

READY COMMUNITIES
IMPACT REPORT AND ACTION PLAN 2026:

Regions in Transition





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Glossary of terms

This glossary defines terms used throughout this report. It covers the Ready Communities framework, concepts from place-based development and collective impact practice, community capital and investment structures, and acronyms commonly used in Australian regional policy. Definitions follow the sense in which each term is used in this paper rather than attempting a full technical scope.

- **Advocacy and promotion:** One of the five enabling conditions of readiness. The capacity of a community to make its story, needs, and outcomes visible to decision-makers, investors, and the public to attract attention and investment.
- **Backbone organisation:** In collective impact practice, a dedicated entity, often a separate non-profit, partnership hub, or specialised team, that provides staff, infrastructure, and strategic coordination to manage complex, multi-sector collaborative initiatives.
- **Boundary-spanning:** The work of connecting across organisations, sectors, disciplines, or geographies that would not otherwise interact. Individuals who hold these connections are often called boundary spanners.
- **CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse):** A term used in Australian policy and research to describe communities with cultural or linguistic origins outside Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander peoples and the Anglo-Celtic mainstream.
- **Capability and capacity:** One of the five enabling conditions of readiness. Capability refers to the skills, knowledge, tools, and infrastructure required to act. Capacity refers to the time, people, and resources available to sustain the work.
- **Catalytic event:** An event designed not only for its own outcomes but to concentrate connection, learning, and commitment in a short timeframe in ways that accelerate longer-term community change. In this paper, the Social Impact in the Regions (SIITR) conference is referenced as a catalytic event within the Ready Communities flagship program.
- **Challenge:** In the Ready Communities framework, a time-bound, cross-cutting call to action within a focus area. A challenge describes a current context, a future aspiration, and invites participation for shared value without prescribing the solution.
- **Challenge Engine:** The delivery structure for a challenge, pairing each challenge with case studies (the past), mapping and contextual analysis (the present), and outcome statements for participation (the future).
- **Clarity and understanding:** One of the five enabling conditions of readiness. The shared understanding of a community's current conditions and aspirations, including roles and organisations, the policy framework, common language, information flow between groups, and feedback mechanisms.
- **Collaboration for purpose:** One of the five enabling conditions of readiness. The governance, structures, and shared measurement that support collective action towards shared outcomes.
- **Collective impact:** A structured framework for cross-sector collaboration on complex social issues, built on five conditions: a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support.
- **Community capital:** The range of financial and asset-based structures through which capital is held, deployed, or reinvested by and for a community, including community foundations, community banks, cooperatives, Special Purpose Vehicles, and regional risk capital groups.
- **Connection and connectivity:** One of the five enabling conditions of readiness. The internal and external relationships, networks, and idea development pathways through which information, resources, and support move within and beyond a community.
- **Community foundation:** A locally governed organisation that pools donations into a perpetual endowment and distributes income as grants to support community priorities over the long term.
- **Community Resilience:** The existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterised by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise. The framework this paper uses to assess longer-term impact. Impact is read across six dimensions: economic, social, individual, institutional, infrastructure, and environmental.
- **Enabling conditions:** The underlying factors that determine whether community interventions are adopted, sustained, and able to evolve. In the Ready Communities framework, these are the evidence of readiness described through the five conditions: clarity, connection, capability and capacity, collaboration for purpose, and advocacy and promotion.
- **Flagship program:** The two-year Ready Communities engagement with a selected host community, structured around relationship-building, focus area development, the SIITR conference at the ten-month point, and a second year of embedding and follow-through.
- **Focus area:** A topic or theme within which readiness is developed and interventions applied. Focus areas emerge through community conversations and mobilise attention and resources around a defined scope (for example, Youth Futures, Main Street Activation, Food Systems).

Glossary of terms

- **Impact economy and impact investment:** A system of capital, markets, and enterprise that seeks measurable positive and aligned social or environmental outcomes alongside financial return. Impact investment refers specifically to capital deployed with the intention of generating both economic and social impact.
- **LGA (Local Government Area):** The formal administrative unit of local government in Australia. Used in this paper to distinguish scale from suburb, town, or region-level references.
- **Place-based:** An approach to development that works with the specific geography, relationships, and priorities of a defined community rather than applying a centrally designed program uniformly across different contexts.
- **Readiness:** Enabling conditions to respond to challenges or opportunities that impact prosperity in regional communities. Ready Communities describes readiness through five enabling conditions: clarity and understanding, connection and connectivity, capability and capacity, collaboration for purpose, and advocacy and promotion.
- **Readiness Index:** A 50-indicator assessment tool that captures community leaders' perceptions of readiness conditions at a point in time. Designed to be administered at baseline and again at follow-up to identify where investment in readiness is most likely to produce returns and to track change over time.
- **Social Impact in the Regions (SIITR):** The national conference convened annually by Ready Communities.
- **Social infrastructure:** The relationships, organisations, leadership, and shared norms through which communities organise and support each other. Distinct from physical infrastructure but as fundamental to how a place functions.
- **Systems change:** Change directed at the structures, relationships, and mental models that produce persistent outcomes rather than at the outcomes themselves.
- **Theory of change:** A description of how a program's activities are expected to produce outputs, outcomes, and longer-term impacts, including the assumptions that connect each step.
- **Third place (third space):** A space that is neither home nor workplace where community life forms. In regional contexts this includes libraries, community halls, showgrounds, neighbourhood centres, coworking hubs, and education hubs.
- **Wicked problems:** Problems whose definition shifts as more is learned, whose solutions are "better-or-worse" rather than "right-or-wrong," and whose complexity cannot be reduced through a staged linear process. Each community's experience of a wicked problem is unique, and solutions emerge through ongoing feedback rather than predetermined design.

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge and pay our respects to the traditional owners of the land and Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge the Nations of the Dunghutti, Gumbaynggirr, Yaegl, Bundjalung and Kamubwal peoples where we have based our work in 2025 and 2026.

We gratefully acknowledge the many who have participated, contributed, provided advice, guidance, and feedback along the journey and whose input has informed the direction of the program. We also acknowledge the many who work to advance the discipline of place-based work in Australia and globally and those who are on the ground designing and delivering place-based services across community development and economic development.

We acknowledge this work would not be possible without the support of those at the grassroots in the community who provide the vision for their communities and co-create pathways to realise those visions.

This early work would not have been possible without the support from the Centre for Rural Economies at UniSQ, the Siddle Family Foundation, Seaton Family Foundation, Westpac Foundation, Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal, and Learning the Macleay.

We acknowledge and give thanks to our founding committee member Father Jesse Poole.

We are also grateful for the insights and support from the Social Impact in the Regions Advisory 2023, 2024 and 2025 advisory board members: Jesse Taylor (Mission Australia), Jo Taylor (Siddle Family Foundation), Sam Henderson (Northern Rivers Community Foundation), Tracy Singleton (Girrwaawa Barrwayay TAS Consulting), Deb Samuels (Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal), Jo Kelly (Learning the Macleay), Angela Martin (Lifeline North Coast), Sue Curry (Blue Sky Community Services) and Liesa Davies (Kempsey Shire Council).

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Citing

Renando, C., & Grace, K. (2026). Ready Communities Impact Report and Action Plan 2026: Regions in Transition. Ready Communities. Stanthorpe, QLD.

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Foreword



Communities in regional Australia have always experienced change. 2025 was no different.

Tropical Cyclone Alfred in March and further flooding impacts in May across south-east Queensland and northern NSW coast created disaster declarations in communities we worked in of the Clarence Valley and Kempsey, even as other parts of the country experienced drought. These immediate impacts compounded ongoing pressures from housing availability and costs, rising insurance premiums, workforce availability shortages, pressures on health services, and energy transition pressures. As communities looked to 2026, few would have added to the list fuel availability, diesel cost escalations, and global conflict-induced supply-chain disruptions.

These experiences inform the focus of this year's report. Whereas last year's paper focused on programs and approaches that support community change, we open this year with a review of the systemic drivers contributing to regional transition. This is based on a belief that understanding the nature of change helps to support communities through that change. We also consider additional pressures from regions that are overlooked, describing characteristics of communities who find themselves as the 'gap in the map'.

This is our second impact report, our third year of Ready Communities, and our fourth year of Social Impact in the Regions. Ready Communities began in 2024 in the Macleay Valley with broad community engagement and a focus on initiatives. In Grafton in 2025, we shifted to a greater emphasis on working directly with leaders, letting focus areas emerge from relationships rather than workshops, and expanded from observing readiness conditions to measuring them through leader perceptions with the Readiness Index. The shift in emphasis resulted in fewer but deeper connections that contributed to more structured outcomes. In Stanthorpe in 2026, we are now integrating challenges into each focus area so that readiness builds around specific, time-bound calls to action.

As our work expands and matures, we navigate inherent tensions. The value of an external perspective while needing to be deeply local; the value of a structured program informed by research while also being adaptable for individual community needs; the value of telling the community story while not being extractive; the need to secure funding for program sustainability while raising attention for individual community opportunities for investment; the importance of acknowledging the complexity in which we work and the need to present practical and simple next steps;

the benefit of being an agile startup while acknowledging the benefits of alignment with larger and slower institutional support; and the need for local examples of practical impact balanced against a national approach to address the underlying conditions.

This last tension in particular - working deep in individual communities to understand the systemic challenges shared nationally across regions - is the inspiration for this year's development of challenges. The challenges introduced in 2026 are locally informed and nationally applied, being grounded in a host community's lived experience, framed against national evidence, and opened as an invitation for other regions to contribute what they are learning.

Challenges provide an interface for collective action, where partners and collaborators can align on topics for shared value. As highlighted in the 2025 Ready Communities impact report, our work supports what is known as 'the space between' which can be difficult to find alignment with a specific strategic or investment line item. Challenges have the potential to connect those who want to make an impact with both local outcomes and national systemic impacts.

Readiness remains our constant as the essential enabling condition. We hear reflected back in our conversations over the past year the two sides of readiness: being "investment ready" for communities we work in, and "risk mitigation" from government and philanthropic organisations wanting to have sustained and meaningful impact from their investments. When communities have greater clarity, are better connected, build more capability and capacity, are collaborating for purpose, and strengthen their advocacy and promotion, they are more ready for challenges and opportunities.

This report describes our experience of putting these thoughts and beliefs into practice. We know, however, that we are not doing this alone. We are joined by a national and global cohort of practitioners and supporters passionate about making an impact in regional communities. At the centre of the work are the communities who define what is needed and shape the evolution of the work. We are humbled to contribute to the outcomes and grateful for the opportunity to be a part of the collective journey.

Ready Communities Co-founders
Dr. Chad Renando and Kerry Grace

Executive summary



This is the second Ready Communities Impact Report and Action Plan, marking three years of place-based work across regional Australia and four years of the Social Impact in the Regions (SIITR) conference. It reports on what was delivered over the past year and sets out the plan for the year ahead.

Ready Communities was established to address a recurring pattern in regional Australia. Communities are rich in ideas, relationships, and commitment, but are often expected to respond to accelerating change without the underlying conditions to do so in a way that lasts. Investment arrives intermittently, and outcomes frequently fall away once a funding cycle closes.

Ready Communities works on the enabling conditions that sit beneath visible projects and services, described as "the space between". We describe these as five conditions of readiness as clarity and understanding, connection and connectivity, capability and capacity, collaboration for purpose, and advocacy and promotion.

For communities, readiness means being investment-ready. For funders, it de-risks investment and increases the likelihood that impact is sustained.

The report is in three parts.

Part 1 sets out the systemic drivers of regional transition, organised as eight topics from population and demographics through to identity, culture and narrative. It then describes why some regions carry the additional disadvantage of being a "gap in the map," passed over by mainstream investment for structural reasons: political misalignment, disaster boundaries, transport bypass, the shadow of a larger centre, or statistical classification. Readiness is positioned as the response: the means by which a region raises its visibility and positions itself to receive and hold investment.

Part 2 reports on delivery. Over three years the work has connected around 630 people through 150 hubs, 77 organisations, and 22 engagement events, generating more than 57,000 person-to-person connections. SIITR has generated \$947,671 in regional economic output across its host communities on a direct conference spend of \$334,678, with 96 per cent of that spend going to regionally based small and medium enterprises.

The 2025 conference in Grafton returned a Net Promoter Score of 71. The Readiness Index, introduced in Grafton in 2025, gave the program its first quantitative baseline: considered by community leaders, readiness sat in the Minimal-to-Moderate range on all five conditions, a starting point for a community undertaking structured self-assessment. The Index highlighted specific, actionable findings such as the absence of a backbone coordinating function, a gap between where leaders want investment directed and where they are able to be involved, and weak infrastructure for new ideas. Case studies across six focus areas show readiness developing through locally led initiatives, including the Grafton Chamber of Purpose, the South Grafton main street activation, and the Jacaranda Festival's youth leadership work. Where focus areas did not consolidate within the program year, that is reported directly for collective learning.

Part 3 sets out the year ahead. The 2026 flagship has moved to Stanthorpe in Queensland's Granite Belt, where the program is introducing National Regional Challenges. These challenges are locally informed, nationally applied calls to action across six areas: sustainability, cultural practices, community contribution, liveability, local economy, and intergenerational connection. Each challenge connects a Stanthorpe focus area to a national systemic driver, frames it against national evidence, and invites other regions to contribute what they are learning. Around the flagship, the program continues to deliver investment-readiness workshops, the annual Readiness Index, mapping, and an alumni network of more than 630 regional changemakers.

The primary audience for this report are funders, policymakers, practitioners, and community leaders who can see themselves in it.

The framework offers three things available together: comparability across communities through a consistent readiness measurement approach, accountability without over-prescribing local solutions, and durability, with early evidence that readiness-driven work continues beyond the life of a program year.

We are direct about the limits. One year is a short window in which to evidence systemic change, and many of the outcomes here remain partly anecdotal. The Readiness Index is the instrument through which we are building more rigorous, comparable evidence over time.

Ready Communities is offered not as a finished solution but as a live example of what becomes possible when structure and local flexibility are brought together, and as an invitation to others to inform, challenge, and build on the work.



PART 1:

Regions in Transition

- **The drivers of transition**
- **Missing investment: Gaps in the map**
- **Readiness as a response**

1.0 Ready for what?

Readiness is about being better prepared for change.

Communities come together when change calls for it. Too often, though, the first time people are around a table is when the change is already happening to them.

Communities receive significant but intermittent investment from government, industry, and philanthropy. At any given time, there can be large-scale capital programs alongside smaller grants for infrastructure, community funds, and interventions such as physical hubs, local spend initiatives, and leadership development. The long-term impact of these investments can be hindered by a lack of clarity, connection, capability and capacity, collaboration, and advocacy in the surrounding community.

Readiness helps communities to be **investment-ready**: able to leverage resources, direct them toward shared priorities, and sustain the work once a funding cycle ends.

For funders, readiness **de-risks the investment** and increases the likelihood that the impacts are sustained years after the investment cycle closes. Part 1 of this report presents the case for readiness in regions experiencing change.

We open this section with the **systemic drivers of transition** in regional communities. These are organised as eight topics, each with sub-topics and factors as experienced by the people living through them.

We then consider why some regions experience an additional challenge of being a **'gap in the map'**, where structural conditions cause them to be passed over by mainstream investment even when the need is comparable to their neighbours.

The section closes with **Readiness as a response**, describing how the five conditions of readiness combined with action-focused interventions support regional change. Rather than being applied in the abstract, focus areas and challenges help to focus attention and resources. Programs such as Ready Communities help provide the scaffolding around change, but only when co-designed with local communities to impact mindsets.

Readiness helps communities be investment-ready

Readiness de-risks the investment and increases long-term outcomes



1.1 Systemic drivers of transition

1.1.1 What drives transition?

Change in communities:

- comes from multiple directions at the same time;
- is experienced differently by different groups of the community;
- may be framed as a challenge or an opportunity;
- has impacts that compound and intersect;
- can be long-term and systemic or immediate and episodic; and
- can occur in rapid succession.

The number and scale of these changes can feel overwhelming. In this section, we aim to understand the nature of changes to help make sense of what to expect.

Our framing borrows on approaches by others who describe shifts experienced in regional communities, including:

- the global forum Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),
- the Australian Productivity Commission,
- the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), and
- the peak body Regional Australia Institute (RAI).

Their summaries, outlined below in Table 1 below, provide the basis for the eight topics outlined in our regional transition taxonomy.

Reinforcing Rural Resilience, OECD ¹	Transitioning Regional Economies, Productivity Commission ²	Strategic foresight for regional Australia, CSIRO ³	Regionalisation Ambition 2032, Regional Australia Institute ^{4,5}
• Demographic shifts	• Population consolidation	• Place divergence	• Population
• Economic performance	• Resource sector commodity cycles • Agricultural farm consolidation and small town decline • Manufacturing contraction • Labour mobility	• Transitioning economies	• Jobs & Skills • Productivity & Innovation
• Social outcomes and quality of life			• Liveability • Health
• Environmental trends		• Environmental risk	• Sustainability & Resilience
	• Connectivity to major cities	• Geographic distance • Global exposure	

Table 1 Examples of categories of drivers for change from OECD, Productivity Commission, CSIRO, and RAI

1.1.2 Regional transition taxonomy

Our approach to defining the drivers of community change builds on this past work. The taxonomy is a response to our search for an explanation of the underlying explanations for what we see and hear in community.

The eight topics are not experienced individually, and can be triggered collectively through amplifying events such as pandemics, disasters, or economic shocks that accelerate, compound, or reveal these change forces across multiple topics simultaneously.

Each topic includes four to six sub-topics, and each sub-topic includes three to six factors of change. Each factor has an inherent movement impacting a community, such as decreasing youth population or increasing climate-related events.

The drivers are not presented as occurring to all regions, but they provide a framework to consider which factors might contribute to a community's lived experience.

The full topics, sub-topics, and factors are in the Appendix.

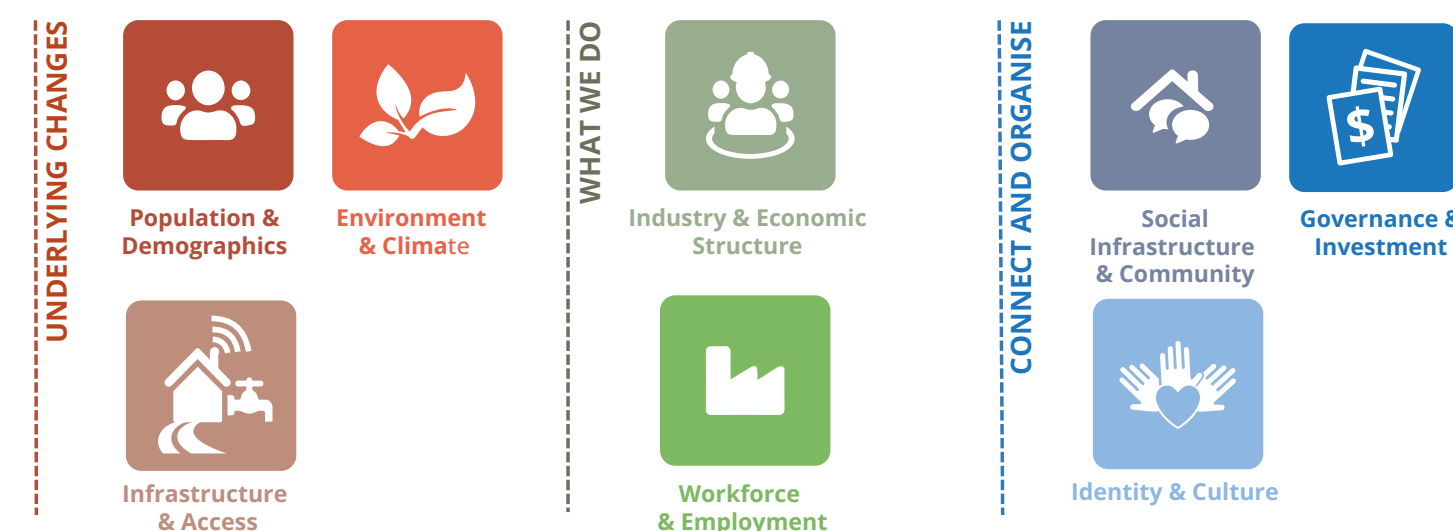


Figure 1 Regional drivers of change

Three of the topics can be considered as underlying changes: **Population and demographics**, **Environment and climate**, and **Infrastructure and access**. These are visible and felt, but change can be deep, slow, and be influenced by factors outside those directly impacted.

