establish a cadence for action, ensuring that energy and collaboration do not fade after an initial burst of activity. Over time, this structured rhythm helps communities build resilience, confidence, and readiness to engage in sustained place-based development. By embedding catalytic events within their approach, place-based programs can create both immediate momentum and a long-term mechanism for sustained engagement and progress.

## EVALUATION



Evaluating impact in place-based programs presents unique challenges, particularly when it comes to measuring change and attributing outcomes to specific interventions<sup>160</sup>. Place-based work operates in complex environments where multiple factors influence outcomes, making it difficult to draw direct links between program activities and results.

<sup>160</sup> Marta Solórzano-García, Julio Navío-Marco, and Luis Ruiz-Gómez, 'Ambiguity in the Attribution of Social Impact: A Study of the Difficulties of Calculating Filter Coefficients in the SROI Method', *Sustainability*, 11.2 (2019), p. 386, doi:10.3390/su11020386.



Evaluation needs to consider challenges with attribution and causality – what contributed to the outcomes apart from the program<sup>161</sup>. Programs can also have unintended consequences of inhibiting some aspects of the community as a result of impacts on other parts, which can be overlooked by reporting of positive outcomes<sup>162</sup>. Consideration also needs the concept of deadweight, or whether a change would have happened anyway and the program investment was additional, unnecessary, and of benefit to the funder more than the recipient<sup>163</sup>. There is also a risk of the process of evaluation attempting to reduce complex challenges into a few simple indicators and reducing the complexity to make it seem as though it was solved by the program and thus creating a ‘dark side’ of social change initiatives<sup>164</sup>.

These evaluation challenges can be exasperated by the complexity of measuring long-term impacts such as job creation or investment and then retrofit program actions to justify these impacts. While this may demonstrate success on paper, it oversimplifies the nuanced ways change happens in a community.

An alternative approach is to document what happened, observe patterns, and collectively reflect on what these changes mean. This combines measurable data, observed shifts in relationships and behaviours, and the lived experiences of people in the community, providing a richer and more accurate picture of impact.

Evaluation methodology for place-based programs typically includes baseline surveys to establish a benchmark and closing surveys at key intervals to capture changes in perceptions, behaviour, and conditions. Other methods include interviews, focus groups, case studies, participatory workshops, and social

network mapping to understand how relationships and systems evolve over time. Consideration should also be given to contextual factors, such as external economic trends, policy shifts, and unexpected disruptions, which can influence outcomes but may not be directly related to the program itself.

Evaluation needs to be adequately resourced with both time and expertise. Under-resourced evaluations risk becoming superficial, data-heavy without context, or too anecdotal to be credible. Investing in technical support, ongoing data collection, and participatory processes is crucial to ensuring that evaluation not only measures success but also guides future action, supports learning, and builds the capacity of communities to track and shape their own development over time.

## EMBED AND SUPPORT

Duration is a key consideration in any place-based program that aims to address systems-level change. Short-term programs of a few weeks or months may only address symptoms if it is not part of a larger initiative. Programs that span multiple years may falter due to loss of momentum, sustained funding, or lack of a consistent shared goal. It is not uncommon to hear of programs that continue over three to five years conduct a ‘reset’ and redefine their position due to changing landscapes or in some cases realising the outcomes they were designed to achieve.

Post-program support is another dimension that can influence whether change efforts are sustained or regress. Programs that rely heavily on external facilitators or intermediaries may struggle to embed new practices into local systems if there has been insufficient investment in building local capacity. Over-dependence on outsiders can result in a vacuum once the program ends, undermining efforts to build self-determination and long-term resilience. Ideally, the support phase transitions external expertise into a facilitative or coaching role that actively mentors local leaders, institutions, and networks to take ownership of program

161 A. Foell and K. A. Pitzer, ‘Geographically Targeted Place-Based Community Development Interventions: A Systematic Review and Examination of Studies’ Methodological Rigor’, *Housing Policy Debate*, 30.5 (2020), pp. 741–65, doi:10.1080/10511482.2020.1741421.

162 Sumera Jabeen, ‘Unintended Outcomes Evaluation Approach: A Plausible Way to Evaluate Unintended Outcomes of Social Development Programmes’, *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 68 (2018), pp. 262–74, doi:10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2017.09.005.

163 Anu Tokila and Mika Haapanen, ‘Evaluation of Deadweight Spending in Regional Enterprise Financing’, *Regional Studies*, 46.2 (2012), pp. 185–201, doi:10.1080/00343404.2010.497134.

164 David Gras and others, ‘Wicked Problems, Reductive Tendency, and the Formation of (Non-)Opportunity Beliefs’, *Journal of Business Venturing*, 35.3 (2020), p. 105966, doi:10.1016/j.jbusvent.2019.105966.

outcomes, adapt to future challenges, and carry forward the work with legitimacy and accountability.

There can also be a subtle risk in long-term programs that external providers or intermediaries become too embedded in the local ecosystem, blurring the lines between objective facilitator and community actor. As relationships deepen, program providers may unconsciously adopt the same norms or power structures they originally sought to shift, diminishing their ability to challenge entrenched systems or provide critical reflection. Maintaining a healthy distance while still fostering trust and collaboration is a balancing act that requires regular reflection, third-party evaluation, and sometimes deliberate transitions in personnel or function.







## 1.4 DESCRIBING COMMUNITY READINESS THROUGH THE READINESS INDEX

### DEVELOPMENT OF THE READINESS INDEX

The *Ready Communities* framework describes readiness through five enabling factors for a community to realise long-term impact from change. These five factors were identified through research into contributions to community resilience<sup>165</sup> and in conversations with over 500 leaders and practitioners in over 30 working groups across Australia.

The working groups brought leaders together based on industry sector (e.g., food and agriculture, mining and resources, tourism, health and life sciences, education, creative industries, space and defence), areas of impact (gender, Indigenous, regions, youth, climate, social enterprise, sustainable development goals), roles and functions performed (corporate and industry, ecosystem building and placemaking, government and policy development, business incubation and acceleration, investment, university and research), and across Australian geographic regions.

<sup>165</sup> Chad Renando, "The Role of Innovation Hubs in Building Community resilience". [www.research.usq.edu.au/item/q715x/the-role-of-innovative-hubs-in-building-community-resilience](http://www.research.usq.edu.au/item/q715x/the-role-of-innovative-hubs-in-building-community-resilience)

Each conversation and workshop followed similar patterns, asking participants within each domain what was working well and their challenges, what a positive future might look like, and what might need to happen as a result.

This approach builds on related work including seven principles of ecosystem building<sup>166</sup> and work out of US-based Ewing Kauffman Foundation that produced seven goals for entrepreneur ecosystems<sup>167</sup>. Using a similar approach backed by research and experience, the strengths, challenges, visions, and strategies that came out of the workshops and conversations over 18 months in 2022 to 2023 were grouped into five themes:

- Clarity & Understanding;
- Connection & Connectivity;
- Capability & Capacity;
- Collaboration for purpose; and
- Advocacy & Promotion.

The factors are integrated with each other, for example greater **clarity** of issues and actors helps with **connection** while greater **connection** supports **clarity**. The factors also build on each other in a logical flow, in that greater **clarity** facilitates connections, which enhance **capability and capacity**, which together facilitate **collaboration for purpose**, which can then be leveraged for greater **advocacy and promotion** and provide further clarity.

## READINESS FACTORS AS ENABLING CONDITIONS

The five readiness factors are enabling conditions assessed through short-term outcomes determined by leaders in the local community and observable change. These outcomes in turn contribute to longer-term impacts.

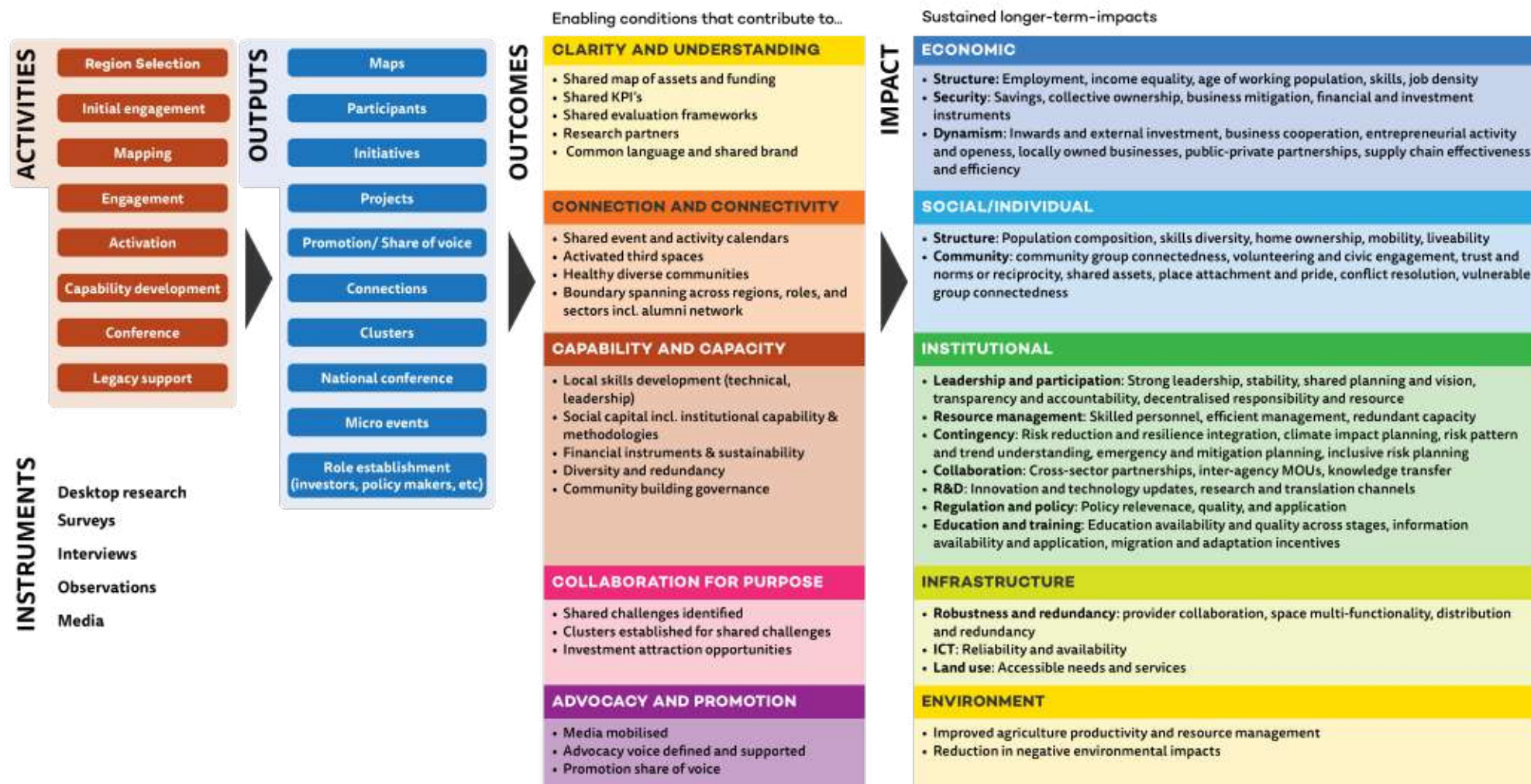
Long-term impacts are described based on six dimensions of community resilience, borrowing on the aggregation of several instruments into 129 indicators across dimensions of community resilience – economic, social, individual, institutional, infrastructure, and environmental<sup>168</sup>.

<sup>166</sup> Reinette Biggs and others, 'Toward Principles for Enhancing the Resilience of Ecosystem Services', *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 37.1 (2012), pp. 421–48, doi:10.1146/annurev-environ-051211-123836.

<sup>167</sup> Kauffman Foundation, 'Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Building Playbook 3.0 © 2019 - The EShip Goals - Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation | Kauffman.Org', 2019 [www.kauffman.org/ecosystem-playbook-draft-3/eship-goals](http://www.kauffman.org/ecosystem-playbook-draft-3/eship-goals).

<sup>168</sup> Ayyoob Sharifi, 'A Critical Review of Selected Tools for Assessing Community Resilience', *Ecological Indicators*, 69 (2016), pp. 629–47, doi:10.1016/j.ecolind.2016.05.023.





**Figure 6** Ready Communities program logic showing Readiness Factor outcomes as enabling conditions to community resilience impacts

The focus on the enabling conditions of the Readiness Factors is intended to address issues that come from an emphasis on end impact indicators such as employment, leadership structures, physical infrastructure, or environmental renewal at the expense of the conditions that enable the impacts to be realised. These end impacts are important and the focus of many interventions, but can be difficult to sustainably influence due to the complexity and systemic nature of community challenges. Without building enabling conditions, the impacts can also drop off after intervention resources are no longer available. The focus on enabling conditions is not to say end impacts are not important, but it acknowledges that the path to developing those impacts is often not initially apparent and is born out of community.

## THE READINESS INDEX APPLIED

The Readiness Factors were applied in 2024 through 2024 Ready Macleay across the program elements:

- Policies related to the region were mapped against the five factors;
- Activations were designed around building the enabling conditions;
- The five enabling conditions were used to assess initiatives identified through the program; and
- Indicators were also created to assess expectations and realised outcomes for Social Impact in the Regions conference delegates in the pre- and post-event surveys. As outlined in [Part B](#) of this paper, participants in the Readiness Macleay program reflected higher outcomes across the Readiness Factors compared to general participants in the Social Impact in the Regions conference.

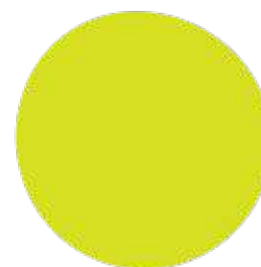
In 2025, the Readiness Factors are being expanded through the development of a Readiness Index to consider community readiness through 50 indicators across the five factors. Delivered through surveys to key stakeholders, the Readiness Index

captures the assessment of readiness at a point in time from the different roles in the community.

