

**Murdoch Childrens
Research Institute**

Healthier Kids. Healthier Future.

The state of play in Australian place-based activity for children

Collaborate for children: scoping project

Produced by the Centre for Community Child Health

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The Royal **Children's**
Hospital Melbourne

About this report

This publication has been developed by the Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and The Royal Children's Hospital as part of the Collaborate for children: scoping project funded by the Australian Government Department of Education. It provides a summary of project findings with recommendations for accelerating place-based efforts.

Over 12 months, the project investigated the Australian place-based landscape to understand how we can better promote children's wellbeing through place-based initiatives. This publication is one of four key reports produced through the project. The reports are:

- *The evidence: what we know about place-based approaches to support children's wellbeing*
- *A snapshot of place-based activity promoting children's wellbeing – who is driving, doing and supporting place-based initiatives*
- *Big thinking on place: getting place-based approaches moving*
- ***The state of play in Australian place-based activity for children – a summary of project findings with recommendations for accelerating place-based efforts.***

All publications can be downloaded from www.rch.org.au/ccch.

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About us

The Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and The Royal Children's Hospital is committed to supporting and empowering communities to improve the health, development and wellbeing of all children. The

Centre works in collaboration with campus partner The University of Melbourne to integrate clinical care, research and education in community child health. The Centre provides leadership in early childhood and community health at community, state, national and international levels, and is widely recognised for its clinical, teaching, research and advocacy programs.

The Centre seeks to enhance outcomes for children through:

- population health research
- policy and advocacy
- consultancy in service improvement and innovation
- training and professional development
- specialised clinics
- knowledge translation and dissemination.

Thank you

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Contents

Executive summary	4
Overview	6
The evidence	7
A snapshot of activity	10
Big thinking about place	12
Getting place-based approaches moving	16
References	19

Executive summary

Overview

Increasingly, governments, philanthropy, practitioners and communities in Australia have recognised place-based approaches as a means to tackle disadvantage and address the complex problems faced by children and families in today's society. However, there is a perceived lack of cohesion in describing place-based approaches as well as limited coordination across policy, practice and research in designing, executing and supporting place-based initiatives. In response to these issues, the Australian Government Department of Education funded the Centre for Community Child Health to examine the Australian place-based landscape and consider:

- the evidence for place-based approaches to improve children's wellbeing
- current place-based activity promoting children's wellbeing across Australia
- issues and opportunities for accelerating Australian place-based approaches.

Overall, the project sought to answer whether place-based initiatives to promote children's wellbeing could be better supported by a national effort to stimulate knowledge exchange, collaboration, dialogue and learning between policy makers, researchers, practitioners and communities.

This final report, *The state of play*, draws from and summarises three key publications produced by the Centre for Community Child Health during the project:

1. *The evidence* – summarising what we know about place-based approaches.
2. *A snapshot of place-based activity* – documenting who is driving, doing and supporting place-based initiatives in Australia.
3. *Big thinking on place* – outlining expert-identified issues and opportunities for getting place-based activity moving.

This report provides recommended action to accelerate place-based efforts to improve children's wellbeing and address inequalities in Australia, based on project findings.

The evidence

A literature review was undertaken to bring together the latest research on place-based approaches, stimulate thinking and to help craft a common way of talking about 'place'. This report provides a brief summary of the evidence that is expanded upon in *The evidence*. It focuses on the following key questions:

- What are place-based approaches?
- How do they work?
- What is the evidence of efficacy?
- What evidence is missing?

A snapshot of activity

A 'snapshot of activity' was developed to better understand who is driving, doing and supporting innovative or well-known examples of place-based approaches in Australia. It was thought that this information offered the greatest value to the sector and would help to identify organisations or initiatives supporting, or with the potential to support, the strategic coordination of place-based approaches. This report documents the key findings that are expanded upon in *A snapshot of place-based activity*.

Big thinking on place

We listened to 23 experts across policy, practice, research and philanthropy to understand the issues and opportunities for accelerating effective place-based practice to improve children's wellbeing. Consultations revealed a number of issues or gaps that were perceived to diminish the effectiveness of child-focused, place-based initiatives in Australia, and a series of solutions were offered by participants in response to these issues/gaps.

