Activating Civic and Community Participation Project

Community Research Artefacts Compilation

March, 2026

the good shift

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Introduction

This compilation is one output developed through the Activating Civic and Community Participation (ACCP) project commissioned by Minderoo Foundation as input to its exploration of opportunities to support active community participation, strengthen social capital and foster positive social connection across Australia. The insights generated through the overall project also explore how philanthropy more broadly can support the systemic changes needed to cultivate agency, hope, and stronger connections among key system actors. Please see the ACCP Thematic Summaries Report for further information on the project and its other outputs.

Our overall project design combined desk-top research, interviewing and a Community Research strand of activity. Five Community Research contexts were selected – chosen to bring-in diverse perspectives on how to activate civic and community participation:

- **Youth Advisory Group** - Cherbourg, QLD
- **Tatreez Project** - Logan, QLD
- **Housing Matters Action Group** - Bellingen, NSW
- **The Good Neighbourhood Project** - Norlane, VIC
- **The Wilderness Collective** - Mallacoota, VIC

Each context is different – offering unique experiences and insights in relation to the overall objectives and in relation to six thematic 'deep dive' topics explored as part of the project (see ACCP Thematic Summaries Report).

As such, each artefact is different – reflecting the varied contexts, aims and approaches taken. The content of the artefacts has been drawn on across our other project outputs, and each is also featured in a mini-case study included in the five thematic deep dives.

This compilation contains the actual artefacts developed by the five Community Researchers. Their messages are clear, compelling and consistent with the insights generated through our evidence review and interviewing. The purpose of this document is to foreground their voices and perspectives by letting them 'speak for themselves'.

Our approach

Community Researchers are trusted locals with lived experience and deep knowledge of their communities. Involving them in fieldwork helps surface insights that mainstream studies often miss, adding nuance, context and practice-based critique.

We designed our way of working with Community Researchers to reflect the engagement 'process steps' that interviewees and our evidence review told us matter in practice (and that align with our own decades of experience working alongside communities).

With TGS acting as the project manager and conduit, each researcher received a small, flexible lump-sum budget ($5,000) from Minderoo Foundation and was encouraged to design a project that would add value to work they were already doing, rather than creating something new that would increase already stretched workloads.

To keep administration proportionate, we developed a light-touch Independent Contractor Service Agreement rather than a full, complex contract. This simple template focused on the essentials and avoided getting bogged down in detail. It also invited researchers to be creative about what they would produce, with no expectation of a traditional written report. The agreement supported an iterative approach by asking for an initial plan that could be refined as the work progressed. We also extended our organisational insurance so Community Researchers were covered as independent contractors for their project work.

Importantly, we also provided a coach to support them to scope realistic plans (with a deliberate focus on not taking on too much) and to check in several times over the 2.5-month period. Each check-in was recorded and transcribed, and these 'in-process' reflections have been drawn on across all TGS outputs. Capturing perspectives as the work unfolded meant we didn't only hear a polished final account; it also helped researchers stay on track while integrating what they were learning along the way.

". . . the process that you at The Good Shift have used was really an example of what we're suggesting needs to be the way that you work with small communities . . . or groups within communities. That has allowed us our agency and . . . it has produced more than could have been extracted if all the details were set out for us".

-TH, The Wilderness Collective

Youth Advisory Group, Cherbourg, QLD

Overview of the Community Research Team & Project

The Community Team at Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire Council, under the stewardship of Community Services Manager Aunty Edwina Stewart, set out to work with its Youth Advisory Group to capture and share what had been learnt from the NAIDOC Ballroom Dance Night that was held earlier in the year (2025).

The Dance Night had demonstrated how a simple, community-led idea can bring joy, connect generations, and build pride and hope. The project was designed to support the team and community to reflect on what happened, through capturing the story in a way that felt true to Cherbourg and to share insights that might help other communities and funders see the value of community led ways of leading, through projects like the Dance Night.

In particular, the team was interested to explore some key themes:

- Cultural memory is powerful – reviving ballroom dancing created a bridge between generations; Elders share memories, young people discover tradition
- Small things matter – a single dance night, with modest resources, created joy, pride and connection
- Intergenerational connection builds resilience – from the YAG the project was a response to suicide concerns; by connecting young and old it showed that belonging can protect, and ownership and leadership and commitment grows when communities are leading
- Community-led ideas have the strongest impact – because the idea came from Cherbourg, people felt safe and included
- The story is part of the impact – capturing voices and memories will help keep the feeling alive and inspire others

A mini-case study on this Community Research context is also included in the Social Capital Thematic Summary.

The Cherbourg Youth Advisory Group project used the story of the NAIDOC Ballroom Dance Night to understand how a simple, community-led idea can spark people into showing up, taking part and taking the lead. By retracing how the ball was imagined by local young people, organised with elders, and held as a shared celebration, the project documented the practical steps and ‘soft’ ingredients that activated community and civic participation – from young people volunteering, MC’ing and running activities, to elders stepping forward as dance teachers, mentors and storytellers, and to wider community members coming together around a positive, hopeful event.

At the same time, the project was designed to deepen insight into social capital and belonging in Cherbourg. Through interviewing young people, elders and families, and capturing their voices in a short video clip, story brief and community flyer, the team traced how intergenerational relationships, cultural memory (like reviving ballroom dancing) and shared work on other projects - from camps and creative workshops to centropic farming and Golden Oldies events - build trust, reciprocity and a stronger sense of ‘we’.

The YAG hoped that by making this story visible in ways that feel true to Cherbourg, they could help reinforce local pride and belonging and offer other communities and funders a grounded example of how community-led initiatives protect young people, grow leadership and keep connection alive, even in the face of grief, trauma and ongoing challenges.

The YAG worked with Levi-Joel Tamou from the Indigenous Futures Foundation to develop and produce the video artefact using existing film footage and other materials.

Link to the Video produced as their Community Research Artefact here: https://youtu.be/aVB5KEy2LkY (please note that this link is not to be shared outside the ACCP project at this point)

Tatreez Project, Logan, QLD

Overview of the Community Research Team & Project

Independent Community Researchers, Huda Akhlaki and Aleea Monsour created a project in collaboration with TAQWA Palestinian Community Group to run women's workshops in preparation for The Forest of Hope Installation as part of a Palestinian Exhibition created by Susan Al-Maani.

For stage one, three workshops were held focusing on:

- Tree of Life – using creative narrative therapy, creating artists Trees for each participant to explore their roots, connections, community and purpose

- Tree of Life and creating Community Forests – using drawing and group discussion, starting to develop and explore their wider community through creating trees that brought in connections outside the immediate circles

- Cooking Conversations – sushi and rice-paper roll making session; inspired by feedback from the women that they would love to cook together and were interested to learn to make sushi and rice-paper rolls

For stage two, two Tatreez embroidery workshops were held. Each participant used traditional Palestinian embroidery patterns to create an installation to decorate an olive tree as part of the Palestinian exhibition held 1 November 2025.

The workshops were open to women from all communities with an interest in contributing to the Exhibition installation, and in creating stronger connections with the wider community and sustained friendships amongst the group.

A number of community members provided volunteer input to this part of the project - including facilitation and graphic design. The facilitators and participants hoped that the project would contribute to advocacy and solidarity with Palestine and the Australian Palestinian community.

A mini-case study on this Community Research context is also included in the Gender & Participation Thematic Summary

TATREEZ PROJECT
SUPPORTED BY TAQWA, THE GOOD SHIFT AND MINDEROO ACCP COMMUNITY RESEARCH











FOREST OF HOPE

Tatreez workshops (October 18th - November 2nd):

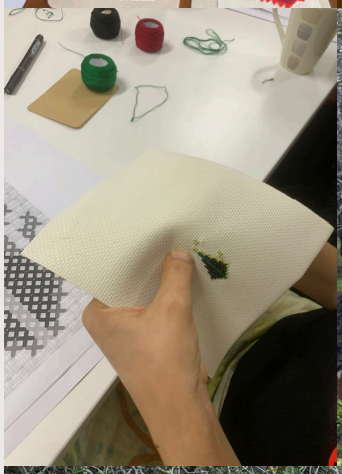
This series of **Tatreez (Palestinian embroidery)** workshops brought people together to connect, share stories, and collaborate creatively. Through stitching and conversation, participants built meaningful relationships while contributing to a **collective installation** that celebrates resilience, culture, and community. The project fostered a sense of belonging and empowerment through art and shared purpose.

The project included two community workshops facilitated by Abla, a recent Arrival from Gaza who specialises in Palestinian Tatreez. Co-facilitators included Aleea Monsour, Sarah Elaklouk and Nour al Huda akhlaki.

Over the two Saturday workshops at The Madina Centre in Logan more than 30 community members attended and creating a Tatreez tree and writing a message of Hope for Palestine.











FOREST OF HOPE

Tatreez workshops (October 18th - November 2nd):

Many participants submitted their tatreez over the two week period and the final design and making was brought together with the guidance of Lebanese Palestinian Artist and Graphic Designer Siren Varma. And photographs of the workshops and instillation were taken by Palestinian artist Mia Slattery.

The instillation was exhibited at the Falestine - One Land, Many Faiths, One Heart event on the 1st of November. Over 600 people attended the event and engaged with the instillation adding to the messages of Hope for Palestine.





FOREST OF HOPE

Facilitator reflections



Facilitator 1

What is your name? What was your role on the Forest of Hope project?:
Sarah Elaklouk
Can you describe your role in the Forest of Hope project and any learnings your had from working on this project?
Supporting facilitation - connecting with wider community and gaining skillsets through observing and connecting with others with various artistic skills
What do you feel participants and audiences got out of being part of the Forest of Hope project?
Community connection, healing, hearing about other upcoming events and meeting people with dismissed interests backgrounds, learning a new skill or developing a beginner skill (tatreez) very meaningful and traditional artform.
What are your areas of work outside of community organising? and how do you use/ apply those skills in your community organising?
Learning facilitation
What are some learning you have had in your recent community engagement projects?
Trauma informed care

Facilitator 2

What is your name? What was your role on the Forest of Hope project?:
Aleea Monsour - I was one of the lead coordinators and facilitators of the Forest of Hope project.
Can you describe your role in the Forest of Hope project and any learnings your had from working on this project?
Through this project I contacted facilitators and engaged with the community to invite them to the workshops. My role also included coordination, making and running/ facilitating the space. Through the project I learnt that having the right creative team can make a project really fun and smooth and that having a task based activity is a really good way to bring different people together.
What do you feel participants and audiences got out of being part of the Forest of Hope project?
I think that participants were able to learn Tatreez, meet new people and form connections, find an outlet for doing something positive towards hope for the situation in Palestine. Especially some of the older women who attended seemed to be seeking this kind of space. The audience who engaged with the instillation itself also added messages of hope, giving them an outlet.
What are your areas of work outside of community organising? and how do you use/ apply those skills in your community organising?
Outside of community organising. I work as a theatre director and university teacher. Through this work I have skills in facilitation, communication skills, creative framing, working with CALD communities and administrative skills which ultimately help with my community organising.
What are some learning you have had in your recent community engagement projects?
Some of my recent community engagement has taught me the importance of bringing people into the framework -- although I might have a clear understanding of how arts is important in engaging and teaching this is not something to take for granted -- sometime communities and organisations need to be brought into this framework.

FOREST OF HOPE

Facilitator reflections



Facilitator 3

What is your name? What was your role on the Forest of Hope project?:
Sirena Varma - design
Can you describe your role in the Forest of Hope project and any learnings your had from working on this project?
I helped with the development and detailing of the final vision, including assembling and signage.
What do you feel participants and audiences got out of being part of the Forest of Hope project?
Hope! It really focussed on community building and messages of hope.
What are your areas of work outside of community organising? and how do you use/ apply those skills in your community organising?
Art and Design. I help organize exhibitions and fundraisers for community. In addition, my artwork often supports fundraising efforts and serve as tools for solidarity and resistance.

Facilitator 4

What is your name? What was your role on the Forest of Hope project?:
Mia Slattery - Project photographer
Can you describe your role in the Forest of Hope project and any learnings your had from working on this project?
I captured the process and event delivery through photography. It reaffirmed my hope that art can shift long engrained narratives and bring communities together.
What do you feel participants and audiences got out of being part of the Forest of Hope project?
If it's not obvious from the images, absolute joy and connection! So many people sighing a deep, shoulder dropping sigh as they worked on tatreez or saw the tree in person.
What are your areas of work outside of community organising? and how do you use/ apply those skills in your community organising?
Portfolio creative - writing, photography and event coordination.
What are some learning you have had in your recent community engagement projects?
Now, more than ever, community arts and cultural engagement projects are a necessity. For hope, for joy but most important for humanity.





FOREST OF HOPE

Facilitator reflections



Facilitator 5

What is your name? What was your role on the Forest of Hope project?:
Huda :) co-facilitator/helper
Can you describe your role in the Forest of Hope project and any learnings your had from working on this project?
As a co-facilitator, I have learnt so much from just being able to be part of the project. I learnt how to both be a participant and a co-facilitator and how to mange these things while trying to engage with others. I also learnt the power of knowledge sharing among the participants and just hearing all of the incredible work each individual is doing outside of this project is amazing. It really taught me that regardless of what profession, background, skills etc that you may have, coming together for an important movement and causes truly strengthens community.
What do you feel participants and audiences got out of being part of the Forest of Hope project?
I think participants and audiences were able to take a sense of connection, community and a sense of being able to contribute to important causes. After observing the participants in the workshop, it was clear that there were connections and strong friendship being made through such the street stitching. I also think participant and audiences have taken away a sense of agency and being to believe that they can still have a positive impact in supporting the Palestinian community. Especially with the negativity and devastation, it can make people feel hopeless. I think this project for everyone who came across it or who were involved were able to feel a deep sense of hope and be able to feel confident in being able to do something to support.
What are your areas of work outside of community organising? and how do you use/ apply those skills in your community organising?
I've recently just over the weekend completed my AVP - Peace Leadership Training and now registered as a quagmire AVP Trainer and Facilitator. This project has unfolded over the last 6 months and this work outside of community organising absolutely has supported me in community organising. One of the key skills of conflict resolution and peace building through the AVP principles has highlighted ways of navigating challenges, obstacles and conflicts that may arise in community settings and projects .
What are some learning you have had in your recent community engagement projects?
One of my biggest takeaways has been that the audience/participants are always going to teach you more and give you such valuable insight. Facilitators are not just learns but also learners and learning to let the participants and audiences drive the process!

Facilitator 6

What is your name? What was your role on the Forest of Hope project?:
Abla, facilitator
Can you describe your role in the Forest of Hope project and any learnings your had from working on this project?
Tought people how to do tatrez for who needed and gave guidance as required
What do you feel participants and audiences got out of being part of the Forest of Hope project?
A chance to practice part of Palestinian heritage and a chance to meet and gather
What are your areas of work outside of community organising? and how do you use/ apply those skills in your community organising?
It's the same work, teaching people about tatreez
What are some learning you have had in your recent community engagement projects?
A chance to meet new people and keep our heritage and teach it to new people

FOREST OF HOPE

Facilitator reflections

TAQWA and Falestine Event Facilitator

What is your name? What was your role in TAQWA?
Susan, cofounder of TAQWA

Can you describe your role in the community engagement project and the Falestine event and any learnings you had from working on this project?
I was the event planner, coordinated the project.

What are your areas of work outside of community organising? and how do you use/ apply those skills in your community organising?
I am a social worker and an advocate for human rights. I am also a wedding planner.







FOREST OF HOPE

Christmas Markets for Palestine (December 7th)



Since the first showing and workshops The Forest of Hope instillation was invited to exhibit as part of the Christmas Markets for Palestine organised by the Watermelon and Seed Studio in West End on the 7th of December. Over 200 people attended the event and engaged with the instillation adding to the messages of Hope for Palestine. This was also a fantastic opportunity for collaborators and participants to re- connect and share tea, coffee and snacks.



The Good Shift and Minderoo Foundation Project - Reflections

Workshop	Aleea Reflection
Workshop 1: Tree of Life	In this workshop we began by getting to know one another and sharing our stories. The “Tree of Life” activity, a narrative therapy tool, uses the metaphor of a tree to explore different parts of our lives: the roots (where we come from), the trunk (our skills and strengths), the branches (our hopes and dreams), and the leaves and fruits (the important people and influences in our lives). The women shared stories of their deep connection to roots, culture, religion, and family, as well as the strength and resilience they have developed through life and motherhood. Many also spoke about the hardship of being far from their families, separated from mothers or children. This led to a powerful discussion about the gifts and values passed down to them by the important people in their lives. The activity gave everyone a chance to reflect on their personal journeys and share meaningful parts of themselves in a safe and supportive way. It was a gentle introduction that set the tone for openness and connection across the workshops.
Workshop 2: Forest of Life and voice	In the second workshop, we began by reflecting on the highs and lows of our week. We then moved into the “Forest of Life” exercise, which encouraged participants to think about their relationships to community and the ways they are supported by others. We also explored the “Storms of Life”—the challenges and difficulties that can shake us—and shared strategies for navigating them. During this discussion, some participants spoke about challenges they had faced in recent weeks, including the rise of Islamophobia and a bomb threat at the ICB where their children attend. While these were difficult experiences to talk about, the group was guided to share coping strategies, ways they had overcome these challenges, and how they could support one another. The conversation on how we use our voices encouraged deeper sharing and built a strong sense of solidarity within the group.
Workshop 3: Sushi Making	The final workshop took a practical and fun turn, as we tried sushi making together. . This was based on participants expression of interest to learn how to make sushi. Alongside learning a new skill, we reflected on our experiences of living here—the positives, the challenges, and the skills we have learned since arriving. Preparing food side by side created an easy and natural space for open conversation. As hands were busy, stories and reflections flowed. Participants celebrated new skills such as driving and learning English, while also sharing struggles with finding work and frustrations with the lack of support from case workers in this area Making and eating food together fostered a warm sense of connection, celebration, and joy. Everyone left with food to share, a sense of achievement, and ideas for other skills they would like to explore in the future.