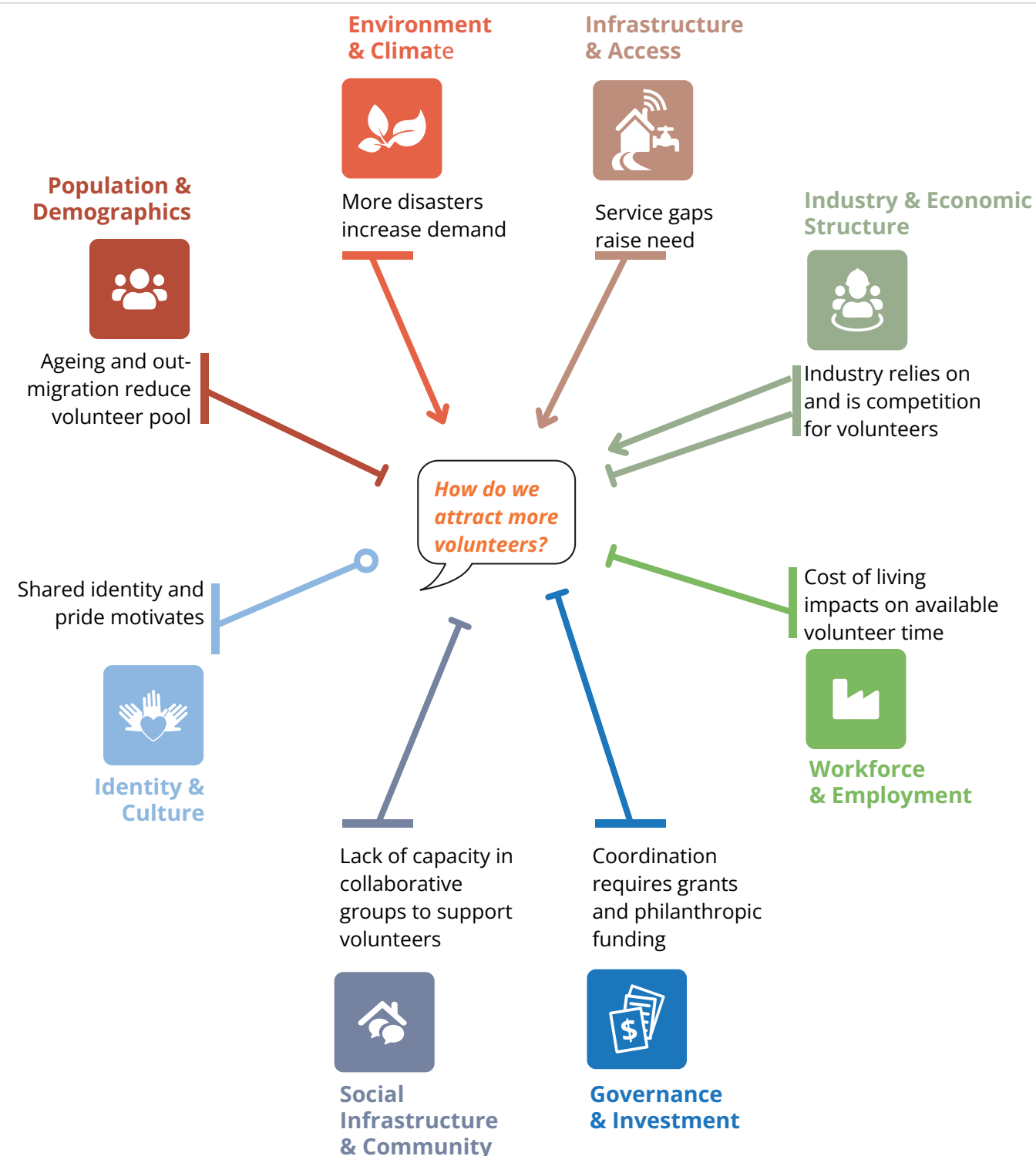
Then there are topics related to what people do in community. The **Industry and economic structure**

topic is split into two categories: **Export-oriented sectors** and **Population-focused sectors**. Related to this is the **Workforce and employment** topic.

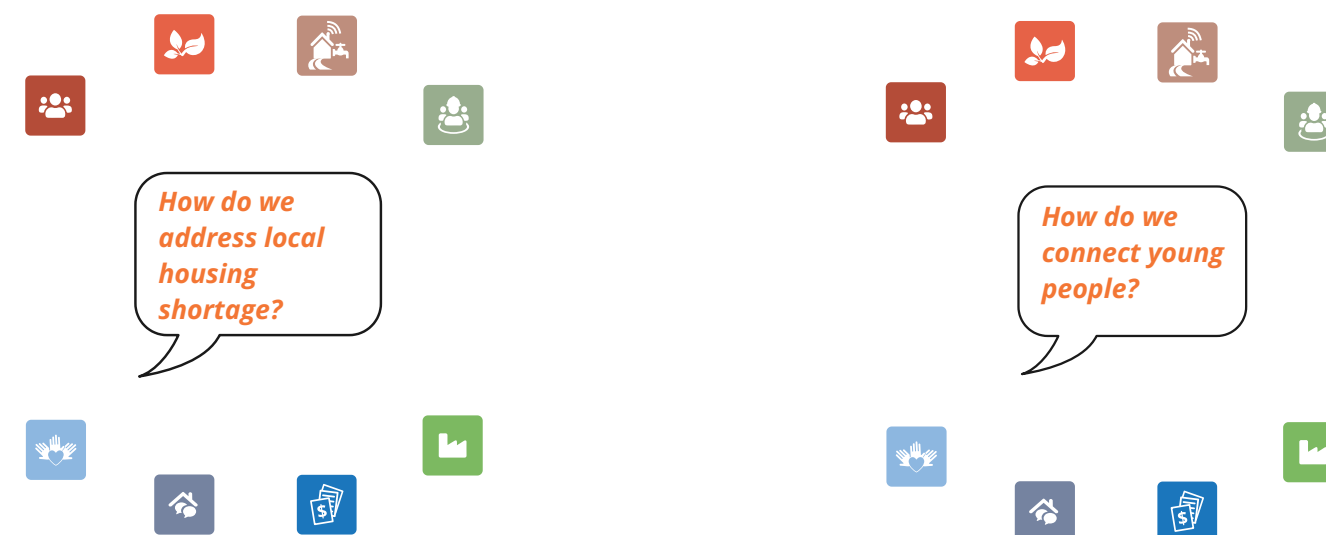
The last three topics focus on the often-invisible connections in a community: **Social infrastructure and community**; **Governance and investment**; and **Identity, culture and narrative**.

1.1.3 Transition taxonomy in action

Responses to individual concerns in communities such as more volunteers, local housing shortage, and connecting young people can mask the complexity of diverse contributing factors. An understanding of contributions from each driver of change can expand responses beyond isolated symptoms.



Rather than a single solution, responses to a single question of housing or youth are more a portfolio of approaches connected through a common language. This coordination requires clarity, connection, capability and capacity, collaboration, and shared advocacy - considered as readiness in the "space between".



Key

-  Raises the need
-  Limits the capacity to respond
-  Enables

1.2 Missing investment: Gaps in the map

1.2.1 Characteristics of the gaps in the map

All regions experience the changes described in the eight areas just described. But there are characteristics of some regions that make them hidden such that they are not 'seen' by policies, programs, interventions and other support. People in these regions describe a condition of feeling like an unseen 'gap in the map'. Having heard this described in varying ways, this year's white paper explores conditions that might contribute to this condition.

a. Political (mis)alignment

The preference to allocate public funds for electoral advantage is a reality of Australian politics. Funding flows tend to preference government-held marginal seats and co-partisan safe seats while politically perceived unattainable opposition seats receive less funds per capita. This disadvantage can compound for a local community misaligned with both state and federal government parties. The paradox of the situation is that research shows there is not a resulting material impact on election results due to a lack of awareness by most voting constituents about the extent of the preferential funding. ¹⁷³⁻¹⁷⁸

b. Environmental exceptional circumstances

Funding for environmental and climate-related events - floods, fires, drought - has historically been allocated based on declared boundaries. From a geography perspective, this can result in 'lines on a map' inequity - although this is being partially addressed by additional needs-based assessments.

An issue though with acute needs-based assessment is that the impacts can be experienced well beyond the immediately observable areas with detriments of the event felt from displaced demand, economic flow-on, supply-chain disruption, and the inter-dependent nature of thinly supported regional areas. The boundaries also apply to time, with long-term social impacts resulting in economic costs well after the public discourse moves on from a high-profile environmental event. ¹⁷⁹⁻¹⁸⁶

c. Transport and logistics

An obvious geographic 'gap in the map' is seen in physical transport infrastructure bypassing or inhibiting flow to and from certain communities. Highway bypasses consistently reduce travel-oriented retail in towns already in structural decline while having more variable effects on diversified regional centres. Regional aviation costs sit roughly 52% higher per kilometre than capital-city flights with a 36% decline in regional routes between 1989 and 2021 and many remaining routes serviced by a single operator. Local roads face a structural maintenance funding shortfall concentrated in regional and remote councils with small rate bases. Rail is at risk from increased climate events, with fires and floods resulting in long-term impacts from permanent line closures. Regions that once sat on principal corridors can rapidly find last-mile delivery to regional and remote areas carrying up to a 50% cost premium over urban equivalents. ¹⁸⁷⁻¹⁹¹

d. In the shadow of a regional centre

Smaller communities located near a dominant regional centre can struggle in an "agglomeration shadow" where investment, services, retail functions, and population centralise into the larger centre at the expense of surrounding towns. They can also benefit from "borrowed size," where adjacent smaller communities benefit from access to regional-capital infrastructure and amenities without bearing the diseconomies of scale. There is a long-run pattern of regional centres growing while their hinterlands lose population, services, and economic functions, though this migration is not seen consistently.

Whether a smaller adjacent town sits in shadow or borrows size is contingent on factors including the quality of physical and digital connectivity to the regional centre, the presence of independent institutional anchors (hospital, university campus, TAFE, or peak body), local civic and entrepreneurial capacity, and whether the town has a distinct economic and cultural identity rather than functioning as a diluted version of the regional capital.

Regional development policy has increasingly concentrated attention on regional capitals. Communities sitting between metropolitan and recognised regional-capital framings can fall outside the dominant policy categories at both state and federal level.

e. Statistical and administrative classification

The designation of a community based on its geographic boundaries or population size can determine what programs it qualifies for. These designations can be independent of lived conditions, with some communities on the border of a classification missing out on funding arrangements even though their experience is similar to their neighbour who benefits from having a different postcode or a few more or less residents.

Program boundaries can pull small towns within road-distance of a regional centre up the scale into less-rural categories despite carrying socio-economic and service-access profiles consistent with smaller rural classifications. At the metropolitan edge, the inverse problem applies where communities classified as metropolitan sit within an outer-metropolitan LGA are excluded from regional funding programs while also missing out on metropolitan growth funding.

A community can sit at the edge of multiple catchments without being the primary focus of any, with fragmented data and no single accountable agency to convene around. ¹⁹⁹⁻²⁰⁴

1.2.2 Support for gaps in the map

If we visualise support evenly applied across a topographic map, gaps in the map can be perceived as 'divots' where policy, programs, and resources might pass over or miss. This is reflected in Figure 2, noting that a region can experience multiple contributing characteristics.

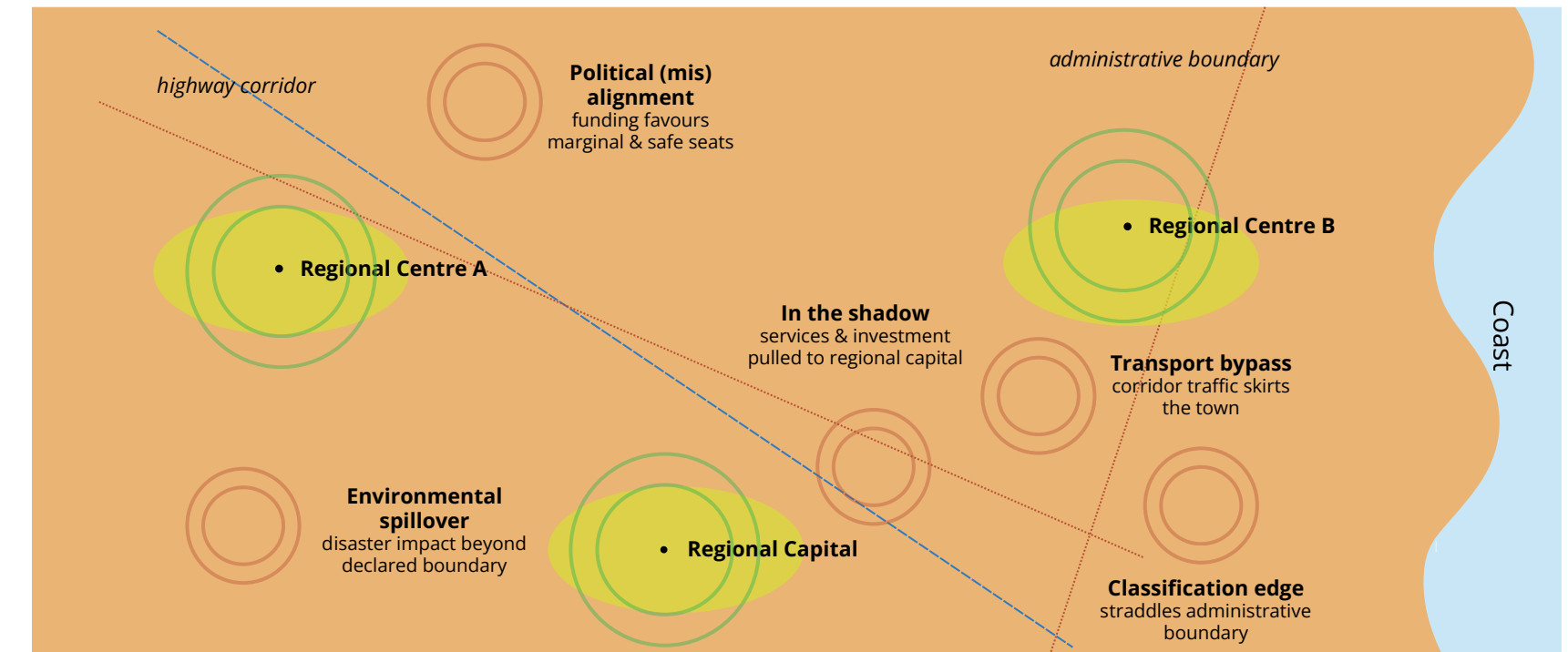
These gaps in the map are not addressed by removing the contributing condition such as an infrastructure bypass, environmental spillover, or being in the shadow of a regional centre. These factors are often seen as unmovable as the town itself.

Rather, regions identifying as gaps in the map can require different forms of support to raise them up for alternative forms of investment, make them more visible, and position themselves in the path of established policies and programs.

The enabling conditions of readiness are positioned as a response to the conditions that contribute to the gaps in the map. These can be seen as 'backfill' to raise a region on level with standard flow of resources.

- **Clarity** ensures a shared awareness of the context including systemic inequities and relative needs across a region.
- **Connection** establishes additional boundary-spanning roles and structures that are otherwise missed.
- **Capability and capacity** fills in gaps with extra and potentially alternative resources to compensate for what is not provided from mainstream support.
- **Collaboration for purpose** establishes social infrastructure for the region specific to addressing these gaps.
- **Advocacy and promotion** raises the region up in the map, supported by the other conditions to maintain visibility and long-term support.

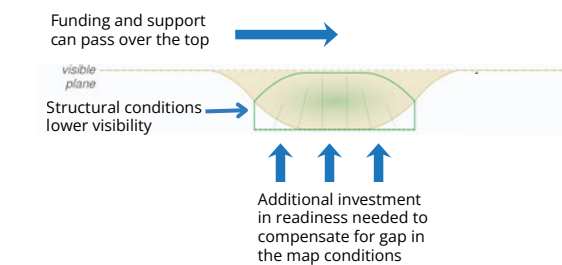
The gap in the map



Map symbols

- Visible terrain**
Regions seen by policy & programs
- Divot - gap in the map**
Region depressed below the lens
- Filled by readiness**
Visibility restored; interventions can land

Cross section how readiness fills the divot



Reading the map

Institutional policy-driven investment and funding can flow across the landscape in ways that are predictably consistent and uneven. Yet there can be situations where regions might feel like a divot, somehow hidden from sight.

The gap conditions create these depressions, and prompt different responses to compensate for systemic conditions to push up these gaps in the map into view.

These backfilling responses are described as readiness, providing clarity, connections, capability and capacity, collaboration, and advocacy and promotion to make regions investment ready.

Figure 2 Characteristics of the gap in the map

1.3 Readiness as a response

1.3.1 Readiness supporting regional transition

Interventions impact all aspects of a community. A community foundation engages the business sector and community services. A shop local program supports main street while addressing overall livability and community governance.

However, interventions alone can be insufficient to impact the systemic drivers of change. Readiness acts to support both identification and implementation of interventions suited to specific community needs.

- **Clarity** provides the shared understanding of the current condition and future aspirations to identify possible interventions as well as a common language and clear accountabilities for implementation.
- **Connection** ensures interventions consider all aspects of the community, provides new ideas through boundary-spanning networks, and ensures there is trust in community relationships.
- The development of **capability and capacity** helps in both identifying suitable interventions as well as the skills and resources for sustainable and effective implementation.
- **Collaboration**, including suitable governance, evaluation loops, and representation, ensures broad acceptance, efficient adoption, and momentum of community initiatives.
- Finally, **advocacy and promotion** help attract interest in fit-for-purpose approaches and long-term support for implementation.

Readiness and initiatives go hand in hand. Readiness is needed for the successful delivery of a program or initiative, while programs and initiatives can be used to build readiness. But this benefits from a conscious, collective effort.

Specific aspects of readiness can be identified for development. Rather than working on “Clarity”, a community may identify a need for a shared vision, or to map resources, or connect to culture and history. It is not working on “capability and capacity”, but instead a community may find they do not need leadership development as much as investment in capacity and sustainable funding for leaders to deliver on capability they already have. There may be plenty of collaboration in a community, but lacking specific governance frameworks or measuring progress for alignment between different collaborative groups. In this way, readiness can be measured as a benchmark and collectively determined where interventions might have the most impact.

We find that readiness is also not experienced equally in a region. Individual and institutional leadership may be perceived as strong in agriculture but lacking in creative industries. There may be strong advocacy for young people but a need for a more prominent representation for First Nations. Residents living close to main street may see themselves as connected to the community while people living in a community 10 minutes out of town may feel disconnected.



Figure 3 Readiness enabling conditions and indicators

1.3 Readiness as a response

1.3.2 Readiness and action

It's one thing to be 'ready', but readiness needs to be associated with action.

While change can be described in simplified categories such as youth population decline or increased climate-related events, the practical lived experience in community is that change is integrated and complex. This creates a tension between a desire to 'fix' specific issues or achieve targeted goals, and work aimed at addressing underlying systemic conditions.

A focus on single topics such as disaster response, industry transition, or housing affordability can create siloes, result in unintended consequences in seemingly unrelated areas, and produce rapid drop-offs of longer-term impacts due to competing pressures from other initiatives. Alternatively, community-wide, collective impact approaches that work on addressing systemic change can get lost in complexity and struggle to show timely outcomes.

We propose both perspectives are needed, where sustainable change comes from focused, community-led interventions that are supported with underlying enabling conditions. These enabling conditions are described as community '**readiness**', where change is more likely to succeed when there is better clarity and understanding, connection and connectivity, capability and capacity, collaboration for purpose, and advocacy and promotion.

These interventions or initiatives are also becoming more standardised as communities, program providers, and policy makers learn from lessons from the past and what works in other regions.

Examples of standardised approaches to initiatives include approaches to building community capital, frameworks for supporting main street retail, establishing collective models, and more.

But these approaches require deep community work in readiness to ensure a greater likelihood of success.

Some examples of the current state of these interventions are linked below to the Ready Communities website:

- [Community capital](#)
- [Local retail](#)
- [Collective models and co-operatives](#)
- [Physical hubs](#)
- [Structured collective impact models](#)
- [Events and festivals](#)

1.3.3 Focus areas and challenges

Focus areas help to mobilise attention and resources towards specific outcomes. They provide the context in which readiness is developed and interventions are applied and encourage people to think beyond problems and towards aspirations.

Focus areas create the boundaries and scope for change and attract people and organisations to the table. For example, a focus area of youth brings together parents, schools, creative industries, and employers. A focus area of housing connects the construction and tourism industries alongside people impacted by livability, affordability, and workforce attraction and retention topics. A focus on environmental sustainability connects agriculture and mining with climate impacts and disaster response.

Challenges add momentum and urgency, creating a time-bound scope in which collaborative action can be applied. A challenge describes the current context where change is desired, the future state to be realised, and creates space that invites participation for shared value.

Challenges provide an effective way to engage with others to address "wicked problems" that require cross-sector collaboration and a portfolio of projects rather than a single solution.²⁰⁵ These wicked problems are difficult to define with no clear end point of the problem being 'solved', where solutions are 'better-or-worse' rather than 'right-or-wrong', and where every community's experience is unique.

Solutions emerge gradually with constant feedback from those who have direct experience and where the solution is not predetermined by those outside of the context.²¹⁰⁻²¹¹ Examples of mission-led or challenges approaches include European Commission's Horizon Europe programme, Australia's CSIRO Missions Program, Switzerland's New Regional Policy, and Regional Australia Institute's Regionalisation Ambition 2032.²⁰⁶⁻²⁰⁹

Challenges are designed to address systems-level change, which includes: 1) explicit structural change such as **resources, policies and practices**; 2) semi-explicit relational change of **connections and power dynamics**; and 3) the implicit transformative change of **mental models**.²¹²

Crafting a challenge is intentional and requires both skill and art. There are principles for the design and delivery of effective challenges:

- Defined enough to focus attention, open enough to attract a wide audience.
- Bounded in time and scope.
- Cutting across sectors and impact areas by design.
- Invites participation for shared value, not competition for scarce resources.
- Can be held without being owned by the program that initiated it.
- Operates as a portfolio, not a single bet.
- Frames the current context and a future aspiration without prescribing the path between them.

1.3.4 Implementation: programs and mindsets

A conversation about community change acknowledges that regional communities across Australia have agency and are responding to change. We see community-led change come from an inspirational individual leader who reframes what is possible and brings others along on the journey. Other times, we see change as a result of a collective shift from a sudden external force such as a disaster, an industry closure, or a moment of national attention.

Programs provide scaffolding and structure around community change. The 2025 Ready Communities Impact Report explored program structures in detail, mapping place-based programs in Australia and walking through program principles and stages: being invited in, initial engagement, mapping, activation events, a catalytic event, and ongoing support.

Programs provide structure to support individuals in the community who are often doing the work alone and amidst multiple volunteer and part-time positions. Programs concentrate attention, allocate resources, mark milestones, and create accountability across the duration of an engagement.

But programs alone are not the change. Without deep engagement, programs can be *inflicted* on communities. Sustainable change comes from shifts in individual and collective **mindsets**, including what they believe is possible and whether they recognise themselves as part of the response.

A program itself does not generate the mindset shift, but can create the conditions under which changes in collective understanding happen.

This is the work of Ready Communities, to support regions responding to underlying systemic change, providing the context in which readiness is developed alongside the practical action of initiatives, working through focus and challenges to concentrate attention and resources, supporting changes in beliefs and mindsets defined by community-led collective vision for what is possible.

Part 1 of this report outlined the rationale for change programs.

Part 2 now shows practical application of this approach, with evidence from our practice of supporting leaders and communities to develop readiness to respond to the systemic drivers of regional transition and to receive investment that supports long-term impacts.



Figure 4 Regional readiness framework for community transition

PART 2:

What we delivered

- **Ready Communities Overview**
- **Evaluation**
- **Case studies**

2024 Kempsey

2025 Grafton

2026 Stanthorpe

2.0 Ready Communities year in review



2.0.1 Our work in review

This Impact Report has been published half way through the first year of our third Flagship Program, Ready Stanthorpe.