Key themes included the need for:

- new skill sets to deliver place-based initiatives
- expertise in collaborative practice and co-production with families
- evaluation for learning and impact
- a more rigorous and coordinated research agenda
- better ways to exchange knowledge and information, particularly across practitioners
- advocacy and leadership on place-based approaches in Australia.

Getting place-based approaches moving

Our examination of Australian place-based approaches supporting children’s wellbeing tells us that, as a strategy for improving outcomes for children and families, place-based approaches continue to gain traction and resonate with government, philanthropy, practitioners and communities. However, we are still at the early stages of understanding *what* works in relation to place, as well as *how* it works and, indeed, *if* place-based models actually make a difference to children’s wellbeing.

Given the absence of critical information and the early stage of the Australian place-based journey, our narrative is fractured and greater coherence is required to generate a broader understanding and will, that can support the right type and length of investment in the promotion of children’s wellbeing.

The high level of place-based activity currently underway, and the apparent similarity in focus and target of many initiatives, provides us with significant opportunities to learn from others, advance expertise, test different methods and share findings. However, without an overarching coordinated strategy that fosters an ability to share resources and learnings, both duplication and missed opportunities will continue to occur.

Broadly, action in the following areas is necessary to accelerate progress and leverage from existing opportunities and investment in place-based initiatives:

- thought leadership, advocacy and coordination
- whole-of-government policy
- co-production of policy
- funding arrangements that foster collaboration, rather than competition
- investment in the right type of research; that is, well-designed long term evaluations to measure impact, as well as evaluation that promotes continuous learning and improvement
- better coordinated research, targeting areas where there has been an identified need for greater evidence
- network/s to share lessons and knowledge (may draw on an existing network or information exchange mechanism)
- targeted professional development to strengthen expertise and address skill gaps.

A national effort could advance the place-based reform agenda in Australia with the right level of focus and with willingness and collaboration across policy, practice and research. We believe the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) is well placed to convene this national effort and recommend:

- ARACY establish and play a convening role in a national network to advance the place-based reform agenda in Australia to promote children’s wellbeing.
- ARACY facilitate a collaborative and inclusive process to develop a shared plan of action for the network, with with clear links to The Nest.
- Policy-makers, practitioners, researchers and other agencies with an interest in place-based approaches continue to embrace collaborative ways of working and contribute knowledge and learnings to the national effort.
- Findings from this project and the associated series of reports are incorporated into the network’s action plan.

Overview

The Centre for Community Child Health was funded by the Australian Government Department of Education to investigate whether place-based initiatives to promote children’s wellbeing could be better supported by a national effort to stimulate knowledge exchange, collaboration, dialogue and learning between policy makers, researchers, practitioners and communities.

Over 12 months the Centre for Community Child Health, in consultation with a reference group of policy, research, practice and philanthropic leaders on place-based approaches for the early years, considered:

- existing and missing evidence on the efficacy of place-based approaches for improving children’s outcomes
- current place-based activity promoting children’s wellbeing across Australia
- issues and opportunities for accelerating Australian place-based approaches
- the interest and need for a national effort to advance the Australian place-based agenda for children.

This publication - *The state of play* - draws from and summarises three key publications produced during the project as seen in Figure 1, below. They are:

1. *The evidence* – summarising what we know about place-based approaches.
2. *A snapshot of place-based activity* – documenting who is driving, doing and supporting place-based initiatives in Australia.
3. *Big thinking on place* – outlining expert-identified issues and opportunities for getting place-based activity moving.

This report provides recommended action to accelerate place-based efforts to improve children’s wellbeing and address inequalities in Australia. All publications can be downloaded from www.rch.org.au/ccch.

Figure 1: Collaborate for children: scoping project publications



The evidence

A first step in our investigation of the Australian place-based landscape was to examine the evidence and clarify what we know and what we are yet to learn about place-based approaches that promote children's wellbeing. A literature review was undertaken by the Centre for Community Child Health to bring together the latest research on place-based approaches, stimulate thinking and to help craft a common way of talking about 'place'.

The evidence summary, available as a stand-alone paper – *The evidence* – considers the importance of place and the evolution of place-based approaches in Australia. It defines place-based approaches and their key features, reflecting on six Australian initiatives. The summary outlines the evidence of efficacy for place-based approaches, focusing on building community and interagency partnerships and place-based action planning and intervention. The paper concludes by summarising gaps in our knowledge and what we still need to learn about establishing collaborative partnerships and successfully implementing place-based interventions.