Meeting with The Good Shift	A fantastic provocation from Gael: How to help to facilitation future friendships: - Whatsapp group - Coffee date afterwards - Exhibition meet up and photo opportunity.
Workshop 1: Forest of Hope	This workshop had around 20 people attend. While collaborating creatively participants had space to connect and to share stories. Through stitching and conversation, participants built meaningful relationships while contributing to a **collective installation** that celebrates resilience, culture, and community. The workshop went really well and mostly people did an amazing job with the cross stitching. The participants represented a very good mix or cross section - drawing together my personal connections, people connected to the Pro Palestine political movement, Muslim and Arab community connected to Susan and to the Madina space. While cross stitching people shared food and chatted with each other, however although there was a little bit of cross over, people still mostly stayed in their family/friend/cultural groups. However as facilitators moved around a little more interaction began to happen between facilitators. During the workshop Huda added people to a community Whatsapp so that participants could share updates on their stitching and keep in touch. We also set up a number of kids activities for kids and took turn as facilitators engaging with the children in the space and allowing their mums to focus on the workshop. The community workshops was facilitated by Abla, a recent Arrival from Gaza who specialises in Palestinian Tatreez. Co-facilitators included Aleea Monsour, Sarah Elaklouk and Nour al Huda akhlaki. Learnings/ things to try in the next workshop: - Perhaps providing conversation starters to encourage people to talk outside of those they already know. - Less food needed as people are quite focused/ didnt eat much.
Workshop 2: Forest of Hope	This workshop had a smaller number with around 10 people attending including some people who attended for the second time. This session also became and informal Homework club where while Abla ran the stitching workshop participants took turns helping her daughter with her English speech. The community workshops was facilitated by Abla, a recent Arrival from Gaza who specialises in Palestinian Tatreez. Co-facilitators included Aleea Monsour, Sarah Elaklouk and Nour al Huda akhlaki.And photographs of the workshops and instillation

	were taken by Palestinian artist Mia Slattery.
The Making day:	Many participants submitted their tatreez over the two week period either at the workshop or in the mail. There were a few participants who were either unable to drop off or did not complete their stitching. Overall, there were around 30 submissions. The final design and making was brought together with the guidance of Lebanese Palestinian Artist and Graphic Designer Siren Varma. This was at my house and it went really smoothly, we listened to music, shared snacks and worked out how to make the pieces strong and aesthetic.
The event day:	The installation was exhibited at the Falestine - One Land, Many Faiths, One Heart event on the 1st of November. Over 600 people attended the event and engaged with the installation adding to the messages of Hope for Palestine. The audience interaction with the installation was really positive - a lot of people took photos with it and spent time reading the messages. Over 15 people who had attended the workshops came to the exhibition and we managed to take a group photo with some of those attendees.

Update (24/11/25): We are also really excited to inform you that we have been invited to exhibit the work again on the 7th of December at a community Christmas market organised by "Mums for Palestine" a grassroots community group here. We aim to also use this as a chance to have a cup of tea in the park with the participants from the project.

Housing Matters Action Group, Bellingen, NSW

Overview of the Community Research Team & Project

Housing Matters Action Group (HMAG) is a grassroots citizen action group in Bellingen, NSW. It started in 2017 after local organisations, Councillors and residents came together to address rising homelessness and the local housing crisis. Recognising that multiple drivers were worsening the problem - and that waiting for government alone wouldn't deliver timely change - the group formed to lead community-driven action to keep the shire diverse and inclusive.

Since an initial forum attended by 160 people (with 46 committing to ongoing involvement), HMAG has mapped local housing needs, created a 10-point advocacy platform, contributed to Bellingen Shire Council's Local Housing Strategy consultations, co-hosted state and federal "meet the candidates" events, and commissioned three short films. It also works on medium-to-longer term solutions, including helping drive 40 affordable housing units for older single women through RFBI and progressing a Community Land Trust to secure perpetually affordable housing for essential workers (the 'missing middle').

HMAG incorporated in January 2020 and refreshed its strategic plan in 2024, reaffirming its place-based advocacy and project incubation with an intent to influence broader systemic causes of the housing crisis. Aspects of its work are supported by the Siddle Family Foundation. Through this project, HMAG piloted a creative, relational, community-focused engagement model which has contributed to ensuring HMAG's long-term planning, strategy and advocacy efforts are grounded in up-to-date, locally generated evidence.

In particular, the team:

- Engaged families in accessible, trauma-aware community spaces
- Updated HMAG's understanding of local housing pressures
- Identified householders for deeper Needs Mapping
- Linked eligible households to the WWCLT 'missing middle' shared-equity pathway
- Tested and refined intergenerational engagement methods
- Informed HMAG's organisational development
- Generated insights for its 10-year strategy

A mini-case study on this Community Research context is also included in the Community Wealth Building Thematic Summary

HousingMatters
ACTION GROUP INC

Acquittal Report to The Good Shift (TGS)

Project: Community Outreach & Relational Engagement for the 10-Year Strategy

Organisation: Housing Matters Action Group Inc. (HMAG)

Date: November 2025

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1. Introduction

About HMAG Inc.

Housing Matters Action Group Inc. (HMAG) is a resident-led community organisation established in 2017 in the Bellingen Shire (NSW). HMAG works to address local housing challenges through community organising, research, advocacy, and partnership-building. Our work is grounded in the lived experience of people in our Shire who are affected by rental insecurity, displacement, and exclusion from the local housing market.

HMAG is currently undertaking a major period of organisational strengthening through the Next Horizon Initiative (NHI) — a long-term, place-based partnership with the Siddle Family Foundation (SFF). SFF represents a strong example of *progressive philanthropy* in Australia: funders who invest deeply in community-led responses, governance capability, and long-term systems change rather than short project cycles. The NHI supports HMAG to build well-informed, evidence-based strategies that reflect the priorities of local residents.

About WWCLT

HMAG is also the driving force behind the establishment of the Waterfall Way Community Land Trust Ltd (WWCLT) — a community-led not-for-profit housing organisation using a modified shared-equity CLT model adapted for the Australian legal context.

WWCLT aims to provide permanently affordable homeownership opportunities for the "missing middle": essential workers, lower- to moderate-income households, who earn too much for social housing but are shut out of the private housing market.

Through our outreach work (including this TGS-funded consultation), HMAG is also identifying and connecting eligible households to the WWCLT pipeline, helping ensure that future CLT homes reach households most affected by the current housing pressures.

Evidence-Based Practice: HMAG's Previous Needs Mapping Surveys

HMAG's work is anchored in community-generated evidence.

- The 2018 Needs Mapping Survey highlighted the vulnerability of older single women in the Shire. This data directly supported advocacy that helped pave the way for Watson Place, a 23-unit affordable housing development for women over 55 at risk of homelessness.
- The 2022–23 Needs Mapping Survey expanded this evidence base to include families, essential workers, volunteers, and younger residents. It highlighted how fast housing stress was escalating and helped shape HMAG's work program and the development of WWCLT.

The Pulse Survey and Needs Mapping activities supported by TGS form the next data iteration under the NHI and are central to shaping HMAG's 10-Year Strategy.

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2. Purpose of the TGS-Funded Outreach Project

The Good Shift's investment supported HMAG to pilot a creative, relational, community-focused engagement model as part of the wider Next Horizon Initiative (NHI). This consultation forms a key component of the NHI's broader objective: ensuring that HMAG's long-term planning, strategy, and advocacy efforts are grounded in up-to-date, locally generated evidence.

The project aimed to:

- engage families in accessible, trauma-aware community spaces
- update HMAG's understanding of local housing pressures
- identify households for deeper Needs Mapping

- link eligible households to the WWCLT “missing middle” shared-equity pathway
- test and refine creative, intergenerational engagement methods
- inform HMAG’s organisational development under the NHI
- generate insights for HMAG’s 10-year strategy

This work is supported by HMAG’s partnerships with progressive philanthropic organisations, including SFF and TGS, who enable us to drive community-led housing innovation.

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3. Activities Delivered

3.1 Community Film Night with Bellingen Public School (End of September)

HMAG collaborated with the school’s P&C to deliver a family-friendly film night. Our team designed and ran all pre-film creative activities, including:

- a large collaborative township drawing
- clay modelling of homes or meaningful local features
- gentle prompts exploring “What does home mean to you?”
- filming by a local videographer
- direct, relational Pulse Survey outreach by HMAG’s social workers and community development workers
- a structured internal debrief to capture learnings

3.2 Change in Delivery Approach: Film Nights Replaced with February 2026 Focus Groups

When the project was originally scoped, HMAG planned to deliver three family film nights, using the same creative, relational engagement model piloted at the September event. While the first event was delivered successfully, the operating environment shifted significantly shortly afterwards, requiring HMAG to adapt the delivery of the remaining two events.

Operating environment: Council consideration of land transfer to WWCLT

During October–November 2025, Bellingen Shire Council began formally considering the potential transfer of two Council-owned parcels of land—one in Dorrigo, one in Urunga—to the Waterfall Way Community Land Trust (WWCLT) as potential demonstration sites for permanently affordable shared-equity housing.

This emerging process created a more sensitive local context. Even though the purpose of the remaining film nights was purely community engagement and data collection, there was a real risk that public-facing events run by HMAG—particularly in or near communities connected to the proposed sites—could be misinterpreted as an attempt to influence Council's decision-making or sway public opinion.

We were conscious that this could create:

- misunderstanding among community members,
- reputational risk for HMAG and WWCLT,
- perceived pressure on councillors or staff,
- and confusion about the purpose of the events.

Decision: Do not proceed with two additional film nights

After careful consideration—and with an eye to community trust, transparency, and the integrity of the broader CLT process—HMAG made the decision not to proceed with the two remaining film nights.

Although these events were unrelated to the proposed land transfer, the *perception* of influence mattered. HMAG and WWCLT rely on strong and honest relationships with residents, council staff, councillors, and other stakeholders. Preserving those relationships was more important than delivery fidelity to the original engagement format.

This was a strategic, ethical decision that safeguarded the credibility of both organisations and protected the integrity of the emerging land transfer process.

Refocused Engagement: February 2026 Community Focus Groups

To ensure continuity of community consultation and to meet the goals of the TGS-funded project, HMAG has shifted its engagement approach to **a series of facilitated focus groups in February 2026**.

These sessions will:

- bring community members together in structured, small-group settings,
- test HMAG's draft "Plan on a Page" for the 10-Year Strategy (developed from all consultation insights: surveys, interviews, outreach conversations),
- examine the underlying *assumptions* emerging from the data,
- gather deeper reflections on priorities, trade-offs, and community expectations, and
- provide a safe, neutral format that is not vulnerable to misinterpretation in the current environment.

This adjusted approach maintains the spirit and intent of the original project while responding responsibly to changes in context.

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4. Engagement & Participation Snapshot

- 25 households completed the Pulse Survey
- 7 households opted into HMAG's in-depth Needs Mapping Survey
- Engagement was strongest through direct relational outreach, rather than QR codes or static signage
- Parents shared openly when approached by warm, trusted workers with lived experience
- Children's activities acted as a natural bridge to deeper adult conversations
- Several households have been connected to the WWCLT project because they fall within the "missing middle" and expressed interest in shared-equity homeownership pathways

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5. Key Learnings & Insights

Relational engagement is essential

A key learning from this project was the central role of a relational, trauma-informed engagement approach delivered by our local social worker. The effectiveness of the outreach was not simply due to her professional training; it stemmed from how she connected with people, the way she held conversations, and the shared lived experience she brought into the work. This was critical in a small regional community where housing stress is acute, shame often silences people, and trust must be earned slowly.

Qualities and Skills That Worked

Across the outreach period, several qualities proved especially impactful:

- Local lived experience of housing precarity - As a renter paying more than 50% of her household income on housing, frequently having to move, she approached people as someone "inside the problem," not an outsider gathering data.
- Shame-aware and dignity-first practice - She consistently normalised people's feelings of embarrassment or fear about disclosing their circumstances.

- Safety before information - She prioritised people feeling emotionally safe in the interaction before pursuing any structured questions or prompts.
- Slow pace and deep listening - Many residents needed time to warm up, tell their story, or express uncertainty. Her capacity to sit with silence, wait, and follow their cues increased participation.
- Non-expert stance - She repeatedly framed participants as the experts in their own lives, reducing power dynamics and encouraging genuine dialogue.

Interview Grab From the Social Worker

"I think people talked to me because I shared that I'm in the same boat, I'm a local renter too. I've moved four times in six years, and rent takes more than half our income. So, when someone tells me they're exhausted or feel like renters are treated like second-class citizens, I genuinely get it."

An Example Interaction

One interaction that stood out occurred before the community film screening, when the social worker approached a family picnicking on the grass, surrounded by some other friends on picnic blankets. The mum was initially hesitant and guarded. Our social worker began by asking gentle, open questions and briefly acknowledging her own experience as a local renter who has had to move repeatedly. That small moment of honesty shifted the tone; the mum relaxed, and the conversation deepened.

As they spoke, the participant's friends sitting nearby started listening in and gradually joined the discussion. What began as a quiet one-on-one chat evolved into a spontaneous group conversation. Parents found themselves comparing their experiences of what many locals call the **Bellingen Shuffle** — the constant movement between a small pool of rentals with little security, the scramble to find a new home with only a few weeks' notice, and the emotional toll this places on families.

Families also spoke about navigating the two dominant local real estate agencies and the fear that raising basic maintenance issues might lead to retaliation or a non-renewal of their lease. Others shared the impossibility of saving for a deposit on local incomes while house prices continue to escalate. The social worker's relational approach — calm, grounded, and non-judgemental — created a sense of safety that allowed people not only to speak to her but to each other.

The outcome was that families began validating each other's experiences, realising their struggles were shared rather than personal failings. This collective recognition generated some of the deepest insights of the event.

The social worker also helped families connect their shared experiences to the broader work underway to establish the WWCLT as a practical, community-led response to the housing crisis. She closed by inviting them to stay engaged with the CLT process, positioning it as one pathway that could begin to address some of the unmet housing needs they had just articulated.

What We Learned

- **Static displays did not work. Conversations did.**
    - Trust grows faster when people see themselves reflected in the person asking the questions.
    - Shared lived experience can reduce shame and open deeper, more authentic conversations.
    - Social workers who adopt an 'insider', participant-led approach gather richer data and support participants to feel heard rather than scrutinised.

- **Creative, child-centred methods build safety and participation**
    - Activities created a welcoming space where families naturally engaged.

- **The housing crisis is now shaping young people's sense of the future**
    - We also engaged the Coordinator of the Bellingen Youth Hub to be onsite during the event.
    - He reported that teenagers see little hope of living or renting locally when they grow up.
    - This reinforces the importance of an intergenerational strategy.

- **Consultation strengthens both HMAG's work program and WWCLT**
    - New data informs HMAG's strategy under the NHI, while also helping WWCLT identify potential shared-equity participants — strengthening the pipeline for the Shire's first CLT homes.

This learning will shape all further community engagement and data collection for the program, reinforcing the value of employing practitioners who bring both professional skill and authentic lived experience to the work.

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6. Project Outputs

Completed

- Final edited short film
- Event photographs with managed consents
- Pulse Survey dataset (25 households)
- Needs Mapping Survey opt-ins (7 households)

In Progress

- February 2026 focus group delivery

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7. Alignment With The Good Shift's Approach

This project directly reflects The Good Shift's priorities:

- relational and community-led methodologies
- lived experience as expertise
- creative, accessible engagement
- slow, deep, place-based learning
- philanthropy that strengthens community capability

The project also demonstrates the complementarity of progressive philanthropic partners like TGS and SFF, whose investment enables HMAG to work in community-centred, evidence-driven ways that would not be possible through short-cycle, output-focused funding.

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8. Use of Filmed and Photographic Materials: Internal Only Unless Consents Permit Otherwise

The September event generated valuable visual materials, including a completed short film and a set of photographs documenting the creative activities, children's reflections, and overall community engagement. Because many participants were children, all imagery is subject to strict child-safety and privacy requirements.

HMAG has obtained consent forms from parents and carers; however, most of these consents allow for internal use only, rather than broad public circulation.

Accordingly:

- The completed short film and all photographs may be used internally within HMAG, WWCLT, and partner organisations such as The Good Shift, Minderoo, and the Siddle Family Foundation for learning, reporting, monitoring, and evaluation.
- They cannot be shared publicly—including via social media, websites, newsletters, or external presentations—unless additional explicit consent is secured from parents or guardians of any identifiable children.
- All materials including identifiable children are stored securely and used strictly within the permissions provided.
- Should HMAG or project partners wish to publish or share any footage or images publicly in future, HMAG will undertake a renewed consent process with families in accordance with best-practice child-safety and privacy standards.

This approach ensures that HMAG, TGS, Minderoo, and SFF can draw on the learning value of the materials while honouring the trust and privacy of participating families.

Links for accessing the film and photograph files have been sent to Minderoo via separate email.

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9. Next Steps

Between November 2025 and February 2026, HMAG will:

1. Complete in-depth interviews with the 7 opt-in households
2. Deliver the February outreach events
3. Connect eligible “missing middle” participants to WWCLT
4. Produce the final written acquittal report, data snapshot, and materials for TGS

Closing Invitation

HMAG deeply values the partnership and learning relationships that have developed through this project. The support from The Good Shift and Minderoo has strengthened our ability to engage our community with integrity, gather evidence that matters, and develop long-term, place-based responses to the Shire's housing challenges.

We would warmly welcome any opportunity to collaborate further—whether through shared learning, future research, or co-designed community engagement. Please feel free to reach out at any time to explore how we might continue working together to support community-led, intergenerational housing solutions in the Bellingen Shire.

Rose West

HMAG Coordinator.

17 November 2025

The Good Neighbourhood Project, Norlane, VIC

Overview of the Community Research Team & Project

TGNP was established in 2011 with the vision of activating local change by facilitating community-driven initiatives that harness the collective power of residents. Through workshops, events and collaborative projects, it seeks to empower neighbourhoods to identify their needs, create solutions and drive positive transformation from the ground up.

Their approach is grounded in the belief that sustainable change happens when individuals come together with a shared purpose.
Fourteen years in with their work in the neighbourhood of Norlane in Geelong, TGNP Founders Kaylene and Simon Reeves took the opportunity this project presented to write-up their learning and insights about relationship-based approaches to community engagement in lower socio-economic neighbourhoods.

In particular, they were interested to explore and distil insights around:

- Relationship-based community engagement – what it is and what it isn't
- Examples of this in practice
- Using hospitality and the facilitation of spaces as relationship building tools
- Reflections on social capital building

In addition to drawing on their existing knowledge and materials, TGNP also ran a small community safety advocacy project, involving surveys and community focus groups, during the project period. This generated additional and useful insights around this complex topic.

A mini-case study on this Community Research context is also included in the Participation & Engagement Thematic Summary



Exploring relationships as a basis for Community Engagement in low socioeconomic communities.

Written by Kaylene & Simon Reeves

Overview

This paper explores the key differences between traditional community engagement and relationship-led approaches when working to create meaningful change in disadvantaged communities. It draws on insights and examples from The Good Neighbourhood Project and its 14-year presence in the neighbourhood of Norlane, Geelong.

What's Inside

1. Introduction and critique of traditional Community Engagement
2. Identifying the problem
3. Methods of implementation
4. Who takes the lead
5. Taking into account the smaller picture - context and lived experience
6. Remembering the bigger picture - systemic context
7. Relationship community engagement in action
    a. Regenerating an abandoned asset
    b. Community consultation that actually works
    c. Building local capacity

Introduction and critique of traditional Community Engagement

In Australia today we face significant equality and equity challenges that many see as beyond solutions. One of the biggest of these revolves around an often unacknowledged and unaddressed determinant, that is geography. Put simply, the income disparity and the growing gap that exists between our richest and our poorest and how this impacts the day to day experiences, health and wellbeing, and quality of life of our poorest communities is often based on where you live. Furthermore, despite the good intentions, many of traditional approaches to address inequality when used to engage low socioeconomic neighbourhoods are simply not working and are in need of innovative and creative reimagining.