Survey participants frame their responses from each of their areas of expertise, be it business, education, community work, youth work, sector-focus, government, etc.. This is to ensure their feedback is unique to their role, identifies gaps and opportunities from different perspectives and networks, and helps with shared lessons in different communities.




The Readiness Index also provides for a 360-degree assessment to consider the contribution of each role in the community. This builds on a similar approach developed as part of a regional benchmarking survey in Australia that assessed the contribution of roles to community resilience.<sup>169</sup>

The Readiness Index also captures ideas on initiatives that might impact the indicators. These ideas inform community-led initiatives through the *Ready Communities* program. Combined with the mapping and regional data analysis, the annual Readiness Index provides insights into each role in the community, a measure of the strength of the network, and a strategy for how readiness might be measurably improved.



<sup>169</sup> Margarietha J de Villiers Scheepers and others, *Queensland Regional Innovation Benchmark: Research Report 2021* (University of the Sunshine Coast, 2021), doi:10.25907/00088.



 <p><b>1</b> Clarity &amp; Understanding</p>	<p><b>Clarity &amp; understanding</b></p> <p>Establishing a shared comprehension of roles, policies, and perspectives, ensuring accurate and accessible information management, and fostering continuous evaluation and feedback.</p>	<p><b>Indicators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ecosystem</li> <li>• Policies</li> <li>• Perspectives</li> <li>• Custodian</li> <li>• Culture and history</li> <li>• Vision</li> <li>• Feedback</li> </ul>
 <p><b>2</b> Connection &amp; Connectivity</p>	<p><b>Connection &amp; Connectivity</b></p> <p>Diverse, frequent connections across roles and sectors, facilitated by local and external boundary-spanning activities. Regular inclusive events foster relationships, trust, ideation, and innovation, supported by adequate infrastructure for timely interactions and progress.</p>	<p><b>Indicators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness</li> <li>• Internal</li> <li>• External</li> <li>• Infrastructure - ICT</li> <li>• Representation</li> <li>• Inclusion</li> <li>• Ideation</li> <li>• Innovation</li> <li>• Structure</li> <li>• Speed</li> </ul>
 <p><b>3</b> Capability &amp; Capacity</p>	<p><b>Capability &amp; Capacity</b></p> <p>Strong individual and institutional leadership capabilities, supported by local programs and a robust network of roles and institutions. There's redundancy in services, a pipeline of skilled youth, and sustainable capacities for individuals and organisations, all backed by adequate infrastructure.</p>	<p><b>Indicators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual sustainability</li> <li>• Organisational sustainability</li> <li>• Infrastructure - physical</li> <li>• Infrastructure - space</li> <li>• Access to capital - traditional debt</li> <li>• Access to capital - local and high-risk investment</li> <li>• Access to capital - grants and philanthropy</li> <li>• Redundancy</li> <li>• Pipeline</li> <li>• Infrastructure</li> <li>• Workforce</li> <li>• Disaster response</li> <li>• Individual leadership</li> <li>• Institutional leadership</li> </ul>



 <p><b>4</b> Collaboration for Purpose</p>	<p><b>Collaboration for purpose</b></p> <p>Individuals and organisations come together to make progress towards shared challenges and opportunities, contributions provided and value received is fair, progress is measured and expected and unintended consequences are known.</p>	<p><b>Indicators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared understanding</li> <li>• Reciprocity</li> <li>• Structure and leadership</li> <li>• Measured progress</li> <li>• Self-forming</li> <li>• Representation</li> <li>• Equality</li> <li>• Connection</li> <li>• Trust</li> </ul>
 <p><b>5</b> Advocacy &amp; Promotion</p>	<p><b>Advocacy &amp; Promotion</b></p> <p>There is a voice representative of the diverse communities, there is a shared narrative of the challenges and opportunities, and there are strategic media relationships to highlight successes and influence positive outcomes.</p>	<p><b>Indicators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocacy - special interest</li> <li>• Advocacy - region</li> <li>• Policy influence</li> <li>• Influencer access</li> <li>• Media availability</li> <li>• Media - relationships</li> <li>• Narrative</li> <li>• Promotion</li> </ul>

Figure 7 Readiness Index five factors and related indicators

## TOPIC-BASED READINESS USING HOUSING AS AN EXAMPLE: AN ACUTE AND SYSTEMIC REGIONAL CHALLENGE

Honing in on the challenge of regional housing provides a case study on the complex tapestry of interconnected issues that different development approaches have historically attempted to address in isolation. Understanding these varied perspectives offers valuable insights into both the strengths and limitations of traditional solutions, while pointing toward the necessity of a more integrated approach.

Traditional economic development views housing primarily through market mechanisms and investment potential, focusing on supply-demand dynamics, developer incentives, and infrastructure costs. While this approach effectively addresses market inefficiencies through zoning reforms and tax incentives, it often overlooks crucial social implications and may inadvertently exacerbate affordability issues and community displacement.

In contrast, community development practitioners can approach housing through the lens of social equity and community wellbeing, emphasising affordability, social cohesion, and cultural preservation. Their solutions typically encompass community housing initiatives, tenant advocacy, and social support services. While this approach effectively addresses immediate social needs, it can struggle with long-term financial sustainability and scaling solutions to meet growing demand.

Regional development attempts to bridge these perspectives but often results in compromised solutions that partially satisfy multiple stakeholders without fully resolving core issues. This approach, while broader in scope, can become caught between competing priorities, diluting the effectiveness of both economic and social interventions.

A more comprehensive framework would recognise that housing challenges in regional communities require solutions that simultaneously address market efficiency and social equity while building long-term community capacity. Such an approach would integrate collaborative planning processes, involving multiple stakeholders from project inception and developing shared visions that balance market forces with community needs.

This integrated perspective acknowledges housing's role in broader community resilience, connecting it with employment opportunities, transportation networks, and social services. It emphasises the importance of clear metrics that combine social and economic indicators, regular community feedback mechanisms, and adaptive management approaches that can evolve with changing community needs.

Successful implementation requires careful attention to both immediate housing needs and long-term sustainability goals. This includes preserving local character and culture while creating viable housing markets with diverse options. It also means fostering effective cross-sector collaboration and building local leadership capacity to ensure ongoing program success.

The path forward lies in recognising that housing is not merely a market commodity or social service, but a fundamental component of community wellbeing and regional prosperity. By adopting this integrated perspective, communities can work toward housing solutions that are economically viable, socially sustainable, and culturally appropriate. This approach creates opportunities for genuine collaboration between economic and community development practitioners, leading to more effective and lasting solutions for regional housing challenges.

The success of such an approach relies on continuous evaluation and adaptation, ensuring that both social and economic outcomes are measured and improved over time. This ongoing process of assessment and refinement helps communities build resilience while maintaining their unique character and strengthening their capacity for self-directed growth.



Community readiness would work upstream, establish a framework where the readiness indicators would be evident through:

- **Housing Clarity:** There is a shared understanding of housing availability, affordability, and quality in the community, including clarity on roles, policies, and funding that impact housing outcomes.
- **Housing Connection:** There are established and active connections between individuals, organisations, and sectors involved in housing, enabling the flow of information, access to resources, and coordination of efforts to improve housing availability, affordability, and quality.
- **Housing capability and capacity:** There is sufficient capability and capacity within the community to deliver housing outcomes, including leadership, workforce, funding, physical infrastructure, and service redundancy, ensuring the availability, affordability, and sustainability of housing to meet current and future community needs.
- **Housing collaboration for purpose:** There is a shared commitment and structured collaboration between stakeholders to address housing challenges and opportunities, ensuring inclusive participation, equitable outcomes, and measurable progress toward increasing housing availability, affordability, and quality in the community.
- **Housing advocacy and promotion:** There is an active and coordinated effort to advocate for housing priorities across the community and region, supported by a shared narrative, strong relationships with key influencers and media, and effective promotion of successes to influence policy, attract investment, and drive long-term, equitable housing outcomes.



# CASE STUDY

## Strengthening Community Development through Collaborative Partnerships in Community Housing

### Background

Across the Mid North Coast (MNC) of New South Wales (NSW), three leading Community Housing Providers (CHPs) – Community Housing Limited (CHL), Mission Australia Housing (MAH), and Home in Place Housing (HIP) – have established a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to enhance community development initiatives<sup>170</sup>. Despite being competitors in housing management, these organisations recognised the strategic advantages of collaboration in fostering stronger, more resilient communities.

The need for this partnership emerged from the region's shared Social Housing Management Transfer (SHMT) portfolios, where tenants live within overlapping service areas. By working together, the CHPs aim to address social issues more effectively, optimise limited community development resources, and improve service integration for tenants.

<sup>170</sup> Community Housing Limited, 'Mid North Coast Community Housing Tenants to Benefit from Newly Inked MoU', Community Housing Limited, 9 March 2023 [www.chl.org.au/2023/03/mid-north-coast-community-housing-tenants-to-benefit-from-newly-inked-mou](http://www.chl.org.au/2023/03/mid-north-coast-community-housing-tenants-to-benefit-from-newly-inked-mou)

### Rationale for the Community Development Partnership

The establishment of this Community Development (CD) partnership was driven by several key factors:

- **Shared Social Housing Management Transfer (SHMT) Portfolio:** The CHPs have overlapping SHMT portfolios, covering major regional centres such as Coffs Harbour and Taree, necessitating a coordinated approach to community engagement.
- **Geographic and Operational Alignment:** As all three CHPs serve tenants in the same locations, collaboration ensures more efficient resource allocation and service delivery.
- **Limited Community Development Resources:** Given financial and human resource constraints, pooling efforts maximises the impact of community initiatives.
- **Proactive and Strategic Approach:** Community development requires long-term, proactive planning, and cross-agency cooperation enhances the ability to implement sustainable solutions.

### Key Benefits of the Partnership

This collaborative effort has provided a range of benefits for tenants, housing providers, and the broader community:

#### 1. Fostering Collaboration Over Competition

Rather than operating in silos, the partnership encourages “co-opetition” – a model where competitors collaborate on shared goals. This shift in mindset has facilitated joint campaigns, working groups, and projects that enhance sector-wide improvements, particularly across the adjoining SHMT portfolios.



## 2. Resource Sharing

By sharing staff time, expertise, and physical resources, the CHPs have improved the efficiency of tenant engagement activities. For example, shared funding and workforce contributions have enabled the delivery of community programs that would have been difficult for individual providers to implement alone.

## 3. Joint Community Development Initiatives

The partnership has led to the successful implementation of projects designed to address complex social issues. For instance, the collaborative efforts in tackling hoarding and squalor among tenants have provided integrated support, combining property management expertise with social and health services.

## 4. Capacity Building and Professional Development

Through shared training sessions and knowledge exchange, staff across the three CHPs have enhanced their skills in community engagement, tenant advocacy, and crisis intervention. This capacity-building approach has strengthened the overall competency of the housing sector in the region.

## 5. Integrated Service Delivery

Coordinating responses to pressing social challenges, such as anti-social behaviour, climate resilience, and economic hardship, has led to more holistic service delivery. Joint efforts in addressing these issues have resulted in improved housing stability and tenant well-being.

## 6. Enhancing Tenant Engagement and Community Connection

The partnership has facilitated collective tenant events such as NAIDOC celebrations, estate clean-up days, and community gardening projects. These activities foster social inclusion and strengthen community bonds, empowering tenants to take an active role in their living environments.

## 7. Amplifying the Tenant Voice

By presenting at industry conferences like the Community Housing Industry Association NSW (CHIA NSW) Conference, the CHPs have ensured that the perspectives and needs of regional tenants are recognised at both state and national levels. This advocacy has contributed to policy discussions on regional housing challenges.

## 8. Establishing Best Practices in Tenant Engagement

Through joint initiatives, the CHPs have set benchmarks for tenant participation and decision-making. Best practices include tenant advisory groups, consultation sessions, and participatory budgeting for community projects.

## Implementation of the MOU

The **NSW Community Development CHP MOU** serves as a framework for collaboration and outlines commitments from all three CHPs, including:

- **Promoting a Positive Working Relationship:** The parties agree to work cooperatively, respecting the roles and expertise each organisation brings.
- **Delivering Collaborative Community Development Projects:** This includes environmental health programs, community revitalisation initiatives, and tenant-led projects.
- **Encouraging Tenant Participation and Social Inclusion:** CHPs commit to engaging tenants in programs that enhance their sense of value and connection with the broader community.
- **Resource Contribution and Joint Funding Applications:** The CHPs identify suitable locations, coordinate outreach efforts, and collaborate on securing funding for ongoing projects.



- **Ensuring Effective Communication and Governance:** Regular meetings and reporting mechanisms are established to monitor progress and address challenges.

## Examples of Collaborative Projects

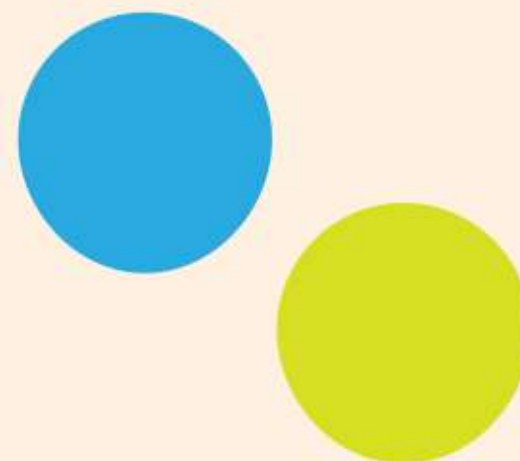
Since the establishment of the MOU, the three CHPs have successfully partnered on several impactful initiatives:

- **Garden Projects:** Community gardening programs have been implemented to promote sustainability, food security, and social cohesion among tenants.
- **Hoarding and Squalor Interventions:** Targeted support programs assist tenants in addressing hoarding behaviours, improving their living conditions and overall well-being.
- **Regional Advocacy:** Joint representation at housing industry events has strengthened the advocacy for increased investment in regional social housing.
- **CHIA Conference Presentations:** The partnership has shared insights and best practices at sector-wide conferences, highlighting the effectiveness of collaborative approaches.
- **NAIDOC Events:** Celebrations honouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture have been co-hosted to promote cultural inclusion and tenant participation such as the NAIDOC Week Housing Forum.
- **Resilient Tenants Program:** This initiative focuses on enhancing tenant self-sufficiency through skills development and mental health support.
- **Estate Clean-Up Days:** Regular community clean-ups have improved the living environment, fostering pride and responsibility among residents.

