

Working in place



Place-based change is about working differently.

It starts from a simple premise: that while disadvantage is shaped by structural forces, it is experienced locally, and therefore requires responses that are rooted in place.

Across Australia, communities are leading the way in designing and delivering local solutions. Their work shows that when systems listen to and learn from community, outcomes improve not just for some, but for all.

PLACE exists to help this kind of work flourish: to connect, align and strengthen the people, organisations and systems working towards better outcomes in every community.

Through our Listening Tour and ongoing collaborations, we've heard a clear and consistent message: place-based work is defined not by its geography, but by its governance. It is shaped by three interdependent principles — **Subsidiarity, Accountability and Partnership** — which together set out how change can be done with communities, not to them.

Subsidiarity

Decisions should be made at the most local level possible.

The people closest to a challenge usually hold both the deepest understanding of it and the strongest stake in its resolution. Subsidiarity means shifting authority closer to community, giving local leaders, organisations and residents real 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 embedding community voice and oversight in decision-making, ensuring transparency in how resources are used, and creating shared responsibility for results. Accountability is not about blame, it's about learning together, building trust and strengthening the relationships that sustain change.

Partnership

Complex challenges can't be solved by one actor alone.

Place-based work brings together governments, funders, service providers and communities to work collaboratively across siloes, sectors and timeframes. To be effective, partnerships must be grounded in trust, reciprocity and a shared purpose. When done well, partnership becomes the infrastructure for collective action and long-term reform.

Together, these principles make place-based work distinct.

It's about governance, not geography. It's about who gets to decide, whose knowledge counts and how systems can serve people in the full complexity of their lives.

This guide offers a set of practical tools to help practitioners, funders and partners apply these principles in practice. Each tool invites reflection on and conversation about how decisions are made, how accountability is shared, and how partnerships are built and sustained.

The goal isn't to produce uniformity, but alignment: a shared language and framework for doing the work of place-based change with integrity, humility and respect for the wisdom that lives in community.



Tool: Subsidiarity test

Purpose:

To test whether decisions are being made as close as possible to where knowledge, capability and consequence sit.

Subsidiarity is not about “devolving everything to the local”; it’s about matching responsibility to context.

It helps partners move from “who has the authority?” to “who should hold the authority, and what would it take for that to work?”

When to use

- During governance or partnership reviews
- When a new decision-making structure is being set up
- When tension arises between central control and local autonomy
- As a diagnostic in community-government-philanthropic collaborations

The framework

Scoring:

3 = Strong local alignment (decision sits close to where knowledge and consequence meet)

2 = Shared alignment (regional or joint authority)

1 = Centralised decision (distant from local knowledge or consequence)

| Dimension | Guiding question | Score | Reflection prompt |
|-----------------------------|--|-----------|---|
| 1. Proximity to consequence | Who feels the direct effects of this decision? | 3 / 2 / 1 | Are those people or organisations part of the decision process? |
| 2. Proximity to knowledge | Who best understands the issue on the ground? | 3 / 2 / 1 | What information or lived experience are we ignoring? |
| 3. Capability | Who currently can make the decision well? | 3 / 2 / 1 | If local actors don't yet have that capacity, what would help them get there? |
| 4. Legitimacy | Who do others trust to make this decision? | 3 / 2 / 1 | What gives that trust — track record, role, representation? |
| 5. Accountability | Who can be held to account by those affected? | 3 / 2 / 1 | Is there a clear feedback loop to those who experience the consequences? |
| Total score | | | |



Subsidiarity score, your results:

- **13–15:** Local-first system. Ensure consistency and resourcing.
- **9–12:** Balanced shared model — review how clarity and coordination are maintained.
- **5–8:** Central-heavy model — identify opportunities to devolve or co-design.
- **Below 5:** Red flag — decisions are distant from impact and insight.

Acting on your subsidiarity score

(For individual place-based initiatives)

13–15: Local-first practice — consolidate and sustain

What this means:

Decision-making already sits close to community knowledge and consequence. The challenge now is to make that strength durable and visible.

Next steps:

- **Document it:** Capture how local decisions are made and why.
- **Protect it:** Build these arrangements into formal agreements, governance documents, or MOUs with funders and partners.
- **Resource it:** Secure ongoing funding for local leadership, facilitation and decision infrastructure (not just program delivery).
- **Share it:** Mentor other communities or PBIs; tell the story of what subsidiarity looks like in practice.

