

# “A MOMENT THAT SHOWED THAT TRANSFORMATION IS POSSIBLE”

Looking back at five years of learning at, and from,  
ChangeFest

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

November 2023  
Lisa Ryan Hecate Consulting

## Executive Summary

The past decade has seen a remarkable growth in community-led, place-based systems change work across Australia. This work, which is informed by and builds on both traditional community development work and [more recently] Collective Impact, is dispersed across locations but shares some common principles and common values, particularly a commitment to placing local communities, including First Nations communities, at the centre of decision-making, and working to shift the conditions which contribute to disadvantage and environmental degradation.

As the uptake of community-led, place-based systems change occurred, there was growing demand from practitioners and communities alike for opportunities to gather, network and learn together, and to identify opportunities to strengthen the enabling environment for the work to occur. ChangeFest was created in response to this need.

### About ChangeFest

Today, ChangeFest is:

*The nation-wide movement for place-based change in Australia, including annual gatherings to learn, celebrate and strengthen the collaborative work of creating thriving and equitable communities across the country<sup>1</sup>.*

Change Fest's aspiration is to contribute to the creation of:

*A more inclusive, equitable and sustainable Australia where every person and their community thrives.*

In striving for this mission, ChangeFest describes its purpose as being:

*To bring together people from across diverse communities and sectors who are committed to place-based change to learn, network and collaborate in ways that to progress their work in place and to address the systemic barriers beyond place<sup>2</sup>.*

ChangeFest was originally conceptualised as an annual event, the first one of which was held in 2018 on the lands of the Yagara and Yugambeh people in Logan (Queensland). It was intended to provide an opportunity to learn about and celebrate place-based change, with a particular focus on learning from practitioners.

Since that first ChangeFest, there have been three national events and four local events [ChangeFest on the Road]. Each of these events have been co-designed and co-produced by a local host community and by national convenors. It has engaged thousands of cross sector actors and hundreds of community-led initiatives across the five years and continues to grow.

ChangeFest has evolved significantly since that first event, with fundamental shifts in:

---

<sup>1</sup> Collaboration for Impact (2023). *ChangeFest: A National Movement for Place Based Change*. (Unpublished).

<sup>2</sup> Collaboration for Impact (2023). *ChangeFest: A National Movement for Place Based Change*. (Unpublished).

- The **understanding of place-based change** which underpins ChangeFest, from a broad definition of place-based change to a specific focus on community-led, place-based systems change.
- The **intent of ChangeFest**, which has shifted from being an annual learning event to a national movement.
- **Governance** arrangements, with a move to more explicit and transparent power sharing arrangements between local hosts and national convenors.

### *Purpose and methodology of this Review*

The purpose of this evaluation is to understand what changes ChangeFest aimed to contribute to over the last five years, how it has worked to support change, and to what extent it has achieved this. The findings of this Review will inform the future direction and form of ChangeFest, including informing purpose, governance and decision making, resourcing and local partnerships.

The Review has used a mixed methodology, drawing on a range of sources including:

- Unpublished documents relating to the design and implementation of each national ChangeFest event, including planning documents relating to ChangeFest 2024.
- Evaluation data generated following each national ChangeFest event<sup>3</sup>.
- A workshop with leaders responsible for ChangeFest 2024, focusing on development of the Theory of Change for ChangeFest 2024.
- Confidential in-depth one-to-one interviews with 24 ChangeFest stakeholders, including Elders, community members, backbones, government, philanthropy, local host communities and national convenors.

Thematic analysis was then conducted across sources to identify key themes and recommendations.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

ChangeFest has contributed to numerous significant outcomes and the five-year incubation of ChangeFest offers rich learnings. Overall, the aspirations, value and potential of ChangeFest was acknowledged, and participants in this Review were generally very positive about the role played by ChangeFest in convening the national movement, and creating opportunities for connection, learning and shared action.

