Skills for place-based work

Why place-based work matters

Top-down, one-size-fits-all approaches have often failed to meet the needs of diverse communities. Despite decades of effort, persistent disadvantage remains entrenched in many parts of Australia.

At the same time, communities across the country are leading powerful place-based initiatives. What's missing is the connective tissue — a way to link up this work, elevate it nationally and remove the systemic barriers in its way.

We believe:

- Communities know best what they need.
- Local leadership produces better outcomes.
- Decisions should be made with communities, not for them.

Defining place-based initiatives

PLACE (Partnerships for Local Action and Community Empowerment) is a national organisation working on amplifying and strengthening place-based work in Australia. We define place-based initiatives as work that is based on 3 key principles:

Subsidiarity – decisions should be made at the most local level possible.

Local 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.

Accountability – communities must be able to hold systems and services to account.

This requires more than consultation. It means building governance structures that embed community voice and oversight in decision-making, ensure transparency in how resources are used, and create shared responsibility for outcomes.

Partnership – complex challenges can't be solved by one actor alone.

Place-based change brings together governments, service providers, funders and communities to work collaboratively, across silos, sectors and timeframes. To be effective, these partnerships must be grounded in trust, reciprocity and shared purpose.

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Identifying key skills for place-based work

PLACE has identified **6 key skills** for place-based work (see below). This is the first step towards supporting the development of a strong place-based workforce. The key skills required have been identified through extensive desktop research of Australian frameworks and case studies and lived experience of place-based work. The desktop research looked at place-based work happening across diverse sectors including youth justice, children and families, mental health and employment. Some comparative international frameworks were also reviewed.

Place-based work is about changing how change happens — not just what is delivered, but who decides, who leads and how responsibility is shared. The **6 key skills** identified by PLACE describe the practical capabilities that make this shift possible. They are not a list of generic competencies. They are the applied skills of subsidiarity, accountability and partnership — the everyday actions and mindsets that turn these principles into practice. Together, they form the foundation of a national place-based workforce able to drive enduring change from the ground up.

They enable subsidiarity.
These skills give practitioners the tools to share authority and strengthen local capability. They help people design processes that respect context, grow local leadership and create conditions for decisions to be made closer to community.

They strengthen accountability.
They cultivate transparency, learning and responsibility — ensuring that work is guided by evidence, that communities can see and shape how resources are used, and that everyone involved is accountable for outcomes, not just outputs.

They sustain partnership.
They build the relational infrastructure that holds collaboration together — fostering trust across difference, creating shared language and goals, and enabling multiple actors to align efforts across systems and timeframes.

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In practice, these skills are what allow place-based practitioners to bridge the gap between community insight and system reform — to turn lived experience into policy influence, local relationships into collective action and individual projects into long-term, systemic shifts.

The purpose of developing these skills nationally is to grow a workforce that can lead and sustain place-based change: people who can work relationally and strategically, who can sit between community and government, and who can keep purpose and learning at the centre of complex collaboration.

We'll be testing and refining these skills with communities, government, philanthropic organisations, practitioners, independent lead organisations and others doing place-based work across Australia. This process will ensure the skills are relevant to the work being done. The skills will form part of a national workforce strategy, which will be released in June 2026.

