

The people powering place-based change

Recognising the invisible work that sustains local leadership

“We’re generating big savings for government and service providers but this isn’t generating any funding for our work.” Deception Bay, Queensland.

PLACE Listening Tour, 2025

What we’re seeing

Efforts to build the workforce for place-based change are fragmented across sectors, regions and initiatives. Despite strong intent, there is no shared approach to developing, connecting and sustaining the people who make this work possible.

We are undertaking a range of activities to support a coordinated approach that brings together partners across government, philanthropy and community to strengthen skills, pathways and capability at every level of the system.

In our conversations, engagement and research, we are seeing that:

Critical roles remain invisible

The relational and community-based roles that hold trust and connection together rarely appear in workforce data or planning frameworks. Their absence means the human side of the work is often missing from how systems plan and support people, leading to underinvestment in the skills that make place-based work succeed.

Planning is still fragmented

Workforce planning happens one sector at a time. The systems that shape jobs, training and funding rarely connect, so effort gets repeated in locations and people end up working in silos instead of side by side.

Investment is short-term and unstable

Funding comes in bursts and disappears just as people find their rhythm. Without long-term backing, it’s hard to keep skilled teams together or build the trust that place-based work relies on.

What success looks like

“Place-based initiatives often rely on this kind of informal and relational leadership to function. But these initiatives are typically marginalised in formal funding systems.”

PLACE Listening Tour, 2025

Recognised community leadership

Community and lived-experience leadership are recognised as integral to the workforce for place-based change and supported with the same respect and resourcing as formal roles. These locally grounded roles draw on knowledge, culture and connection that formal systems cannot replicate. Genuine recognition means resourcing this work, supporting self-determination and creating clear pathways for community leadership. The suite of volunteer tools developed by PLACE helps put this into practice by recognising and resourcing capabilities that have often gone unseen.

Connected systems

A strong workforce system for place-based change recognises and responds to the needs of organisations and individuals practising place-based work – wherever they sit – and supports them to build capability, connection and impact. Planning, data and learning systems are aligned around the shared

principles of subsidiarity, accountability and partnership, and recognise the locally grounded roles that make these principles real in practice. When those principles shape how people are hired, trained and supported, local communities can lead and sustain their own change.

Stable investment

Longer-term, flexible funding builds workforce stability. It allows organisations to retain skilled local staff, train new practitioners and maintain the trusted

relationships that place-based work relies on. Without that stability, every new grant cycle resets progress.

PLACE's role

PLACE connects evidence, people and practice to strengthen the workforce for place-based change.

We focus on building the conditions that help people stay, grow and lead in community-driven work. **We do this by:**

Lifting the roles that are often unseen

We make relational, volunteer and lived-experience work visible and valued in workforce planning and investment.

Turning good practice into practical tools

We translate research and on-the-ground experience into resources that help communities.

Laying the ground work for collaboration

We identify partners and build the relationships needed to develop and implement a national workforce strategy for place-based change that supports the needs of communities.

Supporting volunteers

“Behind every thriving initiative, we found someone whose job it was to hold the pieces together. Not always visible, rarely secure, but absolutely essential.”

PLACE Listening Tour, 2025

Place-based change across Australia depends on people whose roles are rarely seen in formal workforce systems. Volunteers, peer workers, cultural navigators and people with lived experience drive this work, yet their contribution is seldom recognised, resourced or sustained.

This challenge plays out in the context of communities trying to work in place-based ways. Each relies on local, relational and often informal leadership, which workforce planning infrequently recognises or supports. These roles are often overstretched, funding cycles are short and the contributions that sustain local systems are rarely reflected in workforce plans.

This insight shaped the development of a suite of practical tools focused on volunteering, where community contribution most clearly exposes the gap between what systems value and what change really requires. Together, the tools strengthen both sides of the equation – supporting volunteers to recognise their contribution and agency, and helping initiatives design and sustain meaningful volunteer roles within the broader workforce for place-based change.

Explore the volunteering tools developed through this work

Recognising your role in place-based work

For people who volunteer or contribute locally. This tool helps you recognise the value and skill in the work you already do and see it as part of the wider workforce for place-based change.

Find this tool on the PLACE website.

Supporting volunteers in place-based work

For people coordinating or supporting volunteers. This guide helps you design roles that recognise contribution, share responsibility and support volunteers to stay involved for the long term.

Find this tool on the PLACE website.

Looking ahead

Across the country, people driving local change are already showing what works. The next step is to connect and sustain that momentum.

PLACE is working to build a shared workforce system that backs communities for the long term by connecting evidence, people and practice to strengthen the workforce for place-based change.

Find updates, tools and learning resources at placeaustralia.org.