We have seen this method used first-hand in our neighbourhood, Norlane (Geelong, VIC) where we live and work, many times now. Norlane experiences the highest levels of socio-economic disadvantage in Victoria and has done so for decades. Change is needed and it has been attempted, yet it's the same approaches used time and time again while statistics and local experiences show that so far, things are only getting worse.

This was highlighted for us, during a public health university lecture, where the lecturer was talking about engaging different vulnerable population groups in physical activity. The speaker went into great detail about the ways you should address reduced levels of physical activity in a lower socio-economic neighbourhood. They described how they designed a program, what they perceived as the barriers to physical activity were for this group, and what they did. They then proceeded to say after all these details, that no one showed up or participated in their program. The lecturer literally concluded "we actually don't know how to engage lower socio-economic communities in physical activity".

Similarly, I was recently talking to the health promotion team and my local council, who received a grant to address food literacy in the region with a specific focus on Norlane. They used a local tafe to design a program, printed fliers that they put up at the local library and advertised it on their website. They reported back that this program was a success in the region's central libraries, but it 'was not taken up' by the Norlane community. In other words, no one showed up.

We could share story after story of the same approach being utilised and yielding the same non-result, as we are sure many others who live and work in low socioeconomic neighbourhoods. What comes to mind is after many years of funding and intervention with no positive lasting changes, why are we doing the same thing time and time again.

From what we have observed, traditional community engagement approaches used in our neighbourhoods like ours typically utilises the following steps:

1. *A problem is identified by an external organisation/institution, usually through reports and statistics with a target population identified.*

2. *A solution is designed, usually by an external organisation/institution, often drawing from academic reports, or with input from other organisations or institutions.*

3. *The designed program/intervention is usually single issue focused and targets individuals within a target population.*

4. *The program/intervention is advertised through posters or social media.*

5. *The program/intervention is implemented by an external organisation/institution for or to the individuals of a target population.*

The issues with traditional community engagement methods, start from the way in which a problem is identified, to how an intervention/program is designed, to how that program is implemented. It also is predominantly single issue focused, with quick downstream fixes, ignoring both the context and lived experience of people in those communities, and the systems and structures which work against change. If this approach were working then we would be seeing change happen, but it are not. We need to find another way.

Of course there are many shifts that need to happen both at a local and systemic level to address the geographical disparities that exist across our wide country, but one of the first things that needs to be recognised is that no approach, project or intervention will work without engaging neighbourhoods like ours with well designed, relational and community led approaches.

Our understanding that this shift to relational and community led approaches has been based on 14 years of observations, listening, developing trusted relationships, learning from our neighbours and being deeply embedded in the neighbourhood in which we work. Here at The Good Neighbourhood Project we have come to firmly believe that we can start to see lasting changes and long term transformation of both individuals and population groups when we put people and relationships at the center of community engagement.

Relationship led approaches shift the way that community engagement takes place in communities experiencing long term disadvantage. A relationship-led approach puts identifying problems back in the hands of the community who experience them, solutions are co-designed utilising local knowledge and expertise, programs are implemented with and alongside the community, the local context is understood through these relationships with unique opportunities uncovered and barriers removed and finally the beauty of it all is that a relationship led approach builds empowerment models into its very fabric so those engaged don't just have their needs or problems met but they grow, develop and take on a greater capacity to contribute to their neighbourhood which strengthens the community overall.

Steps	*Traditional approach*	*Relationship led approach*
Identifying problems	Through reports or statistics	Identified by the community
Creating solutions	Designed away from the community	Co-designed with the community
Program implementation	Done to or for the community	Done with and alongside the community
Local context	Can leave out the local contextual barriers, ie. literacy, transport, trauma	Tailors engagement to meet the context of the local community and remove barriers
Systemic context	Can add to welfare dependency, taking away agency and adding to a power disparity, focusing on the negatives.	This model has empowerment at the centre, focusing on the strengths of a community

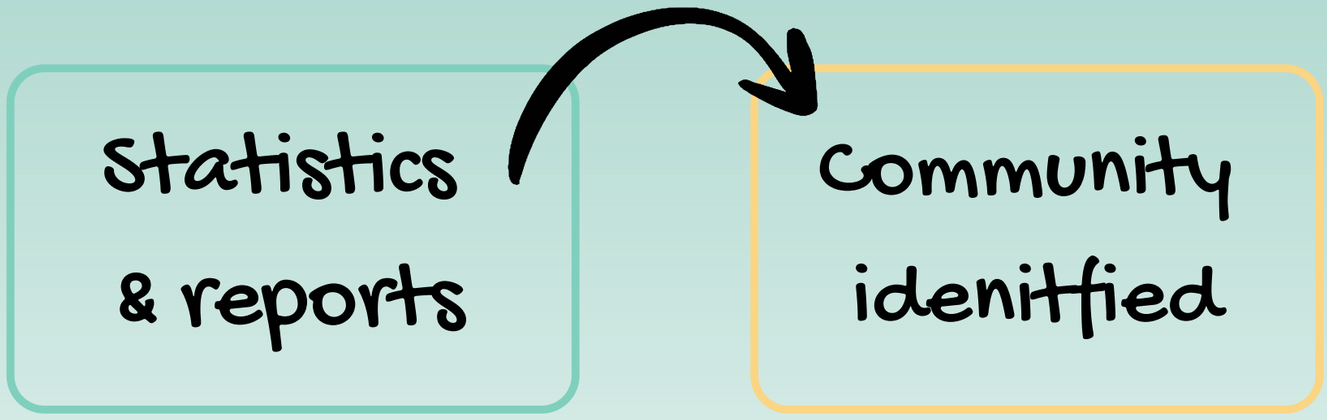
The persistent inequities experienced in neighbourhoods like Norlane make it clear that traditional approaches to community engagement are not creating the transformation they promise and that is desperately needed. Despite well-intentioned efforts, traditional engagement models continue to operate at a distance from the very people they aim to support, identifying problems externally, prescribing solutions from afar, and implementing programs ‘to’ communities rather than ‘with’ them. The repeated lack of participation in these interventions is not a failure of individuals or neighbourhoods, but a structural failure of the engagement model itself.

Lasting change cannot occur without recognising and responding to the lived realities, barriers, strengths and aspirations of the people most affected by disadvantage. Relationship-led approaches offer a pathway out of the cycle of ineffective programs and deepening disparities. By relationally positioning community members as knowledge-holders, co-designers, and partners in implementation, this model restores agency, builds trust, and fosters genuine empowerment. It shifts the focus from quick, single-issue fixes to long-term, contextually grounded transformation.

If we are serious about addressing entrenched geographic inequality, we must rethink how we engage, whose voices shape solutions, and what it means to work alongside communities rather than on their behalf. When relationships, trust and collaboration become the foundation of community engagement, the potential for meaningful and lasting change finally becomes possible.



Identifying the problem



One of the most significant differences between traditional community engagement (CE) approaches and relationship-led models lies in how problems are identified and how information is gathered in low socio economic neighbourhoods. Traditional CE methods typically begin with a pre-determined understanding of what the “problems” are, often defined by institutions, government departments, or organisational priorities long before any meaningful interaction with the community takes place.

These problems are usually informed by statistics, demographic data, and formal reports that paint a broad picture of community need. While such data is valuable for strategic planning, it is often disconnected from the lived experience of residents. As a result, traditional engagement tends to start from a position that assumes it already knows what is wrong and what needs fixing. This is an early warning sign that things will not end up well for anyone. Such an approach at the least will not solve the problem and at its worst will negatively impact the residents and wider community with yet another label and failed attempt creating additional stigma and distrust.

Imagine meeting a friend for lunch, and before they ask how you are, they tell you that they know what is wrong with you and the main issue impacting your life. Even before you open your mouth. This might not be a friendship you wish to continue to nurture. In fact, this might raise serious concerns about whether friendships are worth having at all if this is what they are like.

Or, going to the emergency department, and it being assumed what your ailment is, because of where you live and your income, so you end up being treated for diabetes, rather than the broken leg that you went in for. This may not be a hospital that you would ever go back to. In fact, maybe you might not end up trusting another hospital again?

These examples may sound a little ridiculous, however this is what it is like living in a community experiencing multi-levels of disadvantage, and having people tell you what your biggest issues are before you’ve got a chance to speak and in fact getting it very wrong.

If the issues that impact these communities were really so simple to understand, then they would be simple to solve. And what is very clear in Australia’s growing economic disparity, is that there are no simple solutions. Because the issues are so much more complex than statistics would lead us to believe.

In addition, traditional CE tends to rely heavily on formal mechanisms for gathering information: surveys, public consultations, or submissions processes. These tools favour individuals who are confident, literate, and comfortable engaging within institutional settings. They often miss the voices of those most affected by inequality, people who may not attend formal meetings, who live with competing daily pressures, or who have had negative experiences with institutions in the past. As a result, the "community voice" that informs problem identification becomes a partial and sometimes skewed representation.

In contrast, relationship-led CE begins from a fundamentally different starting point. Rooted in dialogical community development practice, this approach emphasises deep listening as the primary method for understanding community issues. Rather than arriving with a predetermined agenda, practitioners enter the community with curiosity and humility, seeking to understand how residents themselves articulate their concerns, aspirations, and priorities. This listening is not a one-off consultation but an ongoing relational process, built over time through trust, reciprocity, and informal conversation.

In relationship-led practice, residents are viewed as the experts on their own lives. They name the problems, and they describe the conditions and context that shape them. This not only ensures more accurate problem identification, because it emerges directly from lived experience, but also fosters a sense of ownership and agency within the community. This is not to say that experts in fields don't have a role to play. Instead it is about shifting towards a more collaborative and empowering process and one that is led by the residents who are affected the most.

Looking at the neighbourhood of Norlane, statistics tell us that there is high levels of unemployment in the neighbourhood, and traditional approaches would be to then fund employment agencies to work in the community to find people jobs. This approach has been taken in Norlane for over 20 years, and yet unemployment rates are rising.

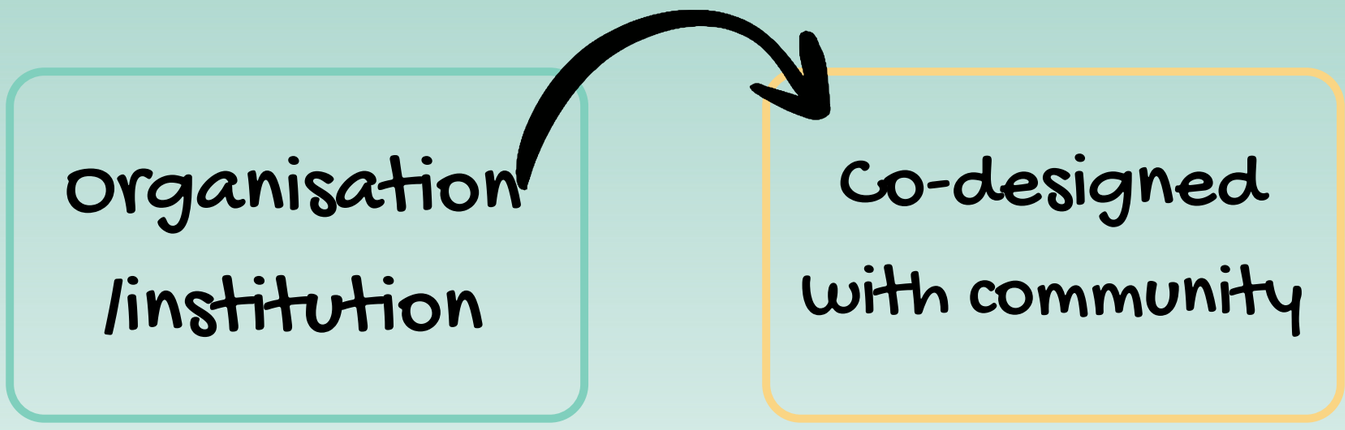
Taking a relationship led approach and listening to residents of Norlane, we hear that barriers to employment include physical disability, poor mental health, social isolation, parenting children with special needs, low literacy rates and much more. By listening, we can now understand that the solution to unemployment is not simply jobs.

Through prioritising relationships over prescriptions, this approach reveals insights that conventional data cannot capture: the intersectionality of issues, the deep seeded impact of generational trauma, the social dynamics between neighbours, the informal networks that support daily survival, the cultural strengths and local knowledge that rarely appear in reports. Deep listening uncovers what truly matters to residents, and from this foundation, solutions become co-created, context-specific, and far more sustainable.

Ultimately, the shift from expert-prescribed problems to resident-named problems marks a profound transformation in how community engagement is understood and practised. It is the first step in engaging communities by putting them at the centre and activating residents for change.



Methods of Implementation



In traditional CE models, prescribed problems naturally lead to prescribed solutions. Because the problem definition has already been shaped by external data, the solutions offered tend to be designed externally also: in staffrooms, policy meetings, or funding proposals rather than arising organically from community voices. This creates a cycle in which interventions may address high-level indicators such as rates of unemployment, chronic disease, or crime, but fail to respond to the underlying social, relational, or cultural factors that shape these issues in everyday life.

Community members often experience this as a top-down imposition, where they are invited to participate only after the direction has been set. Their role becomes one of participation rather than co-creation.

Traditional community engagement methods often operate from a ‘helper mentality,’ where professionals position themselves as the experts who diagnose issues and deliver solutions to a community perceived as deficient or in need of fixing. The ‘helper’ in this case is often portrayed as the hero in the story, and the desire to help usually comes from wanting to feel good about themselves and to get credit for their good work.

This framing reinforces a power imbalance: practitioners help, and community members are helped. While usually well-intentioned, it inadvertently signals that the community lacks the capacity, insight, or resources to contribute meaningfully to its own development.

In the neighbourhood of Norlane, we are frequently asked to create opportunities for people or whole organisations and businesses to come and volunteer in our programs. Everyone is shocked when we tell them that our programs are completely run and empowered by Norlane residents and we don’t need external volunteers. This reaction stems from the fact that in our society, helping is centered around the ‘helper’ not around those who we perceive in need of ‘help’.

Because of this mentality, traditional methods tend not to be grounded in genuine relationships. Engagement may occur through formal meetings, scheduled consultations, or program launches, but it rarely extends into the everyday relational spaces where trust is built. Interactions become transactional rather than relational, focused on gathering input, delivering services, or achieving outcomes, rather than fostering ongoing connection to bring about long-term change. Without authentic relationships, it becomes difficult to understand the complexities of community life or to create initiatives that genuinely resonate with residents.

Traditionally initiatives/interventions are commonly professionally designed and professionally implemented. They tend to be shaped by organisational priorities, funding requirements, and evidence-based models developed elsewhere. Professionals create the program logic, set the objectives, and design the activities, and staff then deliver the program to the community. Community members may be invited to participate, but usually only after decisions have already been made. This creates a dynamic often described as “told, not asked,” where institutions present solutions and expect community members to adapt rather than co-creating strategies that reflect their lived realities. The result can be programs that meet organisational targets but fail to embed themselves in the community or generate lasting change.

In contrast, relationship-led community development takes a fundamentally different approach to implementation. It begins with co-design, where community members are actively involved from the very start in shaping ideas, priorities, and actions. Rather than professionals determining what is best, community members and practitioners work side by side as partners. Co-design recognises the community’s expertise and allows for solutions that are culturally relevant, locally grounded, and more responsive to actual needs.

This approach inherently involves community participation not only in identifying solutions but also in putting them into action. Implementation becomes a shared endeavour: residents lead activities, contribute skills, form working groups, and take collective responsibility for outcomes.

Rather than being passive recipients, community members become co-producers of change. This fosters ownership, strengthens social networks, and builds local capacity that endures beyond the life of any single project.

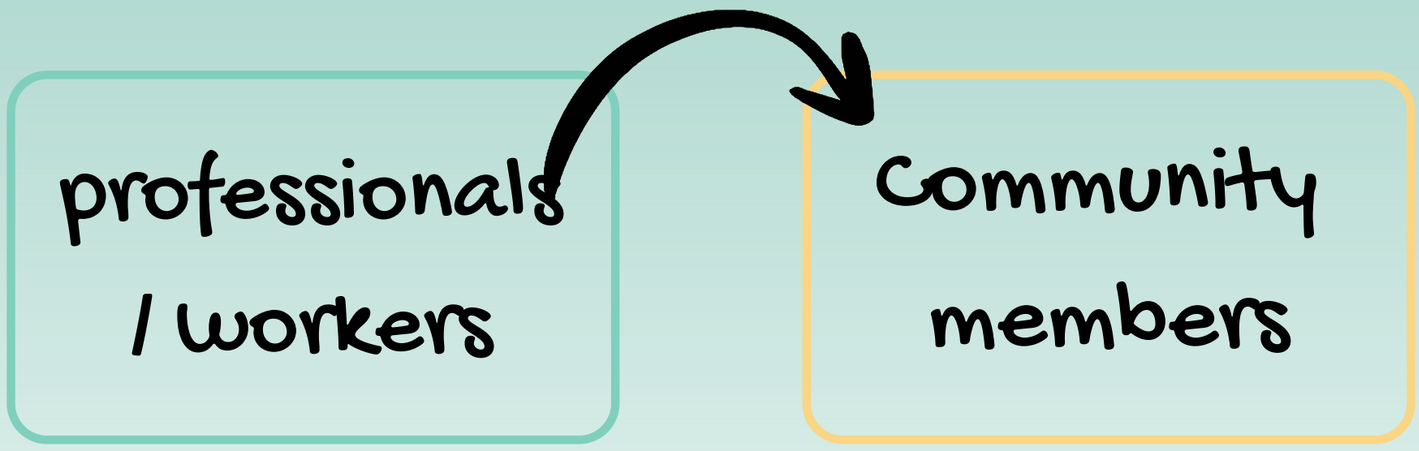
We see this example through art installations throughout a neighbourhood. Artwork, or sculptures that are designed externally with no input from the community and then placed within a neighbourhood, are likely to be tagged with graffiti or destroyed. However, art that comes from the community, through a local artist or with resident input, will be protected by that community and displayed with pride.

A key shift in relationship-led CD is its orientation away from rigid outcome-driven models. Instead, it aligns more closely with approaches like Most Significant Change theory, which emphasises narrative, meaning-making, and the qualitative impact of personal and collective transformation. Success is not reduced to numerical targets but understood through the stories of what has changed and why those changes matter. This allows initiatives to remain flexible and adaptive, evolving as relationships deepen and new insights emerge.

Ultimately, relationship-led approaches operate from a stance of “asked, not told.” They privilege curiosity over instruction, dialogue over direction, and partnership over prescription. The implementation process becomes relational and grounded in community agency. By centering co-design, participation, and meaningful connection, relationship-led community development not only delivers more authentic outcomes but strengthens the fabric of the community itself.



Who takes the lead



A defining distinction between traditional community development approaches and relationship-led models lies in who takes the lead. Leadership whether held by professionals or shared with residents shapes not only how initiatives unfold, but also how power, agency, and responsibility are distributed. Traditional methods and relationship-led approaches diverge sharply in this area, revealing fundamentally different philosophies about where change should come from and whose knowledge counts.