Those views notwithstanding, participants also emphasised the need for ChangeFest to continue to evolve and adapt, in order to best meet the needs of communities and practitioners. There was a widespread view that ChangeFest is at a key point in its development, with the deep learning from past ChangeFests having informed recent shifts in governance, resourcing, backbone support and program design. One person expressed it this way:

*At each point, the next layer of work becomes visible.*

---

<sup>3</sup> The local events created under the ChangeFest banner - ChangeFest on the Road and ChangeFest on the Hill - were generally positively regarded. However, due to time constraints this evaluation has focused on national ChangeFest events.

## Key Evaluation Question 1: the outcomes aspired to and achieved

Looking at the extent to which people felt that ChangeFest had achieved its purpose and intended outcomes: overall, people welcomed the shift in intent from ‘series of events’ to **movement building**. Likewise, participants embraced the shift from ‘place-based change’ to **community-led, place-based systems change**, as they felt that this aligned best with their values and aspirations for their practice.

In relation to long-term outcome of **growing a movement of people whose work in community-led, place-based system change positively impacts outcomes for communities**:

- There was strong endorsement of the shift in intent from ‘series-of-events’ to movement building, with Review participants largely agreeing that this framing best aligns with what it will take to scale up and deepen community-led, place-based systems change across Australia.
- Most felt that ChangeFest had laid **solid foundations for movement building**, particularly in relation to building a common language and vision around movement building and building connections and networks across the diversity of the movement.
- The majority of participants felt that there was significant work ahead to truly build and mobilise the movement, particularly in relation to strengthening cross-movement connection between ChangeFest events, and mobilising shared action.

In relation to medium-term outcome 1, **Strengthening community-led, place-based, systems change practice**:

- All participants commented positively on ChangeFest as a site of **strategic learning** and many commented positively on the **adaptation of those learnings back into their local context**.
- Several participants noted that to some extent the national gatherings provide an opportunity to **observe and work on dynamics within the field of community-led, place-based systems change** – including conflict and/or power dynamics within the field – and that this is one of the more unique elements of ChangeFest.
- Some participants called for a **further development of the approach to strategic learning**, including continuing to embrace new approaches and practices for community-led, place-based systems change.
- Most participants welcomed the focus on **celebration** alongside learning and felt that ChangeFest was one of the opportunities to talk informally with peers, to **normalise the complexity and richness of the work**, and commented that this had helped **sustain them** in the work.
- ChangeFest has also been highly successful in **catalysing collaborations** between communities, and between communities and other systems actors.

This has created new opportunities for communities and strengthened peer learning.

- ChangeFest has been somewhat less successful in **catalysing shared action**. Participants in this Review had differing views about the extent to which catalysing shared action was a reasonable expectation of ChangeFest, though several noted that action on shared priorities is one of the defining features of a movement and is key to the full transition from series of events to movement.

In relation to medium-term outcome 2, **Elevate community voice and leadership, including First Nations voice and leadership**:

- All participants identified this as a strength of ChangeFest, and again an area where ChangeFest makes a unique contribution.
- Many, particularly those who participated in CF18, **identified First Nations Elders and other First Nations leaders taking the stage as a moment that shifted power dynamics within Logan and within ChangeFest, showing how shared leadership and shared decision making is both needed and possible**, as a transformative moment in the development of both the ChangeFest movement and a prompt for shifts in practice and governance locally.
- Participants felt that learning about **Country, and the inclusion of cultural ways**, into program design was another highlight, a source of learning and enrichment and a balance to the other elements of the program.
- Several participants felt that other community voices – including the **voice of lived and living experience** – are heard through ChangeFest, although this could be stronger.
- Several participants commented that ChangeFest has moved through phases, from First Nations voices not being fully heard, to being First Nations First, to seeking to build a new model, which brings together **shared leadership** on systemic issues across the country **whilst continuing to centre and elevating First Nations voices and sovereignty**.

