

# Communities of Focus Learning Snapshot

Mission Australia’s Communities of Focus initiative aims to create positive social change through a place-based community-led approach. This summary outlines our lessons so far.



Mission Australia is committed to strengthening communities to determine their own futures. We believe postcodes should never limit outcomes, so we’re investing in tailored approaches for long-term positive change.

We have committed to working alongside five communities across Australia using a community-led place-based approach through our Communities of Focus initiative. By working differently and stepping away from traditional models of service delivery, we support communities to develop local solutions and lead place-based change.

Over the ten-year commitment and beyond, we seek partnerships with philanthropists, corporate partners and the broader community to ensure sustainability. Alongside this, we work with each community to grow capability to seek sources of funding to enable them to meet community goals.

This summary provides an overview of our Communities of Focus approach and presents the learnings that have emerged so far, from establishing the initiative across the first three communities in Cairns South, Maddington and Meekatharra.

## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the people of the Yidinji nation - the Gimuy Walubara Yidinji, Malanbarra Yidinji and Gulgibarra Yidinji clans, the custodians of the Cairns South region, the Whadjuk Noongar clans the custodians of the Maddington region; as well as the Ngunnawal Wajarri and the Yugunga-Nya people, the custodians of the lands around Meekatharra.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and future, for they hold the memories, the culture and the dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

## Key insights



**Community-led place-based approaches are critical to drive positive social change.**

They can be a successful mechanism for responding to entrenched disadvantage, challenging the systemic drivers of wellbeing and equity in communities and improving community outcomes in particular locations.



**Relationships are a key enabler.**

Success requires embedded deep engagement across sectors and a diverse cross-section of the community, built on relationships that move at the ‘speed of trust’. It is important to ensure everyone is on-board.



**Driving change relies on building strong commitment and partnerships.**

It’s essential that a cross-section of community members, including people with lived experience, are represented.



**There is no one-size-fits-all approach and progress does not happen against a pre-determined timeframe.**

Every community will progress at its own pace. Stakeholder groups and governance structures may change through the different stages of the initiative.



**The level and type of backbone support must be balanced with community autonomy.**

Striking a balance between guiding and supporting, particularly during transition points of the initiative, can maintain momentum and the integrity of the approach.



**A developmental evaluation approach with regular learning cycles works best.**

This enables continuous and iterative reflection on progress and allows processes to be adapted as new information and evidence comes to light.

## What is a placed-based approach?

A collaborative, long-term approach to build thriving communities delivered in a defined geographic location. This approach is ideally characterised by partnering and shared design, shared stewardship, and shared accountability for outcomes and impacts<sup>1</sup>.

Dart, J. Place-based evaluation framework: a guide for evaluation of place-based approaches in Australia, 2018

Mission Australia is committed to strengthening communities through place-based approaches. We believe that if we bring together communities and invest for the long-term, we can catalyse sustainable positive change. Our aim is to stimulate community-led collective action and break down systematic drivers of disadvantage which are not adequately addressed through current service and system responses.

## Mission Australia’s Communities of Focus

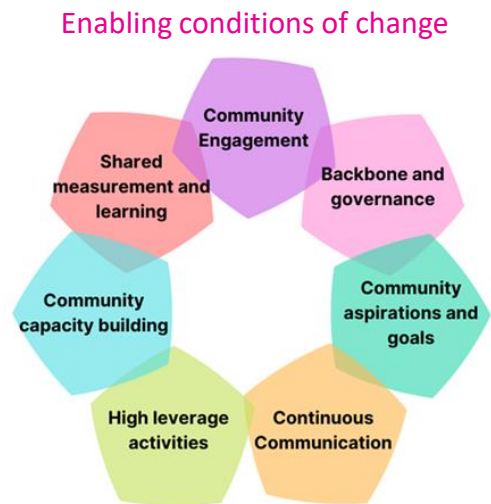
Communities of Focus is a ten-year priority and strategic initiative at Mission Australia. Commencing in 2020, we are committed to establishing five Communities of Focus by 2025.