## Conclusion

The collaborative partnership between CHL, MAH, and HIP is a pioneering example of how community housing providers can work together to achieve greater social impact. By moving beyond competition and embracing cooperative strategies, these CHPs have set a precedent for regional housing collaboration in NSW. Their shared commitment to tenant engagement, resource efficiency, and strategic advocacy has not only strengthened community ties but also enhanced service delivery and housing outcomes for thousands of residents.

Moving forward, this model of collaboration could be expanded to include additional stakeholders, such as local governments and non-profit organisations, further strengthening regional housing support systems. By continuing to work together, CHL, MAH, and HIP are not only improving the lives of their tenants but also shaping the future of community housing in Australia.





PART B:

# READY COMMUNITIES YEAR 1 REFLECTIONS





## 2.0 READY MACLEAY 2024

### 2.1 PROGRAM ORIGINS AND OVERVIEW

In December 2023, Kerry Grace and Dr. Chad Renando created Ready Communities to transform how regional communities approach sustainable change. The initiative built on decades of experience and a growing movement of place-based development to integrate economic development and community development.

Kerry brought hands-on experience in community and economic development through her seven-year tenure as the CEO of Regional Development Australia Mid North Coast. Her journey as an “accidental leader” - documented in her book “Spiralling Up” - provided insights into the challenges faced by community leaders and the importance of resilience and collaboration. Having established the first Social Impact in the Regions in Coffs Harbour, NSW in September 2023, Kerry was looking at ways to have a more significant impact in communities.

Chad contributed his industry experience, academic expertise, and data-driven approach in innovation ecosystems. His work in program evaluation and regional impact as a Research Fellow at the University of Southern Queensland was built on experience growing manufacturing and digital firms in the United States and Australia, delivering leadership development and institutional transformation programs, and managing Australia’s first local government-owned innovation hub in Ipswich, Queensland. His work over two years supporting the September 2023 Global Entrepreneurship Congress in Melbourne informed frameworks for place-based change.



Ready Communities was formed from the combination of Kerry's grassroots community engagement expertise and Chad's industry and academic influence to create a balance in an approach integrating economic and social outcomes. The initiative is founded on the principle that sustainable change comes from within communities themselves, supported by the right tools, knowledge, and networks. The organisation's methodology evolved to bridge the gap between academic theory and on-the-ground reality.

The Ready Macleay pilot commenced in January 2024 in Kempsey, NSW. The remainder of this section provides the experience, evidence, and outcomes from the implementation against the features of place-based development outlined in Section 1 of this report.

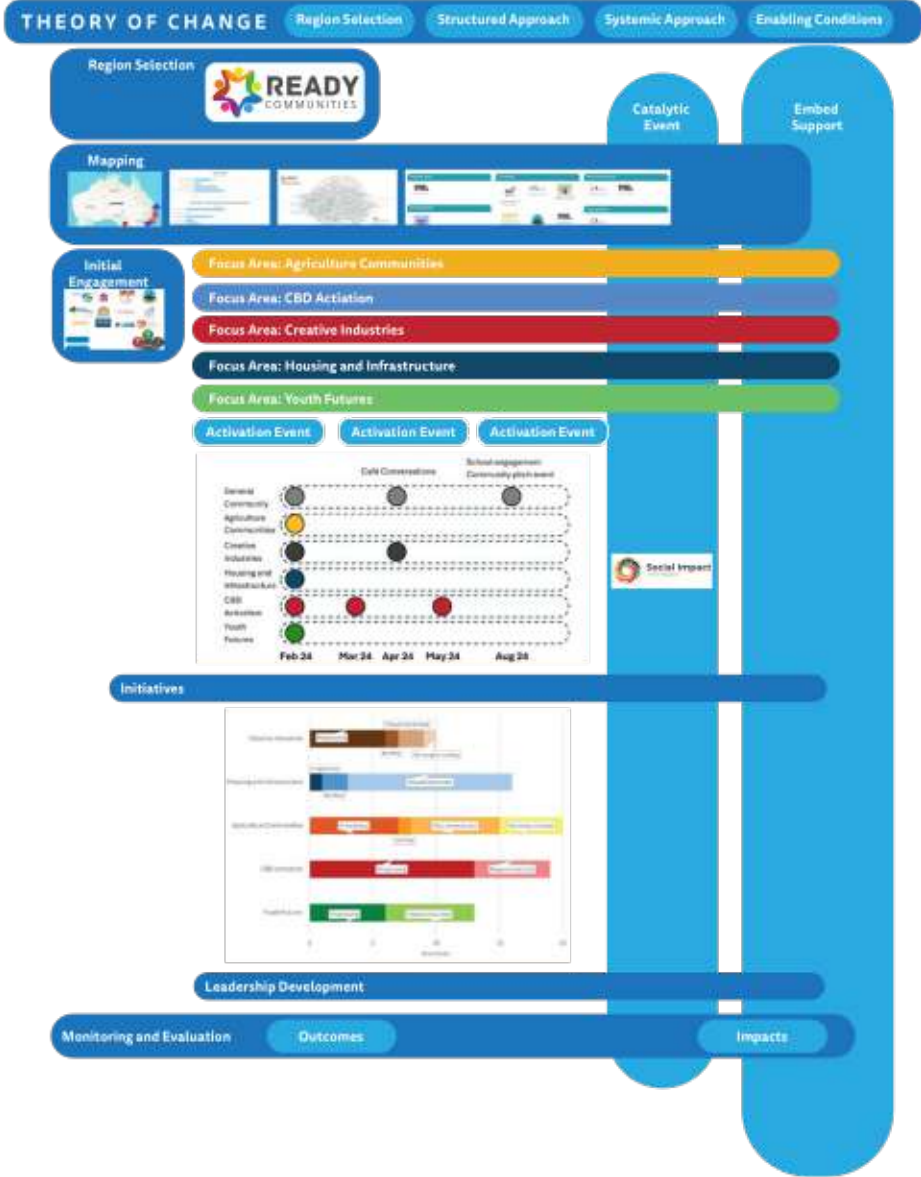


Figure 8 Ready Communities framework elements

## 2.2 REGION SELECTION

The Macleay Valley region provided a unique opportunity for the *Ready Communities* first year pilot based on meeting the region selection criteria and proximity to both program founders.

CRITERIA	READY MACLEAY
<b>Population</b> (1,000 to 50,000)	The Macleay Valley local government area population is 31,453, with a population density of 9.31. The town of Kempsey makes up just under half of the overall Macleay region with a population around 15,000.
<b>Backbone organisation</b> (Potential, existing or emerging)	Kempsey is one of ten regions funded under the ten-year Australian Government Department of Social Services Stronger People, Stronger Places (SPSP) program. Established under auspice of the Kinchela Boys Home Aboriginal Corporation in 2022, Learning the Macleay is the backbone established to support the SPSP program.
<b>Alignment</b> (Alignment with related programs through program support, augmenting or filling in gaps)	There are a number of individual programs and initiatives happening in Kempsey at any given time. The most significant other overall place-based program is the ten-year SPSP program.
<b>Observable need</b> (Potential for impact as a result of program implementation)	Kempsey is in the top ten regions in NSW list the highest poverty rates and top five for highest poverty rates for children and older people in 2021.
<b>Acceptance</b> (Willing stakeholder groups and receptive community)	Existing relationships provided positive reception with key stakeholder groups.
<b>Additional circumstances</b> (Additional factors influencing the selection)	The Macleay Valley was also chosen for its proximity to co-founder Kerry Grace's base location and her existing relationships with the community particularly via her former role as CEO of Regional Development Australia Mid North Coast.

Table 1 Ready Macleay region selection considerations

## 2.3 INITIAL ENGAGEMENT

Through January 2024, on-site and virtual meetings were held with organisations include Regional NSW, Kempsey Shire Council, Kempsey Local Aboriginal Land Council, Learning the Macleay, Kempsey Country Universities Centre, Mid North Coast NSW RDA, the Kempsey showgrounds, and representation from local agriculture, retail, and creative sectors. The conversations informed and validated the themes, considered venue options for the region, and gained support from local leaders. The five themes that emerged were agriculture communities, central business district (CBD) activation, creative industries, housing and infrastructure, and youth futures.



Figure 9 Ready Macleay initial engagement overview



## 2.4 MAPPING

Data from the *Ready Communities* program was captured through the engagement, desktop research, and integrating with existing mapping efforts. The mapping identified 97 Hubs across 27 roles, 60 organisations, 178 individuals, 40 policies, and \$68,098,848 funded by 10 hubs through 15 programs or funds. This is only a sample representation of the policy framework for the region and is intended to seed the approach for ongoing maintenance through the local backbone organisation.



Figure 10 Ready Macleay mapping examples



Policy	Total	Count
Community Child Care Fund (CCCF)	\$2,651,435	19
NSW Creative Capital Fund	\$432,654	4
Regional Airports Program	\$11,177,570	6
Regional NSW - Business Case and Strategy Development Fund	\$94,500	2
Regional Tourism Activation Fund	\$6,710,000	2
Saluting Their Service (STS) Commemorative Grants Program	\$13,700	2
Kempsey Shire Council Community Grants Program	\$45,003	17
Indigenous Youth Connection to Culture	\$400,000	1
NSW Coastal and Estuary Grants Program	\$209,999	2
NSW Floodplain Management Grants	\$309,273	4
NSW Safe and Secure Water Program	\$18,718,176	7
Community Local Infrastructure Recovery Package	\$21,829,412	4
NSW Places to Play Program	\$301,600	1
Stronger Country Communities Fund	\$4,884,093	18
NSW Community Development Fund	\$321,433	2
	<b>\$68,098,848</b>	<b>91</b>

Funding organisation	Total	Count
Australian Government Department of Education	\$2,651,435	19
Create NSW	\$432,654	4
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts	\$11,177,570	6
Department of Regional NSW	\$6,804,500	4
Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA)	\$13,700	2
Kempsey Shire Council Community Grants Program	\$45,003	17
National Indigenous Australians Agency	\$400,000	1
NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment, and Water	\$19,237,448	13
NSW Government	\$27,015,105	23
NSW Liquor & Gaming	\$321,433	2

Table 2 Ready Macleay policy mapping budget allocations

## 2.5 READINESS EVENTS, FOCUS AREAS, AND INITIATIVES

Bringing people together is at the heart of the *Ready Communities* model. **Readiness Events** are designed to convene local people around key focus areas, create momentum, and build meaningful connections. These smaller gatherings build toward a major **catalytic event**, such as the national *Social Impact in the Regions* conference, where themes, insights, and relationships converge into visible action.

The format of a Readiness Event may vary. It could be a community workshop, a networking meetup at a local venue, a pop-up gathering, or a closed session with key stakeholders. What matters most is that the event responds to local context and is led or hosted by a trusted local facilitator (the *Ready Communities* program defines this role as Local Impact Facilitators).

The **first Readiness Event** introduces the program. It offers space to test ideas, spark new conversations, and identify who is already active or interested. This early-stage engagement is invaluable—it reveals what resonates, what's already happening, and who might emerge as a local champion. It also begins to shape the direction of the work by surfacing gaps, insights, and opportunities.

**Subsequent Readiness Events** deepen the dialogue. They sharpen the focus, refine ideas, and explore whether a community of practice might emerge around a particular theme. At this stage, discussions become more structured centred on what collective action could look like, and how to align resources and energy in support of that.

These events may also take the form of **pitch opportunities**, where local groups present their ideas and begin to attract investment, partnerships, or community commitments. Over time, a theme may evolve into a dedicated **cluster**, with its own identity, partnerships, and momentum. Readiness Events also serve to connect

local energy with external support—bringing in expert voices, raising awareness, and positioning the work for longer-term impact.

While each event is tailored to place and people, together they build the scaffolding for readiness—ensuring change doesn't rely on any one moment, but emerges through many purposeful, connected steps.

A series of community consultations for each focus area were held from February 2024. The formal engagements included 91 participants over 13 facilitated workshops and conversations. These engagements identified over 70 possible initiatives which were expanded and validated in subsequent engagements. Further theme-specific engagements continued in the CBD Activation and Creative Industries focus areas, Café Conversations, and general theme discussions.



Figure 11 *Ready Macleay* engagement images



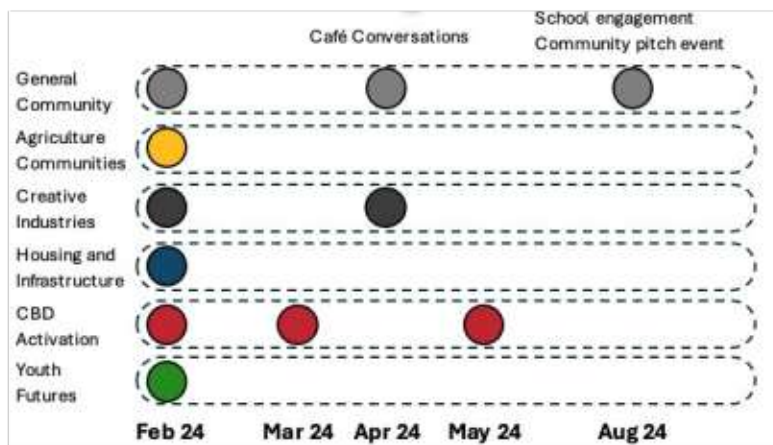


Figure 12 Ready Figure

Figure 12 Macleay engagement schedule

Each engagement attracted participation interested in one focus area as well as participants who spanned across focus areas. The CBD activation had the highest total engagement as well as the highest percentage of participants interested in the one focus area. Nearly half of the CBD Activation participants attended only the one focus area. A quarter to a third of participants in Youth Futures, Housing and Infrastructure, and Agriculture Communities were also dedicated to the one focus area.