The Ready Communities approach has been refined through two years of delivery across two host communities, three annual conferences, and hundreds of individual engagements. From the first stand-alone SIITR conference in 2023 through to the two flagship programs in 2024 and 2025, Ready Communities has engaged around 627 people connected through 150 hubs, 77 organisations, and 22 engagement events, generating over 57,000 person-to-person connections. Over three years, the Social Impact in the Regions conference has generated \$947,671 in regional economic output across its host communities on a cumulative direct conference spend of \$334,678. The combined flagship programs have produced measurable outcomes across the enabling conditions of readiness, with initiatives continuing to generate longer-term impact across dimensions of community resilience.

In Kempsey, Ready Communities built initial connections and continued mapping focused on youth pathways. The CBD activation produced a shop local program that has continued with local sponsorship and a retail leadership pathway that continue without external management. The retail space development next to the Country Universities Centre was further used as social infrastructure for events and creative industries. A social enterprise accelerator supported a cohort of local social impact entrepreneurs. Community leaders who participated in the Ready Macleay program presented on the model at an international event in the United States, raising awareness for their community.

In Grafton, the Chamber of Purpose meets monthly and is self-governing, led by a local not-for-profit leader with experience in community development. Rather than an end in itself, the Chamber of Purpose is positioned as be the means to explore further social infrastructure including a community fund. The Jacaranda Festival youth leadership stream has attracted philanthropic funding and will run again in October 2026.

Outcomes highlight how programs do not need to create something new, but help to reframe and raise awareness about existing capability and work already underway. The Ready Grafton program showcased aspects of the Jacaranda Festival beyond the annual event, focusing on the year-long activities that develop skills of future leaders that contributed to community connectedness and pride. The shop local program re-introduced the shop local campaign as the Jaca Card, facilitating over \$5,000 over a single lunch-time session in South Grafton's Skinner Street. The previously disused retail space activated for the 250+ seating capacity 2024 Social Impact in the Regions conference in Kempsey has since been used for other community events. By repurposing existing and familiar resources into new forms, readiness is seen as leveraging latent resources versus building or attracting something new.

The outcomes observed in both flagship communities were also experienced on a one-on-one basis through the delivery of the 2025 readiness workshops to seventy-five regional changemakers through the NSW Health Community Drug Action Teams (CDAT) program. Participants engaged with the readiness framework to apply a new perspective on existing work. Outcomes reflected following the workshop included mapping local ecosystems for greater clarity, identifying disconnected individuals and entire areas of their community, distinguishing between genuine collaboration from coordination, and advocating more deliberately for the change they were trying to create.

Our approach has evolved each year based on continuous feedback: initiatives in 2024, leaders in 2025, and challenges in 2026. Not only has this contributed to the development of the Ready Communities program, it has also given greater insight to the adaptability and shortcoming of different approaches to community interventions. The Ready Communities' model works in systems change where the approach is adaptive according to the emergent needs of the host community, rather than relying on a singular approach to drive change.

2024
Ready Macleay
Focus: Initiatives

2025
Ready Grafton
Focus: Leaders

2026
Ready Stanthorpe
Focus: Challenges

2.0.2 Insights and changes from Kempsey (2024) to Grafton (2025)

In the inaugural Ready Communities program in Kempsey, NSW, we held broad community workshops in five focus areas (CBD Activation, youth pathways, agricultural communities, creative industries and housing and infrastructure) engaged 279 individuals, and identified over 70 potential initiatives. The breadth of engagement was valuable to identify desired change, map connections, and create visible momentum. But it also created expectations that Ready Communities would manage initiatives to completion, which was neither scalable nor consistent with building local readiness. Gathering and promoting initiatives looked and felt similar to previous engagement efforts that collected ideas without the community infrastructure to sustain them. There is a balance between tangible, visible outcomes and the less visible but more durable asset of local capability to deliver those outcomes.

In Grafton, the approach changed. Rather than hosting broad community events from the outset, we began with one-on-one conversations with local leaders across sectors, including the Manager of the Country Universities Centre, the Dean of the Anglican Cathedral, the Jacaranda Festival committee, local business owners and Not for Profit Managers. Some of these relationships deepened into sustained engagement. Others did not proceed. The engagement was organic and relational, shaped by who showed up and who had capacity and aligned value to work toward shared outcomes.

From these conversations, six focus areas emerged: Youth Futures, Main Street Activation, Food Systems, Social Enterprise, Lifelong Learning, and Community Engagement through major festivals and tourism. The focus areas surfaced from what leaders identified as intersections where change was most felt and where readiness conditions were weakest. There was no existing backbone organisation in Grafton or momentum in the community to develop one. This absence shaped the engagement and may have created the conditions for a different kind of coordinating structure to emerge on the community's own terms.

The shift from initiatives to people highlighted an important observation. Change is described in broad terms such as population shifts or industry transition, and implementation focuses on interventions, funding, and programs. But when we look at how change actually happens, it comes down to a people leading change in their community. Narratives about challenges and opportunities can be in abstract terms while stories of success involve people, names and lived experiences.

Each focus area was anchored by local leaders. The program supported leaders through facilitation, connection, and capability development and created platforms for their work to gain visibility, particularly through the Social Impact in the Regions conference.

We also developed the Readiness Index to provide a deeper understanding of readiness evaluated against 50 indicators from the perspectives of individual leaders in the community.

This evolution from Kempsey to Grafton shifted from broad engagement to leader-focused engagement, from initiative identification to capability investment, and from program-managed outcomes to community-owned structures. The shift reflects an understanding of how readiness is developed and the conditions by which interventions emerged. Our key lessons included:

- **Initiatives.** In Kempsey, Ready Communities identified over 70 potential initiatives and tried to support many of them toward completion. The energy this required was not sustainable and the outcomes were uneven. The lesson was that initiatives need to be owned and driven locally from the start, with Ready Communities providing the enabling conditions rather than the management capacity.
- **Leadership.** Across both communities, the most durable outcomes were produced not by programs or plans but by individual leaders who had developed the clarity, confidence, and connections to act. The model has increasingly oriented itself toward identifying, developing, and staying connected with these leaders, rather than toward producing outputs that exist independent of them.

- **Investment readiness and timing.** A consistent pattern across both communities was that the right investment arriving at the right moment produced outcomes that neither the investment nor the readiness building would have produced alone. Twelve months earlier and the community might not be 'ready', lacking the clarity, connections, capability, capacity, collaborative structures, and sufficient advocacy for the investment to produce the desired impact. The model is increasingly designed around creating moments of readiness into which investment can flow, rather than waiting for investment to drive momentum.
- **Co-developed community goals.** The development of desired community outcomes in the form of goals and aspirations is a combination of locally community-led design and external support raising awareness of new ideas and ways of thinking. The five enabling conditions provide a shared language and framework we find reflected back to us as the communities frame up their goals. Different communities experience similar systemic drivers of change but differences in the background and lived experience of those pressures define different end-points suitable for that community. The role of the external facilitator is to provide scaffolding around the change described and defined by what the community determines is in its best interest at that time. The introduction of Challenges in Stanthorpe is an extension of this principle.

2.0.3 Program evolution for 2026

As our work in building readiness expands, we have learned through delivery of the following programmatic areas:

Region selection and early engagement

Region selection for Kempsey and Grafton were based on proximity, opportunity, and impact. An additional consideration is the characteristics that highlight a community as a 'gap in the map', towns that miss support due to size, geographic location or political misalignment.

In each region we were invited in through local council, and in each region engaging more broadly into the community. The engagement in each region began in January leading into the SIITR conference in September of the same year. While this can appear like a significant period, developing trust in a community and identifying key leaders takes time.

There is a natural approach to relationship building that is part of the change process. In Stanthorpe, the engagement began in August 2025 the month before the Social Impact in the Regions conference in Grafton, and continued through the end of 2025 before confirmation in December.

Focus areas and Challenges

Focus areas focus attention and resources on what matters to communities. These were developed differently between Ready Macleay and Ready Grafton, but worked in a similar way to mobilise resources, attract partners, and develop initiatives. For Ready Stanthorpe, we are now integrating challenges into each focus area to build the enabling conditions through greater clarity of the opportunities, connections of those who want to engage, capability and capacity to make an impact, collaboration of like-minded individuals and institutions, and advocacy for and promotion of specific outcomes.

Expanded program framework

Ready Communities operates across multiple modes of engagement in addition to the annual two-year flagship program. While the most visible and the primary engagement, the two-year flagship is a conduit to engage other regions as part of the Ready Communities vision that "*all regions are ready*". Ready Communities also delivers workshops and shorter-term engagements with communities that are at different stages of readiness. Ready Communities also contributes to advocacy and policy through publications and partnerships, maintains an alumni network of over 600 practitioners and leaders, provides dedicated mapping support, and continues to support activity and map impact in previous host communities.



Leadership engagement and initiatives

In the Macleay Valley, we ran broad community workshops across five focus areas, engaged 279 individuals, and identified over 70 potential initiatives. The breadth was valuable for mapping connections and creating visible momentum, but it also created expectations around managing initiatives to completion that was neither scalable nor consistent with building local readiness. This informed a shift in Year Two in Grafton to more direct one-on-one engagements with local leaders allowing focus areas to emerge from relationships rather than from workshops. This produced deeper engagement with fewer people and stronger alignment between focus area leads and the readiness conditions we were trying to build. We also refined the approach to initiatives that are scalable such as the Why Leave Town main street activation and developing replicable approaches such as the Grafton Chamber of Purpose.

Readiness Index

In Ready Macleay, the five enabling conditions of readiness were observed in the community and measured through participation in the 2024 SIITR conference. In 2025, the five enabling conditions were further defined through 50 indicators and assessed using the Readiness Index survey. The results both informed the approach as well as reflected reasons behind the experience. The Readiness Index will continue to be applied in Ready Stanthorpe as well as delivered against in Ready Grafton to assess the change.

2.1 Origins and overview



2.1.1 Ready Communities overview

The Ready Communities vision is that **every community is ready**.

This is described as having enabling conditions (clarity, connection, capability and capacity, collaboration, and advocacy and promotion) to respond to challenges or opportunities that impact prosperity.

Central to our work is the two-year Flagship program that includes the annual Social Impact in the Regions conference in September, a ten-month in-community lead-in to the conference, and a 12-month follow-up.

Around this program are delivered national workshops, the annual Readiness Index, and bespoke community mapping and engagement research and engagements including through alumni networks.

In 2026, the approach is being expanded through National Regional Challenges.

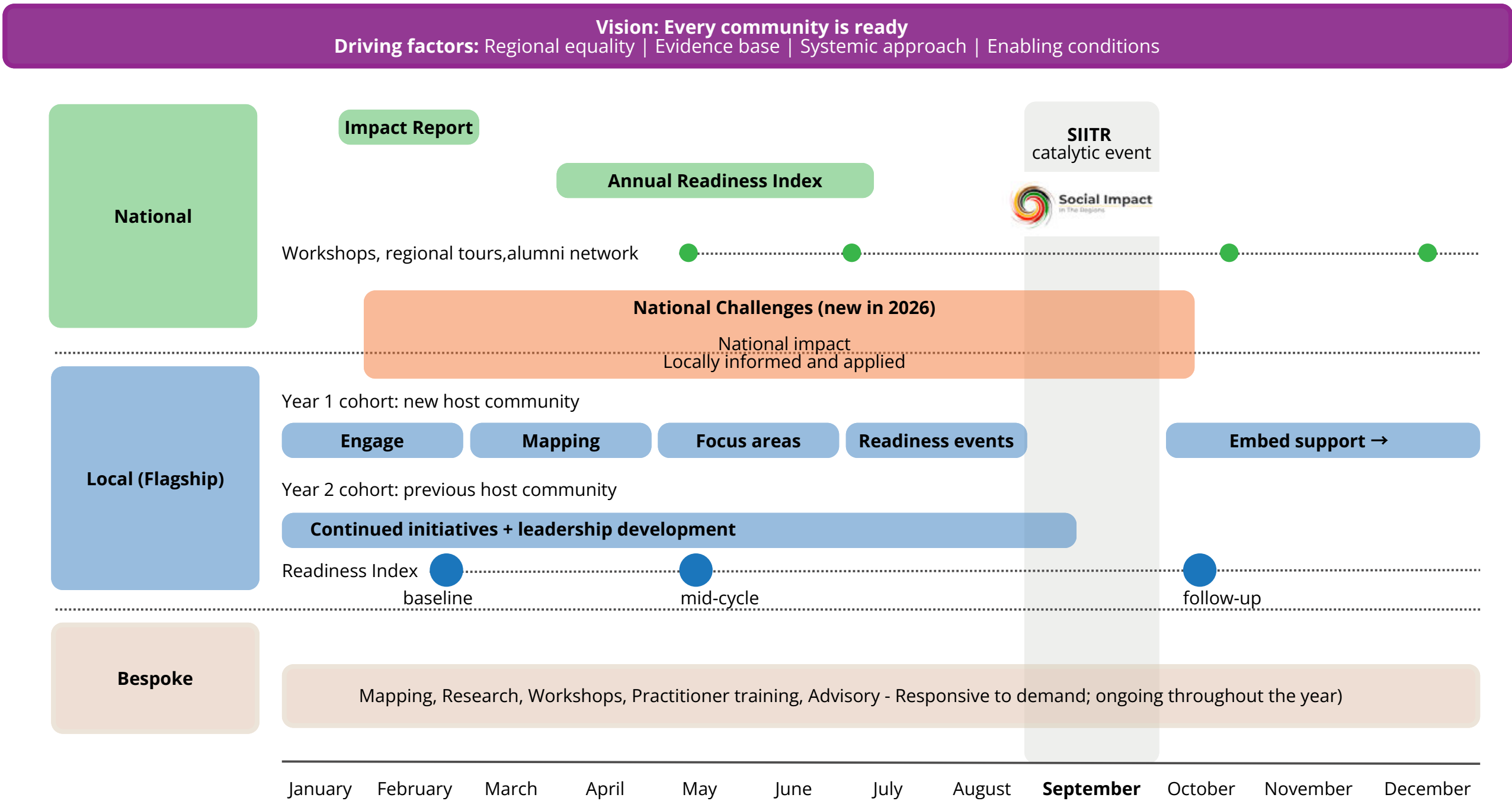


Figure 5 Ready Communities program overview

2.1.2 Evaluation

Demonstrating impact in place-based work is difficult. Changes in trust, shared understanding, leadership depth, and collaborative capacity are slow to form, hard to measure, and easy to overlook in favour of more visible outputs. Programs are not delivered in isolation, and community impacts can often be attributed to the most recent program without regard for earlier or parallel contributing work. At the same time, funders and policymakers need credible evidence that investment is producing results, and communities deserve to see their own progress reflected to them.

Our evaluation and reporting framework follows the program logic through four levels:

- **Activities** are what we do, including one-on-one engagements, mapping, readiness events, leader support, conference design and delivery.
- **Outputs** are the direct products of those activities, including number of leaders engaged, connections facilitated, focus areas identified, events held, conference sessions delivered.
- **Outcomes** are the changes in enabling conditions, aligned to the five conditions of readiness. At a community-level, these are assessed through the **Readiness Index** supplemented by qualitative evidence from engagement, observation, and community feedback. The Readiness Index provides a consistent measurement spine that is comparable across communities and over time, while the qualitative evidence captures shifts that surveys alone cannot.

The Social Impact in the Regions is evaluated through the event level considering local spend and community activation, and individual delegate experiences through an event pre- and post-survey that includes a modified evaluation of readiness condition expectations and realised outcomes.

- **Impacts** are the longer-term, sustained changes in community resilience that readiness is designed to produce. We assess these against six dimensions of resilience: economic, social, individual, institutional, infrastructure, and environmental. These dimensions provide a framework for understanding the breadth and depth of what strengthened readiness produces over time, without claiming direct attribution for changes that are shaped by many factors beyond any single program.

Ready Communities Program Logic

Theory of change - the four characteristics that drive our purpose

Evidence base Truth before a good story	Regional equality Acknowledge structural differences	Systems focus Address underlying challenges	Enabling conditions The conditions that enable impact
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Activities - What we do to bring about change

Annual impact report	Social Impact in the Regions	Two-year flagship program	Research and advocacy
Mapping	National and local challenges	Workshops and engagement	Readiness Index

Outputs - What is immediately visible

Connections	Maps	Research papers and reports	Events and programs
Participation	Case studies	Alumni	Media and policy reference

Outcomes - What we expect to see from outputs to result in long-term impact

Readiness: *Investment-ready and risk mitigation*



Impact - Long-term results for community-defined resilience

Economic Employment Income Skills Financial capital Stability Entrepreneurship Business cooperation Investment Business ownership Labour structure	Social & Individual Population composition Diversity & inclusion Trust and reciprocity Conflict resolution Place attachment & pride Volunteering Connectedness Psychological health Preventive and responsive health Gender and ethnic equality Minority representation Culture representation Disaster recovery Safety & security	Institutional Individual leadership Institutional leadership Shared vision Collective planning and responsibilities Resource management Services backups / redundancy Risk reduction planning and policies Collective leadership infrastructure Education capability & capacity Inter-generational knowledge transfer Integrated cross-sector collaboration	Infrastructure & Environment Infrastructure management & availability Shared space availability & suitability Sufficient transport options ICT access Land use availability Housing availability Environmental resource management Use of local knowledge
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Figure 6 Ready communities program logic

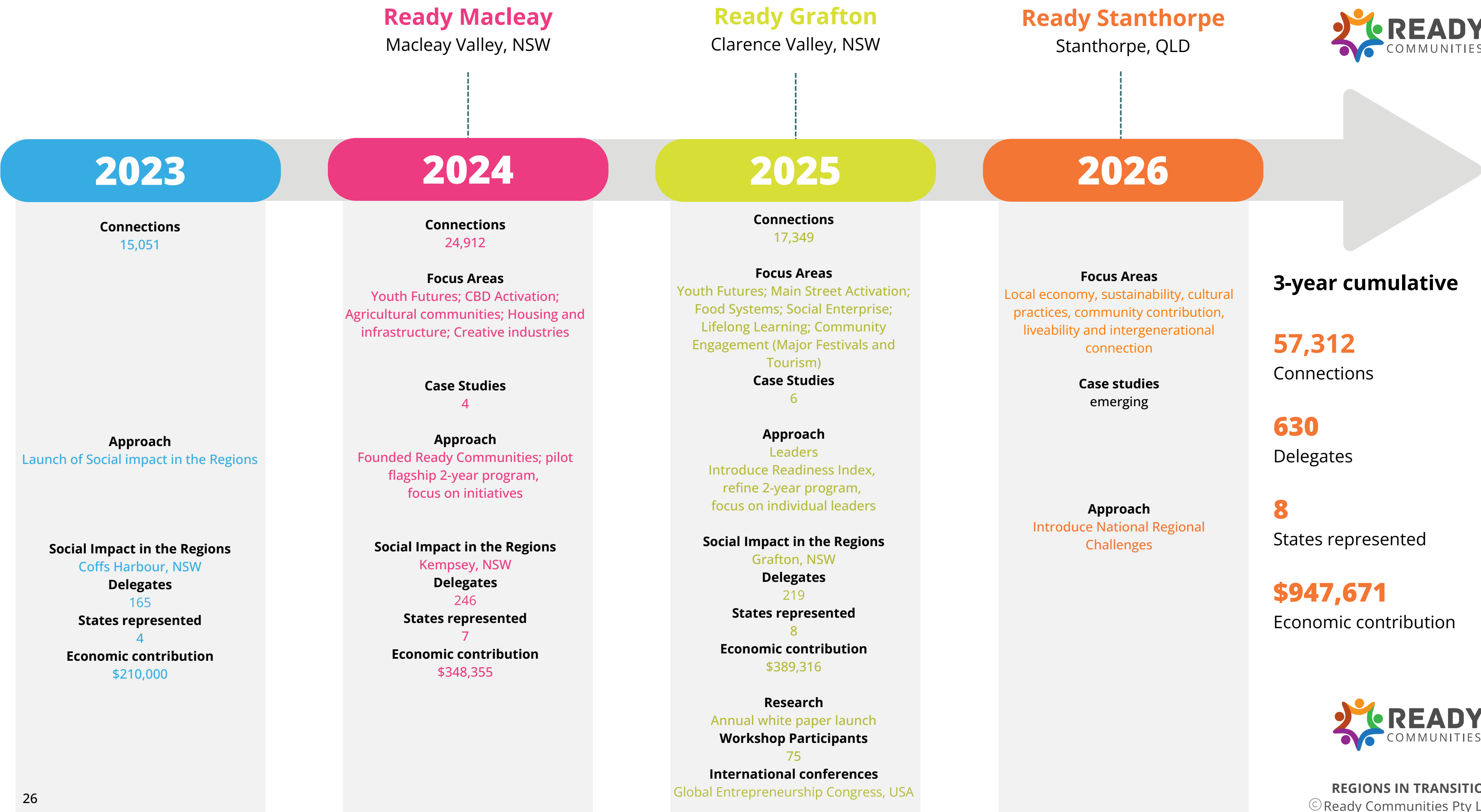


Figure 7 Ready communities annual outputs

2.2 Ready Macleay year two update

Ready Macleay Year Two included initiatives expanded upon from Year One as well as formal engagements that emerged out of the Youth streams.

Country Universities Centre (CUC) retail space

In 2024, the 250+ capacity Social Impact in the Regions conference was held in a vacant retail space next to the local Country Universities Centre (CUC), retrofitted through the Ready Communities program. The space was made available by retail property management Gowings and supported the development of a prospectus with the CUC who was an adjacent tenant and who presented their plan at the SIITR investor tour. The space continued to be utilised as event space in Year Two, including a rolling art exhibition by Arts Mid North Coast and which inspired a similar exhibition in Coffs Harbour.

Kempsey Cash Shop Local Program

In the Year One Ready Communities program, the shop local program (Kempsey Cash) was introduced through Ready Macleay and the Why Leave Town platform building on work with leaders in the CBD Activation focus area. The program expanded in Year Two, gaining sponsorship support from local backbone Learning the Macleay, the Macleay Valley Business Chamber, and Kempsey Shire Council including a dedicated website at <https://kempseycash.com/>.