Within the Community of Focus model, Mission Australia plays the role of backbone in each location. As the backbone, we work together with the community through a community-led governance structure across ten years with the aim to establish, initiate, learn, grow, scaffold, and then transition to independence community-led place-based work.

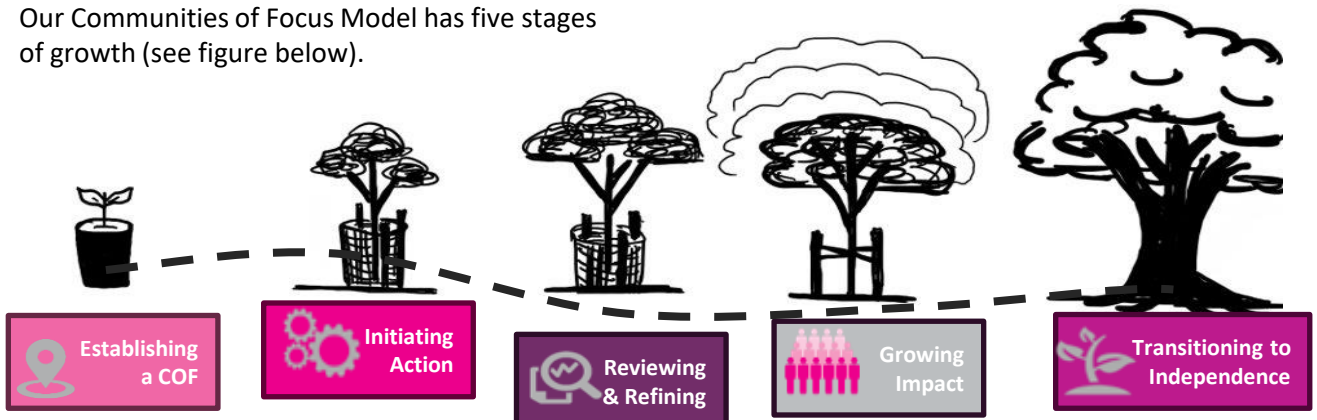
Our Communities of Focus Model has five stages of growth (see figure below).

This summary reflects on the first two stages in which the foundations for place-based work are laid. These are:

- 1. Establishing a Community of Focus:** Fostering readiness for collective action, establishing community commitment and backbone, building trusting relationships, and fostering a shared vision.
- 2. Initiating Action:** Establishing governance, growing representative voice and contribution, developing community goals, co-designing activities and rapid responses, and mobilising inputs and activities.



Throughout the five stages of growth the backbone team and community work together to establish and strengthen seven enabling conditions for change (see above). These have been identified, through our experiences working with communities and existing literature on place-based and collective impact initiatives, as being critical to building the foundation for community-led action.



## Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning is an essential part of our Communities of Focus approach. We have established a multi-layered approach to measuring the enabling conditions, local impact initiatives, population and system level changes.

### The objectives are to:

- Ensure that each Community of Focus is accountable to internal and external stakeholders by producing credible evidence of effective processes, outcomes and long-term community impact.
- Build an evidence base and share knowledge to inform ongoing Community of Focus design, development and scaling across communities.
- Establish sustainable and continuous monitoring, learning and reflective processes that are used to enhance, improve and develop the Community of Focus initiative.
- Build the evaluation knowledge and skills of Community of Focus stakeholders and communities to design and implement localised MEL activities to use data to inform planning, implementation, decision-making and adaptations for greater impact.

**Monitoring** involves the routine collection of data at a local level to identify what is working well and where there are opportunities to learn, adapt and improve. Each community will have a **localised Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan** and sustainable data collection systems to ensure local ownership and continuous access to data to inform decision-making and collective action.

Monitoring tracks the enabling conditions of change, local actions and emerging outcomes. It includes an annual review process to reflect on progress, identify key learnings and to make course corrections as needed



**Evaluation** at key time-points will assess the overall design, implementation and outcomes.

A **formative evaluation** in the early and middle years will be conducted focusing on using evaluation data for development, enhancement and improvement.