9–12: Shared model — clarify and strengthen

What this means:

Decision-making is partially devolved but still mixed — some choices sit locally, others remain central or unclear.

Next steps:

- **Map it:** Create a “who decides what” chart to clarify responsibilities between the community, backbone and external partners.

- **Refine it:** Adjust processes that slow things down or duplicate effort — for example, simplify approval loops or clarify thresholds.
- **Build it:** Invest in local capability (facilitation, governance, data use) so confidence and credibility support further devolution.
- **Balance it:** Hold regular joint reflection sessions with funders and partners to review how the balance of decision-making feels in practice.

5–8: Central-heavy model — test and rebalance

What this means:

Most major decisions are still made externally or by a small leadership group. Local input is present but not authoritative.

Next steps:

- **Start small:** Identify one decision area (e.g. funding priorities, partner selection, evaluation) to pilot a more community-led process.
- **Show evidence:** Demonstrate that locally made decisions deliver strong results and build trust with system partners.
- **Negotiate:** Engage funders and government partners in designing clearer shared decision-making frameworks.
- **Strengthen voice:** Create new local forums or representative mechanisms to channel lived experience into decisions.

Below 5: Centralised control — reset and rebuild

What this means:

Decisions are distant from community insight; local actors have little or no authority. The initiative risks losing legitimacy and traction.

Next steps:

- **Pause and reflect:** Convene your leadership or backbone group to name where decisions are being made about community, not with it.
- **Re-engage:** Run a structured listening process with community partners to reset priorities and rebuild trust.



- **Prototype new models:** Trial joint governance arrangements or community panels — even in small, low-stakes areas — to demonstrate a different way of working.
- **Invest in trust:** Dedicate time and resources to relationship-building before structural reform; subsidiarity follows credibility.

Reflection exercise – what would it take?

After scoring, explore:

1. Shifts in power

- What decisions could confidently move closer to the ground tomorrow?
- What would need to change (funding, skill, structure) to make that shift stick?

2. Shared space

- Where does joint stewardship make more sense than full devolution?
- How can shared decision-making mechanisms (e.g., shared tables, community panels) be formalised?

3. Capability building

- What support, data or tools do local partners need to take on more authority?
- Could government, or philanthropy play a developmental role rather than a gatekeeping one?

Workshop activity version

Setup:

- Draw three concentric circles on a wall: Local, Regional, Central.
- Write your current decisions (funding, program design, data access, evaluation, communications, etc.) on sticky notes.
- Ask participants to place each sticky where the decision currently sits.
- Then ask: *Where should it sit?*
- Discuss the gaps and name the practical enablers needed to move them.



Tool: Accountability mirror



Purpose:

To test whether accountability in your initiative strengthens learning, trust and shared responsibility.

When to use

- When reviewing reporting or performance frameworks
- When designing governance structures or partnership agreements
- When tensions emerge between “upward” and “outward” accountabilities
- During reflective learning or partnership renewal workshops

The framework

Scoring:

3 = Generative accountability (shared, learning-oriented, trust-building)

2 = Balanced accountability (mix of compliance and collaboration)

1 = Transactional accountability (compliance or control-focused)

| Dimension | Guiding question | Score | Reflection prompt |
|---------------------------------|--|-----------|---|
| 1. Direction of accountability | Who are you most accountable to right now? | 3 / 2 / 1 | Who isn't in that accountability loop but should be? |
| 2. Nature of accountability | What kind of accountability dominates your work? | 3 / 2 / 1 | Does this form of accountability build or limit trust? |
| 3. Focus of accountability | What are you accountable for? | 3 / 2 / 1 | Are you being held to what truly matters in this place? |
| 4. Practice of accountability | How is accountability enacted? | 3 / 2 / 1 | What would it look like to make accountability a shared practice? |
| 5. Experience of accountability | How does accountability feel to those involved? | 3 / 2 / 1 | What would make it feel fairer, more reciprocal or more meaningful? |
| Total score | | | |



Accountability score, your results:

- **13–15:** Accountability as stewardship — shared, transparent, learning-driven.
- **9–12:** Balanced but still mixed — identify where compliance crowds out learning.
- **5–8:** Transactional — redesign feedback loops and expectations.
- **Below 5:** Risk of performative accountability — realignment needed with community and purpose.