StartSomeGood Social Enterprise Accelerator supported by FRRR

The 2024 Social Impact in the Regions Conference National Pitchfest was facilitated by social enterprise accelerator program StartSomeGood. In 2025, StartSomeGood returned to Kempsey with support from the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR). The program included mentors engaged as part of Ready Communities and graduated eight participants.

Early Childhood development and youth mapping

Youth Futures was a theme in the 2024 Ready Macleay program and the Social Impact in the Regions conference included a dedicated youth stream facilitated by youth entrepreneur program Futures Isle. In Year Two, Ready Communities supported two projects focused on young people in Kempsey - a mapping exercise to understand the journey of young people through the education, justice, housing, health, recreation, culture, and faith systems in Kempsey, and a business planning and mapping for Dalaigur Preschool to support advocacy and funding.

Ready Grafton connection and international representation

A strong Kempsey cohort attended the SIITR25 conference in Grafton, maintaining the cross-community connection and providing the Macleay community with continued access to the national network. A Kempsey contingent also attended the Global Entrepreneurship Congress in the USA to present on a panel about the alignment of entrepreneur ecosystems and place-based development.



Ready Communities partnered with Piers Groves, Start Some Good (second from Left) to deliver a social enterprise program co-delivered by Courtney Tune (L), Julie Humphris (Front) and Father Jesse Poole (R). Featured participant Tania Kaneer (second from Right).

2.3 Ready Grafton Flagship 2025

2.3.1 Region selection

Grafton was selected based on proximity in Northern NSW, the potential for impact, and being invited in through existing relationships. While there was an initial engagement through Clarence Valley Council, the engagement shifted to direct relationships with community leaders. This experience, combined with learnings from Macleay, reinforced the shift toward leader-focused engagement that defined the Grafton approach.

Grafton is a regional centre of approximately 17,155 people in the Clarence Valley on the mid-north coast of New South Wales, situated on Bundjalung, Gumbaynggirr, and Yaegl Country. The Clarence River is the largest river system on the NSW coast and runs through the centre of the community, shaping both the geography and the identity of the place. Grafton and South Grafton sit on opposite banks, connected by bridge but distinct in character, economy, and perception.

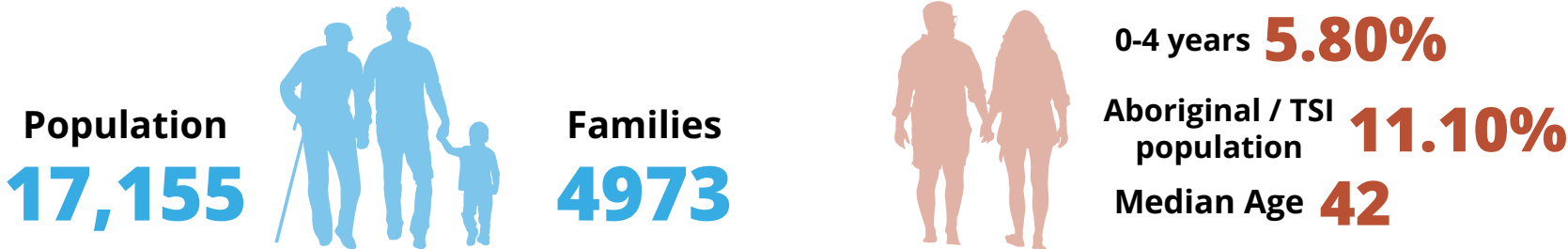
Grafton holds more than half the jobs in the Clarence Valley, with health care and social assistance the largest employing sector at over 17 per cent of local employment, followed by retail, public administration, and education. Housing impacts are reflected in rental stress affecting over 44 per cent of renters and median house prices sitting around \$480,000, creating downstream pressures on workforce attraction, population retention, and community composition.

The community has a strong civic identity, anchored by the 90-year-old Jacaranda Festival, a regional gallery, and a cultural calendar that draws on both the natural environment and a deep attachment to place. Grafton has a vibrant retail main street and a visible creative energy, particularly in South Grafton where a cluster of independent cafes, makers, and creative enterprises has emerged in recent years. Three First Nations language groups are associated with the area.

Industry - Clarence Valley

Top Industry GRP* 1	Construction \$1.057B (14.3%)
Top Industry GRP 2	Manufacturing \$0.941B (12.7%)
Top Industry GRP 3	Rental, Hire and Real Estate \$0.827B (11.2%)
Top employing industry 1	Health Care & Social Assistance 3431 jobs (17.8%)
Top employing industry 2	Retail Trade 2,171 jobs (11.3%)
Top employing industry 3	Public administration & Safety, 2027 jobs (10.5%)

• GRP: Gross Regional Product



Grafton also carries the characteristics of a flood town. The river that defines its identity imposes periodic risk, with the community demonstrating a resilience and pragmatism about recovery. Like many regional centres, it experiences a combination of opportunity and pressure that is not captured by any single indicator.



2.3.2 Engagement approach

In Grafton, Ready Communities co-founder Kerry Grace relocated to the community. There is a level of engagement only available from being in community, bumping into people at the morning café or in the afternoon shopping aisle, attending a local community event, or accepting or offering an invitation to an afternoon catch up. The engagement approach balances the value of being in the community with the benefit of having an external perspective.

The formal engagement began with one-on-one conversations with leaders across sectors, engaging with the Clarence Valley Country Universities Centre, the Anglican Cathedral, and the Jacaranda Festival, the New School of Arts Neighbourhood Centre, Caringa disability services, Anglicare, headspace Grafton, the community bank, Clarence Valley Council, the Yamba Food Markets, the Grafton Brewhouse, and a local accountant who provided the Ready Communities workspace.

The engagement was both deliberate and organic. We engaged with key institutions such as council, chamber of commerce, the neighbourhood centre, major service providers, and rotary. We also followed referrals as the same names came up across multiple conversations.

There was not a specific organisation or network that considered itself as a community 'backbone' organisation for organised collective impact. We tested this directly with the organisations with which we engaged to ask if they considered themselves as a backbone. We also asked where they might go for support to make an impact in the community. Responses included individual topic-specific networks or institutional roles such as Council in the absence of any other entity. The New School of the Arts was involved in broad engagement but as a delivery of programs and services and did not see itself as a backbone, while the Jacaranda Festival was referred by most people we spoke to based on its pervasive engagement across most aspects of the community.



2.3.3 Focus areas

Six focus areas emerged iteratively from the one-on-one conversations: Youth Futures, Main Street Activation, Food Systems, Social Enterprise, Lifelong Learning, and Community Engagement through major festivals and tourism. The themes were developed in conversations with the leaders and tested as initiatives were identified and refined.



Some focus areas initially identified did not proceed. Housing was identified early and a number of workshops were held. The sessions did not generate sustained engagement but did produce an indirect outcome of the resurgence of a cross-sector interagency meeting that had not been held since COVID.

In Grafton, the one-on-one model produced fewer but deeper and more sustained connections than the wider community engagement in Kempsey. The trade-off between breadth and depth is one we continue to examine across communities.

2.3.4 Readiness Index

In the first year of the Ready Communities program, readiness was evaluated through observation. In 2025, the Readiness Index was introduced in Ready Grafton program to assess readiness through perceptions of the leaders in the community.

The Readiness Index has three main sections. The **first section** seeks to understand the nature of the respondents, the roles in which they are involved, and their views on investment priorities for the region. The **second section** provides insights into the five enabling conditions and future-focused actions to consider based on their responses. The **third section** provides an understanding of the network strength in a region through perceptions of institutional impact as a form of a 360-degree feedback tool.

Respondents

The Grafton baseline Readiness Index was completed between May and August 2025 by twelve community leaders across eight focus areas, including education, health, housing, disability, arts and culture, disaster preparedness, retail, philanthropy and social enterprise, and tourism. Each respondent assessed readiness conditions from the perspective of their chosen focus area.

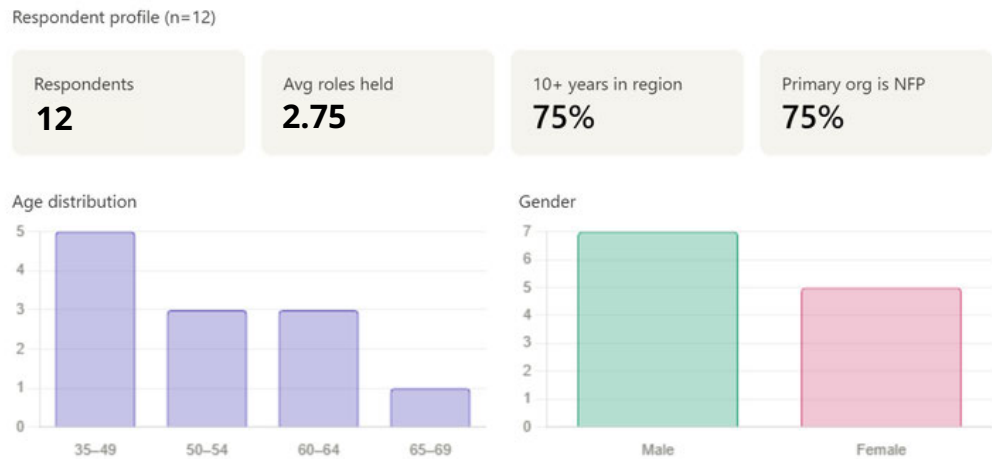


Figure 8 Readiness Index respondent profile

The respondent group spans three age bands: five respondents are aged 35–49, three are 50–54, and four are 60 and above. The gender split is seven male and five female. Three-quarters (9 of 12) have lived in the Clarence Valley for more than ten years; the remaining three have lived in the region between one and four years. Seven have worked in the region for more than ten years. Respondents live across the LGA, including Grafton, South Grafton, Maclean, Yamba, and nearby localities. Almost all work in or around Grafton. Two-thirds framed their responses at the LGA level; the remainder used a town or suburb as their reference point.

The survey sample does not claim to be statistically representative of the community. It is a purposive sample of leaders across sectors whose perspectives collectively span the focus areas of the engagement. Several groups are not represented, including younger residents (under 35), recent migrants, and First Nations community members. The Index is designed to surface the views of those in positions to observe readiness conditions, not to capture every community voice.

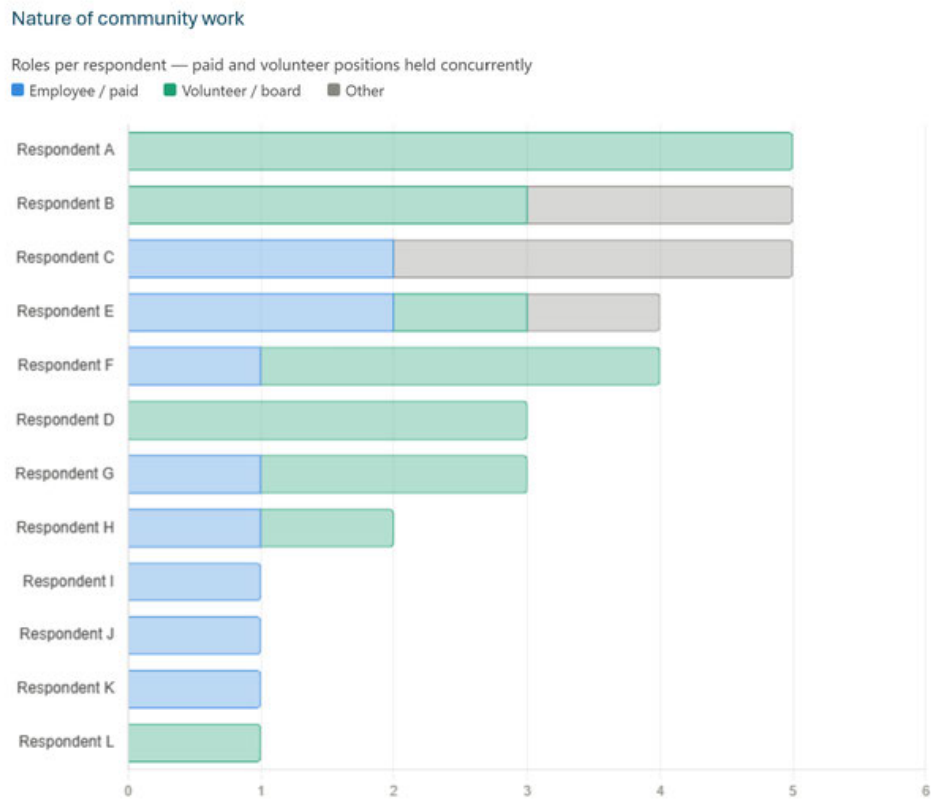


Figure 9 Readiness Index respondent work status profiles

Respondents hold an average of 2.75 formal roles each. Half the group holds four or five concurrent positions. These positions span paid employment, board directorships, committee roles, and grassroots volunteering.

Of the 33 positions listed, roughly half are volunteer. Several respondents hold a single paid role alongside multiple volunteer commitments. This profile is consistent with a recurring theme in the qualitative responses: individual leaders carry disproportionate load across community structures.

Readiness Results - Overview

What follows draws on the quantitative scores, the qualitative responses within the Readiness Index, and the evidence from the case studies and conference. The Readiness Index uses a five-point scale - None, Minimal, Moderate, Partial, Full - scored 0 to 4. The Grafton baseline sits in the Minimal to Moderate range across all five conditions. This represents a starting position for a structured self-assessment of readiness. The scores are useful not as judgements but as a map of where investment in readiness might produce returns.

An interesting feature of the data is the variance between respondents. The same community, assessed by leaders working in different focus areas, produced different readiness profiles. This is expected as respondents are asked to complete the survey from the perspective of their focus area where they have expertise and where readiness is experienced differently depending on their role. A leader working in an area with established institutional structures may experience connection and collaboration differently from one working in an area with limited coordination.

Twelve leaders participated; eleven completed the readiness scoring and nine completed the contribution assessment.



Readiness Index 2025 — dimension averages

n=11, Grafton / Clarence Valley

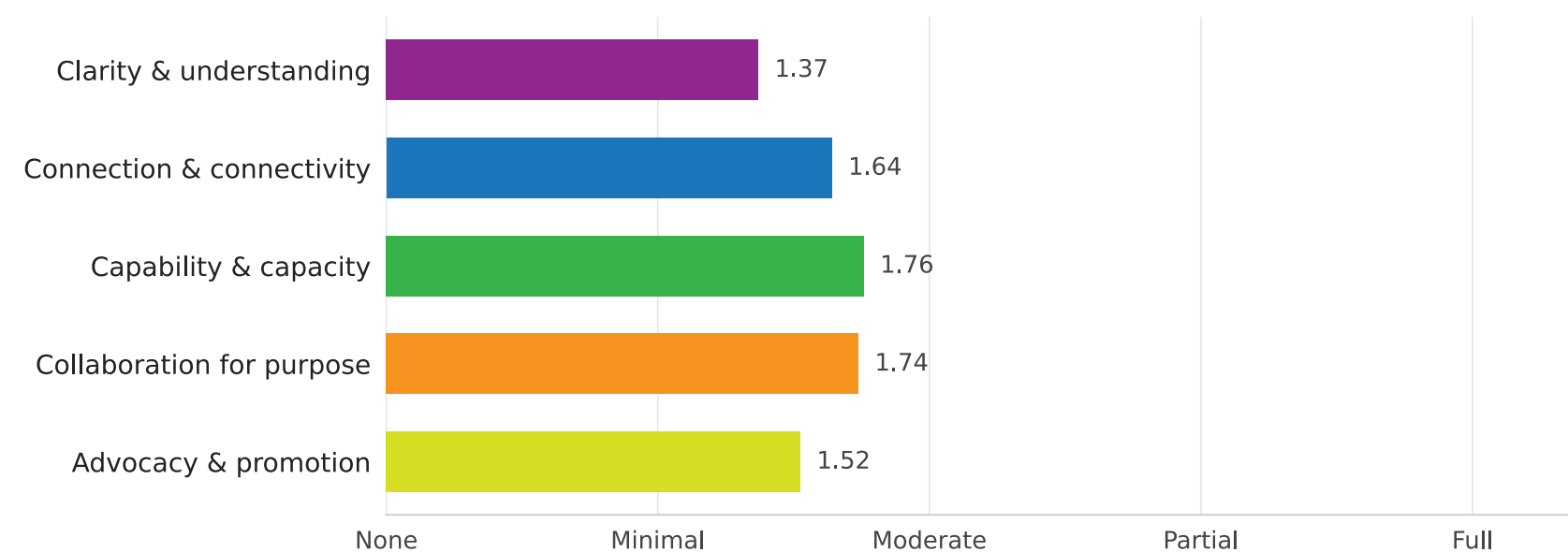


Figure 10 Readiness Index results: Summary



Clarity & understanding

There was a general relative shared understanding of the roles and organisations in the community, and that different perspectives were represented. There were differing yet minimal to moderate views on how information was managed in the community. There were lower rated and aligned views on the degree of clarity of culture and history of the region and the presence, understanding, and access of influencing policies. The availability of feedback to inform decision-making was the lowest rated aspect, followed by a shared vision, both having medium variance reflecting different experiences depending on the perspective.

Respondents described silos that prevented information flowing between groups, an absence of shared strategic priorities, and fatigue from uncoordinated external engagement. Groups were described as achieving great outcomes but that those outside silos may not be informed. Work involved in mapping resources, collecting data, and maintaining information systems was described as being rarely funded, leaving organisations without the capacity for strategic information work though the importance of the work is recognised.

Clarity & understanding

avg 1.37 / 4
Variance: ● low ●● medium ●●● high

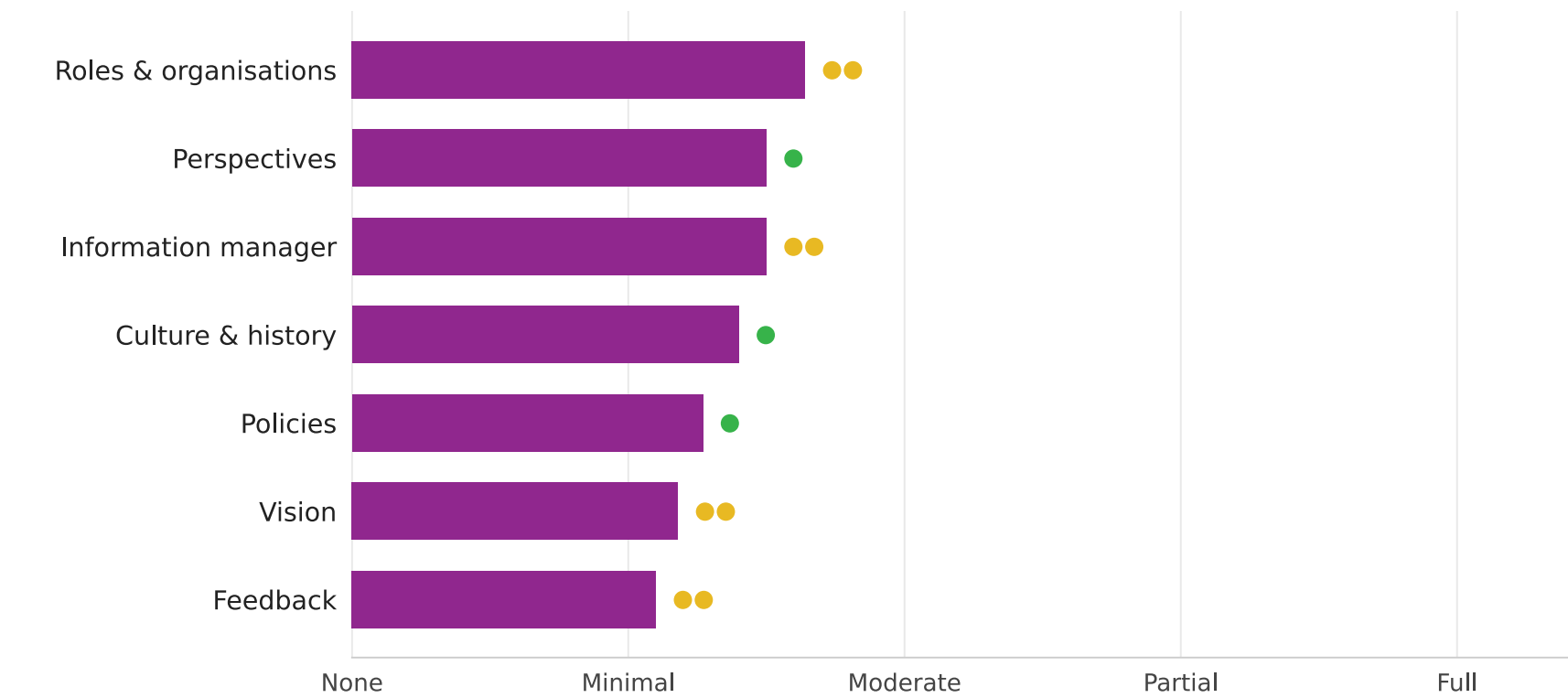


Figure 11 Readiness Index results: Clarity & understanding

Connection & connectivity



There was strong agreement and high ratings for the ICT infrastructure. Other strong aligned indicators included awareness of possible connections and connections internal to the community. Ratings for structures such as formal or regularly scheduled events were relatively high but inconsistent between focus areas. Representation of different groups in connections was lower and also with different experiences. There was alignment in lower ratings for speed of connections, external connections, and innovation capacity, relating to the lowest connection rating of idea development. The indicator with the greatest diversity in responses was inclusion of different groups in existing event structures.

Several respondents described connection as limited "not by goodwill, but by capacity." Structures to support collaboration are "uneven, informal, or reliant on individual champions," and engagement could be inconsistent when people are juggling multiple responsibilities.

One survey respondent noted that in sectors where government funding models are designed to be competitive, collaboration requires a deliberate reframing. Another observed a lack of groups to support social enterprise, and that even local business networks do not recognise it as a category.

