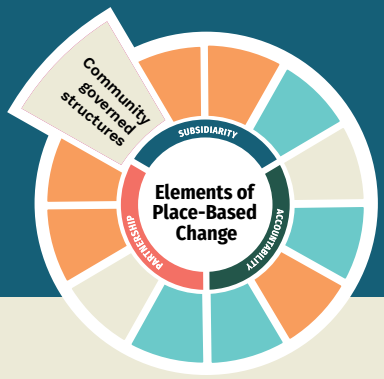
Subsidiarity: Decisions should be made at the most local level possible – where people have the greatest knowledge of context and the strongest stake in the outcomes. In place-based work, this means shifting authority closer to community – giving local leaders, organisations and residents the power to shape the services and systems that affect them.



1.1 Community-governed structures

Mechanisms exist for community members to guide, oversee and make decisions about priorities, funding and performance.

What are community-governed structures in the context of place-based change?

Community-governed structures are enabling structures that support local communities to organise, act collectively and make decisions. Effective community-governed structures enable community to take their seat at the table and have their voices and priorities heard in cross-sector governance groups and decision-making forums about their community.

There is no one-size-fits-all model for community-governed structures. They vary in formality, leadership, authority and representation, reflecting the community and local context. In some communities, there is a single community-governed structure that leads action on a broad range of issues on behalf of the community. In others, there may be multiple community-governed structures that focus on different issues, across different sectors.

Establishing community-governed structures is the foundation for the process of community governance – the formal and informal ways communities come together to set direction, manage resources and hold each other accountable.

The design of community-governed structures often includes core principles like:

- decision-making protocols guided by cultural, social or ethical values, and may include Elders, community leaders, and consultation with many community members
- a shared vision for change
- focus on trust and relationships
- diverse representation and inclusion
- commitment to transparency and accountability to community.

By contrast, most organisations like companies, charities and not-for-profits have corporate structures. These operate within clearly defined legal frameworks, are generally hierarchical, and are led by a board of directors who are legally accountable for the organisation's performance and compliance.

Both types of structures can be effective and, increasingly, organisations are blending them, aiming to maintain the effective community control of community-governed structures with the risk management and regulatory integrity of corporate structures and governance models. The right balance depends on what the organisation is trying to achieve, who needs to be involved and what risks need to be managed.

Community governance can be challenging, and community-governed structures need to be robust enough to withstand conflict. Involving diverse voices in decision-making will inevitably lead to conflicting views, and it is important to design structures that support the management of conflict, as well as the sharing of accountability and risk.

Why community-governed structures are important in place-based change

Community-governed structures are critical to achieving meaningful and lasting impact. They are the mechanism that enables representation and facilitates community participation in decision-making, creating the foundation for trust, shared accountability, and outcomes that genuinely reflect local priorities.

By centring local knowledge and leadership, community-governed structures ensure that place-based change efforts are grounded in the lived realities of people and communities. These structures are a mechanism through which decisions can be shaped 'with' communities rather than 'for' them, strengthening buy-in and ownership. When local voices guide priorities, initiatives are more responsive, resources are better aligned and results are more sustainable.

Community-governed structures serve as a model of collective accountability and decision-making, supported by clear roles, transparent processes, and mechanisms that carry authority beyond individual relationships.

Community-governed structures are a vehicle through which the interactions between communities and systems can be transformed, by shifting relationships from transactional to collaborative, replacing consultation with shared power, and embedding oversight and transparency.

Ultimately, community-governed structures are an enabler for deeper and more durable place-based change. They are the mechanism by which community participates in decision-making, to drive outcomes about the things that matter most to them.

Key takeaways

- **Start with shared purpose and local legitimacy**

  Begin with a shared community vision and purpose rather than predetermined structures. Co-design structures that will support community priorities and reflect how the community naturally organises and makes decisions.

- **Build from relationships to structure**

  Community-governed structures begin with trust. Invest early in relational work, yarning, dialogue and informal collaboration, before formalising structures.

- **Balance community autonomy with shared accountability**

  Establish clear expectations for decision-making, resource use, and reporting. Create mechanisms for reciprocal accountability where communities, governments, funders and service partners are answerable to one another.

- **Invest in capability and inclusion**

  Recognise that meaningful participation takes time and resources. Fund local coordination, training and culturally safe spaces that include diverse voices in governance structures.

- **Adapt governance to context and maturity**

  Periodically review arrangements to ensure they remain inclusive, trusted and fit-for-purpose. Early on, community-governed structures may focus on advisory or design roles, and over time, these structures may transition to community-led decision-making bodies.