Traditional community engagement typically adopts an “outside-in” approach. External organisations, government departments, or service agencies arrive in a community with strategies, pre-set frameworks, and pre-determined priorities. The leadership sits with professionals who operate outside the daily life and rhythms of the neighbourhood. Because these workers often enter as strangers, very few meaningful relationships exist at the outset. Without these relationships, initiatives may feel imposed, disconnected, or short-sighted.

This distance contributes to a pattern of seeking quick fixes. Professional leaders are often bound by short funding cycles, reporting requirements, and organisational targets. As a result, they may prioritise interventions that show rapid progress on paper rather than deeper, long-term change. Quick fixes can temporarily address symptoms, but they rarely shift the underlying conditions that create vulnerability or disadvantage. In this model, workers lead because the system expects them to: they design plans, manage budgets, deliver programs, and evaluate outcomes.

The professionalisation of care reinforces an unintended consequence: the outsourcing of care to organisations. Communities come to rely on services to solve local challenges rather than on their own strengths or collective capacity. This downstream focus directs energy toward responding to crises, after they have already occurred, rather than preventing them. It frames communities as recipients needing expertise from elsewhere, rather than neighbours capable of leading their own change.

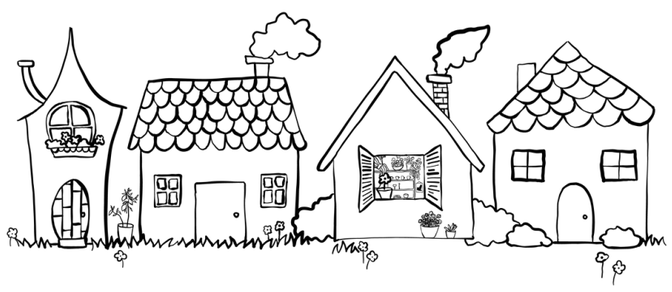
The reality of this is that good services don’t lead to a good life. When looking at what makes a good life and a good neighbourhood, most won’t list services, they will name things like ‘joy’, ‘participation’, ‘friendship’, they won’t name ‘good employment workers’, or ‘NDIS providers’. However, when outcome driven professionals take the lead, this often gets forgotten.

In contrast, relationship-led approaches start from a completely different premise. They embrace long-term, preventative, and upstream strategies that recognise community wellbeing as something grown over time, not delivered through short funding cycles. Instead of entering quickly and leading immediately, practitioners focus on building relationships, learning the neighbourhood's story, and understanding the assets and wisdom that already exist.

This recognises that people who live in places are the experts in those places. If we were to put money and resources into the hands of the community members we are trying to impact, what would they choose to spend it on? We could almost guarantee they won't spend it on services.

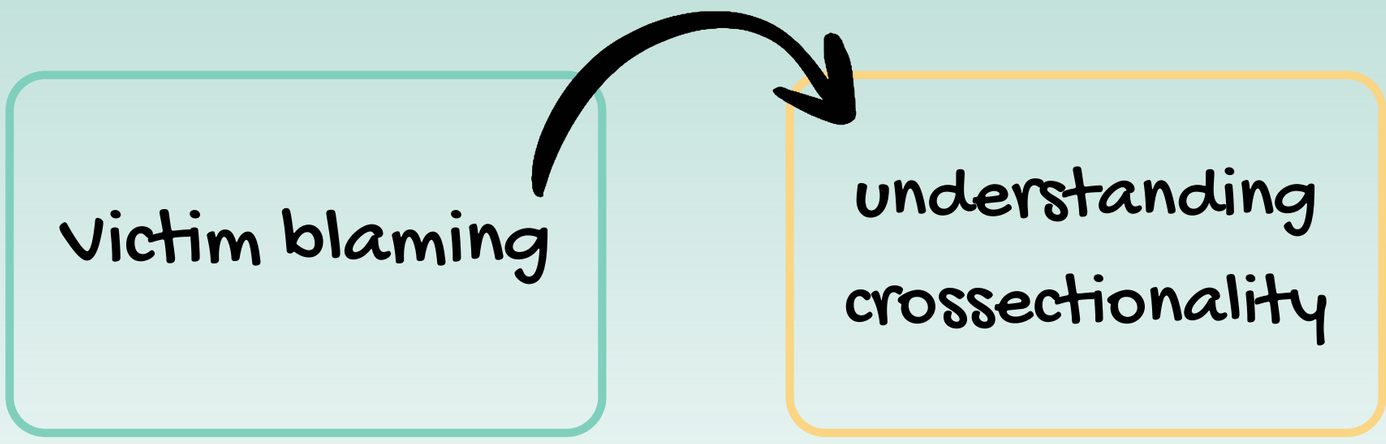
Similarly, this approach is rooted in the idea of learning how to be good neighbours. Care is not outsourced to organisations; it is cultivated within the neighbourhood itself. Rather than assuming expertise, practitioners work alongside residents, affirming that meaningful and sustainable change emerges from the inside out. Local people take the lead because they hold the lived experience, the social connections, and the nuanced understanding of what will work in their context.

In relationship-led work, leadership becomes resident-led rather than worker-led. Practitioners act as facilitators, connectors, and supporters, not directors. It is about relocating authority. Residents identify priorities, shape actions, and steward local change. This requires going at the pace of the community, which is often slow and organic. Progress unfolds in small steps, guided by trust, relationship, and the community's readiness. But this slower pace enables deeper transformation, because it is rooted in local ownership and collective agency and seeks to set the conditions in which people can thrive.



Taking into account the smaller picture:

context and lived experience



A fundamental limitation of traditional community engagement methods is their inability to take into account the nuanced, complex, and deeply personal context in which people live and experience daily life.

Traditional approaches often rely on broad statistical indicators or generalised community profiles, but these tools fail to capture the lived realities of individuals and families, realities shaped by neighbourhood culture, trauma, daily pressures, and structural barriers. This lack of contextual understanding creates an environment in which engagement becomes superficial and misaligned with the actual experiences and needs of the community.

One major gap in traditional methods is the absence of cultural context.

When working within both indigenous and multi-cultural communities, there is an understanding that this is cross-cultural work, and time needs to be taken to understand the culture of those places. However, this is largely forgotten when working in low socioeconomic communities. There seems to be a misconception that people living in these neighbourhoods experience life the same way as middle class Australia. But they do not. In fact, due to many barriers, people from these communities are largely excluded from society and as a result experience life very differently.

Without a deep appreciation for culture, histories, and community dynamics, professionals risk misunderstanding behaviours, misidentifying problems, or applying solutions that inadvertently cause harm. This can lead to a form of victim blaming, where individuals or communities are perceived as resistant, disengaged, or “hard to reach,” when in reality, the engagement approach itself is inaccessible or culturally misaligned.

Traditional methods also tend to overlook practical barriers such as low literacy levels, limited digital access, and lack of reliable transport. These barriers significantly shape whether someone can participate in engagement activities, attend programs, complete paperwork, access services, or even read a flier. When institutions fail to account for these realities, non-participation is often interpreted as apathy rather than a reflection of structural inequities. This further reinforces a deficit narrative about disadvantaged communities.

Additionally, traditional approaches often ignore the perpetual crises many individuals live within. We know through Maslow's hierarchy of needs that until people experience safety, food and housing, it is hard to look after other needs. But, we seem to not consider this when thinking about community engagement in places of extreme disadvantage. Neighbourhoods where residents face daily threats to their safety, food security and housing. Expecting participation in programs or planning sessions without recognising this context is unrealistic and dismissive of lived experience.

Trauma-informed practice is another area frequently missing from traditional community engagement. Without acknowledging the impacts of past and ongoing trauma, institutions may unintentionally create environments that feel unsafe, overwhelming, or re-triggering for residents. A lack of trauma-informed principles, such as choice, transparency, control, and emotional safety, can further erode trust and prevent meaningful relationship-building.

In contrast, relationship-led approaches intentionally centre the lived experiences and contexts of residents. They adopt a whole-of-person lens that acknowledges the intersectionality of issues, recognising that challenges are rarely isolated, but deeply interconnected. This approach understands that a person's cultural identity, trauma history, socioeconomic conditions, health, relationships, and environment all influence how they engage.

Consider a program or intervention run by council at the local library that seeks to address healthy eating. Using traditional methods, this would be advertised by a flier at the library and a facebook event. When we take into account cultural context, we see that this method relies on literacy, transport and the internet. All of these are cultural barriers in low socioeconomic communities, and as a result the ability for people in these communities to even know about this program is extremely limited.

Relationship-led work also prioritises accessibility in every form: geographical convenience, affordability, inclusive design, and accessible communication. Programs and conversations take place where people already are, not where professionals find convenient. Information is shared in ways that are easy to understand, culturally respectful, and responsive to different literacy levels.

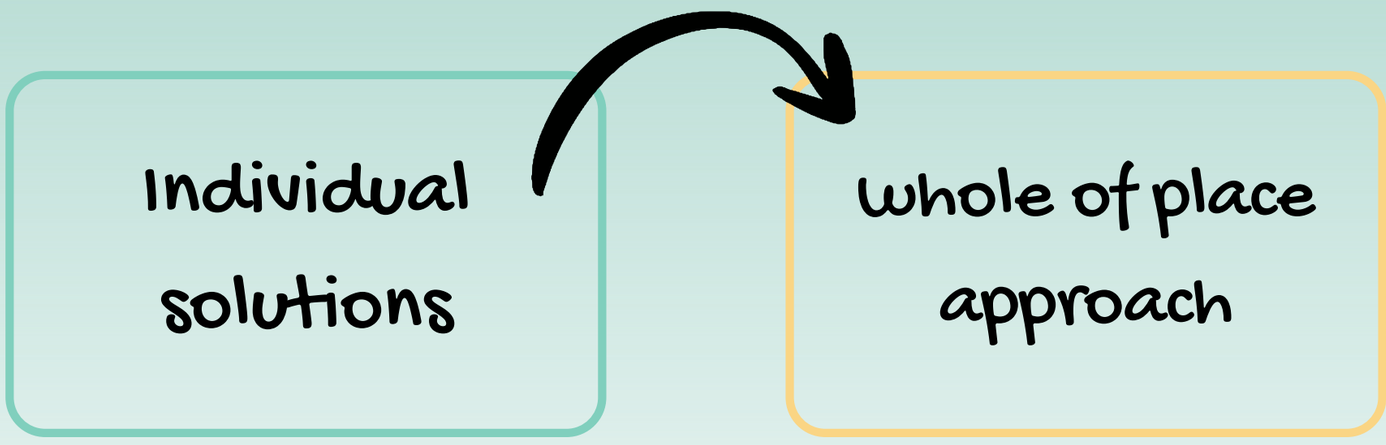
Hospitality plays a central role in creating safe spaces. Relationship-led practitioners intentionally foster environments that are welcoming, non-judgemental, and emotionally safe, spaces where people feel seen and valued rather than assessed or scrutinised. Hospitality is not incidental; it becomes a method of engagement.

Flexibility and consistency underpin this relational approach. Because practitioners prioritise trust and relationships, they adapt to changing needs, shifting contexts, and the unpredictable realities of people's lives. Yet they also show up consistently, providing stability and reliability, something many residents may not experience elsewhere.

Through these practices, relationship-led approaches build social support and strengthen community connections. Rather than positioning residents as isolated "clients," this model nurtures networks of care, belonging, and mutual support. By taking into account the smaller picture, the lived reality, relationship-led practices create more inclusive, empowering, and truly transformative community engagement.

Remembering the bigger picture:

systemic context



A final and critical distinction between traditional community engagement methods and relationship-led approaches lies in how each understands, and responds to, the broader systemic forces shaping community life. While individual experiences matter deeply, they are situated within larger historical, political, economic, and social structures. The ability (or inability) to recognise these systemic factors has a profound impact on the type of change an engagement approach can create.

Traditional community engagement often falls short in this regard. Because it tends to focus on individual problems and behaviours, it can inadvertently become disempowering and act as a barrier to wider community activation. When engagement strategies emphasise compliance, behaviour change, or service uptake, they reinforce a dynamic in which professionals “fix” individuals rather than supporting communities to address the structural drivers of disadvantage. This can create a cycle where communities are positioned as passive recipients of services rather than active participants in shaping their own futures.

This approach can also contribute to welfare dependency, not necessarily because individuals want to rely on assistance, but because the system is structured around ongoing service delivery rather than capacity-building or self-determination. When communities come to depend on external organisations for resources, decision-making, and problem-solving, it diminishes local agency and weakens the community’s ability to generate its own solutions. The design of the system itself can unintentionally entrench the very problems it aims to solve.

Consider food relief. When we arrived in Norlane in 2012, there were 2 agencies that serviced our neighbourhood with food relief. Both had a limit on access to this service with residents only being able to receive food once every 6 weeks and needing to prove that they were in a crisis and were often made to sit through financial counselling before they could access help. So we designed a food bank cooperative that recognised the fact that many residents were in an ongoing crisis so we needed to work together. This was a member run co-op where everyone had to contribute a $10 joining fee and be rostered on to volunteer once a month. We very quickly grew to 50 household members with a waiting list. It was resident run, empowering and the motto was ‘working together to feed each other’.

Then COVID happened and in a 6 month period our neighbourhood grew from having 2 agencies servicing us with food relief to 11. People could now get free food delivered (from the other side of Geelong) to their door. Why would they then leave their house or volunteer when they can get as much food as they want without having to do anything?

Traditional methods also often fail to consider the historical and generational context of disadvantage. Many communities have experienced decades of disinvestment, trauma, policy shifts, economic exclusion, and stigma. Without acknowledging these layered histories, engagement efforts risk misunderstanding behaviours or challenges as individual shortcomings rather than the result of long-term structural inequities. This contributes to a deficit-focused narrative, where communities are primarily defined by what they lack rather than by their strengths, resilience, culture, or collective potential.

Importantly, many traditional approaches centre on individuals rather than the community as a whole. Programs target specific demographics, such as parents, youth, or jobseekers, without addressing the broader systems or social environments that influence these individuals' lives. This narrow focus limits the possibility of community-wide transformation and fails to leverage the power of collective action, shared identity, and social networks.

In contrast, relationship-led community development intentionally keeps the systemic context in view. It begins with social capital building, strengthening the relationships, networks, trust, and shared norms within the community. Social capital is itself a systemic asset; as it increases, communities become safer, more connected, more resilient, and better equipped to address external pressures.

Relationship-led approaches also prioritise advocacy. By amplifying community voice, they help residents speak into decisions that affect their neighbourhoods, challenge systemic barriers, and influence policy or institutional practices. This advocacy work empowers communities to be agents of change rather than subjects of change imposed from outside.

A strengths-based lens underpins this entire approach. Rather than focusing on deficits, relationship-led practitioners identify and nurture the assets, skills, stories, and leadership that already exist within the community. These assets become the foundation for building power and creating sustainable change.

Furthermore, relationship-led work embraces a “whole of place” perspective. It looks beyond individual needs to consider the entire neighbourhood ecosystem: physical environment, social networks, local culture, economic conditions, and institutional relationships. This holistic perspective enables more meaningful and contextually grounded strategies.

Ultimately, relationship-led approaches build capacity, supporting a transformation from receivers to contributors. By positioning residents as leaders, advocates, and co-creators, this approach not only addresses systemic challenges but strengthens the community’s long-term ability to navigate and influence the systems around them.



Relationship community engagement in action:

Regenerating an abandoned asset

Taking a strengths-based approach to neighbourhoods, we often look at bumping places, where people naturally gather or where there is potential for people to gather, and how these can be used as community assets. One such place in our neighbourhood, Norlane, is Labuan square shops.

Labuan square was officially the first shopping centre in Geelong, built back in the 60's at the formation of the neighbourhood. These shops are two strips of privately owned commercial shop fronts facing each other, with a council owned 'plaza' area in the middle. We have been sent many photos of the space in its prime, filled with thriving shops and a key space for the neighbourhood, both economically and to meet a lot of community needs.

Unfortunately, since we moved to the neighbourhood 14 years ago, life at labuan square is vastly different from how it has been described back in its origins. These shops have been largely neglected, with lots of roller doors instead of open businesses and the plaza now being a space for public drinking and drug use. This has created a space that many people are scared to enter, and those that do run shops, find them hard to sustain.

Most people would say that the shops are useless, an eyesore, and many would add that they need to be torn down.

What we know is that if those shops were to be bulldosed, that space would be lost to the neighbourhood forever. So we asked the question, how can we regenerate these shops back into a community asset, and more importantly how can this be a space where we can grow local economy, meet essential needs of the community and build local participation in neighbourhood life?

These goals of course centred around the involvement of the local community. We didn't want to be the ones to decide what would happen there, we wanted residents to decide and be at the heart of the regeneration of the space. Our role was to simply listen and facilitate spaces for trust and dialogue.

So here is how we used a relationships led approach to start to regenerate the space:

1. **First we rented one of the shops.**

This was largely about presence in order to begin dialogue with those who visited the space.

2. **Then we listened.**

We started by just fixing up the shop and being present on the same days at the same time every week. We would leave the door open and people would walk by and ask what was happening. Our response was always ‘What would you like to see happening?’ Overwhelmingly the response was that people wanted a space to buy a coffee and a sandwich and sit and talk with people.

3. **We asked who wanted to run a cafe.**

We up-skilled locals who were keen to help through giving barista training and cafe skills and we opened a cafe / community space run by local community members within their capacity - 3 x 4 hour days a week.

4. **We watched what was emerging.**

People started donating items to exchange or sell for small amounts to the cafe, and a book and dvd exchange emerged, followed by some racks of clothes that we put in front of some of the roller doors to give the shops more life.

5. **We let local residents take the lead.**

As people started engaging with second hand clothes and books, we were asked if we were going to open an op shop. We asked who wanted to run it. Many community members told us that they had many skills and experience running an op shop and would like to be a part of it. So we rented a space and started an op shop, run completely by local community members.

6. **We watched it grow.**

Through the shop we leased for an op shop, we inherited a lot of craft supplies and a local resident shared with us her dream of running a craft shop at Labuan square. We said we would rent her a space and support her to run it, if she had others in the community who shared that dream and could do it with her. So she built a team of 5 women and together they started a craft shop.

When we started our regeneration project at Labuan square, we had absolutely no idea what it would look like. In fact, that wasn’t for us to decide. However, we were present and created space to listen and build relationships. And now we facilitate the running of 3 shops as well as the occasional market, in a space where people struggled to see any potential, powered fully by the passions and time of local residents.









Relationship community engagement in action:

Community consultation that actually w orks

It's time to bust the myth of 'hard to reach' and 'over consulted' communities.

Honestly, what people aren't saying here is that they just don't know how to talk to or hear from people from lower socio-economic communities. It is not at all that they are hard to reach or that they are overconsulted. It is more that they are not approached in ways that make sense to them (ie. highly literate, online forms), and very rarely are they listened to.