Connection & connectivity

avg 1.64 / 4
Variance: ● low ●● medium ●●● high

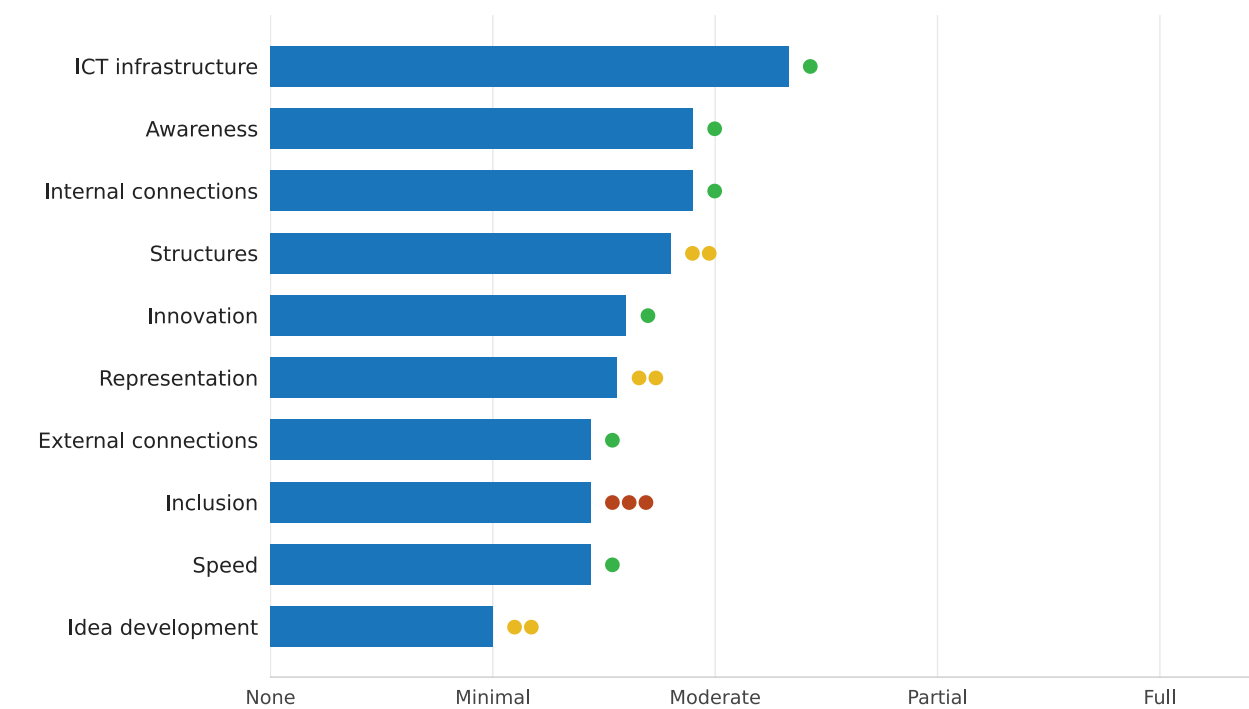


Figure 12 Readiness Index results: Connection & connectivity

Capability & Capacity

The strongest and mostly aligned indicators related to the presence of physical infrastructure, space infrastructure, and emergency response. There were moderate ratings but with different experiences for indicators of workforce and debt capital, and more alignment in slightly lower ratings for individual sustainability, institutional leadership, organisational sustainability, and redundancy or backup of people and services. The lowest ratings were also experienced differently for the generational workforce pipeline, philanthropic capital, individual leadership, and risk capital.

In a reflection characteristic of the ‘gap in the map’, one respondent observed that Grafton is a regional town positioned between larger administrative

centres, and as a result "leadership tends to be dispersed and located elsewhere, especially institutional leadership."

Individual sustainability was an issue where smaller regional organisations "cannot scale up due to market constraints," making it difficult to resource contingencies for key personnel. One described the challenge with capability development as "either free one-off workshops delivered online or expensive courses requiring more time." What is needed is "a community of practice or a mentor for real-time feedback and growth at crunch points." Funding opportunities were described as unevenly accessed on a "if you know, you know" basis.

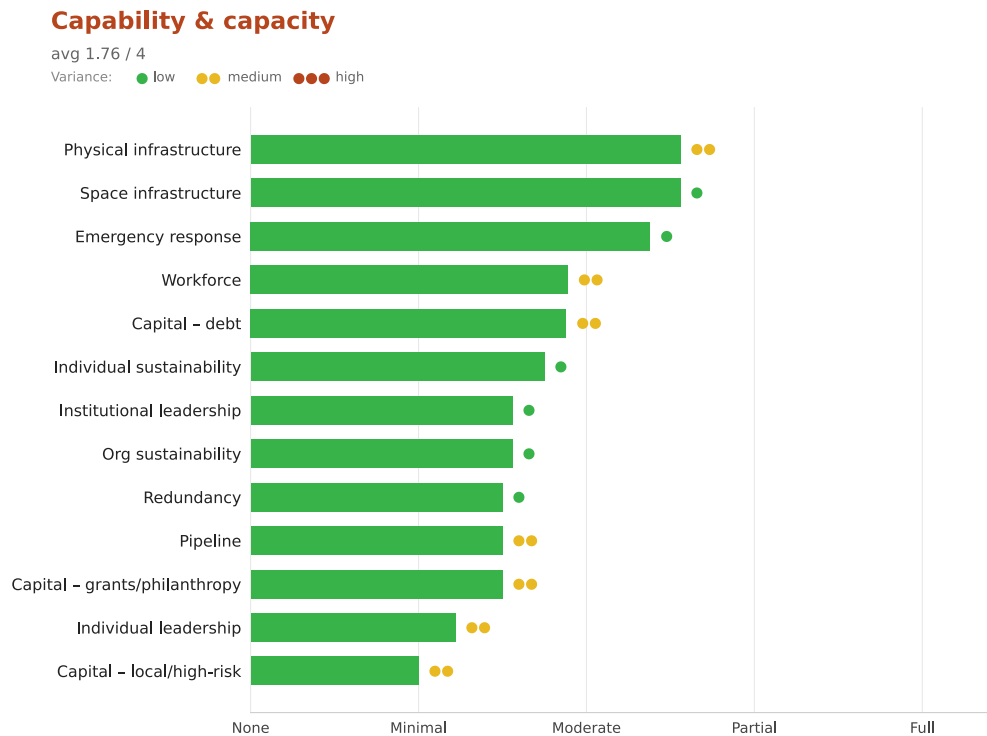


Figure 13 Readiness Index results: Capability & capacity

Collaboration for purpose

While collaboration was largely experienced differently depending on the focus area, there was agreement on the top rated indicator of trust and the lowest rated indicator of measuring progress. The next top three indicators were Connection, self-forming groups, and reciprocity in collaborative relationships, and the bottom three above measured progress were collaborative equality, the presence of structure and leadership, and representation in collaborative groups. With a result reflective of the indicator, the middle rating of shared understanding among collaborative partners also had the largest variance in responses.

Respondents described a lack of backbone support for collaboration, lacking funding for leadership, coordination, and administration. There was an acknowledged shared understanding of issues and trust to enable collaboration, but a needed level of structure and leadership allocated to collaborations to fully realise their potential. Another respondent reflected on a clear understanding of the value of certain collaborations but that evaluation was lacking. Committee burnout was acknowledged as a real and present risk, contributed by limited local and state support for the volunteer-led structures that held the community activity together.

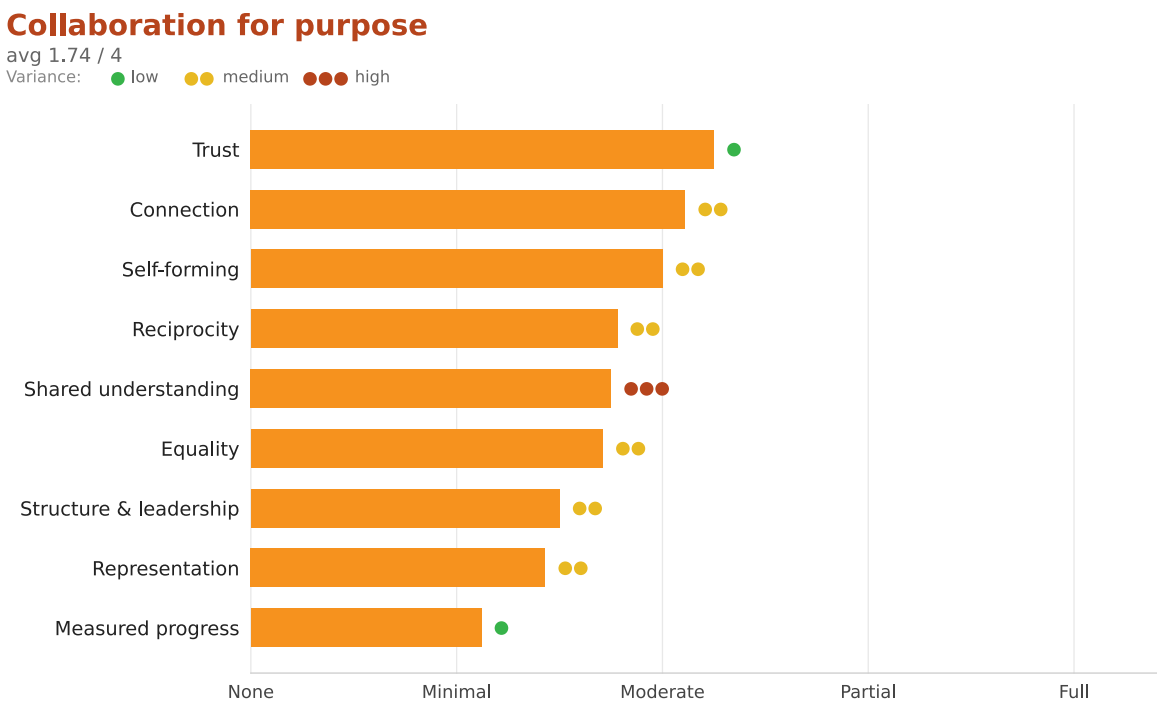


Figure 14 Readiness Index results: Collaboration for purpose

Advocacy & promotion

Readiness Index Results

There was agreement on the highest rated indicator of media availability and the lowest rated indicators of influencer access and a shared narrative. The remaining middle indicators were experienced differently, for media relationships, special interest advocacy, a shared regional voice, promotion, and the ability to influence policy.

Respondents described advocacy as active but fragmented. Advocacy was noted as being supported by personal relationships rather than structured advocacy channels that could contribute to inconsistency in community-wide representation.

Reflective of the large geographic area of the Clarence Valley, local media was seen as being

aggregated across a larger region which diminishes the opportunity for local representation. When coverage occurs, the breadth of the audience could dilute the message.

Media feedback also noted that misinformation traveled faster than good news and that media engagement tended to be reactive, driven by crisis rather than strategy. Without a coordinated structure, a condition was described where multiple groups might speak independently on similar issues, weakening rather than amplifying the regional voice. A joint advocacy agenda was proposed to unify local voices and give the community more weight at the policy table.

Advocacy & promotion

avg 1.52 / 4
Variance: ● low ● medium ● high

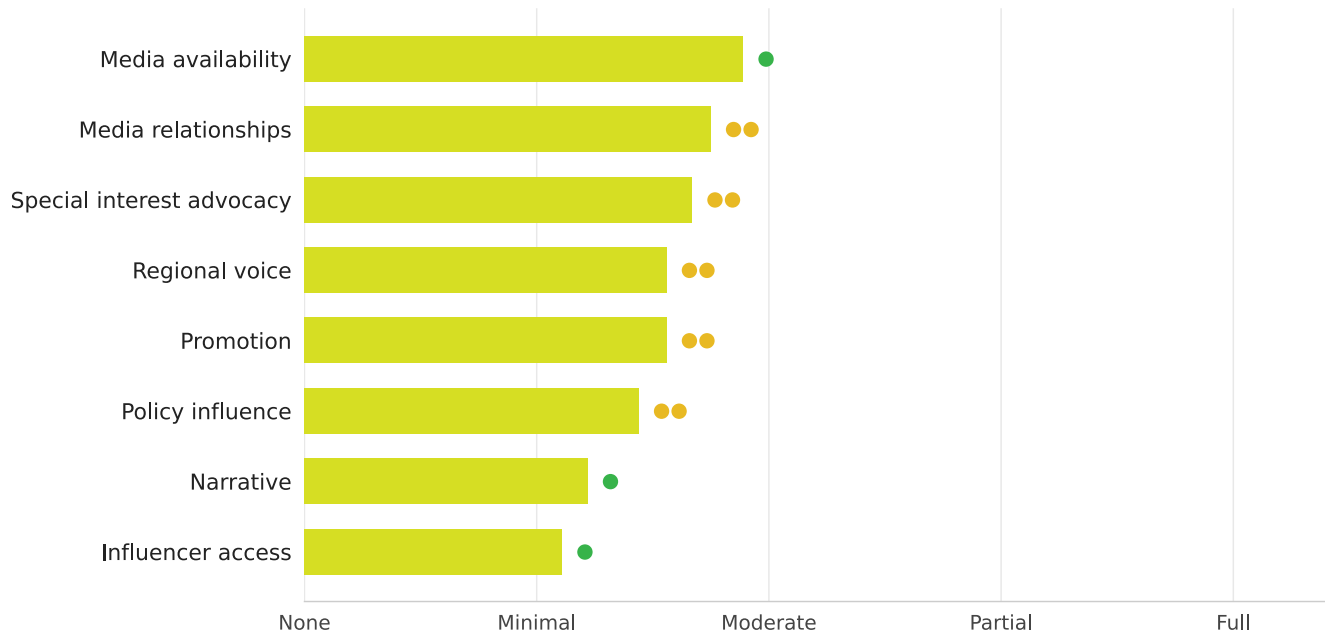


Figure 15 Readiness Index results: Advocacy & promotion



Readiness Index Results - Contributing roles (Community 360)

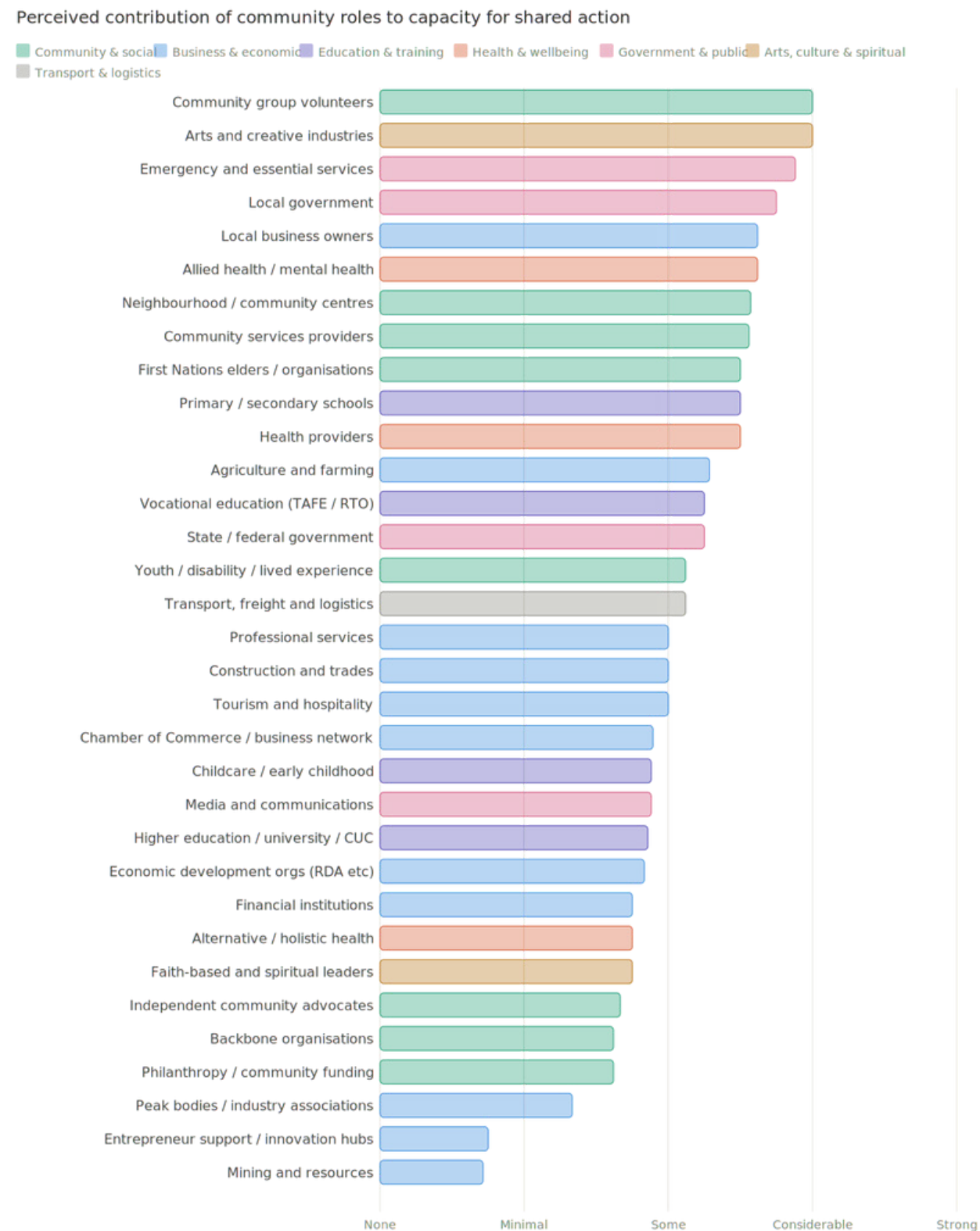


Figure 16 Readiness Index results: Perceived role contribution

The final section of the Readiness Index asked respondents to assess the extent to which different roles and sectors contribute to the community's capacity to act on shared challenges and opportunities. Nine respondents completed this section, rating 33 roles across seven categories on a five-point scale from No Contribution (0) to Strong Contribution (4). Respondents could also select "Unknown / unable to answer," which is itself informative.

Who is seen as contributing

The roles rated highest are community-facing and locally embedded. Community group volunteers and arts and creative industries both scored 3.0 (Considerable Contribution) and were the only roles to reach that level. Emergency and essential services (2.88), local government (2.75), local business owners (2.62), allied health and mental health professionals (2.62), neighbourhood and community centres (2.57), community services providers (2.56), First Nations elders and organisations (2.50), schools (2.50), and health providers (2.50) complete the top tier.

These are the roles that deliver services, convene people, and hold the social fabric together at a local level.

Less visible contribution

The lowest-rated roles are likely reflective of what is perceived as not present in the community rather than an assessment of their contribution. Entrepreneur support and innovation hubs (0.75) and mining and resources (0.71) are rated as contributing almost nothing, reflective of limited mining industry exposure and no formal innovation or entrepreneur hubs in the region. Peak bodies and industry associations (1.33), backbone organisations (1.62), and philanthropy and community funding organisations (1.62) are similarly under-represented and sit in the Minimal range.

The backbone finding warrants attention. Almost every respondent felt able to rate backbone organisations with only one selected "Unknown". The consensus was Minimal Contribution. This aligns with the qualitative finding in the collaboration dimension where respondents described a lack of backbone support for collaboration and with the structural indicator for collaboration leadership (1.50) in the readiness conditions. The community is not saying the backbone function is unfamiliar, but that it is not being performed.

Entrepreneur support at 0.75 is the lowest-rated role with a substantive response rate. This connects directly to the idea development indicator (1.00) in the connection dimension which was the weakest connection indicator. The community rates both the infrastructure for new ideas and the roles that would support them as effectively absent.

2.4 SIITR25



[View the SIITR25 Program](#)

2.4.1 Conference design

The SIITR conference is a central catalytic point of the Ready Communities flagship program, designed so that the ten months of community engagement lead into the conference and the conference generates outcomes that continue into the following twelve months. While SIITR is not all about the host community and focuses on social impact in regions across Australia, the event is deeply informed by and embedded in the host community through the preceding ten-month Ready Communities flagship program. The conference is held across multiple venues, intentionally moving delegates into different community spaces for meals, pitch events, and workshops. In Grafton, this included the South Grafton Ex-Services Club, Grafton Brewhouse, Grafton Cathedral, and the Showground.

The three-day conference structure followed a narrative arc. Day 1, themed "Come as you are," established the current context for regional social impact. Day 2, themed "As you were," explored what brought people into the room and how practitioners move from understanding to action. Day 3, themed "As you want to be," looked forward to practical application and change.

SIITR followed a suite of elements including:

- A Local Impact Showcase (day prior to the event)
- An introduction plenary session which is narrated by a key regional identity (in 2025 Natalie Egleton, CEO of FRRR) and commencing with a panel of philanthropic and government delegates followed by regionally based practitioners.
- Impact Labs that replicate the host community defined focus areas
- A pitchfest
- A welcome event (social event)
- A day two plenary session followed by workshops
- A themed conference dinner (In 2025 the theme defined by Auntie Vicky Taylor from Kempsey was 'Superheroes')
- A conclusion and closing ceremony

A full showcase of presenters, sponsors, pitchers, workshops and program can be found online

Harmonic Principles

SIITR's design is inspired by Harmonic Principles, a term coined by Interior Architects. It follows the nine design principles:

- **Salient features – design for satisfaction**

SIITR is an experience. We don't just stick speakers on a stage and rely on them to carry the whole experience. There are surprises to uncover, creative elements, opportunities to unpack ideas, movement, a range of ways to learn. We encourage curiosity and audience engagement.

- **Sensory richness – design for vibrancy**

When designing SIITR we consider all senses. In 2024 we partnered with the fabulous [Auntie Deb Munson](#) who ensured her healing aromatherapy products were wafting through the conference centre throughout the event. We source local people to create a range of props to support the theming of our event. We showcase all kinds of artists throughout the event. We don't aim for polished and perfect, we aim for creative and immersive.

- **Sustainable realisation – design for reflection**

At SIITR we encourage outdoor experiences, linking people with both the built and natural environment. While there is some sitting involved we mix it up with opportunities to move, to reflect, to get involved in creative experiences.

- **Collective growth – design for fulfilment**

Our speakers are carefully chosen for their ability to present relatable messages to the audience that can be directly applied in their regional communities. We want people to walk away knowing how they can adapt what they have learned to their own community. We mix up the learning modalities to appeal to different learning styles presenting plenary sessions, lots of networking opportunities, living books, workshops and impact labs.

- **Absolute inclusion – design for attachment**

Our program is designed to be inclusive. Over time we are creating a culture among our alumni that is collaborative, collective and nurturing. We provide space for debate and back this up with our annual Impact Report which sums up our year's work in the regions and provides an advocacy platform for regional changemakers.