The café conversations as an additional channel attracted participants not directly engaged in the previous focus area engagements, with 65% of participants engaging solely through the café sessions. Out of all participants in the dedicated workshops, 45% of participants could be considered as boundary spanners, participating in more than one engagement area.

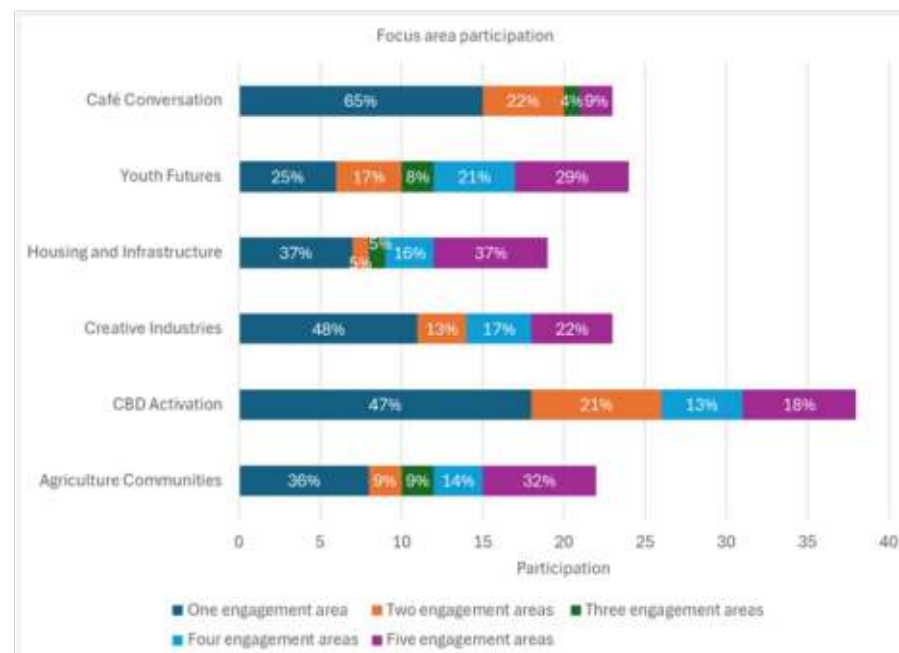


Figure 13 Ready Macleay activation engagement by percentage of participation in each focus area

The participation shows the value of participants focused on a given area as well as those who act as boundary spanners across the areas. Many participants who were long-time residents had not previously connected with each other. Through tracking connections made, we were able to identify how these connected then contributed towards the development of initiatives.

The Readiness Activities facilitated 24,345 unique connections with 279 individuals. These connections were existing and new, and between those in community as well as outside the community.

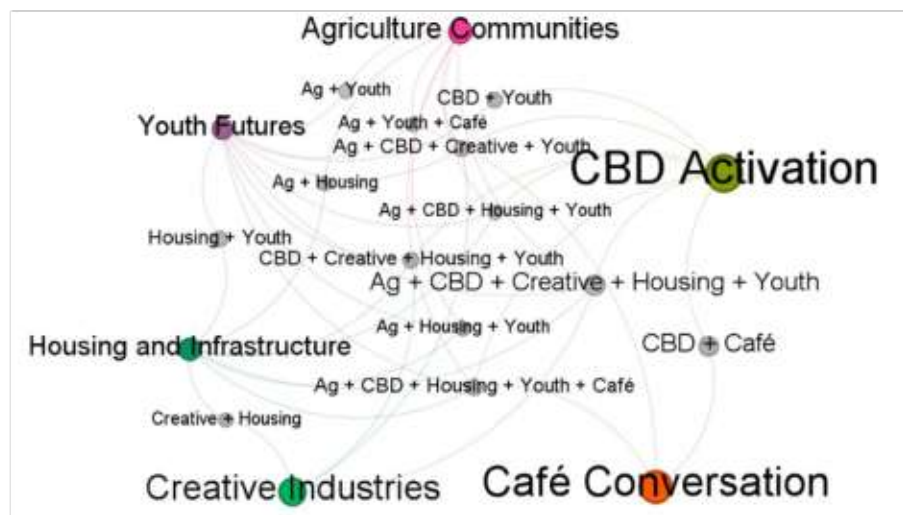


Figure 14 Ready Macleay activation participation social network graph



Figure 15 Ready Macleay cafe conversations

Initiatives developed in formal engagements and the mapping process were supported by a series of one-on-one conversations. The graphic below represents all connections formed in the formal engagements, informal connections, and mapping process.

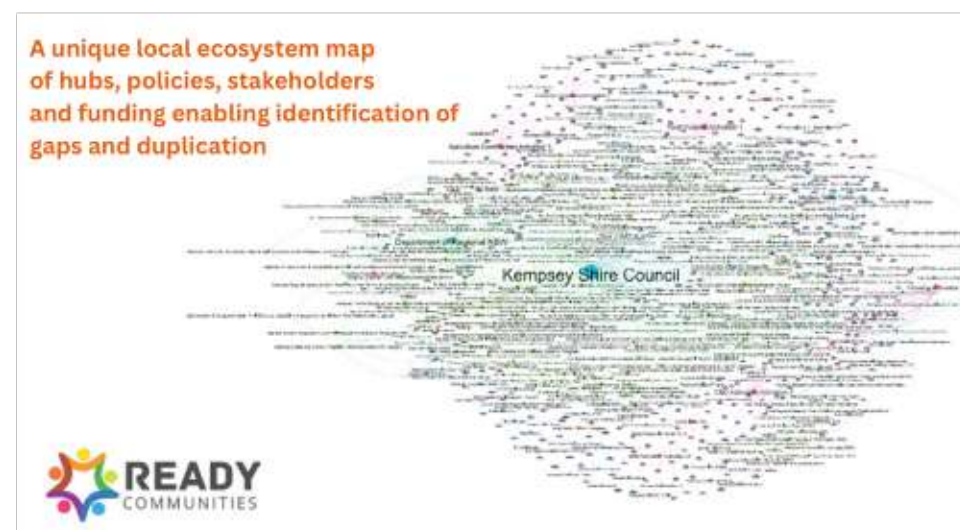


Figure 16 Ready Macleay social network graph of mapping and activation connections as of July 2024

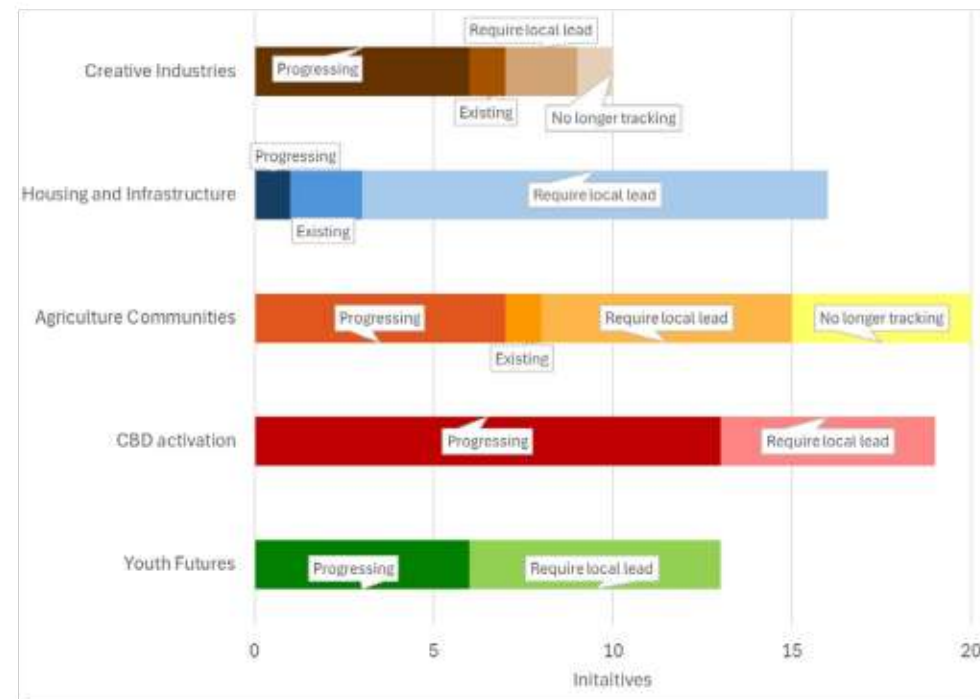
Over 70 initiatives were identified. Initiatives were grouped into three categories: focus-area driven initiatives, existing initiatives already in progress in the community or identified in existing strategies and roadmaps, and initiatives related to the upcoming Social Impact in the Regions conference. Initiatives were mapped to local policies including prominent economic development and community development strategies, roadmaps, and other policies. The mapping is based on the intersection of themes across initiatives.





**Figure 17** Ready Macleay initiatives mapped to existing policies by focus area and tagged impacts

At the end of the first year, the status of each initiative was identified as progressing, already existing, requiring a local lead, or complete or no longer being tracked.



**Figure 18** Ready Macleay initiative status as of September 2024

## Youth Futures

The Youth Futures conversations focused on opportunities to support youth across the region and include topics of education, entrepreneurship, workforce and employability, life skills development, and wellbeing. Working with education providers, established youth networks, and local service providers, topics raised include creating effective pathways for young people, increasing employability and connecting the youth workforce to local business, engaging young people in entrepreneurship and social impact, supporting teacher development and school capability and capacity, and strengthening linkages to early-age support and wellbeing services.

The youth futures consultation was primarily attended by service providers with three young people attending in the room. Ready Communities incorporated the youth futures theme in the 2024 Social Impact in the regions conference, enabling opportunities for young people to engage with social impact content and the conference.





# CASE STUDY

## Youth Social Impact Summit

### DISCOVERY:

The activations with local service providers and youth identified initiatives for “Youth leadership programs, “Amplify the voice of young people in decision making”, and “Increase access to youth events”.

### ACTIVATION:

Through awareness of the Social Impact in the regions conference, a local school teacher invited Ready Macleay to deliver a workshop in the school on social impact.

### OUTCOME:

The engagement increased awareness and excitement leading to an expansion of the youth stream in the Social Impact in the Regions national conference. The conference ran a full-day workshop on social impact with 29 students and participating in a focused session on social impact design with youth specialists Futures Isle. Several young people in attendance continue to participate in the local backbone organisation Learning the Macleay youth advisory council.



## CBD Activation

The CBD activation stream developed through a workshop activations and through walking through the main street to hear perspectives from store owners, retailers, and customers on the health of the town's main street.

Challenges and opportunities emerged that were unique to the region as well as shared by rural communities across Australia. The focus area included conversations relating to beautifying main street, leveraging and activating multi-use shared spaces, renewal strategies for vacant stores, and investment attraction opportunities.





# CASE STUDY

## CBD NAIDOC Week, Shop Local program, and local business leadership

### DISCOVERY:

Retail businesses in the Kempsey CBD were mapped to identify businesses by industry and empty retail space. Early mapping identified 33 empty shops. Activations identified initiatives to "Improve CBD atmosphere", "Address social challenges together", "More local events", "Improve communication with local shop keepers", "Networking and social events for local business", "Official group for retailers to connect", and "Shop local card".

### ACTIVATION:

The local retailers agreed to meet on a monthly basis to create more energy in the main street. The group continued to meet four times with Ready Macleay and a further two times supported by the local backbone Learning the Macleay.

### OUTCOMES:

In May, the retailers agreed to celebrate NAIDOC week in the Kempsey Community including the development of a pop-up shop, the first time this had happened in the Kempsey CBD. Staff from the Learning the Macleay coordinated a successful celebration of NAIDOC week throughout the local shops.

The momentum of the CBD activation continued with a shop local program, introducing retailers to the Why Leave Town program and bringing the program

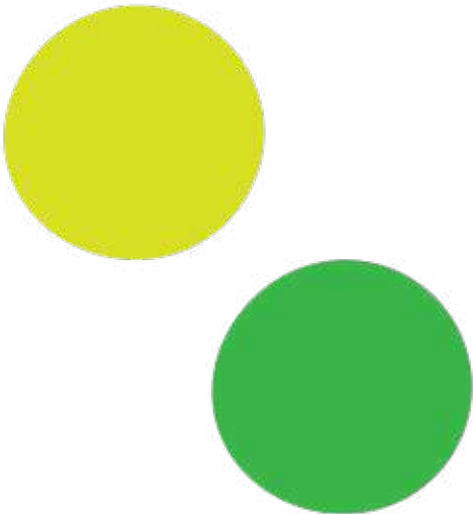
founder to present at the Social Impact in the Regions conference. Kempsey adopted the shop local program 'Kempsey Cash' which generated over \$16,000 in the local community during the 2024 Christmas period.

The activation also supported the leadership of a local retailer who led several projects during Ready Macleay, including developing a local retail map and activating Kempsey Cash, and is now representing the local retail sector through membership with the Macleay Valley Business Chamber.



# Agricultural communities

The Agriculture sector represents over a quarter of businesses in the region. Conversations related to agriculture communities include flow-on impacts across retail, tourism, hospitality, shared community assets, employment, and responses to climate impacts and targets. Building on established work in local agribusiness strategies and local agriculture initiatives and networks, topics raised include paddock to plate and getting more local food on local tables, support for farming commercial opportunities including regenerative agriculture, drought readiness, and diversification through tourism, intergenerational farming, youth pathways in agriculture, and support for women in agriculture.





# CASE STUDY

## Local Buy, Collective Networks, and Youth Agriculture Industry Engagement

### DISCOVERY:

Activation identified initiatives including "Farmer independent advice", "Farmer support networks", "Macleay Valley Foodbowl initiative", "Cultivate Ag opportunities", "Link school and industry", and "Events showcasing local produce".

Mapping identified several agriculture networks and support entities, including a federally funded Drought Innovation Hub, the state government Local Land Service, and specific sector networks including regenerative farming. There was a gap shared for a support network for the Macleay Valley agriculture community with several comments about the value of the Macleay Valley Food Bowl program for coordination and information support. The program was driven by a previous staff member at Kempsey Shire Council who longer worked at the Council and requires local leadership and support to continue or be renewed in another form. Another gap identified in the discovery was in awareness of connecting local hospitality and retail with primary production to support paddock to plate initiatives. The Discovery also identified the CultivateAg program for youth engaging in the agriculture sector.