Prior to starting a shop at labuan square, we became aware that the council was wanting to run a community consultation as to what to do with the plaza space in the square, a space that the council owns. So we jumped in and asked if they could fund us to run that consultation for them. Knowing how little responses that had received in the Norlane community in past consultations, they were more than happy to let us have a go.

So we gathered local residents, gave them some simple consulting tips and sent them out to talk to their friends, family and neighbours.

We ended up with hundreds of responses from Norlane residents. This was more responses than the council has ever had at any community consultation in the entire Geelong region.

From here we were able to put together a report that very clearly stated what the neighbourhood wanted from that space and thankfully the council listened and worked with local artists and the local aboriginal cooperative to design a beautiful space that the neighbourhood looks after and is proud of.

These results did not come from a hard to reach community. They came from allowing residents to take the lead. From building on an existing network of relationships in the neighbourhood. They came from trust.

We used this theory again recently when wanting to hear from residents about neighbourhood safety.

As residents ourselves, we have recently felt that there has been a rise in public acts of disturbance, violence, thefts and drug and alcohol use. We brought this up with our state MP, local government and Victoria police. Responses included: 'we aren't seeing more reports of this', 'it is bad everywhere' and 'don't add to the negative stigma'.

So, we decided to conduct a neighbourhood survey to see what local residents thought. We designed simple questions using scale answers asking about safety during the day, at night, at local shops, in their homes, as well as asking questions about whether they feel it has gotten worse or better recently and how likely they are to call local police for assistance. We also invited residents from other neighbourhoods in the region to complete the survey so we could test the theory as to whether it is really 'bad everywhere'.

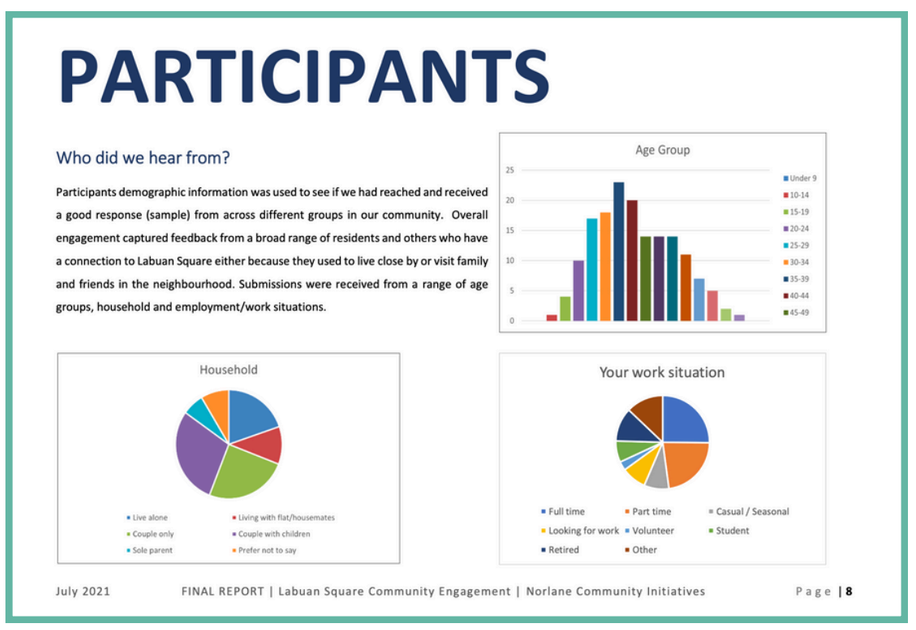
We put surveys on the counter at 2 of our hubs and within 2 weeks we had over 50 responses.

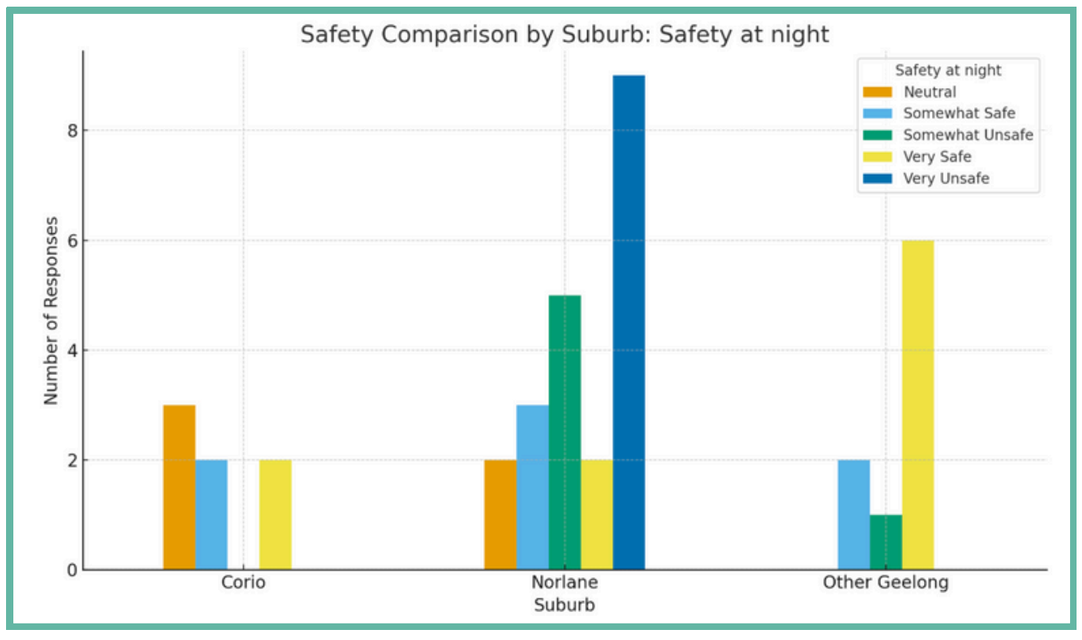
The results showed exactly what we thought the results would show, but more than anything what we proved through this process is that where there is trust and relationships, when surveys are designed to meet the literacy capacity of a community and distributed in bumping places where people frequent, residents will very happily have a say on issues that impact them.

Similarly, we were asked by another organisation if we could gather residents for 'kitchen table conversations', to talk about their experience of the local economy. We very easily were able to put this together and afterwards the hosts of the conversation said that not only was the conversation valuable, they were surprised by how much the residents expressed that they enjoyed their time and were thankful to be included. The reason for this was that very rarely had anyone bothered to ask them their thoughts before. They felt valued and like they had something to offer.

If we take the time to build trust, to build relationships and to practice dialogical community development and deep listening then our community consultation will not only work, it has the potential to bring transformative results to a neighbourhood.









Neighbourhood Safety Survey

We'd like to hear your thoughts about neighbourhood safety. Your feedback will help us understand community concerns and work together on solutions.

Suburb: _____ **Years living in suburb:** _____ **Age:** _____

What describes your living situation?

Live alone | live with a partner | live with a housemate

Single parent | Live with a partner and children | Other_____

1. How safe do you feel in your neighbourhood during the day?

Very safe | Somewhat safe | Neutral | Somewhat unsafe | Very unsafe

2. How safe do you feel in your neighbourhood at night?

Very safe | Somewhat safe | Neutral | Somewhat unsafe | Very unsafe



Relationship community engagement in action:

Building local capacity

Engaging local communities for meaningful change must happen from the inside out, not the outside in. Our role is to help unlock the potential that already exists within both people and places, so they can not only identify the change they want to see in their neighbourhood, but also lead it themselves.

About ten years ago, we stood before a panel of funders and pitched an idea: to build up local leaders who could design programs and activities run by community members, for community members. We were unsuccessful. The feedback was that the idea was underdeveloped and we "weren't ready." We heard something different—that the panel simply couldn't grasp what we were proposing, because we were trying to invert the traditional helper and service-delivery model entirely.

So we did what we always do: we ran the program anyway. We called it Unearth, and we worked with local residents to explore what was "in their hands"—their skills, passions, tools, and resources. When each person contributed their small part, we quickly realised that together, they actually had a lot.

Unearth sparked a toddler story-time group led by a mum with newborn twins who longed for connection. It birthed community games nights and bingo nights. One participant, a passionate writer with physical health barriers to traditional employment, created a local newsletter. In our eyes, Unearth was a success. It shifted residents' mindsets and built confidence, agency, and community leadership. But as our focus moved toward opening new community spaces, Unearth was placed on the shelf—temporarily, we hoped.

Then, at the start of 2024, a friend in the UK reached out. He was the founder of Seedbeds, an organisation running a local capacity-building program called Changemakers, designed specifically for low-income neighbourhoods. Its core idea, "start with what's strong to fix what's wrong", aligned perfectly with our values. It was, in many ways, Unearth 2.0. We partnered with Seedbeds and launched Changemakers in Norlane.

Participants were nominated by others in the neighbourhood who recognised their potential. Each was paired with a coach and joined us for three immersive intensives:

Compassion

Participants explored their own stories—the people and experiences that shaped them—to understand the passions that drive them. Using StrengthsFinder, we helped them identify what is *strong*, not what is "wrong." Many had only ever been told their deficits; for some, this was the first time anyone had acknowledged their strengths.

Innovation

Together, participants developed personal mission statements and identified areas where they wanted to make an impact. They created asset maps of the neighbourhood and learned principles of asset-based community development—working with and alongside others. Each person began designing a project they wanted to contribute to the community.

Resilience

We explored failure, success, courage, and perseverance. Through a neighbourhood pilgrimage, we reflected on the importance of the journey, not just the destination. Participants practiced sharing and pitching their project ideas to gather support.

We recently completed our first cohort and finished with a pitch-to-panel event and graduation. Ten participants graduated, presenting seven community projects, including:

- A twilight market
- An outdoor cinema
- A share-house model addressing loneliness
- A music-based storytelling project capturing community experiences
- A makers' craft collective
- An Indigenous art mural business
- Expansion of our urban farming initiative

Our panel—local supporters and funders—offered encouragement, connections, and seed funding. Feedback from participants was profound:

- "All the doors are open. Now it's up to me to walk through them."
- "I thought my time to contribute had passed. I see now I was wrong."
- "I've never spoken publicly before, but I felt I had something important to say."

Panelists were equally moved:

- "This is it. This is community development."
- "We just want to hug these guys and cheer them on."

Building on this momentum, we have redeveloped an old neighbourhood church, once at risk of being sold, into a flexible community space with a commercial kitchen, hall, workshop area, garden, and shared eating spaces. But what happens in that space is not for us to decide. Our role is to continue running Changemakers, nurture local capacity, unlock the potential of local people, and let the community lead the way.







THE GOOD neighbourhood PROJECT

45 Robin Avenue, Norlane, Victoria 3214

info@thegoodneighbourhoodproject.org

0423 822 456

The Good Neighbourhood Project is a business name of Norlane Community Initiatives Ltd (NCI).
NCI is a registered charitable organisation recognised by the ACNC and the ATO.
ABN 49 623 186 014

The Good Neighbourhood Project team live, work and play on the land of the Wadawurrung People.
We pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging.

The Wilderness Collective, Mallacoota, VIC

Overview of the Community Research Team & Project

Founded in Mallacoota after the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires, the Wilderness Collective emerged from the vision and dedication of five women. They aimed to foster long-term sustainability and community growth, transforming reliance on tourism into a culture of entrepreneurship and self-determination.

By creating a community hub, they provide opportunities for residents to work, build businesses, and learn essential skills. Their commitment to nurturing ideas across generations supports a vibrant future for Mallacoota and its inhabitants.

Co-Founders Paris Brooke and Tricia Hiley took the opportunity this project presented to undertake a Listening & Storytelling project around Mallacoota's current and future 'economic wellbeing' aiming to the process and outputs to be useful for informing local community members, community organisations, TWC and potential philanthropic partners.

TWC explored local perspectives on:

- the local economy now
- their desires for 10 years from now
- any barriers they see to achieving those desires.

The project provided the impetus and time to reflect on the first three years, and the new stories collected from local community organisations about their organisation's past, present and future economic wellbeing were added to a 'common story' that was already emerging from much of the work TWC has done over past years.

Combing these, a snapshot was generated, highlighting:

- what has worked or is working well now
- what isn't working well now
- what the data suggests needs to be done better or differently in the future.

A mini-case study on this Community Research context is also included in the Climate & Disaster Resilience Thematic Summary

wilderness
COLLECTIVE

ACTIVATING COMMUNITY AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Community Insights Report 2025



A listening project for The Good Shift,
as part of research for the Minderoo Foundation

This report has been researched, recorded, lived and prepared by members of the Wilderness Collective in Mallacoota. 2025. ©

About the Wilderness Collective

Mallacoota is a heart place. Our seaside town of around 1200 people is nestled between ocean, lake and bush at the end of a long winding road at the eastern most point in Victoria. Our remoteness can make living here complicated, but it attracts a community with a special passion for the place in which we live. Remote and rural living comes hand in hand with resilience, determination and a general understanding that to 'get things done', we have to be creative and work together.



It's been over 5 years since the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires descended on Mallacoota. These bushfires unveiled a web of interconnected, complex problems. It laid bare underlying issues that suddenly rose to the surface, causing greater problems than just those of 'recovery'.

Alongside losing 123 houses (nearly a third), our two main industries of employment – tourism and abalone – were severely impacted. The NBN was wiped out. We needed to rebuild more than just buildings. We needed to rebuild confidence, connection and community spirit.

From the ashes emerged a new spark, fueled by the unwavering determination of five local women, spanning three different generations. We all have a strong resolve to ensure that as we rebuild our community, we also capture the opportunity to reshape. The Wilderness Collective was set up for this very purpose: to plot a new and reinvigorated course for Mallacoota by using the power of innovation and entrepreneurship to weave resilience and self-determination into the fabric of our community. The past was a challenge, but the outlook is bright, and we can't wait to see what our determined community can create in the near future.

About the Wilderness Collective...

TAKING AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH

Complex problems require an innovative approach. Numerous shifts are required concurrently to turn a community from recovery towards a sustainable and thriving future. The Wilderness Collective is tackling these uncertainties by building the underlying culture of entrepreneurship; providing skills and opportunities for the community. We aim to build a thriving hub of innovation and economic activity, providing a place for local entrepreneurs and the broader community to learn, innovate and collaborate.

SHIFTING TO A FUTURE FOCUS

Mallacoota is at a very real turning point. Our small population coupled with our remoteness makes this community a perfect opportunity to demonstrate a model for modern rural living, where systemic issues are addressed collaboratively and creatively.

Our success can support other communities facing similar futures. We've harnessed learnings from across the globe, coupled with local understanding. Every community is different - which makes the need for community-based leadership, passion and direction even more important.

Our impact extends far beyond the borders of Mallacoota, as we reach out to neighbouring communities that are grappling with similar challenges. United in purpose, we aim to weave a network of support, sharing ideas, programs and resources.





Image above: Digital literacy skills sessions by Wilderness Collective for senior residents

Image right: Business skills sessions by Wilderness Collective, in partnership with ABV..



Image: Wilderness Collective Board 2025, outside the main street building purchased for our community

The Wilderness Collective: Enabling a Life Fully Lived

From MADRA's economic recovery pillar came the Wilderness Collective, a group of five women spanning three generations who believed that Mallacoota's future required more than rebuilding — it needed renewal.

Incorporated in 2022, the Collective's purpose is to facilitate and lead a self-determined future for the Mallacoota community through enterprise, education, coworking, and collaboration. What began as a modest co-working idea became a movement for local enterprise and social wellbeing.

With volunteer labour and local donations, the group transformed a decrepit main-street building into a solar-powered, debt-free workspace — making it the third community-owned commercial property in town.

The hub now supports local professionals, youth training, creative microenterprise support, and digital and social inclusion – strengthening belonging, particularly for women and remote workers. It has become both a symbol and infrastructure for Mallacoota's economic renewal.

The Wilderness Collective's success has depended not on wealth or scale, but on values: transparency, collective ownership, and long-term stewardship. Its story illustrates how local imagination, when supported by trust-based philanthropy, becomes tangible infrastructure.

Still, challenges persist. The organisation operates with minimal paid staff, faces the high costs of remoteness, and continually balances its community mission with financial viability.

Yet its culture of reflection and adaptation ensures it learns forward, recognising these limits as learning opportunities - proving that even small, rural initiatives can become models for self-determined, sustainable development.

- Financial sustainability remains precarious without multi-year funding.
- Balancing openness with professional viability demands continual negotiation.
- Remoteness limits revenue stability and access to skilled staff.

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SETTING THE SCENE -

Introduction and Overview of the Project and this Report

In late July this year we, at the Wilderness Collective in Mallacoota, Victoria, were given the opportunity to participate in a Minderoo Foundation funded project in our community. We are one of five such community projects across Australia. All the projects are different yet grounded deeply in 'place'.

Here in Mallacoota, we chose to focus on listening to the voices of a selection of active community members regarding their engagement in our local economy now, their desires for a decade from now, and any barriers they see to our community achieving that desire. Our wish was to pull the shared stories together, into a common story, synthesising the messages emerging with the work the Wilderness Collective has already done in this area.

As well as providing a powerful shared story, it also gave us the opportunity to reflect on our first 3 years in existence and offer a snapshot of what has worked or is working well now, what isn't working well now, and finally, what our 'evidence' suggests needs to be done better or differently in the future. That is, what we'd like to see done within our community or by parties external to our community that would change our community's future for the better.

Briefly put, the stories we heard were profoundly moving. The messages were clear, passionate and revealing. There was also surprising synergy in the stories. Those stories are the heart of this project report.

What follows has three parts. First, we offer an Introduction to Mallacoota as it exists in 2025 and a summary of the work we undertook. Second, we share the key messages of each of the stories we were gifted as well as key messages related to the Wilderness Collective's economic wellbeing story, and finally, we share our thoughts on the Mallacoota community's key messages for philanthropic donors and grant funders.



PART 1 -

A SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY-LED RECOVERY



PART 1 -

COMMUNITY-LED RECOVERY - Economic Fragility and Emerging Resilience

When bushfires devastated Mallacoota on New Years Eve 2019, recovery began not with government programs, but with the people themselves. Within a day, local residents formed a reference group that evolved into the Mallacoota and District Recovery Association (MADRA) — the backbone of the town's post-fire regeneration.

Despite isolation, power loss, and the constraints of the fast-following pandemic, a democratically elected committee of 12 locals from 44 willing candidates led a massive volunteer effort that restored essential services, reconnected residents, and built new governance systems from the ground up. This collective action created something more enduring than physical recovery — it forged social capital, trust, and a shared belief in the community's own capacity to shape its future.

Mallacoota's recovery and regeneration story reveals the quiet power of community-owned infrastructure, women-led collaboration, and place-based enterprise. From healthcare to co-working, from arts to finance, the town's people have built a thriving model of resilience grounded in belonging, sufficiency, and cooperation.

The shared response also birthed a new narrative: economic wellbeing rooted in place, purpose, and people. Locals began to imagine a future where success was defined not by growth, but by "a life fully lived in Mallacoota."