In relation to medium-term outcome 3, **Strengthening the enabling policy and funding environment**:

- Most participants felt that ChangeFest was a critical opportunity to identify shared system barriers. They felt that ChangeFest achieves this to some extent but could go substantially further in this regard.
- Most participants felt that there was limited mobilisation of action on those barriers and commented that they would welcome a much stronger focus on this in both ChangeFest events and in the movement more broadly.
- Most participants felt that ChangeFest has been a fertile ground for representatives of government and philanthropy to meet and learn with and from community members and practitioners. It was generally agreed that this had **strengthened understanding and commitment of individual public servants but had not translated into sufficient broad support** for community-led, place-

based systems change within Federal, state or local government, and that ChangeFest should modify its strategy to further progress this work.

- Several participants noted that building shared accountability – that is, government also being transparent about its contribution to community-led, place-based systems change and committing to fully occupying its role – was the next frontier.
- A number of participants identified that ChangeFest could also play an expanded role in connecting and mobilising philanthropists in support of community-led, place-based systems change, including addressing barriers to scaling up this work.

### **Key Evaluation Question 2: Unexpected outcomes and processes**

- Participants in the Review highlighted **some unexpected outcomes or processes** – such as funding opportunities or collaborations – that had occurred because of ChangeFest. There were, however, significantly less comments on unexpected outcomes or processes than might have been anticipated. One interpretation is that, over time, participants have expanded their expectations of ChangeFest and thus see many of the impacts it has achieved as ‘to be expected’.

### **Key Evaluation Question 3: the impact of each individual ChangeFest event**

- All participants commented on the **unique flavour and impact** of each ChangeFest convening. This included wide ranging discussion of the strengths and limitations of each event, as well as the specific contextual challenges and opportunities for each event.
- Several participants commented that the **first ChangeFest, ChangeFest 2018** [Logan, Qld], had created something new, and that the mix of traditional learning and celebration had been welcomed. A majority of participants considered the leadership intervention by Elders and other First Nations leaders as **the** defining moment of ChangeFest 2018, a moment which showed [in the words of one Review participant] ‘that transformation is possible’.
- Many participants commented on the strengths of **ChangeFest 2019** [Mt Druitt, NSW], bringing a diverse audience together in Western Sydney and living through the immediate impacts of climate change via the bushfire smoke related emergency evacuation. The evacuation both disrupted and deepened ChangeFest 2019, with some feeling that it provided another ‘live’ opportunity to face the conditions affecting community and to practice more adaptive leadership during the event. For some, the disruption to the program created opportunities for a wider group to step in and play roles in design and facilitation. A small number, however, felt that communication regarding the evacuation was not managed well, and they had missed opportunities for learning and engagement as a result.

- Many participants also commented positively on **ChangeFest 2021** [Palmerston, NT], particularly the strong focus on the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the strong presence of community leaders and community voices. Not unlike CF19, response to CF21 was deeply affected by the immediate context, this time the COVID-19 pandemic, which tested collaboration between the local and national organising groups and created an extremely complicated event planning environment. As a result, the program and logistical arrangements for CF21 evolved constantly, making it difficult to both confirm arrangements and communicate the program to the wider movement.
- **ChangeFest 2023** [Tasmania] represented the most explicit power sharing arrangements between the local hosts and the National Convening Group, with the local hosts holding a strong role in program design, and accountability for event management. Participants appreciated the opportunity to learn about Country and to learn about practice across Australia. Some participants, particularly those for whom this was a first experience of the ChangeFest event, found it inspiring and took significant learning back into their role. There were, however, challenges, including (but not limited to) logistics and aspects of on the ground delivery and managing multiple partnerships and agendas. Several participants felt that one session did not meet the threshold of being sufficiently culturally safe.