Your insights matter

Scan the QR code to access our Reflection Tool and review the **6 key skills** for place-based initiatives. Your insights will help shape PLACE's national workforce strategy.
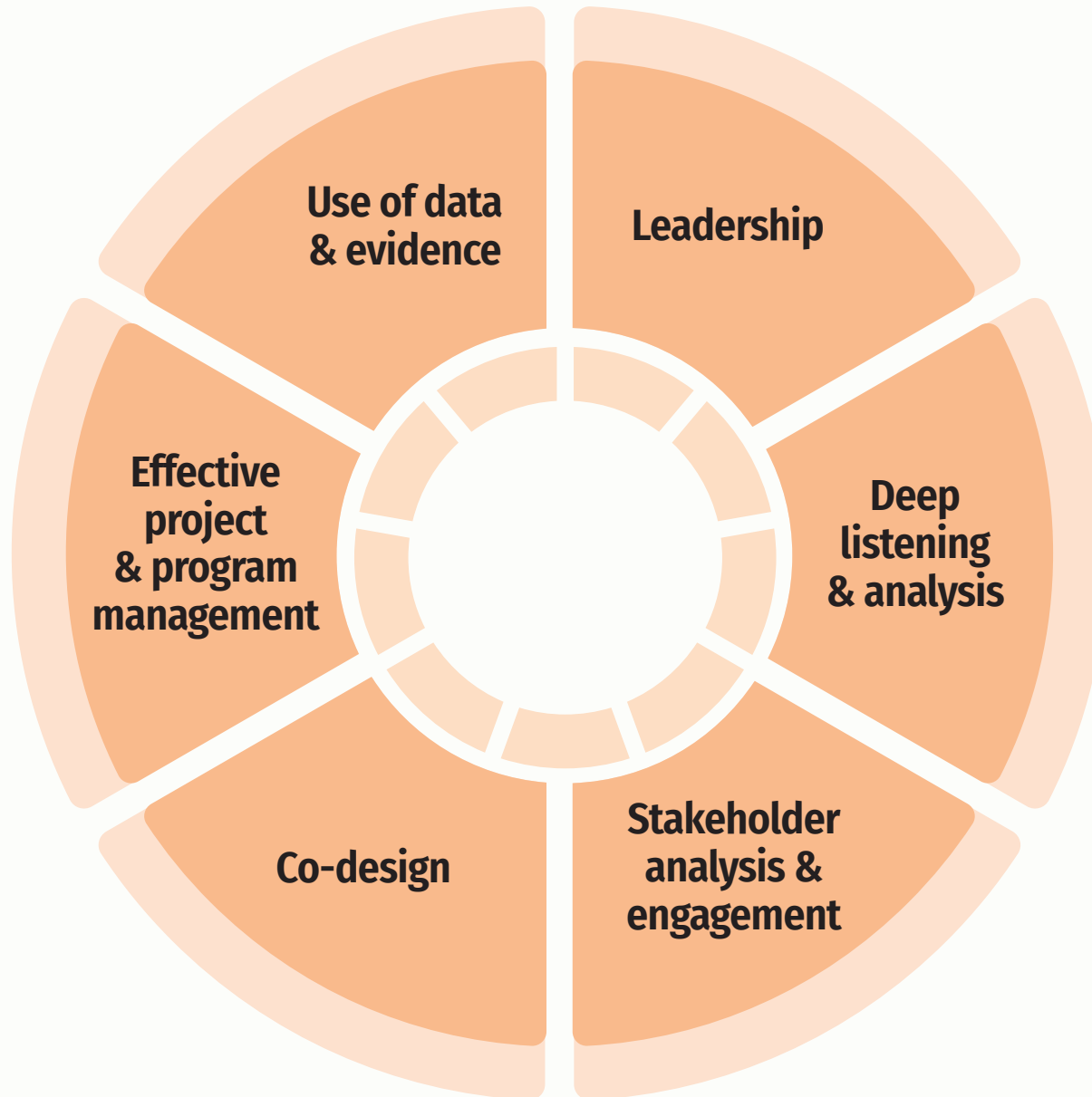
The 6 key skills are underpinned by:

- a commitment to community-led work
- using a strengths-based approach
- being relational and collaborative
- having a curious and reflective mindset for continuous learning
- being a systems thinker.

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6 Skills for place-based work

Use of data & evidence

Leadership

Effective project & program management

Deep listening & analysis

Co-design

Stakeholder analysis & engagement

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6 Skills for place-based work

Leadership
builds momentum to shift power

Relational practice
- Listen deeply and work with empathy and humility across different views
- Communicate clearly and tailor messages to different audiences
- Include diverse voices and share information openly
- Connect people and efforts to reduce silos and improve collaboration

Self-awareness and bias recognition
- Be aware of your own biases and how they affect your work
- Reflect on your underlying assumptions, beliefs, values and worldviews, and how you work through them

Equity-first approach
- Value all perspectives
- Practise cultural competency and support self-determination
- Support community ownership of data

Iterative and innovative mindset
- Lead adaptively and pivot when needed to stay aligned with shared goals
- Encourage a 'safe to fail' culture to support learning and innovation
- Plan for future leadership to keep momentum and learning going
- Use and share tools and methods that support place-based work
- Measure social value (e.g. social return on investment) to guide long-term investment

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6 Skills for place-based work

Deep listening & analysis

uncovers insight for accountability

Understand the big picture

- Understand community issues deeply
- Use systems thinking to see how things are interrelated
- Do independent research and review evidence
- Read and analyse data to spot patterns

Listening and learning

- Listen without judgement
- Hold space for others to share
- Use participative facilitation to draw out insights

Building trust

- Build strong relationships across cultures and groups
- Use trauma-informed and child-safe approaches
- Combine empathy with technical or sectoral skills (e.g. health, disability, business)