Image: Senator Tony Shendon (3rd from left), Emergency management personnel and Commmunity leaders outside the Wilderness Collective Hub.

PART 1 -

COMMUNITY-LED RECOVERY - Economic Fragility and Emerging Resilience

Out of this civic energy, both old and new initiatives flourished
The Sanctuary Youth Group offered young people safe connection when adults were overwhelmed and they continue to do so today, six years later.

The Friends of Mallacoota deepened their decades of environmental stewardship.

Our brand-new community-owned health centre, built by a collaboration of two community groups, the Community Health Infrastructure and Resilience Fund (CHIRF) and Mallacoota Inlet Aged Care (MIAC), and commissioned only 2 months prior to the fires, operated 24 hours a day as a triage centre for several months after the fires. The most recent community enterprise, Mallacoota Cares, has emerged in 2025 to help elders age in place.

Each story reinforces a simple truth: when systems fail, communities can succeed — if they are trusted to lead.

As we've said above, after the fires, a number of locals refused to wait for external solutions. Five women found each other and became what is now The Wilderness Collective beginning its efforts to enable economic wellbeing through enterprise, education, co-working, and collaboration.

Simultaneously, CHIRF, and our local doctor, have expanded the community's healthcare access from 1 GP to 4 GPs and 13 staff offering allied health services, youth, and chronic care programs.

Revealing a Community Economy
The Wilderness Collective, CHIRF, the community bank, and others, even the Op Shop show how a micro-economy can help sustain a whole community.

- TWC's co-working hub and the local bank underpin professional viability;
- CHIRF keeps people healthy and working; Mallacoota Cares is now there for the elderly needing support,
- and the Op Shop redistributes wealth at the grassroots.



Image:
Animation workshop held by Wilderness Collective for all ages.

PART 1 -

COMMUNITY-LED RECOVERY - Economic Fragility and Emerging Resilience

The Wilderness Collective's Economic Wellbeing Story

Like one founder's contribution of "Love Letter to Mallacoota" the Wilderness Collective embodies a philosophy of living fully in place. Its solar-powered workspace anchors economic and social wellbeing, blending enterprise, education, and community collaboration. It represents the beginning of the town's shift from recovery to long-term regeneration.

Yet, there is not only sunlight. This has been responding to our first question:

"What has worked or is working well?"

To re-iterate, what is working well includes:

- Ownership & Governance: Community-controlled assets provide stability and autonomy.
- Partnerships: Collaborations with regional funding bodies and local philanthropy strengthen health and enterprise systems.
- Volunteerism & Leadership: Generations of volunteers sustain vital institutions and build social cohesion.
- Micro-capital Models: The Op Shop and community bank exemplify accessible, high-impact local funding.

But ... there are also things which are not working, including:

- Extreme volunteer Fatigue: A small, aging leadership base carries heavy operational loads.
- Funding Fragility: Programs depend on short-term grants and post-crisis funds.
- Representation Gaps: No local councillor or regional governance voice.
- Remoteness Gaps: Distance limits access to healthcare, workforce, and grant opportunities and increase the costs for EVERYTHING.



Image: The team behind CHIRF and the Medical Centre development.

PART 1 -

COMMUNITY-LED RECOVERY - Economic Fragility and Emerging Resilience

What our evidence suggests for Philanthropists

1. Fund Coordination, Not Just Projects. Paid 'backbone' roles are vital to prevent burnout and retain capability.
2. Secure Multi-Year Partnerships. Long-term philanthropic commitments (5 – 6 years) create REAL transformation.
3. Build Enterprise and Workforce Pipelines. Train locals in care, digital work, and small-business skills.
4. Quantify Social Return. An economic evaluation will reveal the hidden value of volunteer hours and avoided costs.

A Key Message for Potential Funders

"We don't need 'hand-outs'; we just need a helping hand – partners who see that we are already helping ourselves."

The following pages hold:
1. Common threads of Community Regeneration
2. The Shared Stories of 8 key community contributors
3. A Summary of findings regarding Why Philanthropic Support Matters
4. Background Demographic Data



Image: Members of the Mallacoota Pony Club, which was completely rebuilt by a volunteer committee after the bushfires.



Image: Opening of the community-owned Solar panels for energy resilience at the Water treatment plant, by Totally Renewable in Mallacoota (TRiM)

PART 2

A STORY OF COMMUNITY REGENERATION



Image: Social Enterprise Schools program at Mallacoota P-12 College,
brought to Mallacoota by Wilderness Collective and run by a locally-trained 'Place Facilitator'

PART 2 -
Community Regeneration

Over the past three years, the Wilderness Collective and our community partners have been engaged in a deep process of learning, reflection, and renewal. Following the 2019–20 bushfires, we began not only rebuilding infrastructure but redefining what it means to live well — economically, socially, and ecologically — in a place like Mallacoota.

This Use Case brings together the voices and experiences of local residents, volunteers, and small enterprises who have shaped Mallacoota's regeneration. Through recorded conversations, collaborative projects, and ongoing practice, we have traced a living story of community-led economic wellbeing.

Our aim here is threefold:
1. To bring the shared community stories together into a coherent narrative;
2. To synthesise the Wilderness Collective's learning and reflections from our first three years; and
3. To offer clear, strategic messages for philanthropic partners who are interested in how small, resilient communities can design their own future.

The Shared Community Story

Out of the Fire: Choosing to Lead Ourselves

When the fires came through in 2019–20, locals didn't wait for permission to act. Within hours, small groups formed, coordinating relief, communications, and early recovery in the absence of infrastructure. Out of that urgency came the belief that community-led action wasn't optional — it was the only viable way forward. From this came the foundations of the Mallacoota and District Recovery Association (MADRA) and a broader culture of self-determination that still defines Mallacoota's approach today.



Image: A local parent defending her property against the fires.

Holding the Threads: Volunteering as a Way of Life

Volunteering is the backbone of Mallacoota's daily life. From conservation to arts, from recycling to governance, residents sustain the town's essential functions through persistence and care. These efforts aren't just maintenance — they are acts of belonging, forming the social and emotional infrastructure that underpins local wellbeing.

A Garden Grows: Tending What Survived

The Mallacoota Endemic Garden emerged as a tangible expression of hope. Volunteers collected seed, propagated endangered plants, and built Victoria's easternmost botanic garden — entirely through community effort. It is a living classroom and a symbol of resilience, linking environmental recovery with education, tourism, and pride of place.



Image: Bryce Watts-Parker - part of the Friends of Mallacoota and endemic garden team; who also saved countless species (fauna and flora) throughout the fires.

Making a Living Here

Small enterprises like the town butcher reflect the challenge of sustaining livelihoods in rural economies. Long-term service, deep community connection, and physical exhaustion coexist. Questions of succession, housing, and shared ownership are now pressing — revealing that caring for local business owners is also caring for the community's fabric.

Making Do and Making Meaning

Many long-time residents describe a philosophy of sufficiency. Mallacoota doesn't aspire to expansion, but to endurance. The community bank and Op Shop circulate resources locally, embodying a self-sustaining model of shared prosperity.

Learning from Each Other

Partnerships with the school and environmental groups illustrate how knowledge moves through the town — intergenerationally and collaboratively. Teaching and learning happen through doing; young people are not observers of recovery, but participants in it.

Looking Forward Together

Across all voices, a common desire emerges: to sustain a community capable of looking after itself — environmentally, economically, and socially. Residents seek cooperation, stability, and recognition for the value already created through their collective labour.



Image: Members of the Friends of Mallacoota, weeding on Gabo Island

Summary Companion: Shared Community Insights

• Community-led recovery works: Local governance like MADRA builds enduring capability.
• Volunteering drives economic wellbeing: It is unpaid but essential, creating both services and learning.
• Environment and economy intertwine: Ecological restoration sustains livelihoods and identity.
• Small business is social infrastructure: Enterprises like the butcher embody care-based economies.
• Sufficiency over expansion: The goal is stability, not growth for its own sake.
• Knowledge continuity: Education and mentorship bridge generations.

Key Challenges: Volunteer burnout, workforce and housing shortages, service succession.

Recommendations: Fund volunteer coordination, enable cooperative ownership, support housing and continuity funding.

PART 3 -

SHARED STORIES



SHARED STORIES -
1 - The Wilderness Collective

At its heart, this Use Case captures a story of place-based renewal — where community imagination meets structural need. The Wilderness Collective's work provides both a mirror and a model: reflecting Mallacoota's lived experience and modeling how rural communities can shape their own futures when empowered by partnership, trust, and local leadership.

The Wilderness Collective emerged from post-fire reflection and deep personal conviction — "a passionate expression flowed out all at once." Five women spanning three generations united around a shared wish: a healthy, productive, vibrant, community-focused future with opportunities for work and play in Mallacoota.

The Collective's vision: "Enabling a life fully lived in far East Gippsland."
Its purpose: "Facilitating and leading a self-determined future for the Mallacoota community through the catalysts of enterprise, education, coworking, and community collaboration."

The Wilderness Collective positions economic wellbeing not as mere financial growth, but as thriving through interconnected wellbeing—social, environmental, and economic.

Origins and Formation
The Wilderness Collective grew directly from MADRA's economic and business pillar. Founders — including Mary O'Malley, Meg Allen, Bel Temby, Paris Brooke and Tricia Hiley — identified that economic renewal required a space for entrepreneurship, digital work, and community collaboration beyond MADRA's recovery remit.

A digital hub was first envisioned and assessed via a feasibility study with GippsTech. Early conversations evolved from a "Wilderness Workspace" into The Wilderness Collective, formally incorporated in May 2022. The group's founding principle: create a multi-generational, community-owned space supporting sustainable livelihoods and local innovation

Key features include:
Community enterprise: Supporting local businesses, volunteers, and one-person ventures.
Place-based economy: Leveraging Mallacoota's natural assets for sustainable livelihoods.
Education and co-working: Encouraging skills exchange and creative entrepreneurship.
Intergenerational inclusion: Linking elders' experience with youth opportunity.
Sustainability as infrastructure: Integrating renewable energy, local production, and resilience-building into community life.
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SHARED STORIES -
1 - The Wilderness Collective...

Proof of Concept and Growth

The first small hub — a leased boardroom behind the Bendigo Bank — became the testing ground for the co-working model. Despite limitations (only open two days weekly), it demonstrated strong demand and symbolic momentum: proof that local capacity could drive tangible economic infrastructure.

From there:

- A very generous benefactor kickstarted our fundraising, with The Collective then securing grants, workspace revenue, and private donations, across a fundraising period of 12 months.
- With volunteer labour and resourcefulness, the group renovated a derelict main-street building into a modern workspace — solar-equipped, community-owned, and debt-free.
- Every dollar — from raffles, sponsorships, and donations was placed into securing the building for this town.

Achievements and Impacts

Co-working and infrastructure: Reliable internet, professional facilities (e.g., Zoom pods), and separation of home/work life have strengthened microbusiness productivity and mental health.
Social capital: The Collective has fostered belonging, peer learning, and community leadership—especially among women.
Local enterprise incubation: The space models how microenterprise and local collaboration can seed economic resilience.
Governance and reflection: The organisation regularly reviews its balance between community service and financial viability, recognising its need to sustain both purpose and solvency.

- Establishment of youth entrepreneurship programs in local schools.
- Over 50% of the community engaged in learning or development initiatives related to social enterprise.
- Acquisition of a community-owned commercial building, creating affordable space for local businesses and services (including simple but vital amenities, like a local hairdresser).
- Philosophy: Economic wellbeing is framed around autonomy and agency — the ability to live meaningful lives “in the place that we love,” rather than pursuing growth for scale’s sake.



SHARED STORIES -
1 - The Wilderness Collective...

Challenges

Financial sustainability: Rent from tenants alone cannot sustain operations or pay a full-time executive officer.
Ambiguity of role: Balancing community openness with workspace professionalism remains a daily negotiation.
Remoteness: Geographic isolation increases costs and reduces access to resources or consistent revenue streams.
Workload and burnout: Limited staffing places intense pressure on leadership to perform multiple roles.

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This story mirrors a broader shift from dependency to self-determination, with the Wilderness Collective acting as a remote and rural prototype for regenerative local economies.

Learning and Adaptation

The Wilderness Collective's reflective culture acknowledges that:

- Longevity for anchor organisations looking at systemic shifts is rare without multi-year philanthropic support and asset-building.
- Viability requires both earned income and philanthropic partnership over a 5–10 year horizon.
- There is value in accepting that organisational life cycles may be finite — but impact need not be.

Current Role and Vision

Now one of three amazing community-owned commercial assets in Mallacoota (alongside the radio station and art gallery and Mallacoota Medical Centre), the Collective anchors the local digital economy. It provides:

- Workspaces for local and remote professionals
- Training workshops, school partnerships, and digital literacy programs
- Microbusiness programs, coaching and support.
- A visible, inclusive hub that models self-determination and sustainability

The organisation embodies "creators of potential" — demonstrating what's possible when local leadership, collective effort, and governance structures align.

SHARED STORIES -
1 - The Wilderness Collective...

Why Investment Matters

The Mallacoota story demonstrates that remote communities can lead innovation — but need sustained partnership and flexible funding. Donors can amplify proven grassroots capability by investing in:

- Scalable local initiatives that integrate social, environmental, and economic goals.
- Community governance and collaboration infrastructure (like the Wilderness Collective) that multiplies local impact.
- Energy resilience projects that model low-emission, community-owned transition.

The Case for Continued Philanthropic Partnership

The Collective's experience demonstrates that:

- Philanthropy can be transformative bridge capital — providing time and stability to develop self-sustaining models.
- A minimum 5–6 year horizon of support enables true capacity building rather than project churn.
- Long-term partnerships allow organisations to build assets, training pipelines, and diversified revenue streams.

What's Needed Next

- Recognition of rural complexity: Remote communities need hands-on support and flexible structures to evolve beyond reliance on grants.
- Investment in capacity — staffing, technology, and regional outreach — to move from local pilot to national model.
- Recurrent multi-year funding to anchor programs like Remote Microenterprises Australia.

A Vision for the Future

"We have made a good start in three and a half years. We have the asset, the community trust, and the momentum.

What we need now is the time and stability to build the next chapter — where Mallacoota becomes a living model of how remote communities can thrive through enterprise, connection, and shared purpose."

SHARED STORIES -
2. Community & economic engagement

Current Economic and Social Wellbeing

The interviews reveal a strong sense of commitment and adaptability among community members engaged in volunteer-run organisations and small businesses. Many acknowledge the fragile economic base — a mix of tourism, casual employment, and small enterprises — but emphasise the resilience and interdependence that sustain it.

Locals spend actively within the town year-round, suggesting a base economy beyond tourism. However, it's highly seasonal: six intense summer weeks and six moderate shoulder months provide bursts of income, followed by long, lean periods.

Working well:

- Community-driven organisations like the Wilderness Collective and Mallacoota Business and Tourism Association provide infrastructure, connection, and purpose.
- Volunteerism and collaboration remain the social glue holding the town together, often substituting for formal employment.
- New employment pathways are emerging in health, aged care, and allied services — beginning to create viable livelihoods for younger residents.

Not working well:

- Overreliance on volunteer labor for essential community functions creates burnout and dependency cycles.
- Many small business owners lack business and financial skills, leaving them vulnerable to burnout and closure.
- The short-term, grant-based funding model limits continuity and staff stability in local organisations.
- The "anti-competition mindset" among some Main Street businesses discourages innovation and limits collective growth.

Community aspirations for the future:

- To maintain an "economy that enables a life fully lived in Mallacoota"—one not limited to tourist seasons.
- To create intergenerational opportunity: young people can train, work, and afford to live locally.
- To nurture collaboration over competition, building a community economy where local success reinforces others' success.
- Our elderly can "age in place" until their final day.

SHARED STORIES -
2. Community & economic engagement

Community-Led Recovery and Rebuilding

After the 2019–20 fires, a small group of local leaders coordinated a community-driven response. Within 24 hours, they formed a reference group that evolved into MADRA (Mallacoota and District Recovery Association) — the backbone of Mallacoota's post-fire recovery. Despite isolation and limited communication, the effort was remarkable for its scale, inclusivity, and the "social capital" it generated.

The first MADRA committee — a cross-section of the community — was democratically elected from 44 candidates. They faced immense administrative and logistical challenges: establishing governance, coordinating with government and agencies, and responding to immediate housing and infrastructure needs, all during COVID. Volunteers drove nearly every part of the recovery.

The Role of Community Volunteers and Emerging Organisations

Key local initiatives arose from this civic energy:
The Sanctuary Youth Group provided psychological and social space for young people when adults were overwhelmed — a powerful, enduring example of self-organised care and continues weekly to this day.

Mallacoota Cares later emerged as a volunteer network enabling older residents to age in place, reflecting a deep commitment to "a life lived fully, from first day to last."
The recognition that small, remote communities like Mallacoota often fall through cracks in state and federal support was central to local advocacy. In the last six months, it has developed into a centralised carer workforce (paid) and enabling more residents to age in place. This helps people stay more connected with place and family and ultimately reduces the overall healthcare costs on the system.

Economic Resilience and Systemic Barriers

The fires, followed by COVID, exposed the fragility of Mallacoota's local economy — highly seasonal, casualised, and reliant on a few major employers such as the Abalone Co-op. With multiple main-street businesses for sale and tourism collapsed, residents faced the stark reality that "if we lose the mechanic, the takeaway, the bakery, the butcher, the post office — this town will die."

These experiences crystallised a shared recognition: the need for long-term, locally owned economic transformation— not just recovery.

SHARED STORIES -
3 - Community Voices and Common Threads

Across interviews and reflection, a clear shared narrative is emerging:

- **Economic well-being is inseparable from social connection and community purpose.**
- **Volunteers and microbusinesses form the real economic backbone of Mallacoota.**
- **Philanthropy is not charity — it's infrastructure. It provides the space and stability needed for regeneration.**
- **The next decade depends on skills, succession, and shared leadership — building an economy where doing good and doing well coexist.**

Community Commitment and Collaboration

The story begins with arrival in Mallacoota — "came for the environment and found a community." This dual commitment to place and people reflects the defining spirit of the region: a volunteer-driven, deeply interdependent community. Through examples such as saving the local doctor's practice, creating the Croajingolong Centre for Communications and the Arts, and supporting local radio and art initiatives, Mallacoota's progress has come from volunteer action, shared purpose, and creative resourcefulness.

Shared Themes Emerging from Stories

Volunteerism as a Foundation: From health, arts, and emergency communications to renewable energy and recovery initiatives, volunteer energy underpins community success.
Innovation through Necessity: "Mallacoota-style" problem-solving — creative, self-directed, and hands-on — appears as a recurring motif.
Community as Resilience: Whether rebuilding post-bushfire or transitioning to sustainable energy, Mallacoota's approach is collective, adaptive, and driven by belonging.
Distance as a Catalyst: The "Tyranny of Distance" is both obstacle and opportunity — fuelling self-reliance, local enterprise, and innovation born of remoteness.