Key sections of the summary are provided as follows.

What are place-based approaches?

Place-based approaches are defined loosely as:

...stakeholders engaging in a collaborative process to address issues as they are experienced within a geographic space, be it a neighbourhood, a region, or an ecosystem (Bellefontaine & Wisener, 2011).

The exact form that such approaches should take is far from clear. In Australia and internationally, place-based approaches are evolving. Four related but different objectives have shaped place-based approaches in Australia over the past three to four decades: the empowerment and participation of disadvantaged people; service improvement and coordination; improving specific social objectives such as poverty, housing or employment; and

whole-of-community improvement (Katz, 2007; West, Wiseman and Bertone, 2006).

A review of the evidence tells us that it is currently impossible to define a single model for effective place-based initiatives that guarantee improved outcomes for children and families. Instead, a high-level understanding of how they 'work' and certain key elements for success have been articulated to stimulate thinking and advance the dialogue on place-based approaches in Australia.

How do place-based approaches 'work'?

Place-based collaborations should be understood as providing a mechanism or platform through which action can be taken to address, in this instance, the needs of children and families more effectively so as to achieve better outcomes. A simplified program logic for a place-based initiative looks like this:

If we build a partnership with all stakeholders and gain a collective commitment to an agreed set of goals for the community,

and if we develop an action plan that improves the conditions under which families are raising young children, and provide families with direct services that address their needs,

and if we implement the action plan in partnership with the families themselves and in a way that continuously adapts to emerging child and family needs,

and if the strategies succeed in building the capacity of families, services and communities to provide children with the care and experiences they need to flourish,

then we will see improved outcomes for children (Moore, in press).

What this program logic makes clear is that building a collaboration is only the first step, and that the efficacy of the partnership-building process and the efficacy of action planning and of the intervention need to be determined separately.

What does the evidence tell us?

Existing evidence on the efficacy of collaborations, action planning and interventions indicates features or characteristics that are more likely to lead to effective place-based activity and partnerships (see Table 1).

While an ideal place-based approach should contain as many of these features as possible, it should not be assumed that an initiative which

does not incorporate all identified elements will fail. When it comes to 'place', we are still at a relatively early stage both in implementing child-centred initiatives and in our understanding of what works.

Table 1: Key features of effective place-based activity and partnerships

Partnerships		Action planning and intervention	
Partnership-building processes	Partnership structures	Interventions	Ongoing improvement and monitoring
Sense of urgency	Governance model	Multilevel approaches to address underlying conditions	Flexible and continuous learning
Vision	Backbone organisation	Evidence-based	Developmental evaluation
Champions, leadership	Long-term commitment	Co-production/ co-design	Build local competencies
Composition/ engagement		Integrated service systems and progressive universalism	How to help people change
Trust, relationships		Alignment to outcomes	Continuous communication Shared measurement

What evidence is missing?

Gaps in the evidence-base relate both to partnerships and action. Moore et al. (2014) suggest contributions to the research on the topics presented below in Table 2 would be beneficial for advancing Australian place-based approaches to improve children's wellbeing.

Table 2: Gaps in place-based research

Partnerships	Action planning and intervention
The efficacy of Australian-based community/interagency partnerships, in Australian settings, in improving service system coordination and family access to programs	The most effective multilevel approaches for addressing 'wicked' problems
The efficacy of community/interagency partnerships in improving outcomes for children and families	The most effective application of continuous learning strategies
The best methods for community engagement	How to design and implement a service system based on progressive universalism
The efficacy of common measurement systems	How to help people change
	Well designed, long-term evaluations of place-based interventions

A snapshot of activity

Policy-makers, service providers and researchers agree that a logical and necessary step to enhance the sharing of information relevant to place-based initiatives and to prevent duplication is to better understand the general 'place-based' landscape in Australia. Despite this, a comprehensive list of Australian place-based initiatives remains absent from the literature and the sharing of knowledge appears ad-hoc.