Acting on your subsidiarity score

(For individual place-based initiatives)

13–15: Accountability as stewardship — keep it shared and generative

What this means:

You've built a culture of transparency, learning and mutual responsibility. Accountability is strengthening trust rather than enforcing control.

Next steps:

- **Protect it:** Embed shared reflection and reporting rhythms into your governance calendar so learning is routine, not reactive.
- **Broaden it:** Involve community voices and partners in reviewing progress and lessons learned.
- **Show it:** Share your accountability stories publicly.
- **Sustain it:** Check periodically that funder or system expectations don't drift back toward compliance at the expense of learning.

9–12: Balanced but mixed — rebalance toward learning

What this means:

Your accountability mechanisms mix compliance and collaboration. Learning is valued but not yet central.

Next steps:

- **Map it:** Identify which reporting requirements feel developmental and which feel performative.
- **Redesign:** Simplify or reframe existing reports into “learning conversations” or shared reflection sessions.

- **Model it:** Demonstrate accountability by surfacing what's not working, and what you're learning from it.
- **Negotiate:** Work with funders and partners to ensure they see learning and honesty as indicators of maturity.

5–8: Transactional accountability — redesign the feedback loop

What this means:

Accountability is primarily upward and procedural. Reports are written for compliance, not learning or improvement.

Next steps:

- **Reframe:** Shift the focus of internal reviews and board discussions from “what did we deliver?” to “what did we learn?”
- **Engage:** Invite community and partner feedback into your monitoring or reporting processes.
- **Test:** Pilot a shared learning review with funders — using narrative and reflection
- **Build trust:** Show how open accountability improves performance and community outcomes over time.

Below 5: Performative accountability — reset and realign

What this means:

Accountability has lost connection to purpose or community. It's performative — more about proving than improving.

Next steps:

- **Stop and listen:** Engage directly with community stakeholders to understand how current accountability feels from their side.
- **Reground:** Revisit your purpose statement and values — what should you be accountable for, and to whom?
- **Rebuild:** Co-design a new accountability model with community representatives and funders centred on transparency and shared learning.
- **Realign:** Replace tick-box metrics with evidence of trust, relationship quality and adaptive practice.



Reflection exercise - accountable to whom, for what, in what way?

After scoring, explore:

1. To whom:

- Who has the greatest stake in the outcomes?
- How are they part of the accountability relationship?
- Where is voice missing — especially from community?

2. For what:

- Are you accountable for impact, or just delivery?
- Does the system recognise relational and process outcomes?
- What would change if you treated accountability as shared learning?

3. In what way:

- How often is accountability expressed through conversation rather than paperwork?
- Could you co-author reports with community or partners?
- Are there ways to make accountability moments feel developmental, not defensive?

Workshop activity version - Circle of accountabilities

Setup:

- Draw three concentric circles on a wall or whiteboard:
 - **Inner:** internal/team
 - **Middle:** partners/funders
 - **Outer:** community/beneficiaries
- Ask each participant to place sticky notes describing:
 - What they are currently held accountable *for*
 - Who holds them accountable
 - How that accountability is expressed
- Discuss patterns: Which circles dominate? Which are thin or missing?
- Then ask: If accountability were designed to build trust, what would look different?



Tool: Partnership barometer



Purpose:

To assess the quality, maturity and integrity of a partnership and to identify what's needed to strengthen it over time.

When to use

- When forming or reviewing a collaboration
- Before signing an MoU, joint workplan or funding agreement
- During reflection sessions or annual partnership reviews
- When tensions or role confusion start to appear

The framework

Scoring:

3 = Deep partnership (trust, reciprocity, shared purpose)

2 = Working partnership (aligned goals, mixed practices)