Self-determination and local agency: Communities like Mallacoota want to "create their own opportunities" rather than remain dependent on grants or external aid.
Resilience and renewal post-crisis: The 2019–2020 Black Summer fires exposed deep fragility in Mallacoota's economy and infrastructure — becoming a turning point for new models of regeneration.
Entrepreneurship as a community tool: Locals view entrepreneurship not as individual ambition, but as a collective mechanism to rebuild and sustain community wellbeing.
Intergenerational inclusion: Young people, women, and First Nations voices are emphasised as essential to community design and decision-making.
Belonging and place-based pride: A commitment to creating viable livelihoods without leaving home — countering the long-held narrative that "success means leaving."

These themes align across our recorded community conversations, showing how shared local values — autonomy, inclusion, creativity, and place — are shaping a new definition of prosperity.

SHARED STORIES -
4 - CHIRF (Mallacoota Community Health, Infrastructure and Resilience Fund)

CHIRF emerged as a grassroots response to a local healthcare crisis, catalysed by a 2015 community meeting at the golf club where residents realised their only doctor's practice was unsustainable. Out of that moment, CHIRF and MIAC (Mallacoota Inlet Aged Care) joined efforts — MIAC purchasing the medical centre property with community savings, and CHIRF forming to manage and sustain health infrastructure and services.

Since then, CHIRF has evolved into a community-owned, volunteer-driven hub providing allied health, medical, and wellness services for a largely aged population. Its evolution has depended on creativity, partnerships, and persistence, filling service gaps the state or council could, but would not, fund.

What's Working Well

- Community ownership and agency: Mallacoota's medical centre is 100% owned by the community, a tangible expression of self-determination.
- Innovative service creation: When needs appear, locals find ways to meet them — e.g., the "Teen Clinic," mental health services, and a "Falls and Balance" program were created through local initiative and grant support.
- Volunteer leadership and commitment: Leaders behind the organisation have combined professional expertise, volunteer energy, and intergenerational collaboration to create a groundbreaking model.
- Successful grant outcomes: A $2M infrastructure grant recently awarded for a new Wellbeing Centre — including a small hydrotherapy pool and rehabilitation facilities — represents a major success for local advocacy and planning.
- Integration with the medical community: Allied health professionals, the GP practice, and the community health organisation now work as a networked system, increasing access to local services.

What Isn't Working Well

- Over-reliance on grants: Funding for services offered by CHIRF fluctuates dramatically (at times 85–89% grant funded; currently 0%). Sustainability is threatened when grants are unavailable or don't align with 'on the ground needs'.
- Volunteer burnout: Many leaders and board members dedicate the equivalent of part-time jobs unpaid. This dependency risks burnout and knowledge loss.
- Structural complexity: The overlapping roles of CHIRF, MIAC, and the medical practice create operational confusion. The upcoming merger of CHIRF and MIAC will streamline governance.
- Service gaps: Shortages of skilled workers (e.g., physiotherapists, palliative care nurses) limit what can be delivered, even when funding exists.
- Economic fragility: With 75% of residents in the lowest income quartile, local capacity to financially sustain services is low. Many can't pay for what they use, even if willing.

SHARED STORIES -
4 - CHIRF (Mallacoota Community Health, Infrastructure and Resilience Fund)...

What Needs to Be Done Differently

- Shift from project-based to relationship-based funding: Build philanthropic partnerships that understand community self-help, offering flexible, ongoing support rather than short-term, compliance-heavy grants.
- Develop hybrid sustainability models: Use local tourism and social enterprise opportunities (e.g., gym or hydrotherapy services) to generate steady income.
- Foster cross-community collaboration: Reduce duplication across community facilities (e.g., the Main Hall and Wellbeing Centre) and promote shared infrastructure.
- Economic valuation and advocacy: Conduct an economic impact study of CHIRF's contribution — showing cost savings, volunteer labour value, and social impact — to strengthen advocacy for ongoing external government health services support.
- Strengthen workforce pathways: Create systems to attract, train, and retain allied health professionals and care workers locally (including through the new "Mallacoota Cares" initiative).

CHIRF's story intersects strongly with the Wilderness Collective's economic wellbeing narrative. Together, they illustrate how volunteer energy, place-based knowledge, and local ownership can drive community wellbeing where traditional economic development fails.

Key shared principles include:

- Community resilience through self-determination: When state systems fail, local action fills the gap.
- Value of social capital: Networks of trust, volunteerism, and shared purpose are the true economy of small towns.
- Adaptive innovation: Small, nimble responses (like a toenail-care initiative or home-based palliative support) demonstrate how community ingenuity replaces bureaucratic rigidity.
- Invisible economies: Volunteer labour and relationship-based care are critical but undervalued components of economic wellbeing.

Key Philanthropic Messages

- Invest in continuity, not just novelty: Funding that sustains core capacity between grants yields exponential returns.
- Support local governance development: Community-led entities like CHIRF and MIAC demonstrate accountability and impact; small operational grants could unlock vast volunteer value.
- Fund integrated wellbeing models: Health, housing, social connection, and economic wellbeing are inseparable in regional regeneration. Philanthropy should fund across these intersections.
- Recognise non-monetary value: Each dollar invested in community-owned infrastructure multiplies through volunteer hours, social cohesion, and local health equity.

SHARED STORIES -
5 - Friends of Mallacoota

Friends of Mallacoota (FoM) has been a cornerstone of local volunteerism and environmental stewardship for over 40 years. Entirely volunteer-run, it works to preserve the natural character of Mallacoota and its surrounding wilderness. Its members represent the deep knowledge, care, and self-organising spirit that underpin the town's social and ecological wellbeing.

What's Working Well:

- Strong community engagement: Local volunteers of all ages contribute to weeding, native plant propagation, bird surveys, waste reduction, and public education.
- Collaborations with institutions: Productive partnerships with Parks Victoria, Birdlife Australia, East Gippsland Water, Cranbourne Botanic Garden, and the local P–12 College create shared value across education, conservation, and wellbeing.
- Practical environmental innovation: Successful initiatives include Kitchen to Compost, Plastic-Free Mallacoota, the Container Deposit Scheme, and Terracycle Collection Hub, which close local waste loops and model circular economy principles.
- Endemic Garden as legacy and resilience project: The Mallacoota Endemic Garden (MEG), established after the 2019–20 bushfires, is a community-led triumph — preserving endangered plant species, providing education space, and symbolising post-fire regeneration.

What's Not Working Well / Barriers:

- Reliance on volunteer capacity — sustainability of labour and leadership is a growing concern.
- Limited funding for biodiversity monitoring and habitat restoration, especially as climate impacts intensify.
- Bureaucratic hurdles in liaising with multiple levels of government and securing longer-term resource commitments.

What's Needed / Future Directions:

- Investment in knowledge transfer and youth engagement: Strengthening school partnerships, internships, and cross-generational mentoring will ensure continuity.
- Stable funding for environmental education and infrastructure: Ongoing maintenance of the Endemic Garden, waste initiatives, and citizen science programs requires predictable support.
- Recognition of environmental stewardship as economic wellbeing: Linking ecological health to community prosperity will strengthen local narratives around "economic wellbeing" and place-based resilience.

SHARED STORIES -
6 - Local butcher community contribution

The local butcher and his family have been running their shop since 1996, making them one of the longest-standing small businesses in Mallacoota. Their work — rooted in community service, local connection, and continuity — embodies the social and economic threads that sustain the town's wellbeing.

Community Role and Contributions

- Everyday engagement: The butcher and his wife operate their shop together, supported by close family ties — her mother and their children also live in town.
- Community reciprocity: Their shop acts as a quiet hub for community exchange. Locals bring in lemons, herbs, and garden surplus to share through baskets on the bench.
- Generosity and embeddedness: They regularly supply sausages ("snags") for community events and meat products for both local grocery stores.
- Social fabric: Even though their community involvement occurs "without leaving the shopfront," their contribution is central to the town's connectedness and identity.

Challenges and Reflections

- Physical toll: After 29 years, the butcher's body is wearing down, particularly his knees, from decades of physically demanding work.
- Continuity risk: Finding a successor is proving difficult due to barriers like affordable long-term housing and the challenge of attracting skilled workers to a remote area.
- Emotional weight: He still loves his work and his customers but recognises that he must soon stop. The question becomes: "How does he stop?"

Emergent Questions

- How can a small town like Mallacoota care for its shop owners and maintain essential local services?
- Could community ownership or cooperative models provide a solution?
- How might this example illuminate broader systemic vulnerabilities in local economies dependent on individual family-run enterprises?



SHARED STORIES -
6 - Local butcher community contribution...

Key emerging themes:

- Community as interdependence: Economic wellbeing is seen as more than commerce — it's about connection, continuity, and mutual care.
- Local sustainability challenges: Housing, workforce renewal, and aging small-business owners represent structural pressures that undermine long-term community resilience.
- Invisible labour and local legacy: The butcher's story exemplifies the often-unseen contributions sustaining small-town life until "a rupture in the status quo" exposes fragility.
- The moral dimension of economy: The reflection — "You don't know what you've got till it's gone" — underscores that local economy is not just transactional but deeply relational.

Considerations for Philanthropic funders:

- Supporting succession and sustainability of essential local services through community ownership, training pathways, and cooperative business models.
- Addressing local housing constraints to enable workforce retention and renewal.
- Recognising and sustaining social capital — the informal networks and mutual care practices that underpin small communities' economic resilience.
- Developing replicable models of "place-based wellbeing economies" that integrate human, social, and ecological capital.



Image: Butcher's shop in the main street

SHARED STORIES -
7 - Community member A

This person arrived in Mallacoota 32 years ago as a metalwork teacher at the P–12 school and soon became immersed in local community life, particularly through the Arts Council. Early on, they witnessed and participated in the building of a vibrant arts culture that drew creative people into town — leading to the establishment of enduring cultural traditions like the Easter Festival, which became a key community event and attracted visitors who often stayed and contributed to the town's fabric.

Current Perception of Economic and Social Wellbeing

Community Member A expresses a strong sense of contentment and sufficiency. They describe Mallacoota as a place that "makes things work" — not wealthy, but thriving in ways that matter. There's no perceived "major economic disadvantage"; rather, the emphasis is on self-sufficiency, cooperation, and stability.

Institutions such as the Bendigo Community Bank and the Community Op Shop are highlighted as cornerstones of local resilience:

- The Bendigo Bank, developed through local effort, provides financial stability and continual reinvestment in community initiatives.
- The Op Shop quietly funds small community projects, offering accessible micro-grants and reinforcing local mutual support.

Future Outlook

This local feels optimistic about the town's post–2019/20 bushfire recovery, citing the role of organisations like the Wilderness Collective as positive and relevant. While acknowledging seasonal challenges (e.g. summer busyness), they see these as essential to the town's vitality. Their vision for the future is steady-state prosperity — maintaining community cohesion, volunteer engagement, and local control without an excessive push for growth or external intervention.

Key themes reinforced:

- Economic wellbeing as belonging and agency: Prosperity defined through participation, not scale.
- Volunteerism as local capital: Demonstrating that sustained volunteer contribution underpins Mallacoota's economy and identity.
- Local systems of support: The Bendigo Bank and Op Shop mirror the Wilderness Collective's ethos of mutual investment and shared purpose.
- Effective investment strengthens local capacity rather than introducing external programs.
- Micro-granting models and community-controlled funds align with the town's culture and track record.
- Sustained relationship-based funding, recognising long-term commitment (e.g., the 30+ years of involvement by residents), is crucial to enabling resilient outcomes.

SHARED STORIES -
8 - Community member B

The power of relationships

Being connected – Our funding success to date has come due to our connection and network or relationship with others. It was only through a strong, clear, mutually beneficial relationship that we received a very generous financial contribution from an amazing woman, that we were able to kickstart our dream about a community-owned asset. It was existing relationships that have brought us partnerships, programs and sponsors. It is the foresight of our Board that we have taken the time and resources to go on roadtrips to meet with potential funding bodies. This, we firmly believe, meant the securing of essential funding for us to not only develop the organisation but to secure the building as a community asset.

This takes time – the EO and a Board member being away from the office and their job for a week (2 days in transit). Costs of accommodation and travel. Management of schedules to try and line up everyone within a short window. The only reason we could even begin to open those doors to potential funding was due to an introduction from an existing contact. As a small community, without those connections, we would never get past the door.

Extraction

When we consider the role that researchers and visitors have had in our community, it is very extractive. On the surface, there are positives of more people in town and insights into our environment or social fabric. However, when you peel back a layer we see that:
a) Usually researchers come to the community and we don't even know. There is no communication, connection or sharing of learnings with the community
b) Research, involving community is often worse. Volunteer time is taken, promises made – never to hear back, see the final report, or experience change.
c) Visitors, more often than not, come with their eskies full. These visitors are not spending locally, then are fishing, utilising supplies they brought with them, and then taking full fish catches home. This is extractive and we wish it to change.

Money on the table

There is grant funding available, but the equity and opportunity context is uneven. Small communities rely on volunteers. Community organisations do not have access to grant writers, paid resources, or usually even a history in grant preparation or knowledge. Community organisations end up competing against each other for small grants – even within the same community – which often undermines the purpose of the grants in the first place. Grants are not a 'trust based' system. They are built around accountability and government reporting structures that are a true burden on volunteers. While established in good faith; the timeframes, processes, responsibilities and expectations upon volunteer bodies are inappropriate. Good-hearted volunteers should not be expected to manage $500k+ project management cycles, budgeting and evaluation requirements without any support or compensation. Asking for acquittals on December 31st or June 30th, also takes no consideration of the individuals behind the grant process.

SHARED STORIES -
8 - Community member B...

Do you have consultant after your name?
As a bushfire-effected community, we have seen a lot of bushfire recovery projects and tender works occur in our town. The consideration by funding bodies that it is ok to pay external city-based consultants; rather than locals with similar experience/qualifications, plus lived experience is absurd. This has happened on numerous occasions. We are seeing shifts or acknowledgement that this is an issue but there is still a way to go.

How to make things work?
Community groups engaged in place-based work, especially those addressing systemic complexity require all the support, connection and resourcing they can get. This is difficult work, that exists because the previous attempts, government policies, circumstances and disasters have led to a situation where communities know they need to take matters into their own hands in order to survive.

The Wilderness Collective still has a long way to go as well, so we don't profess to have the answers. To date though, what we consider to be the elements to make this work are:
1) Gather a small group of seriously passionate and determined locals
2) Provide enough resourcing that is untied to enable them to have the runway to get things into action and do what needs to be done (without the burden of trying to retro-fit needs into a grant outline)
3) Get cross-sector and cross-community leaders together to talk, explore, understand what each are working on, common threads, needs, challenges. This is where the glue is and also where collective action can occur.
4) Advocate and communicate – there needs to be trust built – within community, with funders, with external partners. Being open and transparent about what is happening, where you are going and the community's vision is vital.
5) Small communities can't do everything themselves – enable and empower them to attend conferences (for contacts and professional learning); open doors to potential funds and networks; and partnerships with dual benefits.

The fine line between perceptions and assumptions; success and failure
At the Wilderness Collective, we've focused quite heavily on telling our story and attending conferences. We've also had a program partner that have used us quite extensively as a case study in forums as well.

While the awareness on one hand can be helpful in opening doors and making people aware of our work; there is a very fine line between this being helpful and it being detrimental.

We are often perceived as being a 'success story', like the hard work has already been done. The amount we've achieved in a short period of time is also confused with the belief that we must be government funded.

SHARED STORIES -
8 - Community member B...

While it is lovely to be perceived as successful, we don't want it to be our downfall in not being considered for future funding. We are by no means out of the weeds and our future is very much hanging in the balance of what happens within the next six months.

Activating the network

For quite some time after the fires, there were a group of community group leaders that came together once a month to share how we were doing. We were learning about collective leadership, systems change and community-led activation. This, in hindsight, was a key to how we've continued to activate the community today. That group of leaders have a better understanding of what each other does and what we are aiming for. We are more open to reaching out, sharing information or opportunities and being aware of each other's needs.

Community needs a calendar

Over the last few years, our community has lost its long-standing community newsletter. This has created significant challenges for getting the word out about events, programs and information. In the past, the source of information and truth was available every Thursday and there was no excuse for not knowing about something happening in the community if you wanted to know. Now – that information is spread across noticeboards, radio, social media (multiple platforms). This means that it is extremely difficult to reach different sections of the community. Many community members are not on the internet or social media. They may not check the noticeboard. Community groups have started to share each other's key events at times amongst their members – but this only partially works and timeframes often don't align. Word of mouth seems to become more and more important; as well as small What'sApp groups for various sporting club or activity groups.

A community calendar has been started and stopped, considered and pitched numerous times. Even trying to decide when to hold an event when you can't see what other groups are doing is problematic in a small town. This is not a difficult fix… but it is when you need yet another volunteer to take on a big role without any resourcing. Hence, we are still without a calendar.

Additional resources

Video – 'Think, start, grow' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUIEOJmLVfU
Podcast on 'Big fish, little place', Paris Brooke – Episode link

SHARED STORIES -
8 - Community member B...

The tightrope of grant funding

Whilst grant funding to support recovery and resilience brings important benefits to communities, the downsides of competitive processes that have been raised include:

• They do not recognise that communities are at different stages of readiness;
• They place tremendous time pressure on community leaders to ensure grant applications are prepared;
• Communities do not participate in decision-making processes;
• There are winners and losers in the aftermath of trauma. They pit community groups against community groups and communities against communities in the grab for funds;
• They do not necessarily seek to align complementary initiatives that can have a positive multiplying impact;
• They are often short-term in their orientation and not supporting place-based transformative changes that will build longer term resilience.

There was a call for equity to be at the heart of the grants process. The fires equalised the situation for everyone. But not everyone had the same equity. Some people had more resources i.e., equity to deploy in recovery, others had little or no equity.

When the people who had the resources gave to others who had not, or people had access to funds based on equity, not equality, we saw the system responding at its best. But this was often the response by individuals in the system, not the system itself.

[Grant funding extract above taken from East Gippsland Resilience Project. Delivered by Gippsland Community Leadership Programme in partnership with C4 Impact. Prepared by: Dr Nicola Watts. Mark Answerth and Jeremy Scrivens]



Image: Microbusiness participants at the local market

PART 4

A SYNTHESIS OF WHY PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORT MATTERS



PART 4 -
Why Philanthropic Support Matters



Image: Visitors and exchange students from Vietnam, engaged with our Hub

The message to philanthropic partners is simple:

Philanthropy here is not charity — it is infrastructure. Each dollar invested multiplies through volunteer labour, social connection, and long-term community capacity.

1. Invest in continuity, not novelty — sustain proven community capacity.
2. Support community asset ownership — it creates legacy infrastructure and enables leadership succession.
3. Fund integrated wellbeing models — economic, environmental, and social health are interdependent.
4. Back leadership succession and youth pathways — to retain skills and optimism locally.
5. Build long-term partnerships — Provide flexible, multi-year funding that allows organisations to plan, learn, and thrive.