A second focus of this project was therefore to map who is undertaking, driving and supporting place-based activity. For several reasons it was determined that documentation of all place-based activities was too great a task. First, as the review of the evidence indicates, there is no one single definition or understanding of a place-based model. Agreement on what initiatives, supporting policies and associated research should – and should not – be included in a compendium of place-based activity is therefore almost impossible to reach. Second, the number of government policies and programs to support place-based initiatives in Australia is considerable and the task would require extensive research across multiple levels of government, jurisdictions and sectors, at considerable expense. Maintaining currency of the list of initiatives was also highlighted as an issue and the usefulness of a comprehensive listing was also questioned.

Under advice from the project reference group, we instead sought to document leading or innovative examples of place-based initiatives working towards improving children's outcomes. In addition, we documented federal and state policies driving child-focused place-based reform and significant bodies of research underway that would contribute to improving our understanding of place-based approaches for children. This information offered the greatest value to the sector and assisted us to capture organisations and initiatives that are supporting or have the potential to support strategic coordination efforts around child-focused place-based approaches.

A snapshot of place-based activity drew on existing resources and documents at the Centre for Community Child Health, and was expanded with data from expert consultations conducted during the project and feedback from the project reference group. Advisors from policy, practice and research reviewed the final document.

A full set of findings is provided in the snapshot and a summary is outlined as follows.

Policy

There is a range of policies and government initiatives in Australia seeking to influence the environments that promote healthy child development via place-based approaches, indicating the willingness of government to invest in this strategy.

Policies and initiatives at a federal and state/territory government level have typically been led by a specific department, who may then seek to work in collaboration with other departments and/or levels of government. The most commonly identified federal or state/territory government departments leading place-based initiatives for children were those with education and social services portfolios.

Some whole-of-government initiatives (ie. initiatives involving multiple departments and sectors focused on children's health, education and wellbeing) were identified, however these were typically initiated by state governments.

Examples of policies and government initiatives supporting place-based reform within Australia include: the Australian Government's Communities for Children and Better Futures, Local Solutions; various child and family centre or school hub initiatives (initiated by both federal and state/territory governments); Victoria's Best Start and Area Partnerships initiatives; and Families NSW.

Research

There were challenges in locating and sourcing current research on place-based approaches due to the high number of organisations contributing to the research agenda, the lag time between conducting and publishing research and the aforementioned difficulties in defining research contributing to the 'place-based' agenda. Overall, a relatively young body of Australian research on place-based approaches was found and investment in long-term research appeared to be minimal. Most research investigated how to best implement or support place-based approaches, as opposed to evaluating the long-term impacts of initiatives.

A small number of research centres or networks with more specific research agendas (eg. social planning to benefit children) were identified as potential contributors to place-based research.

Practice

A range of initiatives have emerged in every Australian jurisdiction, differing in duration, structure and membership, focus/target, implementation processes and activity. The evidence summary describes key features of six leading initiatives including Communities for Children (national), Go Goldfields (Victoria), Stronger Families Alliance (New South Wales), Tasmanian Child and Family Centres (Tasmania), Children's Ground (Northern Territory) and Blue Sky (Victoria) on a continuum or spectrum to advance dialogue around implementation and best practice. A range of practice supports were also identified within the compendium, including resources (e.g. Australian Early Development Census, Community Hubs website, Child Family Community Australia Connect), networks (e.g. Linking Learning Community of Practice, Child Friendly Communities Networks) and organisations supporting implementation (refer to *A snapshot of place-based activity* for a full list).

Strategic coordination

No mechanism or network for coordinating policy, research, practice and philanthropy for child-focused place-based activity was found. Related networks or initiatives seeking to advance either place-based

policy, practice or research at a national level included:

- Collaboration for Impact – seeks to accelerate the adoption of collective impact in Australia with a focus on social impact beyond improving children's wellbeing.
- Child Family Community Australia (CFCA) Connect – provides a dynamic, interactive source of the latest information in the child, family and community welfare sectors.
- Expert panel for Families and Children Activity – recently announced by the Department of Social Services, the expert panel will seek to improve implementation support for government-funded place-based initiatives.
- Policy round tables – held intermittently by separate organisations including the Australian Institute for Family Studies and the Centre for Community Child Health to advance the policy agenda and facilitate thought leadership.
- Opportunity Child – a national, community-business-government collaboration to reduce childhood vulnerability by aligning visions from community with the efforts of local agencies, practitioners and funders. The work will be informed by a national shared outcomes framework (The Nest).