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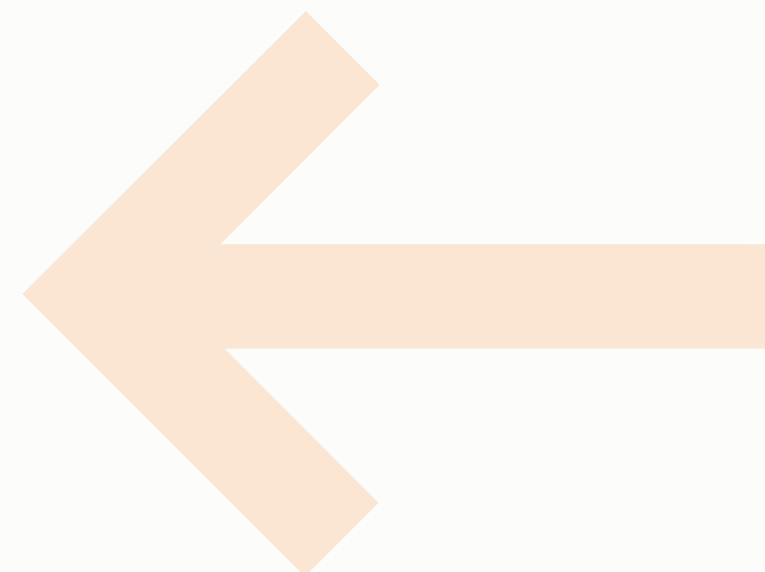
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Stakeholder analysis & engagement

connects allies for change

Working together

- Research and identify key players
- Build trust across sectors
- Help people team up around shared goals
- Spot opportunities including policy challenges and act with others to strengthen what's working and remove barriers

Building relationships

- Find and connect with key stakeholders
- Build strong, respectful relationships
- Show empathy and help others feel heard

Clear communication

- Identify and articulate compelling stories
- Tailor messages for different people
- Manage power dynamics
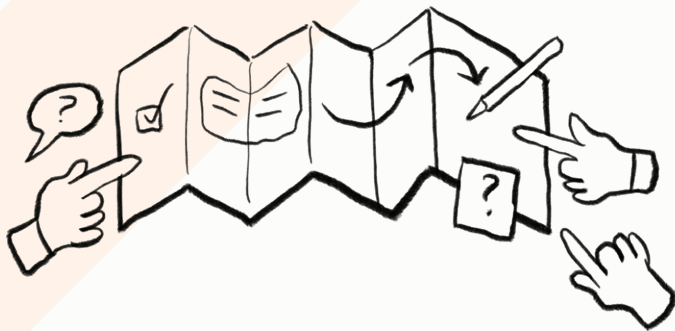- Maintain open and transparent communications
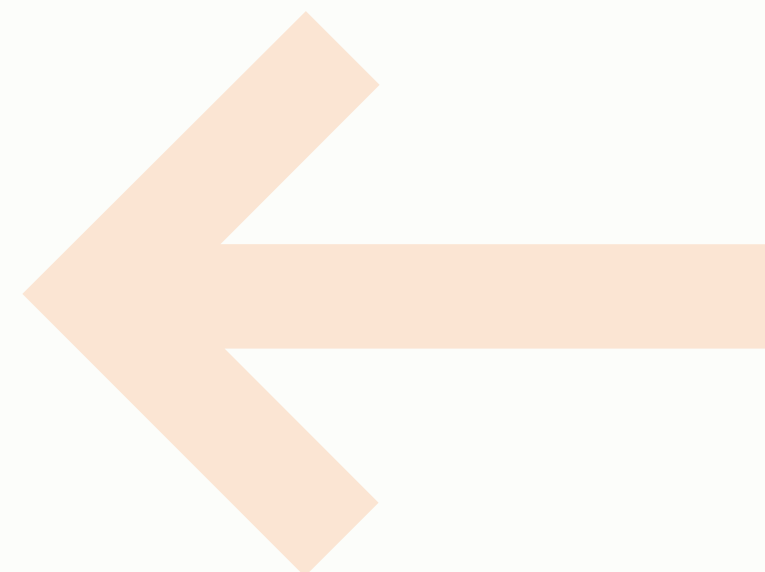
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Co-design
shares decision-making and strengthens subsidiarity

### Clear and inclusive communication
- Explain issues clearly to diverse audiences
- Understand different agendas and help build shared vision
- Create safe spaces where all voices are heard and valued