- **Authentic purpose – design for meaning**

The SIITR audience genuinely wants to create and invest in sustainable change in regional communities. We keep the audience small on purpose so that those incidental opportunities to connect happen. Where else can a practitioner sit shoulder to shoulder with an investor or policy maker? Where else is the potential power imbalance of such connection ironed out by one clear goal – to create sustainable change in the regions.

- **Positive affordances – design for encouragement**

Our event (particularly the conference dinner) incorporates many creative elements which are designed to provide talking points, ways for more introverted audience members to connect and curiosities' to stimulate new trains of thought

- **Bespoke flexibility – design for competence**

In 2025 we are experimenting with a new conceptual framework for SIITR. Our conference program has been designed as a 'choose your own adventure' book inviting the delegates to indulge in a learning framework that suits their learning goals (or mood) each conference day. The guide gently guides delegates through a curated experience which will influence what they see and learn as well as what they attend on a given day.

- **Equitable beauty – design for wellbeing**

SIITR isn't held in traditional conferencing venues. We see a great deal of beauty in small regional communities and host our activities in the most unusual venues. Little details matter and we always work with a range of local creative industries practitioners to present professional and beautiful backdrops to the rich learning experiences presented by the event. We incorporate a range of locally influenced wellness experiences from incorporating local practitioners to sourcing locally produced food.

2.4.2 SIITR experience

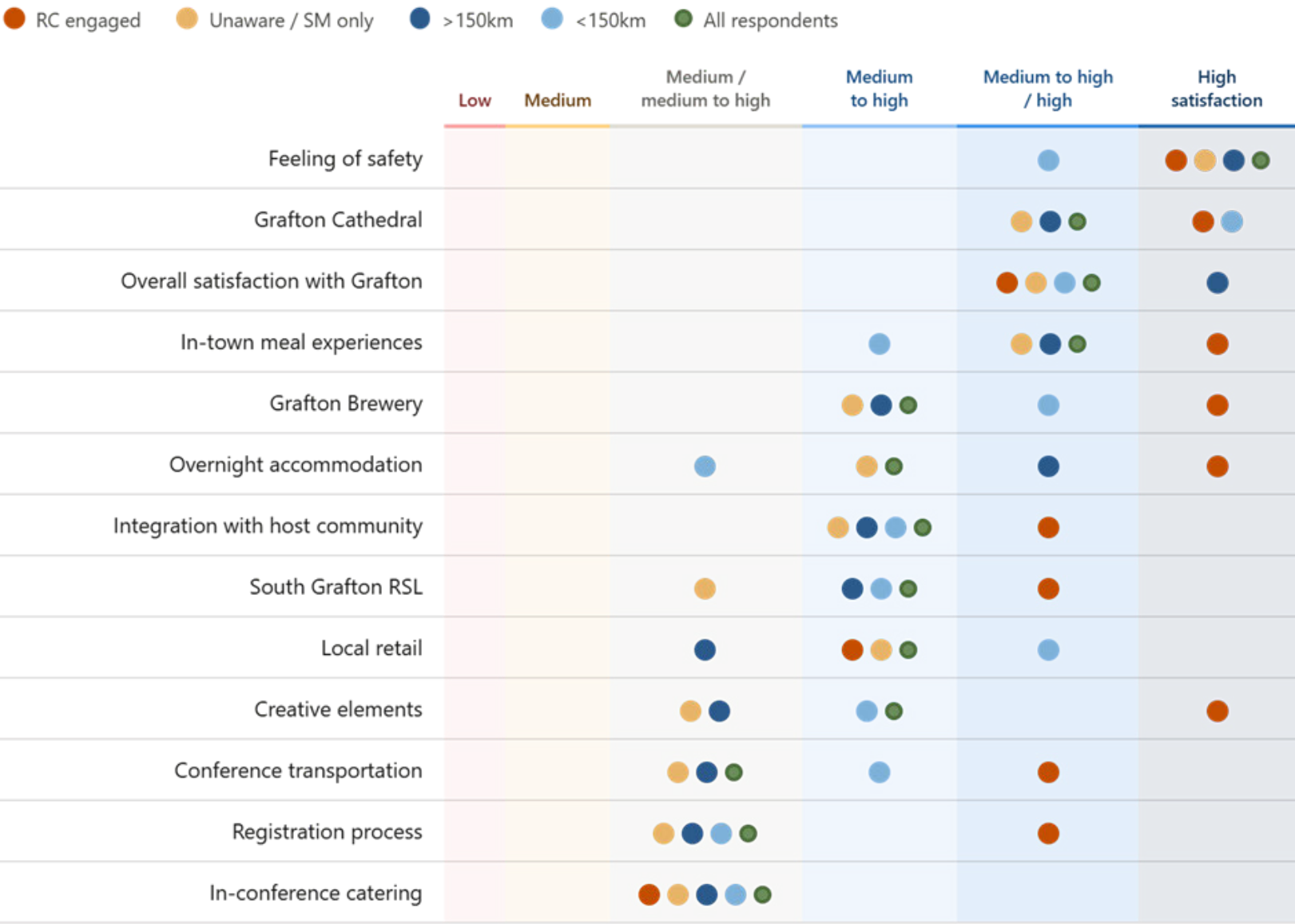
Delegates rated 13 conference elements on a five-point satisfaction scale from low to high. Overall satisfaction was strong, with all elements rated greater than medium/medium-to-high satisfaction. Feeling of safety, the Grafton Cathedral venue, and overall satisfaction with the town of Grafton all approached high satisfaction. In-town meal experiences, the Grafton Brewery venue, overnight accommodation, and integration with the host community all sat solidly at medium to high.

Delegates with prior engagement with Ready Communities rated every conference element higher than those whose only exposure was through social media or who were unaware of the program. A contributing factor may be delegate’s direct experience with the co-design of the program elements and local community pride in heritage assets. The average gap in ratings between those who had engaged with Ready Communities and those who did not was 0.46 points.

The distance comparison between travellers and locals (within 150km) also provided interesting insights. Travellers had a higher relative overall satisfaction with Grafton, expected for outside delegates having a novel experience in a region putting its best foot forward while locals would have familiarity. A notable distinction was the experience with the Grafton Brewery which launched at the event, impressing locals who saw the new venue for the first time. While still at Medium/Medium-to-high, the reflections of the venue elements of registration and in-conference catering were understandable as SIITR resulted in new ways of doing things in the venue logistics with understandable bumps in a few instances.

2.4.3 SIITR delegate outcomes

Conference outcomes are assessed through a pre-event and post-event survey to understand expectations, actual experience, and the difference between. The pre-conference survey was completed by 114 delegates and the post-conference survey was completed by 53 delegates, of which 49 were valid for analysis. Both surveys asked delegates to rate the same eleven outcomes on a five-point scale from "not at all" to "significant." This allows us to better understand the meaning behind a low or high rating based on what was expected and to consider how those expectations differ based on the delegate.



Source: SIITR25 post-conference survey. RC engaged n=15, unaware/SM only n=34, >150km n=37, <150km n=12, all n=49.

Figure 17 Social Impact in the Regions delegate experience

What delegates valued - connection and capability

SIITR delegates realised the most value in connection (connecting with people in their field of interest (4.0/5)) and capability (learning new information including examples, strategies and trends (4.0/5), learning how to authentically work in regional communities (3.9/5), improved ability to work as a regional ecosystem builder (3.7/5)). While the event does connect people with potential financial resources, fewer delegates were likely to expect capacity from access to funds or investment (3.0/5) and advocacy for a project, cause or region (3.2/5).

The Net Promoter Score was 71, with 57 per cent of respondents rating 10 out of 10 for likelihood to recommend.

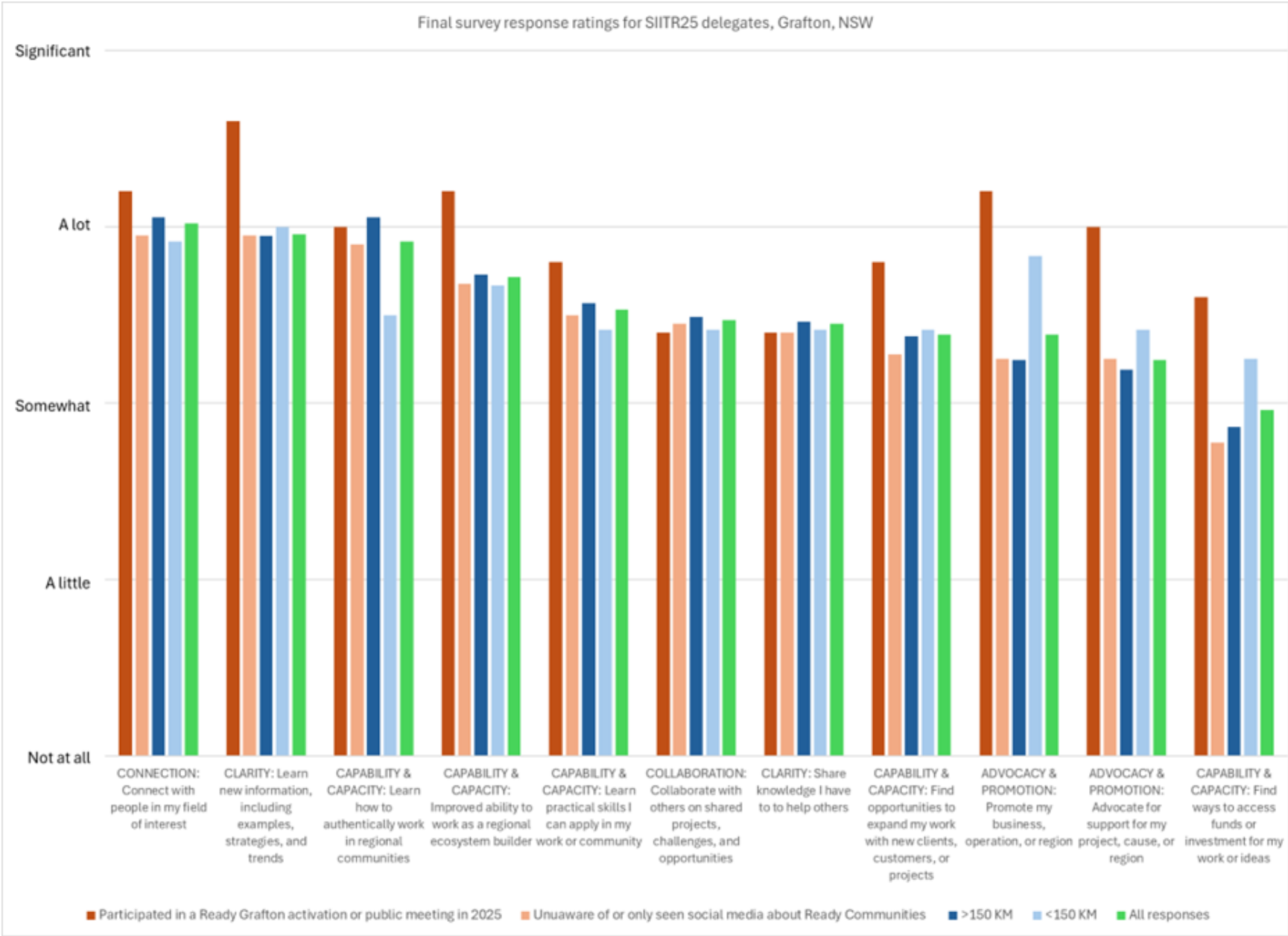


Figure 18 Social Impact in the Regions: Delegate post-event survey results - Readiness

Locals versus travellers – promotion and advocacy versus authentically working in community

Delegates who travelled more than 150 kilometres and those within 150 kilometres of Grafton gained different but complementary value from the same event.

A key goal of the conference is to facilitate boundary-spanning where individuals from more populated areas can more deeply understand the challenges and opportunities of regional Australia. This was achieved, with travellers from outside the region showing the strongest positive shift on learning how to authentically work in regional communities (14 per cent increase from pre- to post-conference as compared to an average 2 per cent increase for all respondents). It is also important to understand what delegates outside the region are not expecting, providing lower ratings for promotion, advocacy, access to funds, and practical skills.

By comparison, local delegates reflected higher outcomes for strong advocacy and promotion benefit to their business, operation or region with a 16 per cent increase compared to all respondents. Delegates from the local region also provided a notably higher rating for finding ways to access funds and learning new information, while also having an expected significantly lower rating on learning to authentically engage in regional communities - given they lived the experience daily. The SIITR value proposition changes for local and external delegates. Travellers come to learn how to better authentically engage in regional community. Locals use the conference to gain skills, funding, and visibility for their place.

Prior Ready Communities engagement matters

The SIITR conference is embedded in but distinct from the two-year Ready Communities flagship program, where SIITR is delivered in the host community at the ten-month point. SIITR delegates nominated their prior experience with Ready Communities in pre- and post-event surveys as: direct one-on-one engagement with the Ready Communities team, participation in a Ready Grafton activation or public meeting, general awareness of Ready Communities through social media or communications, and no awareness of the Ready Communities program. Through the survey, we aim to better understand how engagement with the Ready Communities program impacts SIITR delegate perceived outcomes.

Around a third of delegates had engaged with Ready Grafton or had one-on-one connections with Ready Communities. These delegates reported an average of 8 to 10 per cent higher ratings across all indicators than post-event ratings from the average delegate response. These increases are greatest for advocacy and promotion, clarity, and capability and capacity. Participants in the Ready Grafton program provided between 12 per cent to 24 per cent higher ratings for promoting or advocating their business or region, accessing funds or investment, expanding their work with new clients, learning new information, and learning to work as an ecosystem builder.

In addition to reporting higher than the average in the final survey results, Ready Grafton participants also had the greatest impact or change. They reported the highest increases from their pre-event expectations and post-event realisations for learning new information (+8%), ecosystem building (+10%), learning authentic regional work (+7%), and promoting their region or organisation (+7%).

By comparison, two-thirds of SIITR delegates were not aware of Ready Communities or only heard about the program through social media or other communications. These delegates scored consistently at or slightly below the average ratings across all indicators. While all delegates reported value from the event, engagement with the wider Ready Communities program increases that value in areas aligned with the readiness process - advocacy, promotion, ecosystem building, and clarity. Also notable was that delegates who were not aware of Ready Communities had the second highest increase (8%) between expectations and realised outcomes for learning how to authentically engage in regions, perhaps due to not having preconceived ideas.

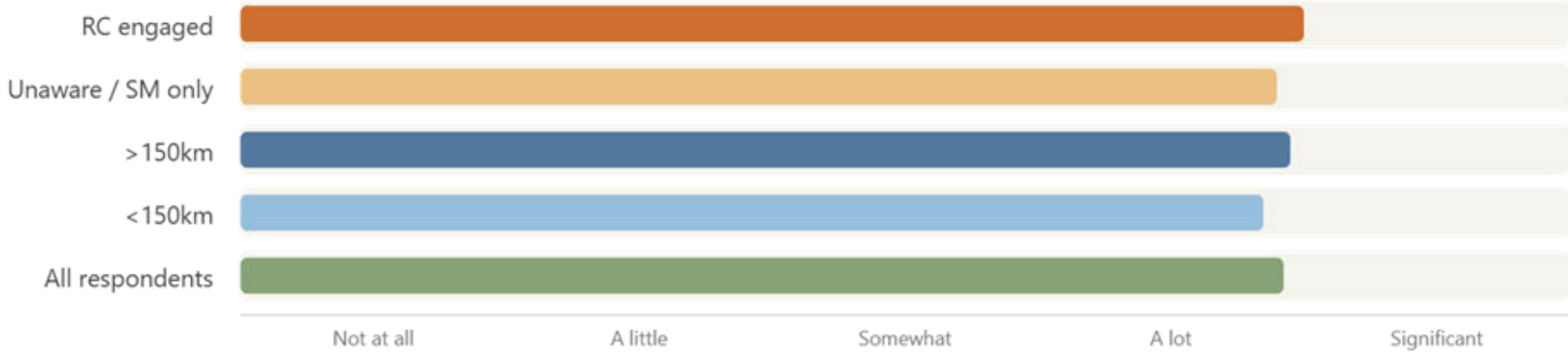
Personal, organisational and community impact

The post-conference survey asked delegates to rate the value they gained across three perspectives: personal development, for their firm or organisation, and for their region or community. Personal development was the highest-rated outcome of the entire conference at 4.1 out of 5, and the only perspective where every delegate cohort reported higher value than their pre-conference expectations. Travellers showed the strongest personal gain (+8%), consistent with the novelty of immersion in a regional context. Locals arrived with the highest pre-conference expectation for community benefit of any group, reflecting a hope that the conference would deliver directly for their place.

RC engaged Unaware / SM only >150km <150km All respondents

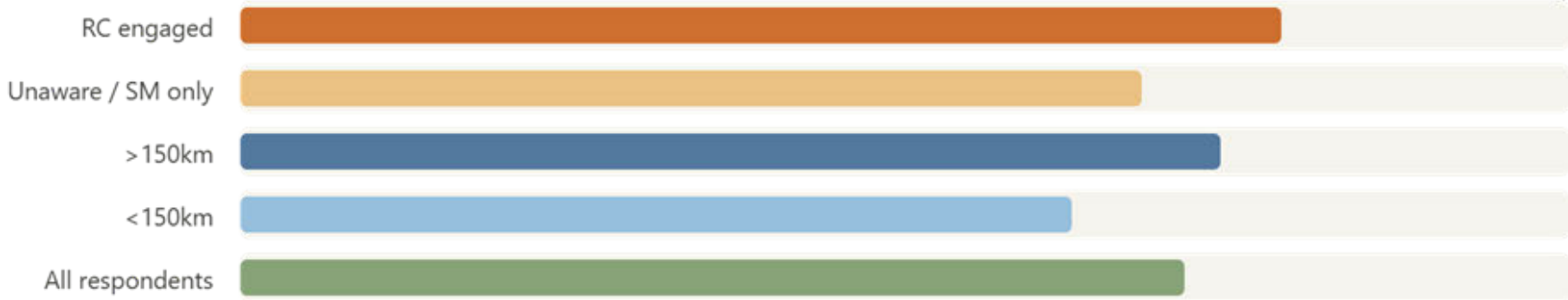
Personal development

Highest-rated outcome across all delegates — exceeded pre-conference expectations for every cohort



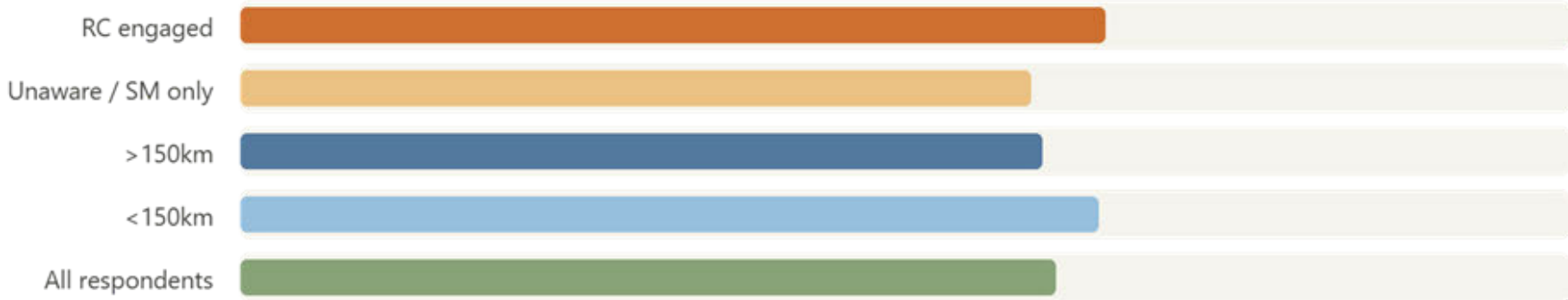
For my firm or organisation

RC engaged delegates reported the highest organisational value



For my region or community

RC engaged delegates reported the highest community value



Source: SIITR25 post-conference survey. Scale: 1 (not at all) to 5 (significant). RC engaged n=15, unaware/SM only n=34, >150km n=37, <150km n=12, all n=49.

Figure 19 Social Impact in the Regions: Delegate post-event survey results - Personal, Firm, Region

Conference design implications

Two outcomes were consistently lower across all delegate segments and warrant attention in future conference design.

Final ratings for collaboration on shared projects were among the lowest for every group, ranging from 3.4 to 3.6 out of 5. This suggests the conference creates connection and shared understanding but finding the sufficient structured time for delegates to work together on shared challenges in a four-day event is a structural challenge. There is a design opportunity for dedicated collaboration time for delegates already in the Ready Communities engagement pathway, distinct from the networking and learning that the conference delivers well.

Delegates sharing knowledge with others showed a different pattern. Delegates with direct Ready Communities engagement rated it positively (+6% for those who engaged with Ready Communities one-on-one, final rating 3.86/5). The conference provides platforms for sharing such as panels, Impact Labs, the Pitchfest but these are primarily structured around facilitated sessions. Delegates who arrive with context from the Ready Communities process have knowledge to contribute and pathways to do so. Those without that grounding experience the conference more as recipients than contributors. Expanding peer-to-peer sharing formats could broaden the sharing function beyond those already engaged.

2.4.4 SIITR Economic contribution

SIITR25 generated \$389,316 in economic output in the Grafton community. The direct conference spend was \$130,000, with over half going to small businesses based in Grafton. The conference operates a strong local procurement policy: across three years and three host communities, 96 per cent of total direct conference spend has gone to regionally based small and medium enterprises. Eleven small cafes were directly supported through the conference catering and the Day 2 South Grafton main street lunch activation, where preloaded JacaCards channelled delegate spending into Skinner Street businesses, over \$5,000 spent in under an hour.

Over three years, the conference has generated \$947,671 in regional economic output across its host communities, on a cumulative direct conference spend of \$334,678. The economic contribution has grown each year: \$210,000 in Coffs Harbour in 2023, \$348,355 in Kempsey in 2024, and \$389,316 in Grafton in 2025.

SIITR functions as a regional tourism event. From the post-conference survey, 88 per cent of the delegates stayed overnight in the region. Over half (52 per cent) stayed three nights, and a further 22 per cent stayed four nights or more. The average stay for overnight delegates was 3.3 nights. Extrapolated across the full 219 delegates, SIITR generated an estimated 639 guest nights in the Grafton and Clarence Valley region. Accommodation was rated 4.2 out of 5, and overall satisfaction with the town of Grafton was 4.5 out of 5 - the second highest of any conference element behind only feeling of safety (4.6/5). In-town meal experiences rated 4.4/5, and availability and type of local retail rated 4.0/5.