No peak body or organisation was found to regularly convene or coordinate dialogue and activity between practice, research, policy and philanthropy on place-based initiatives to promote children's wellbeing.

Big thinking about place

The final project investigation was to hear from experts in the field about the issues and opportunities for accelerating effective place-based practice to improve children's wellbeing. Twenty-three experts were engaged in 'big thinking' on place including:

- Practice leaders – community leaders and practitioners from community service organisations experienced in coordinating the implementation of place-based initiatives.
- Research leaders – researchers renowned for their work in child-focused place-based approaches or those currently undertaking relevant large-scale research projects.
- Policy leaders – those funding and/or experienced in driving policy to support innovative child-focused place-based initiatives.
- Philanthropic leaders – committed to sustained investment in supporting community-led place-based approaches with a focus on children.

Findings were analysed thematically and critiqued by the project reference group. The consultations revealed a number of issues or gaps across practice, research and policy that were perceived to diminish the effectiveness of child-focused, place-based initiatives in Australia. They also offered solutions to address the identified issues/gaps. Key themes from our big thinkers are outlined below, with Table 3 detailing the issues and associated solutions. Further information is available in the separate *Big thinking on place* report.

Key themes

New skill sets

Place-based initiatives are complex and require different ways of working. Consultations revealed a new set of skills and knowledge is necessary to think, act and be accountable for change at a population or whole-of-community level. Leadership, data and evaluation, multilevel intervention planning

and understanding the conditions influencing child development were identified as key areas of expertise needing further support.

Collaborative practice and co-production

The importance of the ability to work in partnership was a consistent finding. Consultations broadly described working in partnership as relating to either 'collaborative practice' across community organisations and government departments or 'co-production' of services, policy and research directly with families or service users. Addressing skill gaps in these areas was reported to be of high importance to practice, research and policy leaders.

"We know that we need to work in a genuinely respectful way in partnership with disengaged families and we know that a lot of work is needed to support practice change in this area."

Practice leader and practice change facilitator

Establishing shared agendas or community action plans for the place-based initiative was also noted to be a consistent practice challenge and an area requiring further support.

"Again and again I talk to communities that are struggling with this."

Practice leader

Evaluation for learning and impact

While place-based approaches make sense conceptually, there is still little evidence that they 'work'. The absence of evidence on place-based reforms in the Australian context, particularly those with a focus on improving children's outcomes, was seen as a significant issue. Research on the overall effectiveness or impact of place-based approaches, the conditions under which interventions are effective (eg. community demographics) and effective implementation processes were all areas seen as needing further research. Policy makers highlighted their desire for further information on how to best support and monitor place-based activity, with key

questions around which communities to invest in, how to know when a community is ready and how to select organisation/s to deliver the initiative.

“Every practice example I’ve talked to says, we think we are making a difference but we just don’t have the resources to demonstrate that we are... this of course has challenges for further funding but also more importantly for knowing if we are making a difference to the outcomes of children.”

Research leader

New methods to evaluate place-based initiatives for the purposes of learning and monitoring progress (by the partnership/collaboration), in addition to evaluating impact, were identified as a need by consultation participants. It was thought some of the issues associated with using and accessing research findings could be overcome through different research and evaluation designs.

“We ought to be encouraging several approaches, and we ought to be resourcing all of it. They shouldn’t compete but compare notes, and at the end of the day we might end up with quite a flexible new set of tools and new knowledge about how to do this work, and not just the one way, but perhaps several ways of doing it.”

Research leader

Participants stressed the importance of changing public and political value of and understanding of costs, recognising long-term savings from upfront investment and the size of the investment required, in order to elicit further funding for quality evaluation and research.

Knowledge exchange

The need for improvement in capturing and sharing findings on what does and does not ‘work’ was expressed as a common issue experienced by all sectors, particularly in ‘real-time’ across practice and in the literature via research.

“Failed interventions never get published, and yet they’re the ones that we ought to look at because often they fail for a reason...well, they can fail for many reasons, and we can all learn from that. It doesn’t mean the researchers were incompetent, it means they had the courage to test the model and try.”