### ACTIVATION:

Ready Communities worked alongside local caterers Mangiato to plan the Social Impact in the Regions conference menu to integrate locally made and produced food. The program also worked with CultivatAg on the business plan and model.

### OUTCOMES:

The Social Impact in the Regions conference catering spend of \$30K (31% of the conference budget) was spent with local suppliers with a focus on local produce. Ready Macleay continues to support the CultivateAg youth program. There remains a gap in centralised support to replace the Macleay Valley Food Bowl.



# Housing and infrastructure

Housing is a national challenge with particular impacts on regional communities. We acknowledge the complexity of the issue with local considerations in Kempsey including housing densities, diversity, choice, location, dwelling types, and affordability. The activation conversation focused on different ways to use living space to alleviate the housing crisis and other alternative approaches. The discussions highlighted the systemic nature of the challenge.





# CASE STUDY

## Community Housing Billeting case

### DISCOVERY:

Activation identified initiatives including “Housing support one-stop shop”, “Public transport improvements”, “Rent to own programs”, and a “Billeting program”.

### ACTIVATION:

The engagement included an activation to investigate alternative forms of housing including screening the film *Our Spaces* to stimulate conversations about community led housing solutions. To engage the local community in shared housing opportunities Ready Communities explored options to facilitate a billeting program with both a local Rotary Club and Flatmates.com. Outcomes: Regional housing was a focus issue (stream) at the SIITR24 conference in Kempsey, NSW and significant effort was made to develop programing which attracted a significant range of speakers on the topic. Community Housing Limited utilised the event as an opportunity to provide professional development in delivery of services in regional communities for their national community engagement team. While the uptake of the billeting program was limited at both the supply and demand end, two case studies will provide a solid platform for promotion at future events.

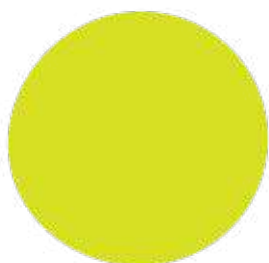
The event design also enabled the opportunity for host community needs to be addressed. A provocative comment was made about failings of the housing system. Because the stream had attracted many sector leaders representing various aspects of regional housing the leaders were able to rally around the impacted community

member and advocate for systemic improvements to remediate the expressed challenge.



## Creative industries

Creative industries play an essential role in the vibrancy, liveability, and transformative capacity of a region. Aligned with momentum from local arts and culture plans, conversations related to creative industries include cultural heritage, visual and performing arts, shared spaces, events and festivals, development and application of emerging technologies, and tourism.

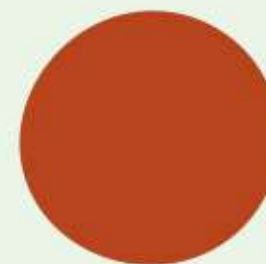




# CASE STUDY

Creative industries practitioners were engaged throughout the SIITR Conference program. Arts Mid North Coast participated in the initial consultation and contributed funding for both the photography exhibition and creation of a mural.

Ronnie Grammatica's photography exhibition provided an important insight into various segments of the Kempsey community. His exhibition spoke to what it was to be a resident of the Kempsey community. It enabled dialogue about what community is, who is included and who may be cancelled.





## 2.6 LEADERSHIP

The *Ready Communities* engagements were designed to identify, support, and grow local leadership through each focus area. As momentum built and initiatives progressed, local leaders increasingly stepped into roles that helped move ideas into action. This was particularly evident in the CBD Activation focus area, where an existing community member emerged as a key convener. Their involvement extended beyond the program, taking on a formal role with the Chamber of Commerce to represent the retail sector.

In some cases, such as with the local backbone organisation Learning the Macleay, Ready Macleay intentionally partnered with individuals in positional leadership roles. Support included facilitation, community engagement, and strategic alignment, allowing the program to complement existing efforts while offering a platform for shared leadership. In other cases, leadership emerged from less conventional roles. For example, the local Anglican church became a vital partner, with the parish priest—whose background included youth engagement and community foundations—playing a pivotal role in the Social Impact in the Regions conference and continuing into broader leadership within the *Ready Communities* program.

Leadership in Ready Macleay reflected the nature of leadership in regional communities: it is often relational, situational, and grown through action. While formal training can provide useful tools and language, the program focused on creating conditions for leadership to emerge organically through collaboration and shared purpose. In addition to partnering with designated roles such as councils and backbone organisations, Ready Macleay recognised and supported the many informal and boundary-spanning leaders who hold influence across sectors. The program provided opportunities for these individuals to extend their leadership into new domains, reinforcing the idea that strong local ecosystems depend on diverse and distributed leadership.





## 2.7 SOCIAL IMPACT IN THE REGIONS CONFERENCE AS A CATALYTIC EVENT

The second annual *Social Impact in the Regions (SIITR)* conference was held in Kempsey, NSW from 3 to 5 September 2024. The conference launched as a stand-alone conference in Coffs Harbour, NSW in 2023 and was delivered as part of the *ReadyCommunities* initiative through Ready Macleay in 2024.

The conference is unique in that it remains as a stand-alone event while also being integrated into the local community through the *ReadyCommunities* program. At a national level, the conference provides a space for changemakers, innovators, and investors working at the coalface of regional transformation. SIITR blends lived experience with practical activation immersing participants in a deeply place-based environment that bridges community insight with investment readiness. Through hands-on formats like Impact Labs, pitchfests, and local activations, it equips attendees to move from conversation to implementation.

The SIITR conference would not be possible without the support of sponsors and donors:



## Conference activities and outputs

The conference program was positioned over three days, with an additional opportunity on the first day. An interactive network map was created on the online platform Kumu to help delegates explore the speakers and topics. The conference included over 50 speakers representing over 65 organisations who worked with delegates over 44 keynotes, panels, masterclasses, and breakout sessions<sup>171 172</sup>.

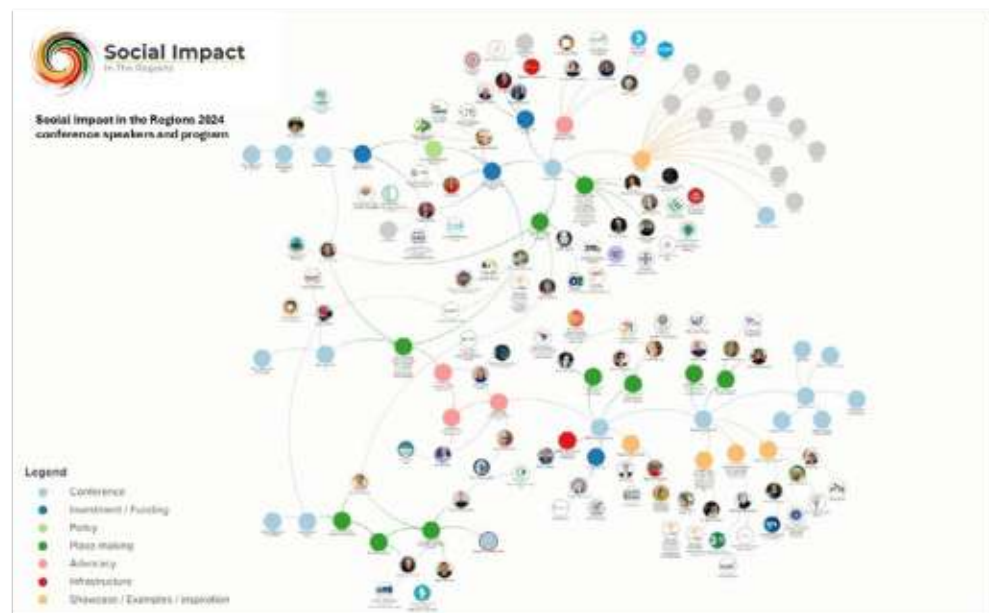


Figure 19 Kumu social network graph of Social Impact in the Regions 2024 speakers by topic area

The 2024 conference structure was designed around four goals: to be challenged and inspired, to be informed and connect to action, to have fun and reconnect, and advocate for system change<sup>171</sup>

<sup>171</sup> Social Impact in the Regions, 'All Speakers, Past and Present | Social Impact In The Regions - Conference', 28 June 2024 [www.socialimpactintheregions.com.au/speakers/all-speakers-past-and-present](http://www.socialimpactintheregions.com.au/speakers/all-speakers-past-and-present)

<sup>172</sup> Ready Communities, 'Kumu | Social Impact in the Regions 2024', Kumu, 6 August 2024 [www.kumu.io/chadrenando/social-impact-in-the-regions-2024](http://www.kumu.io/chadrenando/social-impact-in-the-regions-2024)

## The Dunghutti Express and investor tour

The first conference activity happened before the first day with the #SIITR24 Dunghutti Express and investor tour.



Figure 20 Social Impact in the Regions pre-event activities

Originally designed to travel from Sydney to Kempsey via train on a dedicated carriage, the Dunghutti Express experience was redesigned with a chartered bus when track work resulted in the train being cancelled. The unexpected infrastructure change highlights the frequent and uncertain impacts and associated costs on regional communities and the need to adapt. However, serendipity prevailed and as the Kempsey Taxi service closed the week prior to the conference leaving no transport options after work hours, the bus provided much needed connections to get to and from venues, particularly the conference dinner.



The Dunghutti Express travelled from Sydney to Kempsey via Maitland with a visit to the social enterprise cafe Organic Feast Wholefoods Café and a presentation by Hunter Valley impact leader Alex Brennan on the Newcastle region's social impact ecosystem. The experience was facilitated by Social Enterprise Council of NSW & ACT (SECNA) to support social impact connection, learning, and engagement. The investor tour visited local impact enterprise programs at the Kempsey Country University Centre, YP Space Ngurra Temporary Accommodation Centre, and the Kempsey Anglican Church conservatorium opportunity.

## Conference Day 1: Theme - Investing in regional impact



**Figure 21** *Social Impact in the Regions 2024 Day 1*

The start of the conference on Day One set the current state of regional investment and policy with a global, national, and local perspective. The day opened with the topic of Investing in Regional Impact with a global perspective from Philip Gaskin who shared about the need for access to funding, resources, networks, and knowledge, a national view from Liz Ritchie on the Regional Australia Institute's Regionalisation Ambition, and practical local insights from David Hetherington who shared about funding with the Social Enterprise Development Initiative (SEDI) Grants from Impact Investing Australia.

The speakers and panel were followed by a series of Masterclasses covering local ownership, place-based program design, funding, and advocacy. That evening the national Pitchfest showcased four social impact initiatives reducing youth offender recidivism, financial literacy, domestic violence, and retail activation connected to

entrepreneurship. The day ended with welcome drinks for delegates to meet and share insights from the day before heading into town for dinner.

## Conference Day 2: Theme - Amplifying regional voices



Figure 22 Social Impact in the Regions 2024 Day 2

The second day of the conference opened with an overview of the *Ready Communities* program and how it aligns with the Social Impact in the Regions conference with Jo-Anne Kelly and Kerry Grace. This was followed by presentations and a panel on amplifying regional voices with Fiona Nash, Commissioner for Regional Education, Phil Haines with Voices for Indi, and Adam West from the Community Housing Industry Association of NSW (CHIA), moderated by Lucy Brotherton from the City of Parramatta. The afternoon included ten breakout sessions on topics including self-care, theory of change, personal strengths, social impact measurement, main street activation, grant writing, housing innovation, governance models, and diversity.

The Gala Dinner on the evening of Day 2 was held at the Anglican church with a theme of "On the Fringe". With a full choir, a blessing from Father Jesse the Anglican priest, a circus performer, live DJ, and costumes that included a blow up unicorn, the

evening set a new standard. There is a chance this standard might be exceeded with next year's theme of "Superhero" defined by the evening's dance off champion.

## Conference Day 3: Theme - Understanding regional challenges



Figure 23 Social Impact in the Regions 2024 Day 3

The final day of the conference opened with presenters and a panel on understanding regional challenges, including insights from Natalie Eggleton from FRRR (Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal), Mary-Anne Scully from ACRE - Australian Centre for Rural Entrepreneurship, and Jamie Hutchinson from Community Housing Ltd, moderated by Kylie Flament from Social Enterprise Council of NSW & ACT (SECNA). The day closed with a session to embed learnings and inspire next steps facilitated by Talitha Devadass and Emilee Rigby from Futures Isle. The conference also included city activations like the temporary public art installation *Impressions of Tomorrow: Local Stories Through Portraiture* by Mid North Coast artist Ronnie Grammatica.



## Social Impact in the Regions conference cumulative influence

The 2025 Social Impact in the Regions conference provided a cumulative impact when considering the 2023 conference and Ready Macleay. A map of engagements create cohorts that include participants in one or a combination of Social Impact in the Regions 2023, Social Impact in the Regions 2024, and Ready Macleay activities. There are also an increasing number of individuals and organisations around the periphery who are involved in supporting the initiative and organisations connected through related policies and activities in related programs.

Close to 20% of delegates from the 2023 conference attended the conference in 2024, and 13 percent of the 2024 conference attended in 2023. One in five Ready Macleay participants attended in the 2024 conference and 9% of the 2024 conference delegates participated in *Ready Communities*. As would be expected, there was minimal cross over (between 1% and 2%) between the 2023 conference and Ready Macleay that were not related to the 2024 conference. However, the cross section between all three of the 2023 and 2024 conference and Ready Macleay was between 5% and 11%.

It is at the cross section of the initiatives that Ready Communities is focused on cumulative impact. Just as systemic change requires more than any single program or institution, we also understand that long-term change requires consistent effort across time, geography, and context. The evaluation of place-based change considers the outcomes and impact of those involved at the intersection of diverse ideas and initiatives.