A **summative impact evaluation** in the later years will determine the overall value and impact made by each Community of Focus.

### Periodic evaluation schedule

1. Design & Early Implementation (Year 1.5-2)
2. Implementation & Early Outcomes (Years 3-4)
3. Outcomes & Early Impact (Years 4-6+)
4. Impact & Transition (Years 9-10)

**Learning** is the most important part of our approach. Regular reflection, learning and action cycles are embedded within a developmental evaluation approach to continuously build upon, strengthen and refine our place-based approach and share learning with the broader sector.

### Our partner communities

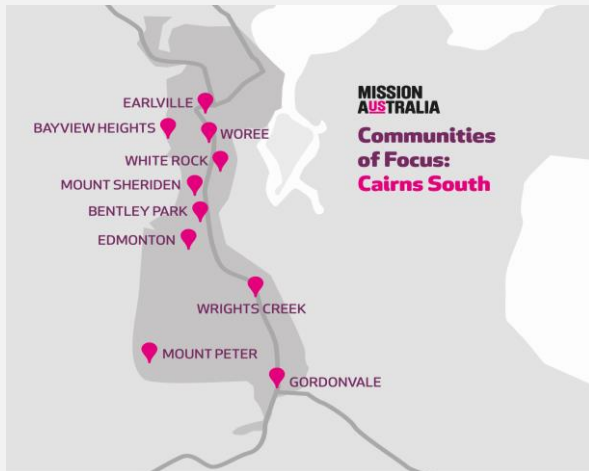
We have been invited to support three communities:

- Cairns South, Queensland in 2020
- Maddington, Western Australia in 2022, and
- Meekatharra, Western Australia in 2022.

These communities are transitioning from the establishment phase for a Communities of Focus into the initiating action phase. Our aim is to commence in an additional two communities by 2025.

The following case studies provide an overview of each community and their unique journey to establish Communities of Focus.

## Working in partnership with Cairns South Together (CST), Queensland



Located in Far North Queensland on the lands of the Yidinji nation, the Gimuy Walubara Yidinji, Malanbarra Yidinji and Gulgibarra Yidinji clans, Cairns South is a strip of suburbs that stretches along the Bruce Highway for approximately 25 kilometres south of the Cairns CBD.

CST originally grew out of a collective impact project which was implemented in Cairns South from 2010-2020 and was informed by the 'State of the Children' reports in 2018 and 2019. These factors heavily influenced the ways that CST was established including the adoption of their governance model.

### Establishing a local backbone team

The establishment of a Community of Focus in Cairns South was agreed with community in late 2020 and a Collaboration Agreement co-developed in 2021. The Mission Australia local backbone team in CST consists of a Program Manager and Community Engagement Facilitator, who are both supported by an Area Manager and a National enabling team.

### Engaging community

Early momentum was built through a range of activities including community asset mapping. Establishing their identity including a logo and motto 'nothing about us without us' saw CST membership grow to over 100 members. CST amplified the voices of their local community to inform and drive early activities and produce resources based on what is needed locally to support the key focus areas.

### Identifying areas of focus

After extensive consultation and data review, a collaborative Theory of Change process assisted CST in identifying two areas to focus their efforts on to address current social challenges in the area. These are:

- ❖ **Children are developing well in their first 1000 days and launch into early learning**
- ❖ **Young people have the foundations they need as they start adolescence and launch into independence.**

### Shifting from establishment to initiating actions

Activities over the past three years have focused on building awareness and engaging with community and service providers. Currently, CST members are rapidly focusing on identifying ideas to build into actions and pilot initiatives through co-design. Last year, CST was also successful in securing funding from Hand Heart Pocket for their community dashboard to ensure their work is informed by evidence.

In 2024, Cairns South Together will launch some new initiatives including a Sculpture Trail aimed at engaging disengaged youth, a Community Navigators project to breakdown barriers to early childhood engagement and a Youth Voice co-design initiative. The focus on actions is allowing a (re)defining of governance and ways of working to emerge through practice. Formalised shifts will be documented in 2024 with an updated Terms of Reference and Collaborative Agreement.