Research leader

Knowing what others are doing and what has worked well elsewhere was seen as an important enabler to undertaking child-focused, place-based work. However, it was identified that this information is not easily accessible and that leading place-based initiatives may experience ‘sharing fatigue’ as they are frequently called upon to impart knowledge in a one-way information exchange.

“For a whole range of reasons, we’ve not been very good at capturing the practice learnings and making them accessible to each other.”

Philanthropic leader

Advocacy and leadership

A desire for stronger leadership to address missed opportunities, duplication of activities, efforts and resources, short-term funding and differences in terminology was a strong theme arising from the consultations. Also identified was the need to increase public and political will and thought leadership on ‘place’.

Summary of issues and solutions

A summary of more specific issues raised by our big thinkers and the suggested solutions is detailed in Table 3. The table also outlines if the issue or gap is universal or shared across policy, research and practice or if it is perceived to be sector specific.

Table 3: Summary of issues and opportunities for accelerating place-based approaches

Issue or gap	Sector-specific or universal issue?	Suggested solution/s
Knowledge and expertise in supporting, implementing or researching place-based approaches	Universal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource opportunities for pre-service training • Establish a community of practice on place-based initiatives, linked to a resource library • Establish coordinated technical support for communities or access to intermediary agencies • Invest in community mobilisation to support long-term sustainability • Establish agencies to connect initiatives with expertise • Increase advocacy and leadership • Use demonstration sites to test new ideas
Limited resources and funding available to enrich practitioner skills/expertise	Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share available resources and improve networks
Missing evidence	Universal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify priority research questions and coordinate a strategic research agenda
Uptake of research in practice and policy	Practice, policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve research synthesis and co-production of research • Establish coordinated technical support for communities or access to intermediary agencies
Optimising investment and resources in place-based initiatives	Universal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop targeted and coordinated research questions • Increase advocacy • Develop whole-of-government approaches

Table 3: Summary of issues and opportunities for accelerating place-based approaches

Issue or gap	Sector-specific or universal issue?	Suggested solution/s
Evaluation and measurement: methodologies, skill gaps, funding	Universal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish mechanisms for leading experts to collaborate on the development of new methodologies and expertise • Develop resources/frameworks to measure short, medium and long term outcomes • Compile regular local 'state of children' reports • Advocate on the need for, and true cost of, evaluation and measurement • Use demonstration sites to build evidence and trial methods
Limited or slow exchange of knowledge	Universal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a community of practice, particularly for those delivering place-based initiatives • Develop a library of existing resources or an intervention catalogue
Inconsistent terminology	Universal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote a shared narrative and logic model on place-based initiatives • Develop and promote consistent messages about children's wellbeing • Increase advocacy and leadership
Public and political will	Universal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and promote consistent messages about children's wellbeing • Increase advocacy and leadership
Short-term funding	Universal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase advocacy and leadership • Pursue whole-of-government investment

Getting place-based approaches moving

What does it all mean?

Our examination of Australian place-based approaches supporting children’s wellbeing tells us that, as a strategy for improving outcomes for children and families, place-based approaches continue to gain traction and resonate with government, philanthropy, practitioners and communities. However, we are still at the early stages of understanding *what* works in relation to place, as well as *how* it works and, indeed, *if* place-based models actually make a difference to children’s wellbeing.

Given the absence of critical information and the early stage of the Australian place-based journey,

our narrative is fractured and greater coherence is required to generate a broader understanding and will, that can support the right type and length of investment in the promotion of children’s wellbeing.

To inform our argument for place-based approaches and advance our understanding of the *what*, *how* and *if*, a coordinated and targeted approach to research is required. Table 4 below summarises key research needs, and priorities for policy and practice. Research will be enabled through a greater appreciation and valuing of evaluation and the resourcing of well designed, long-term evaluations incorporating new methods.