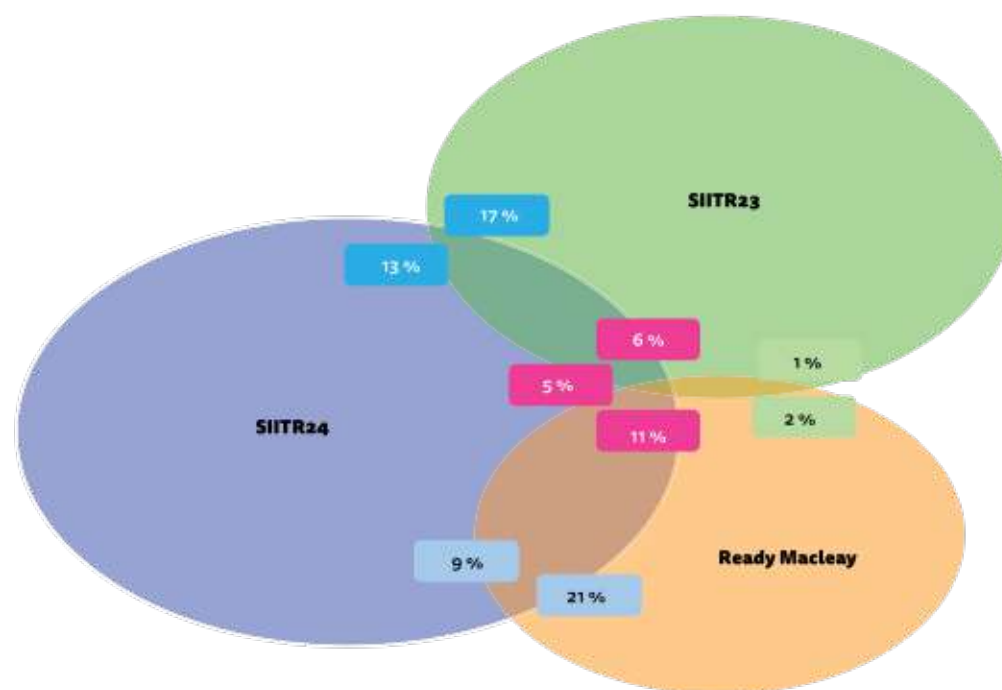
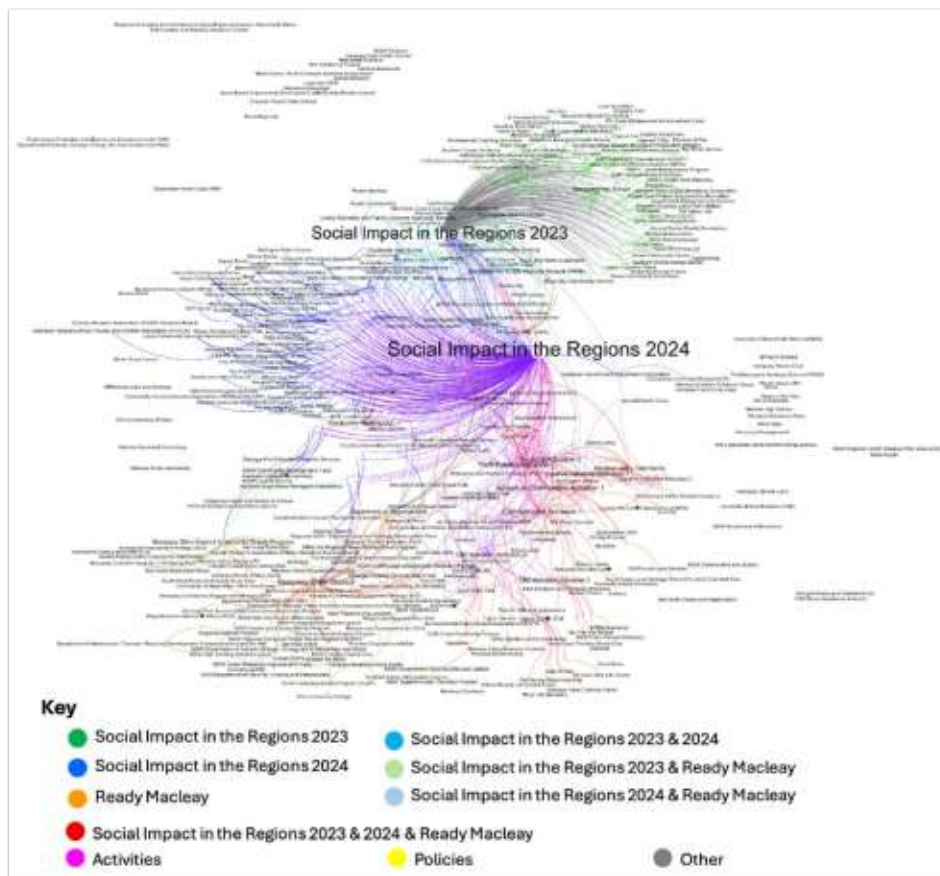


Figure 24 Percentage of cross-over between Social Impact in the regions 2023, 2024, and Ready Macleay



**Figure 25** Social network graph of Social Impact in the Regions 2023, 2024, and Ready Macleay connections

Beyond its core purpose of fostering systems change and building regional leadership capacity, *Social Impact in the Regions* delivers a range of additional benefits for both participants and host communities.

A standout feature of the event is the intentional incorporation of **neuro-arts practices** – creative, sensory, and embodied experiences that support deep reflection and emotional processing among changemakers. These practices are not incidental; they are integrated by design to support the wellbeing of delegates,

spark insight, and catalyse new ways of thinking that extend well beyond the conference walls.

The conference also plays a meaningful role in **enhancing the profile of the host community** as a place to visit, live, and work. Through its lead-in activities as part of the *Ready Communities* program, local stories and leaders are brought to the forefront. Creative initiatives such as *Love Letters to the Macleay*, which invited delegates to share reflections on what they appreciated about their visit, are later shared back into the community – creating a feedback loop of pride and recognition that bolsters local morale and cohesion.

This sense of **community cohesion** is further amplified through collaborative planning, shared local activations, and the engagement of local leaders. These efforts help bridge social, cultural, and sectoral divides – bringing people together around shared purpose and possibility.

Finally, the conference contributes to **tangible economic activity**. Through a strong local procurement policy, 96% of the total event spend remains within the surrounding region. In 2023, 41% of that was retained directly in the Macleay. From local catering to venues, transport, accommodation, and artist fees, the financial benefits are both real and measurable – providing an immediate return to the communities that host us.

Taken together, these additional outcomes demonstrate that *Social Impact in the Regions* is not just a conference – it is a catalyst for creative, economic, and social regeneration in regional Australia.





## Conference outcomes

Conference outcomes were informed by pre-event and post-event delegate surveys and capturing sentiment from social media and interviews.

### Qualitative sentiment


Qualitative questions before and after the conference included “What benefit are you most looking forward to from the Social Impact in the Regions conference?” before the conference and “What do you feel was the best part of your experience at #SIITR24?” after the conference.


As would be expected from a large event, the majority of delegates pre-and post-conference expectations related to increased connections and connectivity. The decrease in feedback related to connections from over 90% pre-conference to 70% post-conference can be attributed to an increase in other factors being top of mind. A higher number of delegates provided feedback related to increased clarity, collaboration for purpose, and advocacy and promotion, while feedback related to expected and realised capability and capacity remained around a third of delegate feedback.



**“I have made more connections and the conference has made me realise I need to talk more with others in the same field. It has also made me realise that there are so many different ways of doing things and I want to learn more.”**

Social Impact in the Regions delegate 2024


**Table 3 Social Impact in the Regions 2024 pre- and post-event expectations qualitative analysis against the five Readiness Factors**

FACTOR	PRE	POST	PRE-CONFERENCE QUOTES	POST-CONFERENCE QUOTES
 <p>Clarity &amp; Understanding</p>	17%	22%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning how to measure social impact.</li> <li>• To learn more about the landscape of social impact and social enterprise development in the regions.</li> <li>• Understanding regional needs better and how Frontier Services can play its role in supporting/partnering with those communities.</li> <li>• Learning about current and good practice, as well as Social Enterprise.</li> <li>• Learning &amp; Connecting...Gala Dinner!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affirmed: the huge difference it makes when people who really understand life in the regions are leading at the state or national level.</li> <li>• Learned: about the many initiatives that are happening in and around my region...</li> <li>• The diverse conversations, the national network of people who care...</li> <li>• As a pracademic, conferences such as Social Impact in the Regions are incredibly valuable...</li> <li>• Presenting with Dr Aastha Malhotra we shared our research insights and reflections with social purpose leaders...</li> </ul>

FACTOR	PRE	POST	PRE-CONFERENCE QUOTES	POST-CONFERENCE QUOTES
 <p>Connection &amp; Connectivity</p>	91%	70%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networking and funding opportunities.</li> <li>• Connecting with people from across the country in multiple regionally focused sectors.</li> <li>• Meeting new people!</li> <li>• Networking, raising profile of our program, looking for ways to collaborate</li> <li>• Meeting others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The connection to community here is inspirational.</li> <li>• Connecting with sector colleagues and getting inspired by the curiosity and knowledge being shared...</li> <li>• A fantastic day of inspiration and connection with passionate regional change makers.</li> <li>• The energy, the stories, the connection... I could feel it all.</li> <li>• Networking - Conference Dinner - Social Enterprise Pitch</li> </ul>

FACTOR	PRE	POST	PRE-CONFERENCE QUOTES	POST-CONFERENCE QUOTES
 <p>Capability &amp; Capacity</p>	33%	30%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am new to my role as a Community Development Officer... I am keen to learn more.</li> <li>• connections and networks, professional development, advanced skills</li> <li>• Fresh ideas tailored to regional areas...</li> <li>• Learning about and connecting with local social impact and actors.</li> <li>• Growing my skills and inspiration to be able to make a stronger impact with my work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The intensity of the personal experience that impact workers in regional Australia confront every day...</li> <li>• How social purpose leaders and managers can look after their own wellbeing...</li> <li>• Witnessing what was possible in the Macleay.</li> <li>• It was wonderful to share the work Home in Place is doing on 'place making' in Taree.</li> <li>• Listening to the views of experts in their field. Inspirational...</li> </ul>
 <p>4 Collaboration for Purpose</p>	25%	32%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networking collaboration ideas support</li> <li>• Networking with other local organisations that we might partner with...</li> <li>• connection and collaboration</li> <li>• More understanding of the organisations and people working in social services...</li> <li>• Sharing and learning as it relates to the challenges in economic service to people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-facilitating a masterclass on place-based design...</li> <li>• Making change in our communities requires getting everyone around the table.</li> <li>• Connect and learn from social impact leaders in our regions.</li> <li>• Stronger connections, support networks and an advocacy platform...</li> <li>• Connecting in context, recognising that we're all pulling in the same direction...</li> </ul>



FACTOR	PRE	POST	PRE-CONFERENCE QUOTES	POST-CONFERENCE QUOTES
 <b>5</b> Advocacy & Promotion	12%	20%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase Community awareness of capacity of Macleay region.</li> <li>• Sharing the story of how everyday people in northeast Victoria got involved in their democracy...</li> <li>• Raising profile of our program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive exposure of a town that often gets misaligned.</li> <li>• Amplifying regional voices...</li> <li>• Advocacy platform for rural and regional social impact practitioners.</li> <li>• Opportunity to showcase the work of two Macleay artists...</li> <li>• Conference speakers. Everything.</li> </ul>

## Quantitative indicators

Conference outcomes were considered as part of the Ready Macleay program as well as a stand-alone event. In the pre- and post-conference surveys, delegates were asked questions to understand initial expectations and realised outcomes against the five Readiness factors. The responses were considered based on whether the delegate had been involved in the preceding 10-month Ready Macleay program as well whether they lived within a 150km radius of the event.

**Table 4 Social Impact in the Regions final delegate ratings**

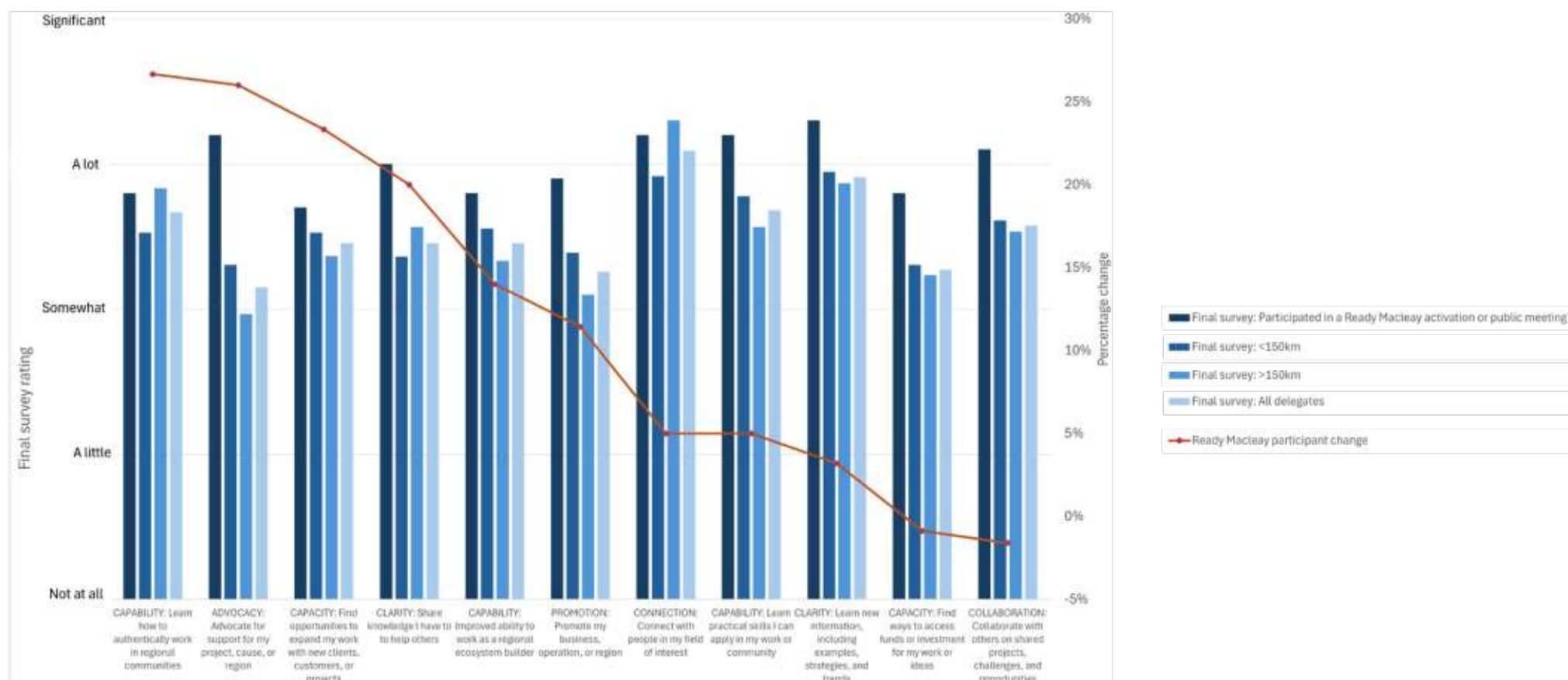
Green highest rating to red lowest rating for each grouping