Collaborative problem-solving
- Think through options and support group decision-making
- Test, reflect and improve ideas together
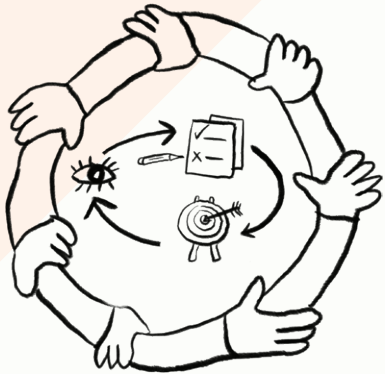- Make sense of information and share feedback

Positive and purposeful engagement
- Use tools like program logic models and methods like theory of change
- Bring joy, hope and energy into the process
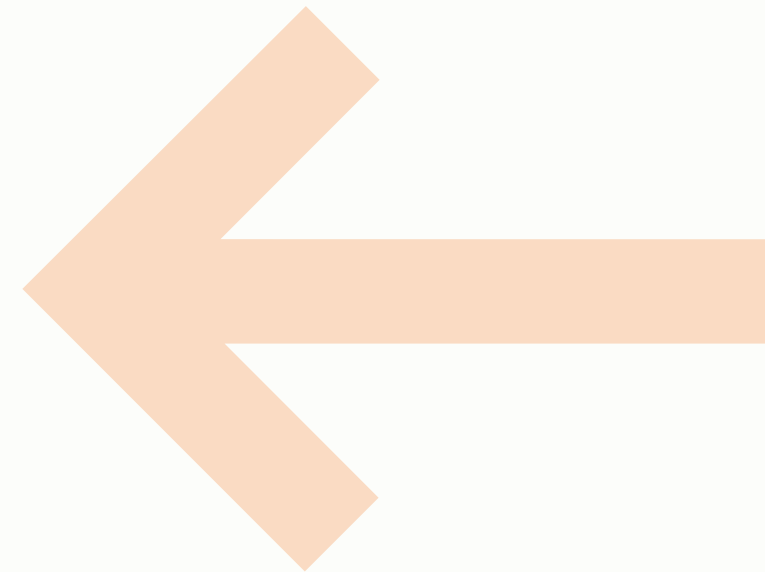
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Effective project & program management

turns collaboration into delivery

### Deeply committed to outcomes

- Build strong partnerships for wraparound support
- Collaborate to achieve shared goals
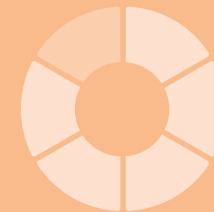
Planning and tracking

- Use tools to plan, and track progress and outcomes
- Stay focused on making a real difference

Learning and improving

- Create space for reflection and learning
- Use systems thinking to find holistic solutions

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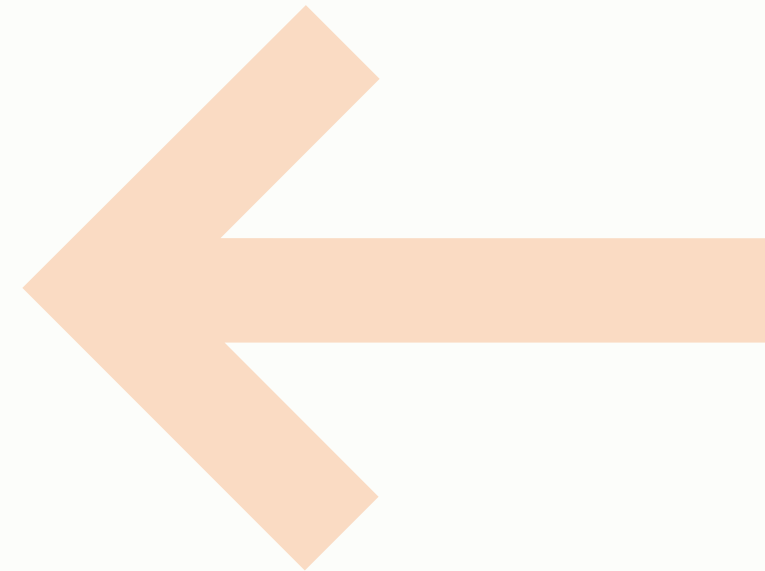
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Use of data & evidence
fuels learning and system improvement

Planning and measuring together
- Collaborate to measure impact
- Use tools like program logic models and methods like theory of change
- Support place-based planning and evaluation

Sharing and collecting data well
- Share useful data with communities
- Collect data in fair and inclusive ways (data sovereignty)
- Use community voice, lived experience and cultural knowledge

Using data to learn and improve
- Use data and evaluation to support learning and advocate for policy and systems change
- Track progress over time, using clear measures
- Use flexible tools that suit local needs

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