Table 4: Summary of research needs and priorities

Research needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The efficacy of Australian-based community/interagency partnerships, in Australian settings, in improving service system coordination and family access to programs • The efficacy of community/interagency partnerships in improving outcomes for children and families • The most effective multilevel approaches for addressing ‘wicked’ problems • How to design and implement a service system based on progressive universalism • The efficacy of common measurement systems
Policy priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The conditions under which interventions are effective (which communities, community readiness, selecting lead community agencies) • Which implementation processes work best • How to best support and monitor place-based initiatives
Practice priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding and using the research to inform planning • New methods for measuring/monitoring progress and incentives to respond quickly to emerging findings • How to help people change • The most effective application of continuous learning strategies • The best methods for community engagement

There is also the need to better apply what we already know works to place-based initiatives. The research to practice gap, however, is more than an issue of knowledge. Place-based approaches require practitioners (and government, policy-makers and funders) to do things differently; yet there is little, if any, pre-service training to support practitioners to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to successfully change or adapt their practice. The co-production of policy and co-production of initiatives with families continue to be ‘red-flags’ within the existing skill sets of many professionals working on or supporting place-based initiatives. Continued professional development can be improved via mechanisms for sharing lessons and knowledge exchange with other practitioners, and across the policy, research and practice sectors, but it is currently unclear how to leverage existing opportunities.

The high level of place-based activity currently underway and the apparent similarity in focus and target of many initiatives, for example child and family centres or school hubs, also provides us with significant opportunities to learn from others, advance expertise, test different methods and share findings. However, without an overarching coordinated strategy that fosters an ability to share resources and learnings, both duplication and missed opportunities will continue to occur.

Across early childhood policy, practice and research there is increasing recognition of the need to improve as well as a willingness to change. Frustration was expressed at repeated mistakes and missed opportunities and it was felt that improved coordination could better direct investment to strategic issues. A desire to optimise contributions and resources to benefit the broader place-based agenda was also noted.

What are the options?

This project identified key issues where change is required and offers tangible solutions to overcome these barriers (see Table 3 above). Broadly, action in the following areas is necessary to accelerate progress and leverage from existing opportunities and investment in place-based initiatives:

- thought leadership, advocacy and coordination
- whole-of-government policy

- co-production of policy
- funding arrangements that foster collaboration, rather than competition
- investment in the right type of research; that is, well-designed long-term evaluations to measure impact as well as evaluation that promotes continuous learning and improvement
- better coordinated research, targeting areas where there has been an identified need for greater evidence
- network/s to share lessons and knowledge (may draw on an existing network or information exchange mechanism)
- targeted professional development to strengthen expertise and address skill gaps.

We were told a **national effort** could advance the place-based reform agenda in Australia with the right level of focus and with willingness and collaboration across policy, practice and research. Project findings highlight areas for action and provide guidance about the focus of the national effort. These include:

- co-production of policy
- establishment of a coordinated and rigorous research agenda, including new evaluation methods for supporting learning and monitoring as well as measuring impact
- development of workforce and community skills and expertise in designing, delivering and evaluating place-based initiatives, particularly through knowledge exchange and capacity-building strategies.

Feedback from participants indicated a network or mechanism to coordinate the national effort would be necessary and it would be feasible for an organisation to convene the network under certain conditions. These include the organisation having: a national focus and reach; broad membership base; authority or general acceptance to act as a convenor and advocate; and expert knowledge in child wellbeing.

The organisation would need to support a new and collaborative way of working between those implementing, supporting and researching

collaborative place-based approaches. In evaluating existing organisations that meet the recommended criteria outlined above, we identified the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) as a suitable convenor.

Making it happen

Place-based initiatives to improve children's wellbeing could be better supported by a national effort to promote knowledge exchange, collaboration, dialogue and learning between policy makers, researchers, practitioners and communities. We believe ARACY is well placed to convene this national effort and recommend:

- ARACY establish and play a convening role in a national network to advance the place-based reform agenda in Australia to promote children's wellbeing.
- ARACY facilitate a collaborative and inclusive process to develop a shared plan of action for the national network, with clear links to The Nest.
- Policy-makers, practitioners, researchers and other agencies with an interest in place-based approaches continue to embrace collaborative ways of working and contribute knowledge and learnings to the national effort.
- Findings from this project and the associated series of reports are incorporated into the network's action plan.