When asked about the likelihood of returning to visit the Clarence Valley as a result of attending SIITR, 47 per cent of non-local respondents said they were likely or very likely to return. This is in keeping with similar reflections from 2024's SIITR in Kempsey. A further 21 per cent indicated no difference in their intent to return, as they had sufficient knowledge of the region prior to attending. SIITR also activates regional spaces that may otherwise be underutilised or untested as event venues. Across three host communities, five regional spaces have been activated through SIITR, including in 2025 the South Grafton Ex-Services Club hosting its first major multi-day conference, the Grafton Brewhouse hosting its first public event, and the Grafton Cathedral serving as both a Pitchfest and welcome event venue. These activations demonstrate venue capability and generate reference points for future bookings.

SIITR has provided 161 scholarships in total, with 87 funded by sponsors and a further 74 provided by SIITR. Fifty-five young people have been supported to attend across the three years, with the 2025 youth cohort from NSW, ACT, and Queensland camping together at nearby Sealands Tourist Park and leading Day 3 of SIITR program. The scholarship and youth programs directly distribute economic benefit beyond the delegate population, supporting accommodation providers, transport, and local food businesses.



2.5 Mapping

2.5.1 Relationship and role mapping

Mapping aims to make visible the often hidden and felt experience of change in a community. It can highlight strengths and gaps and show contributions to impacts that can go unnoticed in the hype of more high-profile announcements. The information from a map can then inform program changes and influence policy direction towards system-level changes.

Ready Communities has been mapping connections and engagements from the first Social Impact in the Regions conference in 2023. This includes interactions in communities, attendances at and involvement with Social Impact in the Regions, involvement in initiatives, and related policies to host communities including policy makers and funding recipients. The aim is to better understand maps and the relational ecosystem in each host community as a network showing who is connected to whom, through what organisations, and around which themes. This social network analysis draws on data collected through engagement across both place-based programs and three SIITR conferences.

The network over the three years encompasses over 630 persons connected through 150 hubs, 77 organisations, and 22 engagement events, generating over 57,000 pairwise derived person-to-person connections.

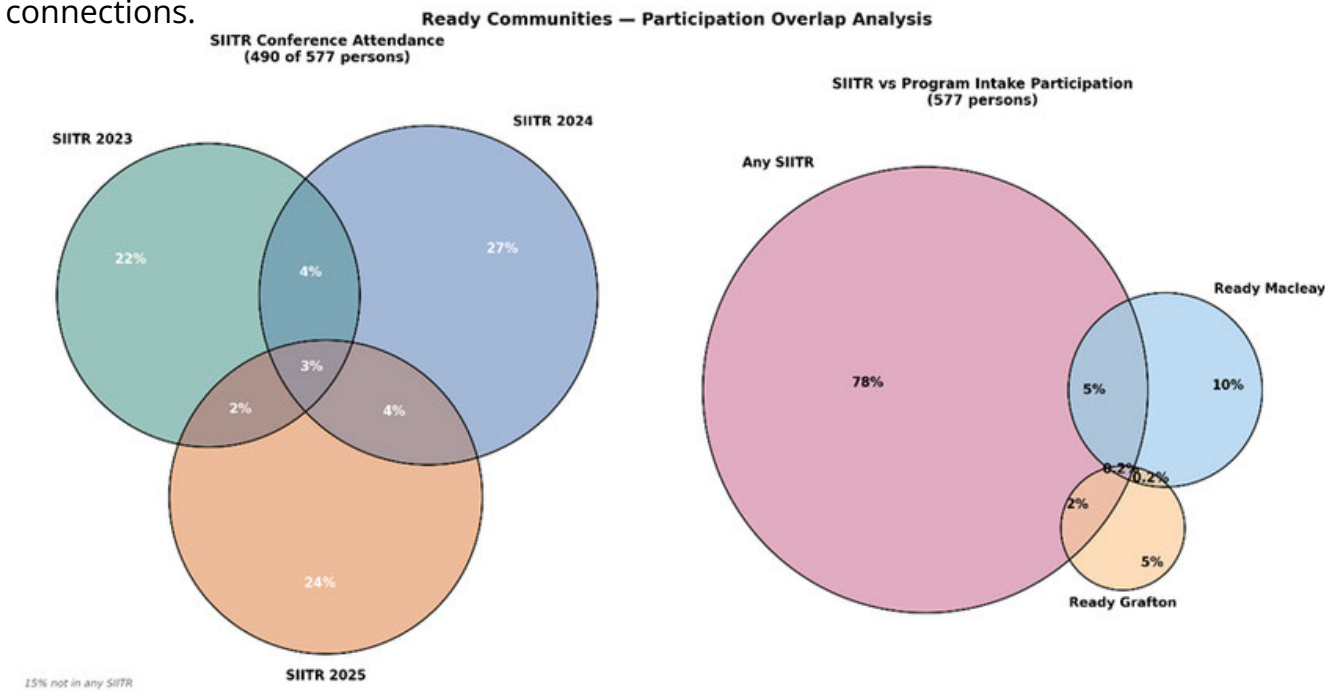


Figure 20 Ready Communities percentage of shared connections across programs

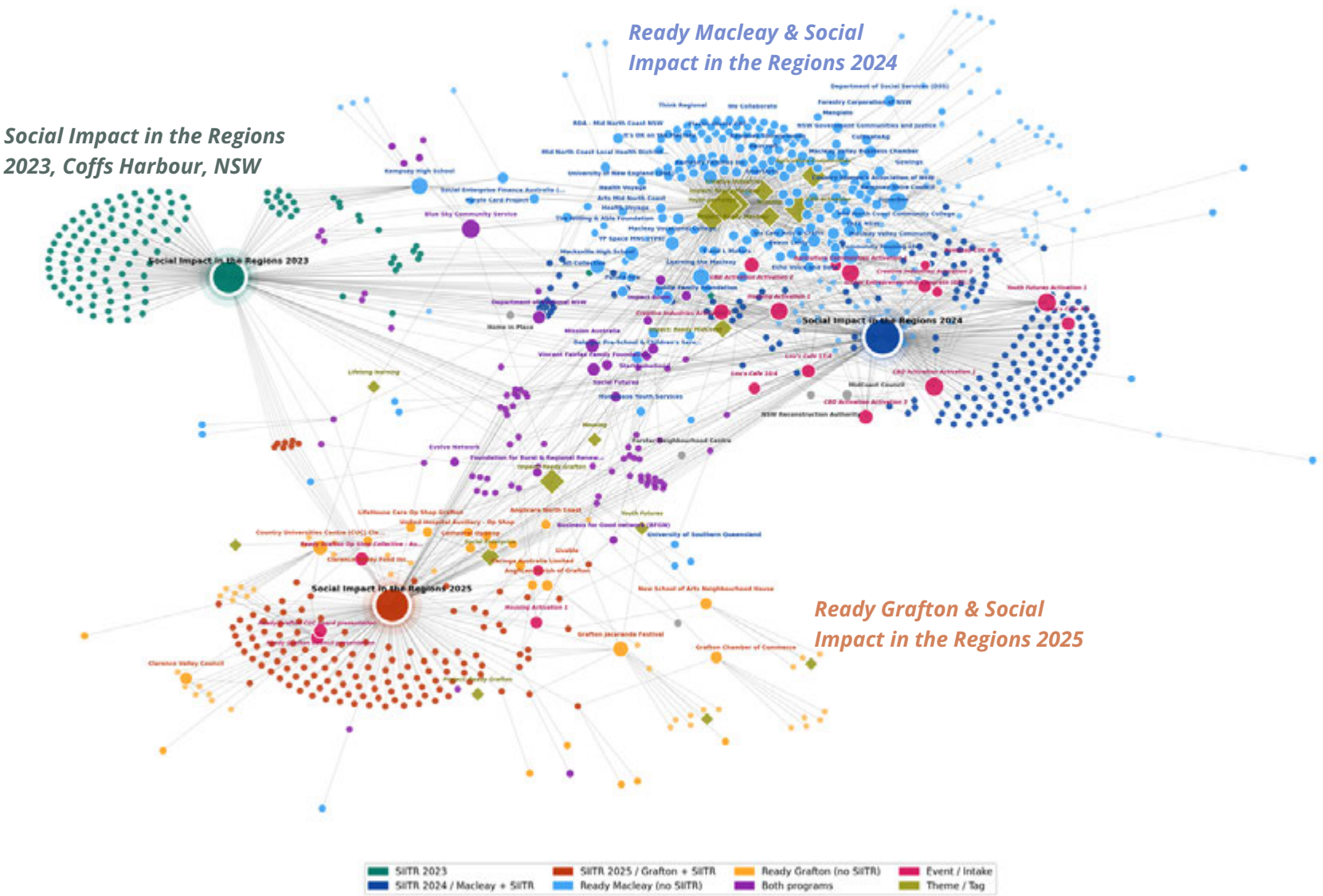


Figure 21 Ready Communities social network graph 2023-2025

2.5.2 Mapping insights

First, the map reflects the role of the Social Impact in the Regions conference as a catalytic event. This is for each region as part of the Ready Communities flagship program but also connects the community of practice advancing the work of regional economic and community development. The events act as a readiness flywheel, accelerating clarity, connection, capability and capacity, collaboration, and advocacy from the perspectives of the diverse nature of the delegates.

A second insight is the value of a longitudinal approach connecting delegates and regions around focus areas. Each Ready Communities flagship program is specific to that community, but they are connected through the Social Impact in the Regions conference. Overtime, the program will have a continued cumulative effect on flagship program host communities, conference returning delegates, and systemic change in each focus area.

Third, the map provides feedback on program changes. Ready Macleay in 2024 had a larger number of events (14) and more connections (1,476) while Ready Grafton hosted 5 dedicated events with 144 connections. This was an intentional focus on specific individuals in the region and has resulted in more intentional interventions in Year Two. Even though Ready Macleay had a larger number of activities and actors, Ready Grafton had the same if not more individuals engaged in longer-term outcomes and impact.

This also provides insights into a challenge with place-based change programs. Feedback takes time to make changes in programs that are delivered over a two-year period. Programs beholden to short-term funding cycles are often unable to integrate feedback in time to increase impact through future iterations.

2.5.3 Policy and institutional mapping

The mapping of roles and relationships show how the community interacts and sees itself. The policy mapping shows provides a lens on how institutions might see that same community. The shared dataset provides a shared view.

Policies are defined by any instance where an organisation – be it government, industry, or philanthropic organisation – documents an outcome and their commitment towards that outcome. This definition is intentionally broad to capture grants, funds, strategies, plans, roadmaps, and investment prospectus.

Essentially anytime an organisation or institution described what they want to do and how they want it done, what they will commit to doing it, and who might be involved. The mapping is substantial for Ready Macleay due largely to intentional focus around youth mapping in year one that contributed to additional focus in year two. Policy mapping for Ready Grafton is more focused in year two in support of initiatives including the Chamber of Purpose and community capital.

The Ready Macleay policy ecosystem encompasses 54 policies, 809 policy action items, and 1,152 connections linking those actions to each other and to the 84 hubs and 23 organisations responsible for their implementation. The policies span local plans (Kempsey Community Strategic Plan, Biodiversity Strategy, Horizons 2030 Economic Development and Tourism Strategy), state programs (Stronger Country Communities Fund, NSW Regional Health Strategic Plan, NSW Domestic and Family Violence Plan, Creative Capital Fund), and federal programs (Communities for Children, Emergency Relief, Community Child Care Fund). Ready Macleay itself appears as a policy node with six action items, positioned alongside and connected to the institutional commitments it operates within.

Like the role and relationship mapping the policy mapping provides further insights.

First is the sheer weight and volume of mapped elements. Fifty-four policies and 809 discrete action items represent a significant volume of commitments, each with its own logic model, reporting requirements, eligibility criteria, and funding cycle. Each institution operating in a region has their own policy framework, intersecting and at times competing. It feels practically impossible for any single organisation to digest much less leverage the information.

Second is how policy integrates and acts as a boundary spanner between diverse drivers of change and individual organisations. As highlighted in part A of this paper, the sub-topic drivers of change such as housing, youth population, climate impact response, and workforce development are interdependent and systemic. There can also be limited visibility and capacity for individual organisations to address the systemic change they are passionate about. Policy has the ability to bridge this gap, and the mapping helps make these bridges visible.

A third point is the absence of enabling conditions in an abstract policy framework. What is missing from the graph is the relational capital and underlying conditions that determine whether a policy initiative will be a success. These exist in varying forms but can be hidden from a pure institutional lens.

A related point is the dominance of central contributors of the policy framework, such as a local council. This can create a power imbalance, resulting in other aspects on a map being not visible. Policies can both enable and displace other roles in the network, strengthening collaborative structures as much as creating competitive tensions and siloes. These dynamics can be made visible through mapping of policy influences with relationship dynamics in a community over time.

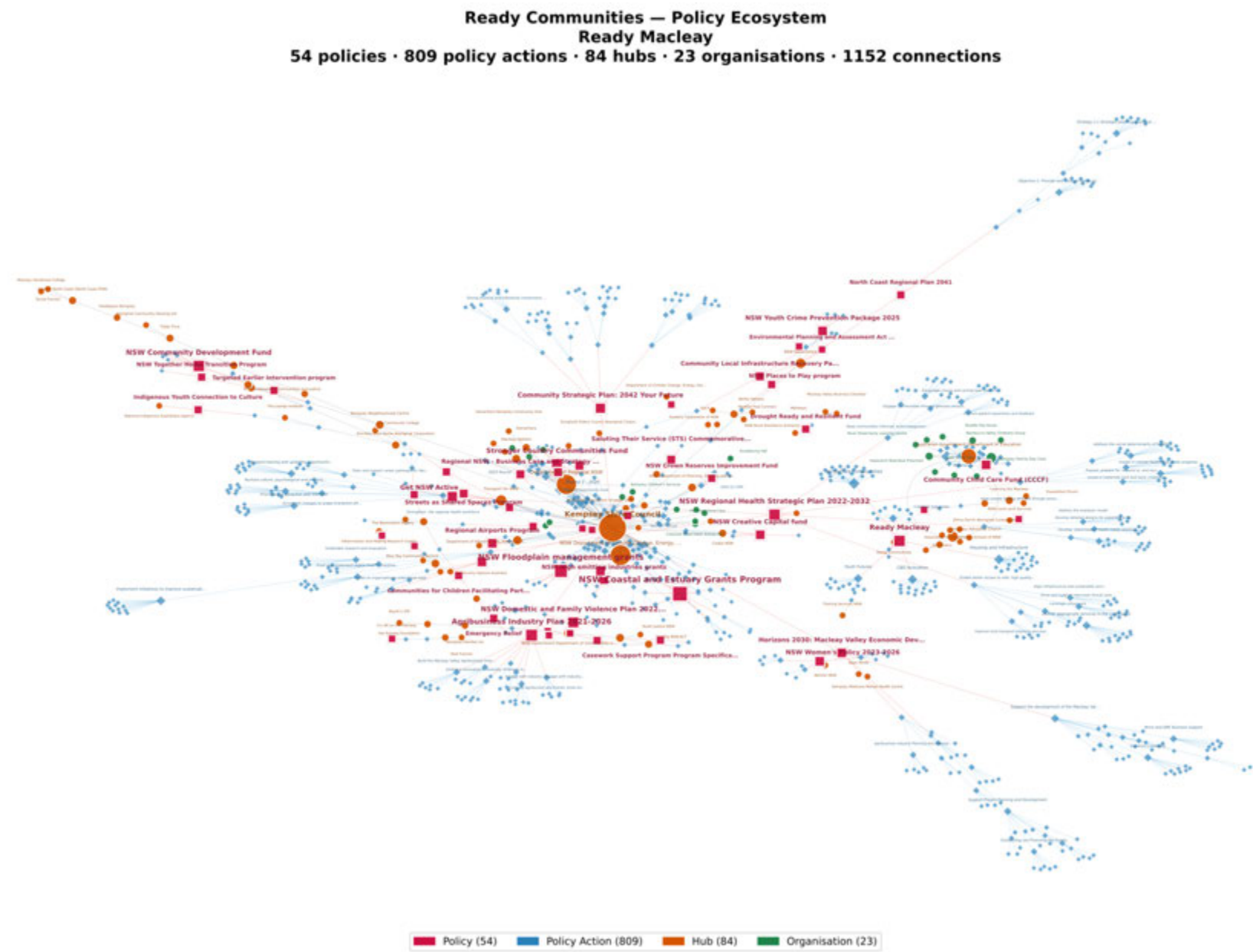


Figure 22 Ready Macleay policy network graph 2024

Learning: Case Study Considerations



In presenting our Ready Grafton case studies, we reflect on the learning from the past two years.

Ready Communities is the combined work of two practitioners with passion for meaningful change in regional Australia, joining with the grace and contribution of community participants and members and support from advocates, mentors, and partners.

We concede the often-stated analogy of building the plane as we fly it, balancing delivering measurable outcomes for regions we work in, applying insights for program feedback and improvement, and sharing feedback for advocacy and collective development of place-based approaches.

We also acknowledge the tension between having the capacity to deliver on one hand and the support needed to deliver community outcomes on the other. This is relevant to evaluation in that it informs decisions based on what might be needed as compared to what we might be funded to deliver.

Difficult to capture in evaluation is what remains after the 'hype' of the program - friendships, partnerships, and the extended learning. We are honoured to maintain strong connections in the communities we have worked in. These connections are often different to the ones with whom we initially engaged as we journey with those who lean in, often outside traditional institutional roles.

This remains an area to understand in how community change practically happens.

Deciding the centre of the story

We considered different lenses to share program outcomes, each defined by what is positioned as the centre of the story.

One option is using the **initiative** as the main actor, describing the conditions that led to the initiative, how the initiative took shape, and the outcomes. This is a common approach and easy to understand. It can also perpetuate the challenge with over-emphasising the form of what is done over the conditions that created it, leading other communities to replicate an activity that may not suit their conditions.

A second central lens is to use each of the five **enabling conditions** - clarity, connection, capability & capacity, collaboration, and advocacy & promotion - and highlighting how the condition was reflected and how initiatives impacted on the condition. While grounded in our program logic, this approach can feel academic and be less useful for application in other contexts.

A third lens and the one used in this report is to use the original **focus areas** as the central theme of the case study. This reinforces the focus area as the community-defined theme that carries through from our initial engagement. This also better supports the application of insights into other communities through those who share the interest, practice, and passion of the focus area.

Considerations

We write these case studies with a number of considerations.

Overstating claims

Readiness outcomes are based on focus area observations, not community-wide claims. We cannot say the entire community has low capability or capacity, but we can reflect on what our mapping highlights and what is reflected through workshops, conversations, and the Readiness Index. We can say an initiative resulted in clarity of roles or measurable collaboration, but not that the community is more collaborative.

People versus place

There is a tension between people and place. Change happens through people while embedded culture and social infrastructure is inherent to place. We experience community through deep relationships with the people we work with, who develop initiatives that have a long-term impact on place. This is reflected in our evaluation, where we describe changes in enabling conditions from the perspective of individuals who then leverage change in mindsets to create new structures which in turn create more sustainable collective readiness.

Outcomes and impacts

We focus on the outcomes framed as the five readiness conditions. While we also look for longer-term impacts defined by economic, social, individual, institutional, infrastructure, and environmental dimensions, these are not as evident in short and medium term programs and are more likely the result of a wider contribution of influences.

Outcome sustainability

A healthy critique of any place-based program is the question *"How will the community be different in X years as a result of our involvement?"* This is empirically difficult for an evaluation of a two-year program at the one-year point. As Ready Communities continues, we will look back at previous programs for an honest assessment of residual evidence of impact in the individuals and initiatives directly and tangentially related to our work.

Readiness only observed in practice

Another consideration is related to the concept of resilience, in that it can only be practically evaluated when readiness is required. We build and test this through Ready Communities initiatives including the Social Impact in the Regions conference, but the real proof is observing how practical shifts in clarity, connection, capability and capacity, collaboration, and advocacy and promotion manifest in times of challenge and opportunity.

Reality and readiness as model

The five enabling conditions of readiness provide a useful framework to consider conditions in a community. However, the model needs to be applied carefully to avoid forcing what is observed and experienced into a model that may not be accurately interpreted to reflect reality. In our evaluation, readiness is applied as a shared interpretive framework that remains open to applications from different perspectives.

CASE STUDIES



Ready Communities focuses on readiness as an enabling condition for change. We consider with the community reflections from the Readiness Index in what emerges as initiatives, and then observe how readiness is developed as those initiatives play out.

Initiatives identified through the Ready Communities flagship program align with one of two perspectives. Some initiatives support the Social Impact in the Regions conference, such as the South Grafton Main Street Activation. Others emerge from conversations before and after the conference, including the Social Enterprise work with Grafton Cathedral, the Op Shop Collective, and the Grafton Chamber of Purpose.

The relationship between readiness and initiatives goes both ways. The five readiness conditions inform what initiatives emerge, and the Initiatives in turn enhance the conditions of readiness.

Initiatives emerging from Ready Grafton

Grafton Chamber of Purpose. A cross-sector forum convened by Leon Ankersmit (CEO, Caringa Australia) bringing together leaders working on community outcomes who had not previously held a shared table. The Chamber met in January, February, March, and April 2026, with new people continuing to attend, building toward a formal launch in July. It is self-governing and led from within the community.

South Grafton Main Street Activation. Skinner Street has a distinct creative culture, distinct from the main Grafton CBD. SIITR25 was relocated to the South Grafton Ex-Services Club to bring delegates across the bridge, with a JacaCard loaded at \$20 per delegate generating over \$5,000 in Skinner Street spend inside an hour. The activation built on existing local work, including the New School of the Arts Neighbourhood Centre's Skinner Street program.

Social Enterprise and Grafton Cathedral. The Very Reverend Naomi Cooke led the exploration of how the Grafton Anglican Cathedral might extend its existing Op Shop social enterprise into broader revenue-generating activity aligned with community purpose. SIITR25 hosted the National Pitchfest in the Cathedral and the welcome event was catered by the Cathedral team, demonstrating venue capability and generating a marketing package for future bookings. The cathedral has developed further events into 2026.