Looking Ahead: A Shared Vision

Mallacoota's next chapter seeks to:

- Deepen social enterprise development and regional outreach,
- Create pathways for youth and women in sustainable local work,
- Model a replicable framework for rural regeneration – where doing good and doing well coexist.

As one leader put it:

> **"We've made a good start. We have the asset, the trust, and the momentum. What we need now is the time and stability to build the next chapter — where Mallacoota becomes a living model of how remote communities can thrive through enterprise, connection, and shared purpose."**

The Mallacoota story offers funders an opportunity to participate in something enduring — a community redefining what wellbeing means and proving that regeneration begins at home.

PART 4 -
Why Philanthropic Support Matters

Current Evidence of Impact

Community-level outcomes: Strengthened networks, new local jobs (especially in care and enterprise sectors), and improved mental health from workplace and social connection.
Organisational impact: A functioning, adaptive model for microenterprise incubation and regional regeneration.
Inter-community relevance: Potential to replicate or share learnings with other small and remote towns.

Why Philanthropic Support Matters

The Wilderness Collective's experience underscores the critical role of flexible, trust-based funding in enabling small communities to build resilience. The project succeeded not through scale or wealth but through:

- Deep volunteer commitment
- Transparent, accountable governance
- Strong storytelling and communication skills
- An ability to leverage small grants and donations into lasting infrastructure

Through trusted relationships, a benefactor's early investment — grounded in shared values of sustainability and intergenerational connection — was the catalytic moment that made ownership possible. The lesson: philanthropy that seeds capacity, not dependency, changes trajectories.

Mallacoota offers a replicable model of rural regeneration:

1. Invest in local agency — Empower existing community networks rather than imposing external frameworks.
2. Value social infrastructure — Spaces like the Wilderness Collective are economic engines and social anchors.
3. Fund flexibility and longevity — Remote communities need time and money to navigate bureaucracy, freight, costs and labour scarcity.
4. Support place-based philanthropy — Encourage local giving frameworks so benefactors can safely and transparently support their communities.

What Philanthropic Partners Can Enable

Philanthropy can act as the bridge across the "tyranny of distance," enabling:

- Sustainable, community-owned enterprises that support economic independence.
- Programs that nurture the next generation's skills, leadership, and optimism.
- Deep, place-based partnerships — moving beyond short-term "projects" to long-term relationships of trust.

PART 5 -

BACKGROUND TO OUR COMMUNITY



PART 5 -
Demographics of our community

(The following data comes from Australia's 2021 Census)

Demographic comparison – Victoria, East Gippsland and Mallacoota

Mallacoota, East Gippsland and Victoria's gender balance is very similar, with Mallacoota having a slightly higher percentage of females than East Gippsland and Victoria.

Location	Population	Male	Female	First Nations
Victoria	6,503,491	49.2	50.8	1%
East Gippsland	48,715	49.2	50.2	3.5%
Mallacoota	1,183	47.5	52.5	1%

Mallacoota has an ageing population with those aged 65+ well above the average of both East Gippsland and Victoria. Percentage of youth aged 15-24 in Mallacoota are less than half that of Victoria's and percentage of those aged 65+ are over twice that of Victoria's.

Location	65+ (%)	Youth 15-24 (%)
Victoria	16.8	11.9
East Gippsland	30.9	8.4
Mallacoota	37.4	5.4

PART 5 -
Demographics of our community...

Employment, unemployment and volunteerism

Volunteerism

Mallacoota's level of volunteerism is nearly 3 times that of Victoria's and twice that of the shire in which Mallacoota is situated. Additionally, almost every volunteer we know volunteers for more than one organisation.

Location	Volunteer %
Victoria	13.3
East Gippsland	19.2
Mallacoota	38.5

Paid Employment – Full-time / Part-time for residents 15+

Location	Full-time	Part-time
Victoria	56.2	32.3
East Gippsland	49.0	42.7
Mallacoota	40.7	48.2

PART 5 -
Demographics of our community...

Income (Equivalised household income – quartiles)

Equivalised Household Income puts all households on an equal footing independent of household size and composition to enable a true comparison between areas and over time. It is an indicator of the income resource available to a household of standard size and is the best measure of the changing economic fortunes of households

Location	Lowest	Med-Low	Med-Hi	Highest
Victoria	25	25	25	25
East Gippsland	38.8	31.2	19.3	10.6
Mallacoota	40.2	31.4	17.6	10.8



Image: Community conversations on social enterprise and opportunities for the town held by Wilderness Collective

A FINAL WORD WITH THANKS...

Fund partnerships, not projects
— sustainable change arises from long-term relationships and systems-building rather than short-term interventions.

Back local leadership
— communities know their needs best; funding should trust and enable locally led solutions.

Value small-scale success
— in small towns, depth of participation matters more than numbers. Metrics should reflect impact in context, not scale.

Support community asset ownership
— investing in local infrastructure (like shared buildings) builds enduring capacity and shared prosperity.

Recognise the role of social enterprise in resilience
— entrepreneurship, when community-driven, becomes both a livelihood tool and a social glue.

Include youth and diverse voices
— philanthropy can strengthen social cohesion, especially in small communities, by intentionally resourcing intergenerational collaboration and cultural respect that in all likelihood already exists.



We wish to thank the community members that were interviewed, or provided context into the development of this report. While this report will form a community perspective to The Good Shift's research for The Minderoo Foundation, this research also provides a gathering of reflections, stories and history of Mallacoota in the aftermath of the Black Summer bushfires.

We hope that it is listened to deeply and provides action where it is needed.


DEVELOPED AND
DELIVERED
BY COMMUNITY
FOR COMMUNITY


the
Environmental
STUDIES
CENTRE
Mallacoota
the CENTRE
of AUSTRALIA'S COASTAL
WILDERNESS
Citizen science
• info
• resources
expertise
ECO TOURISM
training
• MARINE
• ESTUARIES
• RIVERS
• FLORA + FAUNA
free flowing rivers
Ancient sedimentary cliffs
Temperate rainforest
Closed Lakes
Heathlands
Open forest
Estuarine systems
Southern cool waters meet Northern warm waters
Learning from those first on this land and water
CAMPUS OUTREACH
KNOWLEDGE
RESEARCH
DATA
facilities for national and international researchers
LOCAL CAREER PATHS
improve community demographic composition
-locals in employment
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
WITHOUT NEGATIVE IMPACT ON ENVIRONMENT
illustration by melaniemurphy


MALLACOOTA
SUSTAINABLE
energy group
STABLE + RELIABLE ENERGY ELECTRICITY SUPPLY
AND RESILIENT
BATTERY
+ micro grid
+ islanding
SOCIAL ENTERPRISE BASED
OUR FOCUS IS ON FUTURE PROOFING MALLACOOTA'S ENERGY needs
ENERGY JUSTICE
LOCKED OUT
helping those
WORKING TOWARD RENEWABLE ENERGY in MALLACOOTA 100%
ENERGY
DEVELOPED AND DELIVERED
BY COMMUNITY
FOR COMMUNITY
EMPOWERING ENERGY CONSUMERS through DATA
illustration by melaniemurphy

This series of designs were created after the fires, demonstrating the diverse array of activities and projects being undertaken by different groups in the community, as part of our collective leadership work.






KEEPING the COMMUNITY SAFER
HOW to BEST PROTECT MALLACOOTA
What we have planned
How we got there
EXPAND COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE
FUEL MANAGEMENT
COMMITEE of COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS & FIRE AGENCIES
CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT AUTH
FOREST FIRE MANAGEMENT VICTORIA
PARKS VIC
EGSHIRE
DELWP
CFA
AUS NET
WEBINARS
EP.1 WHAT HAPPENED?
DEC 31st 2019
EP.2 WHY HOUSES BURN
EP.3 UNDERSTANDING FIRE MANAGEMENT
HELPING the COMMUNITY UNDERSTAND WHAT HAPPENED and HOW to be MORE PREPARED
BOOKLET
WHAT, WHERE + WHEN IS IT HAPPENING?
Empowering our community
Promoting SHARED + RESPECTFUL discussion
CALENDAR
COMMUNITY RESOURCE
→ WHEN, WHAT + HOW to prepare
→ WHAT to look out for
HOW to STAY SAFE
HOW CAN COMMUNITY IMPROVE KNOWLEDGE
The Land Owner
Contribute to the SAFETY of your community
PRUNE
RAKE
MOW
BURN


WE LOVE MALLACOOTA and want it to THRIVE
SHARE
ATTRACTING the RIGHT INVESTMENT
CONNECT
REPAIRING
RE-USING
REFURBISHING
LEASING
CIRCULAR ECONOMY
RECYCLING
SHARING
LEARN
COLLABORATE
SUPPORTING SERVICES AND RETAIL
INDUSTRIES
ARTS + WELLNESS
DESTINATION DINING
INDIGENOUS FOODS
CULTURAL
NATURE BASED
MARINE BASED
REGENERATIVE
ECO TOURISM
FOOD VANS
FRESH FOOD
DESTINATION DIVING
festivals
SUPPORTING COMMUNITY and ENVIRONMENTAL OUTCOMES
MALLACOOTA + DISTRICT BUSINESS + TOURISM ASSOC...
MARINE INDUSTRY
PLAN
BUILD
SUPPORTING a RESILIENT + VIBRANT ECONOMY
MALLACOOTA to be RECOGNISED for...
A SUSTAINABLE seafood industry
BUSINESS for PURPOSE
SMART TECHNOLOGIES to SUPPORT BUSINESSES that support →
MAINTAINING HEALTHY MARINE ENVIRONMENTS


Showcasing + Celebrating the AMAZING Talent and CREATIVITY in the Community
EXHIBIT
EXHIBIT
SUPPORT the ARTS
LEARN AND TEACH SKILLS
A HEALING + RECOVERY SPACE
We want MALLACOOTA to be a PLACE PEOPLE VISIT to LEARN ARTISTIC SKILLS
Connect at OPENING EVENTS
IMPROVE SENSE of WELLBEING
Arts + Events INSPIRED by the BEAUTY of the UNIQUE natural ENVIRONMENT
CONNECT WITH OTHERS WHILE LEARNING NEW SKILLS
MALLACOOTA ART SPACE
VISIT MALLACOOTA TO LEARN + CONNECT
BUILD the LOCAL ECONOMY
A SAFE SPACE to CONNECT AND CREATE
QUALITY ARTS EDUCATION
UPSKILLING locals + VISITORS
SHOWCASE TALENT
a place to come TOGETHER, LEARN + GROW
WORKSHOPS
WRITING
POETRY
PRINTMAKING
BASKETRY
UPSKILL Locals, EMPOWER them to TEACH + make A LIVING
STRENGTH the ARTS COMMUNITY
illustration by melanie murphy


A LIFE Lived FULLY in Mallacoota...
LEADING the WAY
the WILDERNESS COLLECTIVE
MALLACOOTA
AT THE HEART OF A Thriving AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY
WILDERNESS Workspace
BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER
FORM + SHARE Ideas
WILDERNESS enterprise
AN INCUBATOR
START-UP SUPPORT
SOCIAL ENTERPRISE
ACCESS TO EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES
DIPLOMA
ENTERPRISE Knowledge
STUDY HUB
EDUCATION SUPPORT
SUSTAINABLE CAREERS
CONNECT Globally
ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES
academic research of our CAMPUS UNIQUE ECOSYSTEM
STUDENT ENTREPRENEURS
SUPPORT FOR DIGITAL NOMADS
OPPORTUNITY
IDEAS
SPACE
HOST VISITORS to EXPLORE new thinking
BUILD external PARTNERSHIPS
DRIVEN BY PLACES
OPENTAFF
STRONG CONNECTIONS
A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE
CONNECT NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE
SUPPORT
illustration by melanie murphy

Cross - Cutting Themes

These cross-cutting themes are drawn directly from the artefacts produced by the community researchers. They are summarised here to collate some of the key insights and conclusions that can be drawn from their work.

OVERARCHING SYNTHESIS ACROSS THEMES

Pulling the threads together, the Community Researcher artefacts effectively argue that **relationships are the "delivery system" for systems change** - and that everything else (creative methods, co-design, asset-building, integrated approaches) is a *relationship-dependent capability*.

Three higher-order patterns emerge:

1. **Legitimacy comes from proximity, not credentials.**
   "Expertise" is reframed as lived experience + embedded practice; external expertise is useful when it is invited, accountable, and capacity-building.
2. **Participation is designed, not requested.**
   When methods are culturally resonant and task-based, barriers drop and people self-organise into contribution. Formal "consultation" formats select for the already-resourced.
3. **Sustainability is structural: backbone + time horizon + assets.**
   Volunteerism can't carry the full load indefinitely; durable change needs multi-year resourcing and owned infrastructure so capability and value stay local.

"When relationships, trust, and collaboration become the foundation of community engagement, the potential for meaningful and lasting change finally becomes possible"

This line is used as the throughline for the five community contexts, contrasting a transactional "expert-led" engagement model with a relational, community-led model.

> **Old Model:**
>
> External experts → identify problems → design solutions → implement programs → measure outputs → leave
>
> **New Model:**
>
> Build relationships → listen deeply → support community leadership → co-design solutions → resource long-term → share power → build assets → sustain and adapt

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

1. **Local and Lived Experience as Expertise**

Theme summary: The artefacts position lived experience and local practice as the primary expertise - something to resource *before* external consultants - because it reduces power imbalance and builds "insider" trust.

Across the contexts (examples):

- **Good Neighbourhood Project:** residents define problems and context; change requires recognising lived realities.
- **Housing Matters Action Group:** a local renter "inside the problem" could get honest stories that outsiders can't.
- **Tatreez Project:** cultural practice led by someone with lived displacement makes the work authentic.
- **Wilderness Collective:** people who live in places are experts in those places; solutions arise from local knowledge.
- **Youth Advisory Group:** trusted local practitioners + youth/elders as knowledge holders (e.g., NAIDOC Ball led end-to-end).

Why This Matters: shared lived experience reduces shame, enables deeper conversations, shifts from “helping them” to “we’re in this together,” and leaves capability in-community.

2. **Trust And Relationships Take Time - And They’re Non-Negotiable**

Theme summary: Relationships aren’t a “phase” of engagement; they’re the core infrastructure that makes everything else possible.

Across the contexts (examples):

- **Good Neighbourhood Project:** multi-year embedded listening; relational, ongoing, informal, reciprocal.
- **Housing Matters Action Group:** people open up faster when they see themselves reflected; relational safety lets people talk to each other too.
- **Tatreez Project:** relationships and connection are explicitly part of the method.
- **Wilderness Collective:** partnerships and funding success come through existing networks and connection.
- **Youth Advisory Group:** relational safety treated as “core business,” including during grief/sorry business; intergenerational belonging builds resilience.

Why This Matters: trust can’t be manufactured quickly; one-off consultation fails because it’s transactional.

3. **Creative, Cultural, And Task-Based Methods Work**

Theme summary: “Doing something together” (e.g. art/craft/farming/dance) consistently outperforms formal meetings because it lowers pressure, bypasses power dynamics, and lets conversation emerge naturally.

Across the contexts (examples):

- **Good Neighbourhood Project:** community spaces and art installations become trusted engagement sites.
- **Housing Matters Action Group:** film night + creative activities (e.g. drawing/clay) opens intergenerational conversation.
- **Tatreez Project:** embroidery as a task-based, cultural container for story, hope, and connection.
- **Wilderness Collective:** accessible workshops and “living classroom” assets.
- **Youth Advisory Group:** farming/making/dancing create low-pressure pathways to confidence, yarning, and even paid work.

Why This Matters: creative modes reach people excluded by literacy, language, and “meeting culture.”

4. **Traditional Engagement Models Are Structurally Broken**

Theme summary: The failure mode is consistent: outsiders design solutions away from community, promote via inaccessible channels, no one comes, and communities get blamed as “hard to reach.”

Across the contexts (examples):

- **Good Neighbourhood Project:** explicit critique of expert-driven programs where “no one showed up.”
- **Housing Matters Action Group:** static displays/QR codes fail; conversations succeed.
- **Tatreez Project:** succeeds precisely because it’s not consultation - it’s cultural practice and authentic connection.
- **Wilderness Collective:** “extractive” research takes volunteer time and delivers little feedback/change.
- **Youth Advisory Group:** story-first documentation is treated as stronger accountability than external evaluation; mainstream expectations can misread community-led participation.

Why This Matters: the model is the problem - not the community. Participation increases when the approach changes.

5. Context And Barriers Are Systematically Ignored - But Determine Everything

Theme summary: Participation is shaped by material, emotional, cultural, and systemic barriers; engagement must start from the realities people are living (including trauma, housing insecurity, and remoteness).

Why This Matters: barriers are explicitly grouped as:

- Material - e.g. transport, internet, literacy, housing insecurity
- Emotional - e.g. trauma, shame, exhaustion, crisis
- Cultural - e.g. norms, language, institutional relationships
- Systemic - e.g. remoteness, poverty, historic disinvestment

6. Volunteer Labour Is Both Superpower And Vulnerability

Theme summary: Volunteer energy signals strong local capacity, but over-reliance creates burnout risk - so “backbone” paid coordination is framed as essential to sustainability.

Why This Matters (the paradox):

- Volunteerism = proof of community capacity and commitment
- Over-reliance = risk of burnout and collapse
- Backbone roles = protective infrastructure for longevity

7. Power Dynamics, Trauma, Shame And Dignity Shape Engagement And Participation

Theme summary: How people are approached determines whether they engage. Deficit narratives create shame and withdrawal; dignity-first approaches create safety and agency.

Why This Matters:

- **Power-over / deficit framing** triggers shame and reinforces oppression.
- **Strengths-based / dignity-first** affirms capacity and builds empowerment into the engagement itself.

8. **“Place” Is Not Just Location - It’s Identity, Belonging, And Economy**

Theme summary: Place-based realities shape engagement and the meaning of “success” (including the right to stay, thrive, and belong). Imported, one-size-fits-all programs fail because they ignore local identity, assets, and constraints.

9. **Short-Term Funding Undermines Long-Term Change**

Theme summary: Short grants create churn, shallow relationships, and constant re-starting. The artefacts argue for multi-year horizons (explicitly “5-6 years”) to enable real capacity building and systems change.

10. **Co-Design Means Actual Power-Sharing, Not Tokenism**

Theme summary: Co-design is defined as communities having real decision rights, practitioners facilitating and resourcing (not controlling), and accepting that outcomes are unknown at the start.

11. **Systems Change Requires Integrated, Not Siloed, Approaches**

Theme summary: The artefacts repeatedly show that life issues cluster (housing ↔ health ↔ employment ↔ education ↔ connection), so single-issue programs fail; integrated ecosystems succeed.

12. **Community-Owned Assets Create Lasting Change**

Theme summary: Lasting change is linked to ownership of assets/infrastructure (physical, cultural, economic). Ownership builds autonomy, governance capability, pride, and income potential - reducing dependence on time-limited services.

Why This Matters (contrast):

- Service delivery can disappear when funding ends and doesn’t necessarily grow local capacity.
- Community ownership leaves assets behind and builds intergenerational legacy.