References

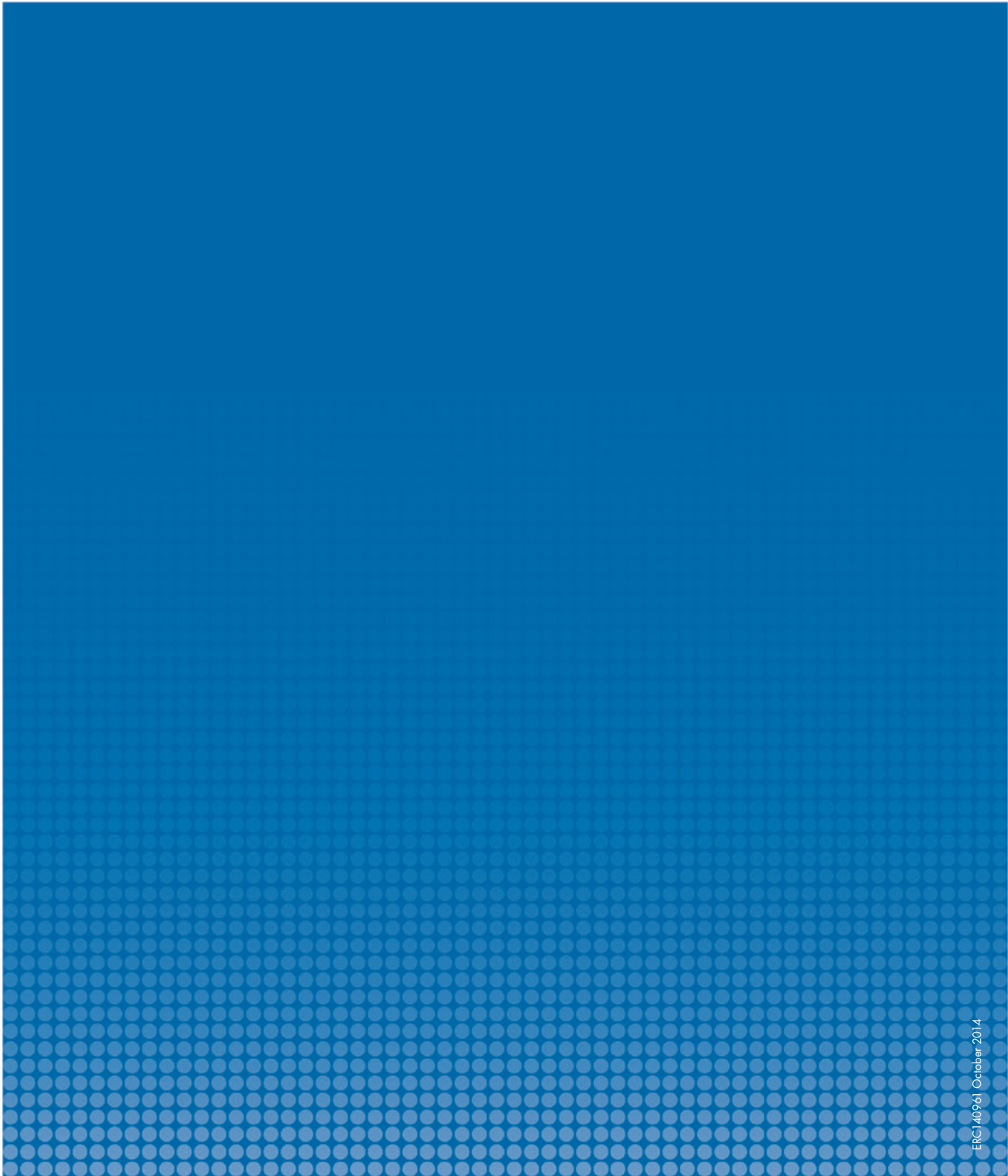
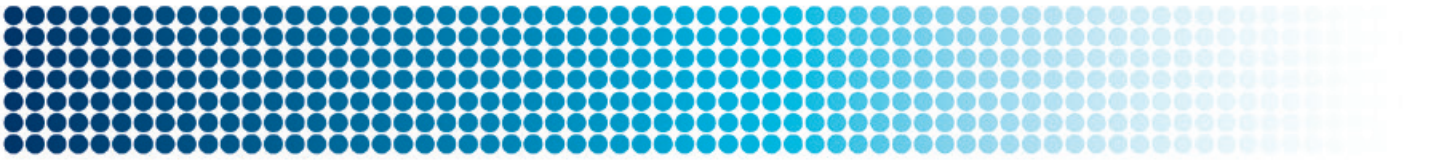
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