	Final survey: Participated in a Ready Macleay activation or public meeting	Final survey: Live within 150km of Kempsey	Final survey: Live outside 150km of Kempsey	Final survey: All delegates
<b>CONNECTION:</b> Connect with people in my field of interest	4.20	3.92	4.30	4.09
<b>CLARITY:</b> Learn new information, including examples, strategies, and trends	4.30	3.94	3.87	3.91
<b>CAPABILITY:</b> Learn practical skills I can apply in my work or community	4.20	3.78	3.57	3.68
<b>CAPABILITY:</b> Learn how to authentically work in regional communities	3.80	3.53	3.83	3.67
<b>COLLABORATION:</b> Collaborate with others on shared projects, challenges, and opportunities	4.10	3.61	3.53	3.58
<b>CAPACITY:</b> Find opportunities to expand my work with new clients, customers, or projects	3.70	3.53	3.37	3.45
<b>CLARITY:</b> Share knowledge I have to help others	4.00	3.36	3.57	3.45
<b>CAPABILITY:</b> Improved ability to work as a regional ecosystem builder	3.80	3.56	3.33	3.45
<b>CAPACITY:</b> Find ways to access funds or investment for my work or ideas	3.80	3.31	3.23	3.27
<b>PROMOTION:</b> Promote my business, operation, or region	3.90	3.39	3.10	3.26
<b>ADVOCACY:</b> Advocate for support for my project, cause, or region	4.20	3.31	2.97	3.15

Overall delegates gained the most from connecting with people and learning new information, while accessing funds and promotion and advocacy were rated lower on average. This is due to the mix of delegates including philanthropic funders and government agencies where those outcomes were not expected.

Delegates that lived within 150km of the conference were more likely to build capability through practical skills to apply in their community, find opportunities to expand their networks, improve ability to work as an ecosystem builder, and leverage the conference for advocacy and promotion. Delegates outside the 150km radius of the conference were more likely to connect with people in their field of interest and learn how to authentically work in regional communities.

Delegates who participated in the Ready Macleay program provided an average of 12% higher rating from pre-conference expectations to post-event realised outcomes. The highest rated outcomes included learning new information, advocating, learning practical skills, connecting, and collaborating. The areas where outcomes were most increased over expectations were in learning to authentically work in community, advocating, expanding networks, and sharing knowledge with others.





The results highlight the intentional design of the Social Impact in the Regions conference to enable delegates outside the community to better engage in the local region while expanding networks and providing a voice for those in the community. Greater connections and capability were the highest outcomes from the conference across all delegates. With the expanded integration of the Social Impact in the Regions conference into the broader *Ready Communities* program, delegates who participated in the program rated higher outcomes from the conference across all areas.

## Economic outcomes

Beyond its core purpose of fostering systems change and building regional leadership capacity, *Social Impact in the Regions* delivered a range of additional benefits.

A standout feature of the event is the intentional incorporation of **neuro-arts practices**—creative, sensory, and embodied experiences that support deep reflection and emotional processing among changemakers. These practices are not incidental; they are integrated by design to support the wellbeing of delegates, spark insight, and catalyse new ways of thinking that extend well beyond the conference walls.

The conference also plays a meaningful role in **enhancing the profile of the host community** as a place to visit, live, and work. Through its lead-in activities as part of the *Ready Communities* program, local stories and leaders are brought to the forefront. Creative initiatives such as *Love Letters to the Macleay*, which invited delegates to share reflections on what they appreciated about their visit, are later shared back into the community to create a feedback loop of pride and recognition.

This sense of **community cohesion** is further amplified through collaborative planning, shared local activations, and the engagement of local leaders. These efforts help bridge social, cultural, and sectoral divides to bring people together around shared purpose and possibility.

Finally, the conference contributes to **tangible economic activity**. Through a strong local procurement policy, 96% of the total event spend remains within the surrounding region. In 2024, 41% of that was retained directly in the Macleay. From local catering to venues, transport, accommodation, and artist fees, the financial benefits are both real and measurable to provide an immediate return to the host communities.

- Over \$348K was generated in the Macleay Valley in 2024 through SIITR24
- Most hotel beds were booked out in the Macleay
- 31% of the conference budget was allocated to 8 Macleay Valley caterers
- 51% of delegates who responded to the post conference survey said they were likely or very likely to return to the Macleay
- The direct conference spend was \$99,599
  - 20% of this was spent on creative industries practitioners
  - 96% was spent on SMEs in the Mid North Coast of NSW
  - 41% was spent directly with Kempsey based businesses
  - 80% was spent within the Mid North Coast of NSW
  - Over \$80K of latent resources was activated in cash and in kind.



## 2.8 OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

### Outcomes described by the Readiness Factors

#### Clarity

The *Ready Communities* program enhanced clarity by raising awareness through mapping and events, aligning shared challenges with new and existing initiatives and policies, and surfacing local strengths. Through mapping, readiness events, and community-led engagements, participants gained clearer insight into their own roles, the broader ecosystem, and how existing policies and strategies align with local aspirations. Gaining new information was rated the highest in the through the Social Impact in the Regions conference for Ready Macleay program participants. Through workshops, panels, and informal engagements, participants deepened their knowledge of system-level thinking and gained clearer insight into the enabling conditions required for long-term change.

Through Year Two of the Ready Macleay program, the mapping platform is being expanded and integrated into the local backbone organisation Learning the Macleay.

#### Connection

Connection was a hallmark outcome across all aspects of the program. From early mapping to structured activation events and informal café conversations, the program brought together individuals and organisations who had never previously worked together – despite living and working in the same region. The deliberate design of focus areas and cross-sector engagements enabled both depth (within themes like youth, housing, or creative industries) and breadth (across themes and roles). Many participants were identified as “boundary spanners” – playing a crucial role in linking otherwise disconnected networks. Connection was the highest outcome across all groups at the Social Impact in the Regions conference. The

growing web of relationships strengthens the region's capacity to collaborate, share knowledge, and respond more effectively to emerging opportunities and challenges.

Outcomes from connections continue to be realised in Year Two as new projects emerge from the connections made in Year One.

#### Capability and capacity

The program invested in growing local capability by supporting community members to lead, convene, and collaborate. Participants gained practical skills in areas like initiative design, project planning, advocacy, and facilitation – often through applied, hands-on experience rather than formal training. Local leaders were identified, encouraged, and supported to take initiative, and Ready Communities adapted support as momentum built. The capability for learning new skills was the most significant change for Ready Macleay participants from the Social Impact in the Regions conference while the ability to apply skills in their own communities was the highest outcome for conference delegates outside the region (greater than 150 km away). Leaders in the program moved into new community roles, other leaders are developing skills in creating business cases and advocacy, and new social infrastructure is in development. The scaffolding approach was designed such that capability and capacity were built within the community rather than being temporarily imported.

In Year Two, capability development continues with key leaders in the region for longer-term initiatives and continued integration of mapping platforms.



## Collaboration

Ready Communities helped unlock new forms of purposeful collaboration by convening people around shared goals and creating structures to support collective action. The program was intentionally designed to avoid “collaboration for its own sake,” instead anchoring efforts around clearly defined focus areas and enabling mechanisms such as local events, mapped initiatives, and strategic partnerships. Throughout the year, clusters of interest formed organically and began to coalesce into communities of practice, supported by ongoing engagement. The CBD Activation was the most evident example, resulting in shared outcomes of NAIDOC week and the Shop Local campaign. While Collaboration was in the top five outcomes from the Social Impact in the Regions conference for Ready Macleay participants, it was also the least changed as a result of the conference perhaps due to already high expectations from the previous ten months.

Collaborations in Year Two continue, although in smaller connections rather than in broad groups across focus areas.

## Advocacy and promotion

The program elevated the voices of regional communities – both within and beyond the region – through intentional storytelling, strategic communications, and direct engagement with influencers and media. Initiatives such as local business leadership, youth forums, and NAIDOC celebrations became vehicles for amplifying local narratives. The integration of national platforms like the Social Impact in the Regions conference allowed for shared stories to gain broader traction and shifted perceptions of the host community. Advocacy was one of both the highest rated outcomes and an outcome that exceeded expectations for Ready Macleay participants attending the Social Impact in the Regions conference. Ready Communities also fostered internal confidence within the region, helping community members see themselves as credible actors and champions for long-term change.





## Mapping activities to outcomes to impact

Impacts were evident through the first year of Ready Macleay, and ongoing evaluation will continue to assess the long-term impacts realised as a result of the activities. While an aggregate analysis of impacts is not available at this time, correlation can be mapped using the examples of the two case studies below.

These are just two of a number of similar initiatives that have ongoing impact opportunities. Similar activities to outcomes to impacts will continue to be mapped from the Ready Macleay program and integrated with future *Ready Communities* programs.

### CBD Activation

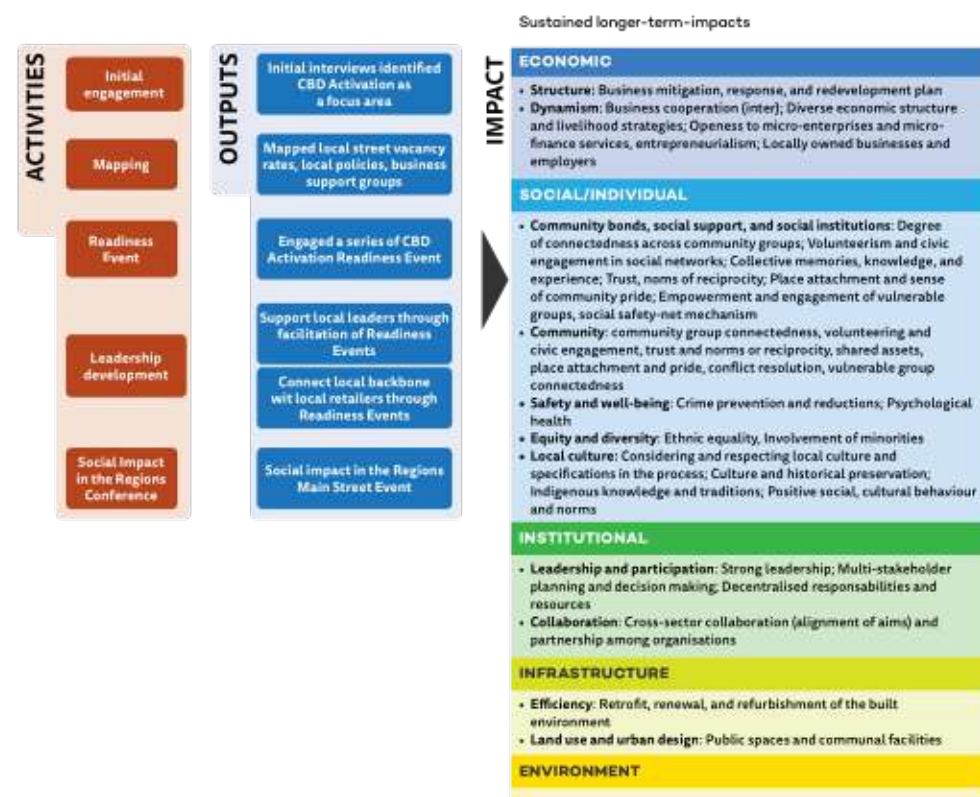


Figure 26 Impact evaluation for CBD Activation

The CBD Activation involved activities of Initial interviews identifying CBD Activation as a focus area, mapping local main street vacancy rates, local policies, and business support groups, engaging a series of CBD Activation Readiness Events, supporting local leaders through facilitation of Readiness Events, connecting the local backbone Learning the Macleay with local retailers through Readiness Events, and dedicated Main Street activation workshops in the Social Impact in the Regions conference.

These activities resulted in outcomes of a shared understanding of vacancy rates and challenges and opportunities for local retail, Connections made during CBD Activation readiness Events. Connections made between local retailers and Chamber of Commerce business community, the Development of local leadership in main street retail, a Retail cluster developed to workshop initiatives, leading to main street map, local buy, and NAIDOC Week celebration, and Raising awareness for challenges and opportunities for local retail.