1 = Transactional partnership (compliance-driven, instrumental)

| Dimension | Guiding question | Score | Reflection prompt |
|----------------------------|---|-----------|--|
| 1. Clarity of purpose | Do we have a shared understanding of why we are partnering and to what end? | 3 / 2 / 1 | Is our shared purpose clear enough to guide hard decisions? |
| 2. Balance of power | How is power distributed and exercised across the partnership? | 3 / 2 / 1 | Who sets the agenda, controls the resources or defines success? |
| 3. Quality of relationship | How well do we understand and trust one another? | 3 / 2 / 1 | Can we have hard conversations without losing goodwill? |
| 4. Openness of learning | Are we learning with each other or simply reporting to each other? | 3 / 2 / 1 | Do we surface what's not working or only what looks good? |
| 5. Fairness of exchange | Are contributions, risks and benefits distributed fairly? | 3 / 2 / 1 | Are smaller or community partners valued and resourced adequately? |
| Total score | | | |



Acting on your partnership score

- **13–15:** Partnership as practice — generative, mutual, adaptive.
- **9–12:** Functional partnership — steady but improvement needed around learning or power.
- **5–8:** Transactional partnership — alignment may be formal but not felt.
- **Below 5:** Symbolic partnership — reset or reframe needed.

Acting on your partnership score

(For individual place-based initiatives)

13–15: Partnership as practice — deepen and share

What this means:

Partnerships are authentic, adaptive and mutual. Trust, shared purpose and learning are embedded in how you work.

Next steps:

- **Document and celebrate:** Capture partnership stories and case studies — how collaboration works in practice, not just on paper.
- **Stabilise:** Formalise what's working well through MOUs, joint planning cycles or learning agreements.
- **Invest in rhythm:** Maintain regular reflection sessions and informal touchpoints to keep trust alive as people and contexts change.
- **Share the model:** Mentor or partner with other PBIs to show how this kind of partnership is built and maintained.

9–12: Functional partnership — strengthen learning and power balance

What this means:

Partnerships are effective but uneven — good intentions exist, but power or learning still flow mainly one way.

Next steps:

- **Check alignment:** Revisit shared goals and success measures — do all partners still define impact in the same way?

- **Name dynamics:** Hold a structured conversation about decision-making power and whose voice carries weight.
- **Open the loop:** Introduce shared learning reviews (not just reporting) to make reflection part of partnership rhythm.
- **Rebalance:** Share facilitation, communication or coordination roles to spread ownership across partners.

5–8: Transactional partnership — rebuild trust and reciprocity

What this means:

Partnerships are mostly formal or compliance-driven. Collaboration exists in structure, not spirit.

Next steps:

- **Listen first:** Conduct brief 1:1 conversations with each partner to understand what's working and what feels extractive.
- **Simplify:** Reduce administrative clutter or reporting tasks that reinforce hierarchy rather than collaboration.
- **Start small:** Co-design one project, product or decision to rebuild trust through shared success.
- **Acknowledge effort:** Publicly recognise contributions from all partners — especially local or community actors who carry unseen labour.

Below 5: Symbolic partnership — reset and reframe

What this means:

Partnerships exist in name only — relationships are transactional, fragmented or based on obligation.

Next steps:

- **Pause:** Step back from delivery to honestly assess whether the current partnership serves your purpose or community.
- **Reframe:** Revisit shared intent — what problem or opportunity should unite the partners?
- **Rebuild:** Begin again through dialogue, not structure — small joint wins, honest storytelling and visible reciprocity.
- **Redesign:** If needed, form a smaller core group of partners willing to invest relationally before expanding the table.



Reflection exercise - what holds this partnership together?

After scoring, explore:

1. Purpose:

- What shared change are we pursuing that we couldn't achieve alone?
- How clearly is that purpose articulated and re-visited?

2. Power:

- Who decides what's important? Who carries the consequences?
- What mechanisms exist to rebalance this over time?

3. Practice:

- What rhythms hold the partnership together — meetings, learning cycles, check-ins?
- Do they foster trust or just coordination?

4. Payoff:

- What value does each partner gain (beyond money)?
- Is reciprocity visible and acknowledged?

Workshop activity version - Partnership spectrum

Setup:

1. Draw a horizontal line labelled:
Contract → Cooperation → Coordination → Collaboration → Partnership → Stewardship
2. Ask each participant to place sticky notes representing where they think the partnership they are discussing sits.
3. Discuss:
 - Where are we now and where do we want to be?
 - What behaviours or structures would move us closer to genuine partnership?
 - What might we need to let go of to get there?

Prompt:

"If this partnership disappeared tomorrow, what capability, trust or system value would be lost?"