#### **Key Evaluation Question 4: the strength of the enablers**

- The majority of participants felt that the historical **governance arrangements** have been important in supporting ChangeFest to mature, but that these had reached their natural limit and needed to shift to better meet the needs of a movement. Almost all participants expressed support for the arrangements that have been put into place for CF24 – that is, a local host, CFI in a national backbone role, and a national advisory group representing the diversity of the ChangeFest movement and ecosystem.
- On balance, participants felt that the role of **local host communities** has been important and should be an element of ChangeFest going forward. However, several noted that it is complex to get local hosts and national convenors in ‘right relationship’ and that this may be aided by a modified approach to selecting local host communities, with a focus on selecting communities with deep practice in community-led, place-based systems change.
- Many participants commented positively on the **investment** made in ChangeFest to date and appreciated the commitment of government and philanthropy.
- The majority of participants commented that financial investment to date has been insufficient ‘for an event of this nature’, and that securing greater and multi-year investment would both strengthen ChangeFest events **and** enable resources to be directed to movement building.

- Collaboration for Impact’s significant financial contribution to the event was not visible to the majority of participants and this may benefit from greater clarity in the future.
- All participants agreed that ChangeFest had been successful in attracting **diverse audiences** and that this was an enduring strength. Alongside this was a call to strengthen the participation of **young people and multicultural communities** in future ChangeFests.
- Some participants felt that the **ChangeFest Statement** had been a rallying cry for the movement, but none felt that it had been fully taken up as a credo or unifying point.
- Several participants commented on **program design** as an enabler, noting that when it worked well, program design allowed people to get the most out of their ChangeFest experience. Some felt that there was room for improvement on this front.
- Likewise, several commented on **facilitation** as an enabler, creating safe-enough learning environments and drawing out the complexity of the work. As with program design, some felt that this should be given greater priority at future ChangeFest events.
- A number of participants commented on the inherent tensions between the needs of host communities – which may place a premium on profiling local communities and local practice – and the needs of those visiting to attend ChangeFest, who place an equally high premium on the quality of program and learning design, and facilitation.
- Several participants commented that a more integrated and better resourced **communication strategy** that covered pre-, during and post-ChangeFest would be a vital enabler, and improve both reach to diverse audiences [including senior decision makers] and consolidation and translation of learning into action post-event.

## CONCLUSION

ChangeFest has made a significant contribution to the development of community-led, place-based systems change and through that has positively impacted communities across Australia.

Uniquely in the Australian landscape, each ChangeFest **event** provides an opportunity for the full diversity of the movement working on community-led, place-based systems change to **gather, to learn from one another, to celebrate practice, and to grapple with the critical challenges and opportunities** facing communities.

Many ChangeFest participants then translate these learnings into new ways of working back in their role. At this stage of ChangeFest’s development, much of the impact comes from this **local implementation of learnings**.

Participants in this Review have strongly endorsed **the transition from annual event to movement building**. There is great energy and excitement around the potential of a movement – particularly the potential for learning, collaboration and shared action

between events. It is widely agreed that this will contribute to both scaling and deepening community-led, place-based systems change across Australia.

There are strong foundations in place for movement building, particularly the strength of connection between ChangeFest participants, and the shared appetite for greater connection and shared action. Realising the full potential of movement building will require dedicated resourcing, as well as a deep engagement with the movement about transitioning to a shared responsibility and shared accountability model.

In many ways, ChangeFest is well positioned for the future: there is now a much **stronger narrative** about the purpose and contribution of ChangeFest; the model **of leadership, governance and accountability** in place for CF24 more closely aligns with the ChangeFest principles, including a strong commitment to shared leadership between First Nations and other Australians.

There remain critical challenges, particularly in relation to: **meeting the needs of the diverse members** of the ChangeFest movement, including communities, backbones, service providers, government and philanthropy; ensuring that each ChangeFest event has a **strong learning design and field building element**, and in doing so balancing the showcasing of local practice with the learning needs of the broader movement; securing **resourcing** that supports both movement building and annual events; and ensuring that **learning from each event is translated into both local action and – where appropriate – shared action.**