## Working in partnership Maddington, Western Australia



### Engaging community

A communication and engagement plan for Maddington was implemented to seek input on community priorities for the future. This plan included key engagement events such as Data Walk and Talk, Education summit, Community survey, Noongar forum, BBQs at the Mission Australia Centre 'Wattle House' and Youth Consultations. The consultation and engagement sought to explore two areas of interest:

- ❖ Youth disengagement, and
- ❖ Housing and homelessness.

Drawing upon learnings from Cairns South, convening a working group and using collaborative facilitation approaches to assist in the early community engagement before establishing governance structures, have been key enablers during this phase.

### Identifying areas of focus

The local backbone team and Community Leaders Working Group facilitated the 200 Voices youth consultation project. This, together with a dedicated Mission Australia **Youth Survey Report** for Maddington in 2023, is providing deep insight into the experiences of young people in Maddington and surrounds. Collation of stories of homelessness sought to minimise survey-fatigue, while building strong insights of housing and homelessness. System mapping is now informing a single focus area.

### Moving forward

The next step is to determine a single focus area for **Maddington's Voice and Vision**, through events in February 2024. This will bring together people from all parts of the Maddington community, from services to sporting groups, churches to schools, local residents, businesses and people with lived and living experience. Together they will reflect on the data and insights gained through consultation and decide a vision for the change they want to see in coming years and the focus area for their Community of Focus.

Located on the lands of the Whadjuk Noongar clans who live in the south-west of Western Australia, Maddington is a suburb 20 kilometres southeast of the central business district of Perth, within the City of Gosnells local government area.

Scoping for the Maddington Community of Focus took place in 2021 with a Readiness Assessment Report and invitation from local stakeholders to form a Community of Focus.

### Establishing a local backbone team

A local WA Implementation Lead and a Community Engagement Facilitator were recruited, informed by learnings from Cairns South on the skills required of a local backbone team. Unfortunately, the latter position fell vacant for a period of three months during the establishment phase, impacting on momentum.



Working in partnership Meekatharra, Western Australia



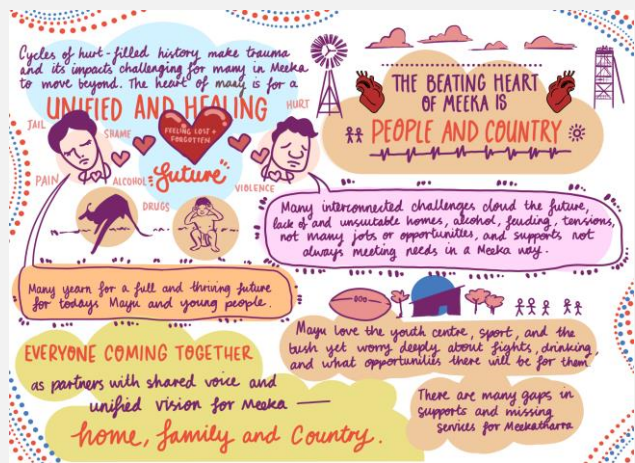
Meekatharra is a town in the Mid West region of Western Australia, approximately 700 km north-east of Perth. The traditional owners of the lands around Meekatharra are the Ngoonooru Wajarri to the west (part of the Wajarri Yamatji people) and the Yugunga-Nya people to the east

Meekatharra has a population of just over 700 people, of which approximately half are Aboriginal. Meekatharra is a Yamatji word meaning "place of little water".

Laying the foundations

During the initial community engagement and consultation, Mission Australia spent time hearing from people across all parts of the community to understand more about their experiences, needs, and hopes for the future of Meekatharra.

‘An overview of all we have heard’ visual and summary was then shared back to the community (see right). The artistic depiction of the six months of consultation and engagement was a pivotal feedback mechanism that was community owned.



Our people Our Country

Community walking together to make long time future changes, sharing knowledge and helping to heath for a better future for Meekatharra. On Country with a people to make changes walking the long path to connect family and their grounded roots and come together with honesty, integrity, celebrations to regenerate further from sunrise to sunset.