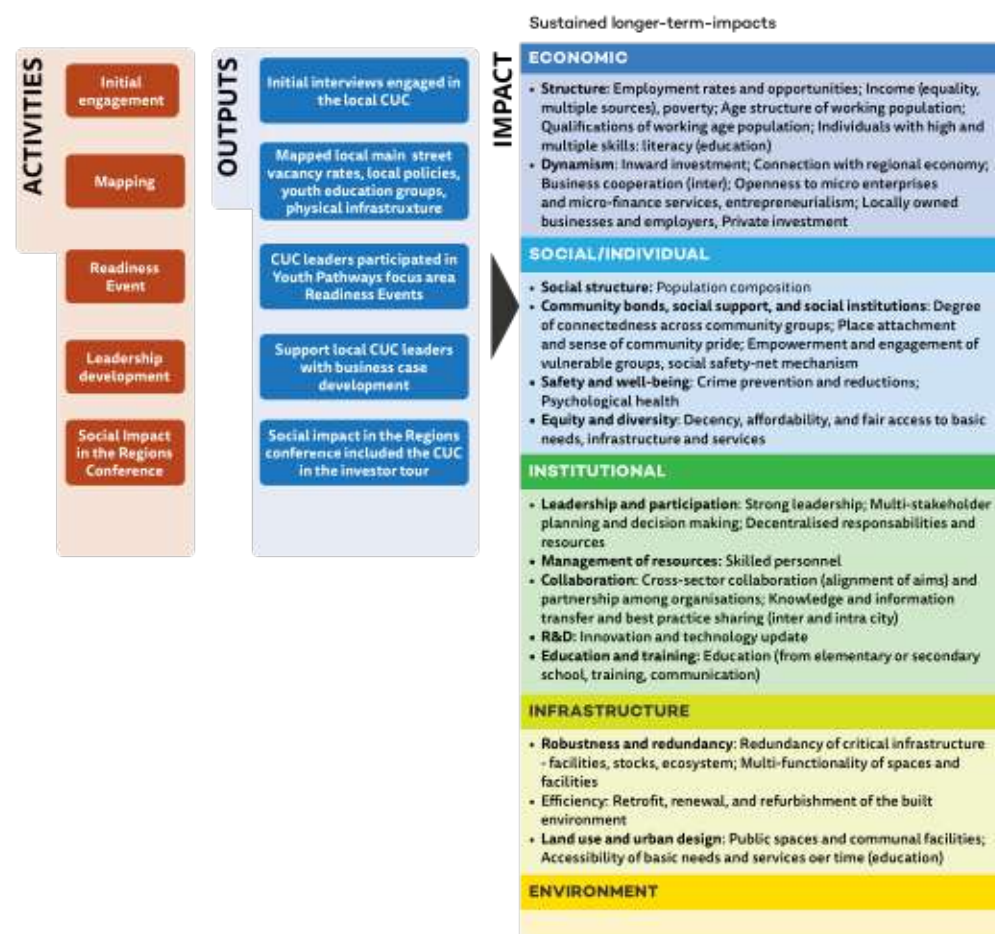
Longer-term impacts were seen across dimensions, including:

- Economic, through collective business planning, business cooperation, diversity of business structures, and openness to new business;
- Social and individual, through connectiveness, volunteerism, shared experiences, trust and norms, community pride, and safety;
- Institutional through leadership, planning, decentralised responsibilities, and collaboration; and
- Infrastructure through shared use of assets



## Retail Centre and Country University Centre hub model

The use of the disused retail space for the Social Impact in the Regions conference venue and subsequent proposed expansion of the Country University Centre into the space as an education and innovation hub could not have been identified at the start of the Ready Macleay program but emerged through the process.



The Initial Engagement interviews engaged the local CUC as well as explored opportunities for a venue. The Mapping process mapped a related cross section of information including local main street vacancy rates, local policies, youth education groups, and physical infrastructure. The CUC leaders participated in Youth Pathways focus area Readiness Events which shared insights from the local retail leaders in the CBD activation sessions and explored opportunities with the Creative Industries focus area. As the ideas formed later in the program, capability was developed in the local leaders in support with the business case and the Social Impact in the Regions conference included the CUC in the investor tour.

Outcomes were realised across the five Readiness Factors. There was increased clarity through a Shared understanding of local physical infrastructure availability, Clarity of Hub business models and value proposition, and Shared understanding of youth education pathways. Connections were increased from the Youth Futures Readiness Events and other related focus area readiness Events and Connections between the local asset owner and the CUC. Capability increases included individual leaders with Enhanced leadership skills in business case development and the physical assets in Developing the physical infrastructure of shared space. Ongoing collaboration is evident from Developing the shared space for collaboration and a Collaborative group developing for expansion of CUC into available retail space. Advocacy outcomes include Raising awareness for success of the local CUC, the CUC model, and advocacy of opportunity for expansion.

The proposal is in development and long-term impacts are potential at this stage. If the proposal goes ahead for the CUC expansion into the retail space, there is likely impacts across economic, social, individual, institutional, and infrastructure dimensions.

Figure 27 Impact evaluation for Retail Centre and Country University Centre hub model

PART C:

# LESSONS LEARNED AND WHAT'S NEXT: READY GRAFTON 2025







## LESSONS FROM READY MACLEAY

The Ready Macleay represented the first implementation of the *Ready Communities* program. The program realised outcomes and there is evidence of ongoing impact. There are also lessons that have been applied for future changes in the 2025 Ready Grafton program:

### **A shift in approach to initiatives and local Impact Facilitators**

The identification of initiatives from the initial Readiness Events helps focus attention. While the Ready Communities team was able to leverage over \$80,000 in latent or in-kind support to progress some of these initiatives, the approach also required significant energy and facilitation from Readiness Communities that did not have the capacity to manage the initiatives to completion. Resourcing and managing local initiatives is not scalable or efficient, particularly in regions where other existing functions, such as local government, chambers of commerce, or service providers are better positioned to lead that kind of implementation. Ready Communities exists to complement and build capability in those roles, not duplicate them.

Gathering and promoting initiatives also risked raising expectations in the community. It looked and felt similar to previous engagement efforts that collected, showcased, and supported ideas. The external management of initiatives to completion can also be counter-productive to the original goal of building readiness in the community. There is a balance between having tangible and visible outcomes and the intangible asset of local capacity and capability to deliver those outcomes. The *Ready Communities* model is intended to help communities build the infrastructure, clarity, and confidence to lead their own futures. It's about readiness, not delivery.

While initiatives will continue to be identified in Ready Communities, they will be fewer in number and almost exclusively related to the conference. The structure of the program is also focused on identifying and supporting a local Impact Facilitator embedded in a particular area of focus. The investment is made in the person, not the idea. By backing local leadership, we ensure the work is deeply grounded, sustainable, and able to evolve in response to community priorities.

## Establishment of the Readiness Index

The Readiness Communities evaluation framework of the five readiness factors and six dimensions of resilience is a helpful tool for both designing delivery and understanding the outcomes and impacts. This has been expanded into the Readiness Index, a survey provided to local leaders and Impact Facilitators as benchmarking tool that is longitudinal, cross-region, and cross-impact area, to support co-creating of program design, and as an evaluation framework for program feedback and improvement. The Readiness Index is integrated with the Ready Communities digital mapping platform for transparency and efficiency of evaluation.

The screenshot shows the 'Clarity and understanding' section of the Readiness Index survey. It includes a header with a purple icon and a brief explanation of the survey's purpose. Below this, there are two main sections, each with a title and a list of radio button options. The first section is '1. Roles and organisations' and the second is '2. Policies'. Each section has a 'Select one of the following options' instruction and a list of options ranging from 'NONE' to 'FULL'.

**1. Roles and organisations:** The community has a shared understanding and map of roles and organisations and their accountability.

- ☐ NONE: There is no shared map of resources, and there is little to no understanding of available support.
- ☐ MINIMAL: A map of resources may exist, but it is not readily accessible or used, and understanding of available support is limited.
- ☐ MODERATE: A map of resources is available in some form, with a partial understanding of available support, and it is somewhat used.
- ☐ INITIAL: A map of resources is available but may not be current, there is a shared understanding of available support, and it is used by some of the community.
- ☐ FULL: A map of resources is available, current, and usable, there is a strong shared understanding of available support, and it is actively used by the entire community.
- ☐ Unknown / unable to answer

**2. Policies:** There is a shared understanding of policies (strategies, roadmaps, programs, funding, grants, etc.), including alignment and gaps, and the amount and nature of funding opportunities is known.

- ☐ NONE: There is no shared understanding of policies or funding opportunities, nor how they apply to the community.
- ☐ MINIMAL: There is limited awareness of policies and funding opportunities, with little understanding of their application.
- ☐ MODERATE: There is some understanding of policies and funding opportunities, and how they apply in practice.
- ☐ INITIAL: There is a good understanding of policies and funding opportunities in some areas, and some work is intentionally aligned with them.
- ☐ FULL: There is a strong shared understanding of policies and funding opportunities across all areas, and most work is purposefully aligned with them.
- ☐ Unknown / unable to answer

The screenshot shows the 'Summary of Your Responses' section of the Readiness Index survey. It includes a header with the title 'Summary of Your Responses' and a sub-header 'Clarity and Understanding'. Below this, there are two main sections, each with a title and a list of radio button options. The first section is '1. Roles and organisations' and the second is '2. Policies'. Each section has a 'Select one of the following options' instruction and a list of options ranging from 'NONE' to 'FULL'.

**Summary of Your Responses**

**Clarity and Understanding**

- ☐ Roles and organisations: NONE: People do not recognise challenges and opportunities from perspectives other than their own.
- ☐ Roles and organisations: MINIMAL: A map of resources may exist, but it is not readily accessible or used, and understanding of available support is limited.
- ☐ Roles and organisations: MODERATE: Some knowledge of roles and resources exists, but it is limited to certain groups, and past lessons are rarely referenced in decision-making.
- ☐ Roles and organisations: INITIAL: There is a good understanding of policies and funding opportunities in some areas, and some work is intentionally aligned with them.
- ☐ Roles and organisations: FULL: There is a strong shared understanding of policies and funding opportunities across all areas, and most work is purposefully aligned with them.
- ☐ Roles and organisations: Unknown / unable to answer

**Connection and Connectivity**

- ☐ Connection and Connectivity: NONE: There is no shared understanding of policies or funding opportunities, nor how they apply to the community.
- ☐ Connection and Connectivity: MINIMAL: There is limited awareness of policies and funding opportunities, with little understanding of their application.
- ☐ Connection and Connectivity: MODERATE: There is some understanding of policies and funding opportunities, and how they apply in practice.
- ☐ Connection and Connectivity: INITIAL: There is a good understanding of policies and funding opportunities in some areas, and some work is intentionally aligned with them.
- ☐ Connection and Connectivity: FULL: There is a strong shared understanding of policies and funding opportunities across all areas, and most work is purposefully aligned with them.
- ☐ Connection and Connectivity: Unknown / unable to answer

Figure 28 Readiness Index Survey



## Readiness Events

Rather than three defined 'activation' phases, Readiness Events are delivered at the pace suited to each of the focus areas. The events are utilised as a tool to bring critical mass to the focus areas, and support to the Impact Facilitators. Rather than a flurry of events at the commencement of the program which act as fact finding (or initiative defining) ventures, Readiness Events take the form defined by the Impact Facilitator. They may be a community conversation, a workshop, or even a general meet up. [Title] Impact Labs; [Copy] Each Impact Facilitator is offered the opportunity to form up a concept for an 'Impact Lab' which is hosted at the Social Impact in the Regions event. Impact Labs are part of the SIITR program and delegates are invited to choose the lab best suited to their areas of interest. During the lab the audience is invited to contribute to the local idea providing experience, intelligence, support and even funding. Local people (who may not be attending SIITR) are also invited to participate in the Impact Lab.

## Impact Labs

Each Impact Facilitator is offered the opportunity to form up a concept for an 'Impact Lab' which is hosted at the Social Impact in the Regions event. Impact Labs are part of the SIITR program and delegates are invited to choose the lab best suited to their areas of interest. During the lab the audience is invited to contribute to the local idea providing experience, intelligence, support and even funding. Local people (who may not be attending SIITR) are also invited to participate in the Impact Lab.





# CONCLUSION: ADVANCING REGIONAL READINESS TOGETHER

Rather than focusing solely on impacts or isolated interventions, the approach provides a practical framework to build scaffolding for communities to shape and sustain their own futures.

A **key takeaway** from the first year of implementation through Ready Macleay and the Social Impact in the Regions conference is that readiness is both measurable and actionable. When communities are supported to build shared clarity, deepen local connections, strengthen capacity and capability, collaborate with purpose, and advocate with confidence, outcomes emerge that are both tangible and transformational.

This report offers lessons and opportunities for a range of stakeholders:

## FOR POLICY MAKERS

- **Shift from transactional to enabling investments** by supporting frameworks that build local capacity and collaboration.
- Use tools like the **Readiness Index** to track enabling conditions over time and guide adaptive policy responses that reflect regional complexity.
- **Bridge community and economic development portfolios**, recognising that challenges are systemic and that enduring impact requires both social infrastructure and economic inclusion.

## FOR PRACTITIONERS

- Consider **repeatable yet flexible approaches** that can be adapted to local context.
- Emphasising activation, mapping, and co-design builds trust and momentum while strengthening community leadership.
- Test the five Readiness Factors to consider alignment for diverse initiatives, progress measurement, and supporting systems-level change.

## FOR PROGRAM FUNDERS AND PHILANTHROPY

- Investing in the **"space between"** is critical to long-term outcomes.
- The Readiness Index and mapped initiatives provide **real-time insight into emerging impact and gaps**, enabling more strategic and responsive funding decisions.
- Funders can support **local impact facilitators** and cross-sector convening roles that foster distributed leadership.
- Invest in **change eco-systems** ensuring capability is built among support networks and reducing reliance on fly in-fly out support
- **Be aware of language barriers** that discourage participation among regional practitioners (e.g. regional practitioners may not recognise terms like social enterprise, social impact)

## FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

- Community readiness begins with **shared vision and local leadership** - every resident has a role to play.
- The tools and examples in this report demonstrate how local energy can be **amplified into broader outcomes** through structured support.
- Building readiness strengthens not just responses to challenges but also **opportunities for growth, investment, and self-determination**.

As Ready Communities expands into Ready Grafton in 2025 and continues to deepen work in Kempsey, the invitation remains open. The model is not a fixed solution, but a platform for **shared learning, collaboration, and adaptive action**. By focusing on readiness as an enabler of impact, we can collectively transform the way we approach place-based development in Australia.







## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

W: [www.readycommunities.com.au](http://www.readycommunities.com.au)

Kerry Grace

E: [kerry@readycommunities.com.au](mailto:kerry@readycommunities.com.au)

Dr. Chad Renando

E: [chad@readycommunities.com.au](mailto:chad@readycommunities.com.au)