Artist Mickaela Mongoo, Meekatharra.

Mission Australia then continued building and strengthening relationships with the community of Meekatharra through a ‘one mission, one message’ engagement approach until we were invited to establish a Community of Focus. This ensured that the experience of community was not linked to an individual and that Mission Australia was able to leverage diverse relationships between staff and community to build engagement and recognising that the final decision to begin a Community of Focus sat with community. A second artwork depicting the COF approach in Meekatharra was created by a local artist (see left) . This continues to be used as an engagement tool when reaching out to new community members due to its local meaning.

In 2022, Elders approved the invitation to become a COF which triggered commencement of the establishment phase.

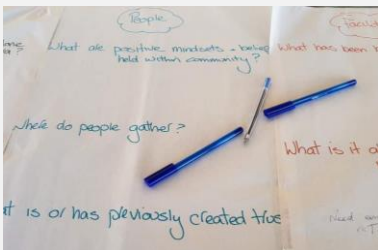
**Working in partnership Meekatharra, Western Australia**

**Establishing a local backbone team**

Towards the end of the establishing stage, the Communities of Focus Implementation Lead was recruited (for both Maddington and Meekatharra) and initially focused heavily on relationship building with key Elders and other stakeholders in the community. The co-design of a local Community Engagement Facilitator position resulted in a range of learnings. Specifically, it is important to adapt standard human resource processes in remote community contexts and adopt adaptive models of employment, such as recognition of time bound contributions by dedicated groups of local people engaged in specific pieces of work and the role of paid participation approaches.

**Continuing community engagement**

Community leaders continue to meet regularly focusing on action planning and their ways of working. Asset-based Community Development approaches have been facilitated collaboratively by leaders providing rich insights and generating ideas and local activities.



**Identifying areas of focus**

In 2023, focus areas were co-created through multiple 'circles' of feedback and validation. These were endorsed and launched at a Family Fun Day in the community.

Since then, there has been a range of locally planned and facilitated community engagement activities and people coming together to drive change in Meekatharra.

Unified by a shared vision for the coming years, the people of Meekatharra have quickly begun identifying opportunities for what is needed to begin realising the change they want to see in their community.

**Looking forward**

A range of significant initiatives are planned that build on the community strengths mapping completed in 2023. These include ways to support young people to build skills and see future pathways to strive for.

Strong strategic partnerships are forming, focused on justice and services working in a 'Meeka way'. Community identity will form the foundation for unified and collaborative change moving forward.



## Key Insights for establishing place-based approaches

Our insights have been drawn from our experiences working alongside communities, perspectives of community members, a formative evaluation of Cairns South Together, and a rapid review of the Maddington Community of Focus.

### Relationships are a key enabler but move at their own rate

Transformative place-based initiatives take time to develop. Success requires deep and embedded engagement across sectors and a diverse cross-section of the community through strong local knowledge and connections. Once formed, relationships need to move at the 'speed of trust'. This is particularly true in the case of culturally diverse, First Nations, and/or remote communities who are likely to want to 'test' the commitment of a backbone organisations for long term support. Adopting agile sequencing of activities enables backbone teams to progress the initiative whilst building trust in the team and process.

### Ensuring everyone is on board is important for long term success

A common understanding of what it means to be a part of a place-based community-led model is important for key stakeholders and community alike. This includes an understanding of what a strategic systems lens for achieving change looks like and building community awareness of their role and agency in driving change, including those with lived experience. The active and collaborative involvement of community leaders from commencement is vital. Including them in the planning and facilitation of activities such as consultations, community mapping and other community events enables a foundation of collaborative momentum.

### Driving change relies on building strong commitment and partnerships

Formalised commitment or partnerships with key organisations builds endorsement of individuals to act, make decisions and leverage resources for collective benefit. Ensuring this is balanced with community representation with equal authority and influence for change on a larger scale is important. Voluntary community involvement in roles such as steering committees often brings varying levels of capacity to commit over time or make decisions on behalf of their organisations. Nevertheless, it is essential that a cross section of community, including people with lived experience are represented.

### There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach and progress does not happen against a pre-determined timeframe

Each community journey will be unique to place. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to working alongside a community, with varying pace, drive, strengths and aspirations for change at different points along the journey. Progress does not happen against a pre-determined timeframe. Instead, place-based approaches are cyclical journeys and while it is useful to have an overarching framework, timeframes and milestones need to remain flexible. However, having a detailed community plan is a core mechanism to drive projects and actions aligned to the community vision. Without this momentum, direction can be easily lost. Local and national events, for example natural disasters, can also impact momentum and can even act as catalysts for change in a community.

### The local structures required to drive change need to adapt and evolve

The organising structure and role of agencies, stakeholders and community is likely to vary depending on the stage of an initiative. The initial focus centres on fostering readiness for collective action, establishing community commitment and building trusting relationships and so there may be less need for governance. However, once the focus shifts to initiating action, there is greater emphasis on strategic decision-making and leadership. It is important to be clear on the purpose of engaging different stakeholders at different times, so that they are clear on the expectations of their role and contribution that they can make.

## Key Insights for establishing place-based approaches (cont'd)

### The level and type of backbone support must be balanced with community autonomy

A high level of backbone support is often required in the early stages of a place-based initiative, when the role is key to building community capacity, developing community-led governance structures and catalysing local leadership collaboration. Striking a balance between guiding and supporting, particularly during transition points of the initiative, is important to ensure that the momentum and the integrity of the approach are maintained. For example, effective governance models are an important enabling condition of place-based approaches. While backbone organisations may strive to establish of governance structures early on, the concept of governance may be less of a priority for community members who prefer to focus on actions and building momentum through quick-win projects. This presents an opportunity to allow a more natural and adaptive governance model to emerge by reflecting on what works and taking a 'defining by doing' approach.

### The backbone provides a key role in coordination and maintaining momentum

The critical role of the local team and the support from the National team are pivotal for ensuring overall coordination and rallying local members of the initiative, especially during challenging times or when there is a dip in energy and momentum. Given the nature of sustained effort required and potential fluctuations in motivation, this support becomes even more crucial as sustainability demands a long-term vision. In addition, key to success are the capabilities of the Program Manager/Lead in translating the policy or approach into practice on the ground. The community engagement facilitator is in turn critical to building and maintaining relationships and networks and the conduit for messaging.

### Adequate supports need to be in place for local staff

Local involvement in a place-based initiative that is striving to tackle entrenched disadvantage is often deeply personal. Small local backbone teams risk overwhelming individuals where the intensity of activities is high. Natural disasters have collective impacts on all people in the community, including those involved in the initiative. Whether employed in the backbone team or contributing voluntarily it is important to be trauma informed at all times, embedding self-care and person-centred approaches.

### A developmental evaluation approach with regular learning cycles is required

Building an evidence base for place-based approaches through robust monitoring, evaluation and learning cycles is critical to driving social change and achieving better outcomes for communities. During the early stages phases it is important to continuously and iteratively reflect on the progress of the enabling conditions for change, as they are a critical success factor for future stages of place-based work. This ensures that adaptive processes are continuously refined to strengthen these conditions as new information and evidence comes to light. Do not wait for the first formal evaluation to know if things are progressing. It is also important to capture emerging positive changes as the community begins to mobilise, as this provides information to celebrate early progress and maintain momentum.

We would like to thank the community members and leaders, organisations and community groups, and backbone teams of Cairns South Together, Meekatharra, and Maddington for their time and their ongoing commitment to working together for a changed future in their local community.

We are honoured to walk alongside you through Communities of Focus.

Mission Australia is a national non-denominational Christian organisation, with more than 160 years' experience in standing together with Australians in need on their journey to independence.



### Partnering to strengthen communities

We believe postcodes should never limit futures so we're partnering to strengthen communities through tailored approaches for long-term positive change.