Youth Futures. Recognition and amplification of Grafton's existing youth inclusion culture, including the Jacaranda Festival's youth ambassador program, embedded apprenticeship and work experience practices across local employers, and Rotary's international exchanges. The Seaton Family Foundation announced funding for the Jacaranda Festival youth program at the SIITR25 Local Impact Showcase. The Youth Futures Impact Lab at SIITR25, facilitated with Dan Griffin (headspace Grafton), surfaced gaps in youth connection by geography, interest, and age cohort.

Op Shop Collective. A network forming across Grafton's twelve op shops on both sides of the river, with shared challenges around product intake, volunteer capability, and impact measurement. Three meetings between mid-2025 and early 2026 identified directions including a regional Op Shop trail map, a shared impact report, central processing infrastructure, and shared volunteer recruitment. The Collective is in formation and seeking sustained local leadership.

Lifelong Learning. Exploration with the Clarence Valley Country Universities Centre led by Aaron Dewhurst around personal, institutional, and community-level learning. The focus area did not converge around a shared definition or a sustained group within the program year. The CUC remains an important community anchor and Aaron remains connected to the Ready Communities network.

Food Systems. Engagement with the Clarence Valley's agri-food economy, the Brewhouse Village precinct concept, a vibrant local food market in Yamba championed by local councillor Debrah Novak, and SIITR25 catering that prioritised local produce. The Food Systems Impact Lab generated engagement at the conference. A sustained collaborative initiative did not consolidate within the program year, reflecting that agriculture in the Clarence Valley has mature institutional support and the readiness contribution Ready Communities is best suited to was not the missing piece.

We acknowledge and give thanks to the following stakeholders for supporting our learning, work and implementation in Grafton.

Leon Ankersmit, Caringa; Kylie Murgatroyd, Liveable; Jacaranda Festival Committee; the New School of Arts, South Grafton; Lesley Grant, Anglicare; The Very Reverend Naomi Cooke, Anglican Diocese; Adam Giordano, Giordano Consulting; Aaron Dewhurst, Clarence Valley CUC; Dan Griffin, Headspace Grafton; Rick Firth and team at Grafton Brewhouse; Pam Hata, The Sound Lounge; Ursula Tunks, Mend and Make Do; Marc Daley, First Nations Community member and local leader; Debrah Novak, Clarence Valley Food Inc. and Clarence Valley Councillor; Karen Toms, Bendigo Bank Grafton Board and Clarence Valley Councillor; hospitality businesses in South Grafton;

Ready Communities works with the people who show up. We acknowledge there is other work happening in the host community that hasn't been included in the following case studies and note that wherever possible it has been included in our mapping.

Youth Futures



Who we connected with

Country Universities Centre, Jacaranda Festival Committee, headspace Grafton, Lovin Life FM, Vines.

What we heard

There weren't enough opportunities for young people in the host community, funding was ad-hoc and often services funded to work with young people didn't visit Grafton. We also learned there had been a significant amount of work done to support young people in the Grafton community in earlier years resulting in the implementation of a local headspace Grafton site.

What we observed

Grafton knows how to support its young people. We found community-led programs for young people within the Jacaranda Festival, the local radio station, embedded in local businesses and throughout groups such as Rotary.

What the data shows

People aged 15–24 make up 9.4% of the Clarence Valley LGA, with the Grafton town figure higher at 11.5%. The First Nations share of the LGA population is 8.1% (up from 6.3% in 2016), with a First Nations median age of 25 against a non-Indigenous median age of 51. Natural increase was negative across the four years FY2022–FY2025 (–431), with net internal and overseas migration accounting for all population growth, consistent with the youth out-migration pattern.

Readiness reflections

Clarity & Understanding

While there was a lot of activity supporting young people in the Grafton community, it was disconnected and not always noticed locally.

Connection & connectivity

Gaps in connection between organisations, schools, young people resulted in program duplication and service gaps.

Capability & Capacity

While there were many programs for young people they weren't always resourced to the level required to meet goals, or to sustain effort. Simultaneously, some of the youth development activities weren't recognised as such.

Collaboration for purpose

Many of the youth activities observed operated in isolation. Capacity limited collaboration between formal youth services, schools, and community programs that supported young people such as Jacaranda Festival.

Advocacy & promotion

Those who supported young people in Grafton just got on with it. Even though funding was an important priority for some, most relied on existing resources, networks of personal relationships, and volunteering to move their activities forward.

Initiatives

Jacaranda Festival Youth Advocacy

Each year the Jacaranda Festival Candidate Program offers a range of leadership development activities for registered candidates. The volunteer-led program has significant benefits for young people, including a structured Candidate program. While the festival itself was a respected cultural icon, it was the youth engagement and community pride that came through in broad community conversations.

We invited the leader of the Festival's Candidate Program to present at the Impact Showcase the day prior to the SIITR conference. A subsequent funding application resulted in \$10K investment by a donor for a youth-led service networking event which will be delivered in September 2026.

SIITR25 youth stream

In 2025, the SIITR dedicated youth stream included an older cohort (18-24) and invited local Grafton changemakers, incorporating opportunities for school students, Jacaranda Festival candidates, and people supporting young people in the community.

SIITR25 Youth Impact Lab

The local headspace Grafton manager was the co-facilitator at the SIITR Youth Impact Lab. Over the course of the workshop, insights into connectivity were described based on geography due to lack of mobility and location of support infrastructure, lack of shared popular interests such as sports, and by age where young people 'age out' of support programs. The Impact Lab facilitated conversations among local Grafton providers of youth services and national organisations, with potential to address these gaps through follow-up conversations.

Outcomes and Opportunities

Outcomes

The Ready Grafton work raised **clarity** around the breadth of youth support already present in the community, including the pathways embedded in the Jacaranda Festival Candidate Program, the embedded apprenticeship and work experience practices across local employers, Rotary's international exchanges, and value of the Country Universities Centre. **Connection** developed through the Impact Showcase platforming of the Candidate Program and the SIITR25 Youth Impact Lab, which brought local Grafton youth service providers into conversation with national organisations. **Capability and capacity** was developed through advocacy support that resulted in a \$10K investment in the youth-led networking event scheduled for September 2026, extending the Candidate Program's youth leadership work into a new format with confirmed resourcing. **Advocacy and promotion** was strengthened through the visibility of the Candidate Program as community youth development infrastructure rather than only as festival activity.

Opportunities

While clarity was improved through facilitated conversations, there remains an opportunity for **more structured mapping of youth support** across the Clarence region. The SIITR25 Youth Impact Lab identified **structural connection gaps for young people**. Future approaches can specifically address these gaps. Capability and capacity gaps remain for the volunteer-led structures that support youth work, including the Jacaranda Candidate Program, where **succession and resourcing beyond individual leadership** remain open questions. In addition to existing youth councils, social **infrastructure solutions for collaboration** could be developed between the festival, schools, and local service providers. **Advocacy at the regional level** can be strengthened to better represent Clarence Valley's youth investment to state and federal funders.

Youth Futures



Jameson Harvey, Founder of Red Dirt Robotics was the winner of the SIITR25 Pitchfest.

Main Street Activation

Who we connected with

Local shops, New School of the Arts, local artists, local not for profits.

What we heard

Our initial exploration of the Grafton community focused on the North side of the bridge and main CBD. It was only through being in town that we were drawn to South Grafton. Once there, the community stories highlighted a rich cultural background.

What we observed

In South Grafton we discovered a vibrant and creative community that were responsive to both SIITR and our broader program.

What the data shows

Grafton and South Grafton are distinct suburbs, separated by the Clarence River and the Grafton Bridge. Grafton has a population of 10,563 with a median age of 44 and South Grafton has a population of 6,288 with a median age of 40 and a predominant age group of 10–19. Median weekly household income in Grafton was \$1,179 against \$975 in South Grafton, a difference of 17%. Similar differences are seen in median monthly mortgage repayments (\$1,348 against \$1,144) and median weekly rent (\$300 against \$280). South Grafton population grew 3.6% between 2016 and 2021.

Readiness reflections

Clarity & Understanding

The offering of South Grafton was not clearly communicated in general conversations. It was not that South Grafton was hidden, but you need to know what to look for to find the main street of Skinner Street.

Connection & connectivity

The New School of the Arts was doing work in bringing people in the South Grafton CBD together, particularly through the lens of public safety and livability. But this work was not necessarily connected to other aspects of the social infrastructure outside of the structured programs.

Capability & Capacity

There was work to be done in expanding business opportunities for local businesses. While a main street beautification program had been delivered years earlier, it needed a refresh.

Collaboration for purpose

There was no observed lack of collaborative opportunity in South Grafton. Acknowledging natural undercurrents of competition, business owners largely supported one another.

Advocacy & promotion

A shared voice was emerging in South Grafton, while also references of engagement fatigue from previous consultations without institutional support.

Initiatives

Shop local program - Jaca Card

Through a partnership with Why Leave Town, Ready Communities supported the rebranding of Grafton's shop local program to the Jaca Card. The intent was to reignite the program and at the same time promote the Grafton Jacaranda Festival and provide a mechanism to track tourism spend during the festival. The RC team activated six program sign ups in South Grafton and purchased Jaca Cards which were distributed to SIITR25 delegates for their day 2 lunches. The program still exists in the community.

The program brought readiness for local shop keepers in the existence and use of the shop local technology. It also promoted South Grafton as a regional shopping destination.

SIITR25 venue

While SIITR25 had initially planned to deliver on the Northern side of Grafton bridge, on the discovery of South Grafton, the event was moved to that side of the bridge. SIITR25 built readiness in the host community through the delivery of the conference, procurement channels, destination marketing and localised networking.

While there is still much scope to build this emerging conferencing destination, the entities we worked alongside in South Grafton became more aware of the business conference market, they connected with new potential customers, they built capability and capacity in this market and promoted as a unique conference destination.

Outcomes and Opportunities

Outcomes

The Ready Grafton work raised **clarity** around South Grafton's distinct creative identity. Building on the work of the New School of the Arts Neighbourhood Centre, the program further **connected** local shops as well as national delegates to the community. **Capability and capacity** was developed through the Why Leave Town platform and the JacaCard rebrand, providing local businesses with a shared shop local infrastructure that did not previously exist in a coordinated form. The SIITR25 day two lunch activation provided proof of concept for the JacaCard mechanism, with preloaded delegate cards generating over \$5,000 in spend across Skinner Street businesses inside an hour. **Capability and capacity** was also developed through hosting the conference at the South Grafton Ex-Services Club and the Grafton Brewhouse to a 219-delegate multi-day event, generating reference points for future bookings. The work aligned with existing **collaboration** efforts through the New School of the Arts programs. **Advocacy and promotion** was strengthened through the deliberate relocation of SIITR25 to the south side of the bridge, with the Brewhouse hosting its first public event and Skinner Street activated as part of the conference experience.

Opportunities

The JacaCard has infrastructure but needs ongoing sponsorship, broader business sign-ups, and local ownership once Ready Communities steps back, a natural role for the chamber, council, or an existing community group. South Grafton's creative cluster remains underleveraged in formal tourism and destination marketing, which still centres on the northern CBD. Small main street businesses need more practical support to navigate online competition and proximity to larger centres. And there's untapped potential in a coordinated Grafton–South Grafton approach that reframes the two sides of the bridge as complementary rather than competing.

Main Street Activation



Ready Communities moved SIITR25 to South Grafton, activating both the shop local (Jaca card) and main street over lunch on day 2.

Social enterprise

Who we connected with

Grafton Anglican Diocese, several locally based NFPs (including Caringa, Anglicare, Mend and Make Do, Liveable), and more broadly with state peak SECNA and intermediary StartSomeGood.

What we heard

In Grafton we were keen to learn about the recognition, importance and application of social enterprise. While we had observed numerous entities that traded like a social enterprise, we didn't initially meet anyone who identified with the terminology. When we met the Very Reverend Naomi Cooke we were presented with an opportunity to activate the Grafton Cathedral precinct. We overlayed this with a social enterprise concept.

What we observed

Little to no recognition for the term social enterprise, nor support mechanism to grow recognition.

What the data shows

There is no register of social enterprises in Australia, as it is not a legal form, and no Social Traders-certified enterprises or SECNA industry members were identified as based in Grafton or the Clarence Valley at the time of engagement. Social enterprise in New South Wales is served by the member-led peak body SECNA. Health Care and Social Assistance is the Clarence Valley's largest employing industry at 3,431 jobs (17.8%), the sector within which many local trading-for-purpose organisations, including the disability and faith-based providers operating often without naming themselves as social enterprises.

Readiness Reflections

Clarity & Understanding

There was a limited broad shared understanding of the definition of a Social Enterprise, but there was an interest in the concept from The Very Reverend Dean Naomi Cooke of the Anglican Cathedral and individual areas of deep knowledge including Leon Ankersmit of Caringa, and Ursula Tunks of Mend and Make Do, who had participated in a SECNA-led program.

Connection & connectivity

There was no observable evidence of local social enterprise networks, although op shops were considered a social enterprise and connected through local parent institutions such as the Anglican church and the local hospital, nationally connected through the Salvation Army or St Vincent De-Pauls, and into the community through associated food banks and community services.

Capability & Capacity

In the absence of recognition of what social enterprise is, there was a lack of pathway forward to build capability and capacity.

Collaboration for purpose

Collaboration structures included domain-specific inter-agency groups and networks.

Advocacy & promotion

Social enterprise was not seen as a driver for engagement, investment nor working with vulnerable groups.

Initiatives

Anglican Cathedral - social enterprise precinct and SIITR Impact Lab

The Anglican Cathedral was identified as an opportunity to explore the potential for social enterprise initiatives. Faith-based institutions provide significant community support and can have significant assets but limited means for developing revenue to support community impact. The possibility was identified by The Very Reverend Naomi Cooke from the Cathedral to act as a social enterprise precinct or support social enterprise projects. The opportunity was supported by Leon Ankersmit from Caringa, Lesley Grant from Anglicare, and Ursula Tunks from Mend and Make Do. The precinct had identified the potential to deliver activities across hospitality, events and retail. The Ready Communities team implemented three training opportunities with the aim of attracting new volunteers to the Anglican Cathedral community, and simultaneously building local awareness of social enterprise. Two event management workshops were delivered and Sydney-based social enterprise accelerator program StartSomeGood delivered a further in-person workshop on social enterprise on the cathedral grounds. The Cathedral host the SIITR25 Welcome event leaving capability, a cash injection and also promotional material for future events. The Cathedral project was also the focus of a SIITR Impact Lab facilitated by Tom Allen from social enterprise accelerator Impact Boom.

Op shop collective

As part of the Anglican cathedral Social Enterprise precinct conversation, there was an identified opportunity for increased support for local op shops. There were around 12 op shops in Grafton and South Grafton, six each side of the river. Each contributed to significant cumulative impact and had individual but common challenges related to volunteering, intake processing, staff training, pricing, customer support, waste management, and reporting. Before the conference in August 2025, representatives from the Op Shops were invited to convene at the Country Universities Centre to consider whether they might find value in coming together on a regular basis. Since then, the op shop collective has formed and come together several times for collective support and shared initiatives including reporting for advocacy and awareness.

Outcomes and Opportunities

Outcomes

The Ready Grafton work raised **clarity** around social enterprise as a recognised category, introducing the language and concept to those who were already trading like social enterprises without naming themselves as such. While identification with the term itself was not seen as a goal, there was value seen in the concept of shared impact and commercial revenue models for sustainability. **Connection** developed among leaders focused on shared outcomes as well as through the Op Shop Collective, which brought operators from roughly twelve op shops across both sides of the river into a shared table for the first time around common challenges of intake processing, volunteering, pricing, and reporting. **Capability** was developed through training workshops and the StartSomeGood session, and through the paid hosting of the SIITR25 Welcome event, which left the Cathedral with event-delivery capability, a cash injection, and a marketing package for future bookings. **Collaboration** emerged among leaders focused on social enterprise, not to advance the concept but in the underlying principles of sustainable business for social impact. **Advocacy and promotion** was strengthened through the Collective's early work on shared reporting, giving the op shops a basis to make their cumulative community contribution visible.

Opportunities

The Op Shop Collective is in formation and its continuation depends on sustained local leadership rather than Ready Communities convening it. The network has met several times but has not yet established its own coordinating structure or ownership. There is an opportunity for a local institution or one of the participating operators to take that role so the Collective persists beyond the program. There are opportunities to build on momentum from the Cathedral events through support for capability and capacity. Collaboration could extend beyond the op shop cohort to the wider set of trading-for-purpose organisations identified during engagement, which currently connect through their own parent institutions and inter-agency groups rather than as a social enterprise community. Advocacy at the regional level remains undeveloped, with space available for a shared voice positioning business for impact as a driver for investment, employment, or work with vulnerable groups.

Social enterprise



Ready Communities engaged the Grafton Anglican Church

Food systems

Who we connected with

Our engagement focused on Clarence Valley Food Inc. and Yamba Farmers Market and in Grafton with the Grafton Brewhouse. While these were one access and output point to the wider agriculture value chain, the emphasis was on potential community outcomes aligned with integration with the Social Impact in the Regions conference.

What we heard

Described as a food bowl, farmers in the Grafton community had access to the Yamba food market and there was an established community with Clarence Valley Food Inc. Food security was identified as a concern in natural disaster.

What we observed

The curated and long-standing Yamba food markets provided community connection and market access across the food value chain. Businesses that had stalls were a mix of distributors for products not available from local sources, emerging food startups, and businesses leveraging local byproducts actively scaling their businesses based in the Clarence Valley. The markets acted as a business incubator, providing mentoring and support.

The renovations on the new Grafton Brewery, a multi-acre precinct, were completed during the time of the Ready Grafton program. The precinct had potential for further integration as value-add support and integrated food and beverage precinct.

What the data shows

The Clarence Valley produced \$118.7 million in agricultural commodities in 2020–21, with livestock slaughterings the largest single category at 51.1% of value. Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing accounted for 6.0% of the resident workforce at the 2021 Census. The Clarence is one of three NSW sugarcane production areas. Macadamia plantings are expanding rapidly into the Clarence floodplains, with Boombera Park near Lawrence (around 250,000 trees across approximately 800 hectares) among the largest single orchards in the country. The LGA hosts the largest combined offshore and estuary fishing fleet in NSW.

Readiness Reflections

Clarity & Understanding

Clarity was centralised around the Yamba Food Markets and Clarence Valley Food, Inc. The markets were accessible but general visibility could be not as evident outside of centralised networks. Sector history and vision were embedded in individual narratives and stories.

Connection & connectivity

The Yamba markets provided a strong connection point and farmers groups such as farmers NSW provided opportunities to connect as hubs. There were identified opportunities for the sector and broader supply chain to come together.

Capability & Capacity

The Yamba Markets provided mentoring, support, and market access for stall holders. Management of the markets and many of the stall businesses relied on the capability and capacity of individuals and personal networks. The development of the Grafton Brewery precinct was based on the entrepreneurial drive of the precinct founder.

Collaboration for purpose

Collaboration structures identified focused on the Yamba markets and related Clarence Valley Food Inc..

Advocacy & promotion

There was a natural advocacy alignment based on the manager of the Yamba Markets also being a councillor with Clarence Valley Council, who was also active in advocacy for the agriculture sector. The markets had strong promotion through social media.

Initiatives

Value-Add food hub, Grafton Brewhouse

The newly refurbished Grafton Brewhouse precinct presented an opportunity to develop a value-add food hub. In exploring the opportunity including engagement with agribusiness advisor Lara Wilde, challenges were identified with stringent manufacturing conditions and the configuration requirements for diverse food value add processing. Other possibilities were identified for smaller configurations involving research partners, support further down the value chain including packaging and branding, and integration more related to food and beverage activities. Ready Communities supported Grafton Brewhouse to design a brochure as a means of attracting potential participants to a 'food value-add' precinct. The Grafton Brewhouse was used as the location of the SIITR Impact Showcase which included a tour of the precinct.

Yamba Food Markets

The Yamba Food Markets operate as a curated weekly platform bringing together producers from the Clarence Valley and surrounding regions, championed locally by Debrah Novak. Beyond their visible role as a public-facing market, the Markets function as social and economic infrastructure for the regional food and agriculture sector. For smaller and emerging producers, the markets act as an incubator and market-access pathway, providing the business support, customer feedback, and trading exposure that early-stage operators need to develop. For more established producers, the markets serve as a stepping stone to wider markets, with businesses leveraging Yamba as a base from which they grow nationally and internationally. The markets are dynamic and adaptable, responding rapidly to weather events and disruption that affect both producers and attendance, and operating as a conduit through which information moves into and out of the sector from production conditions and pricing pressures through to consumer signals and emerging product categories. While no direct initiative emerged from the markets within the program year, the engagement identified opportunities for stronger advocacy for the sector, more structured business support pathways for stallholders at different stages of development, and impact evaluation that would make the markets' contribution to regional food systems more visible to funders and policy-makers.

Outcomes and Opportunities

Outcomes

The Food System initiatives provided **clarity** on opportunities, noting further advocacy and promotion is required for the clarity to be more widely shared. **Connection** developed through the engagement with the Grafton Brewhouse precinct, with the SIITR25 Impact Showcase hosted on site and a precinct tour providing exposure to a multi-acre value-add concept that had not previously been positioned to a national audience of practitioners, funders, and policy-makers. Both initiatives had existing strong **capability** and additional capability-building activities were explored, while both remaining **capacity**-constrained in areas for further development. The Ready Grafton contribution to the food sector was lighter than in other focus areas, as the sector had established mature institutional support.

Opportunities

Clarence Valley Food Inc identified many opportunities to build projects in food security and connectivity that would benefit both local food systems and associated businesses. These projects would require clarity surrounding associated legislation and investment opportunities. They would require a mechanism to formally bring together and connect stakeholders, capacity to support the development of one or numerous business cases, willingness of local businesses to collaborate across the supply chain, and a mechanism to support ongoing advocacy and promotion. The Yamba Food Markets engagement separately identified opportunities for stronger advocacy for the sector, more structured business support pathways for stallholders at different stages of development, and impact evaluation that would make the markets' contribution to regional food systems more visible to funders and policy-makers. The Grafton Brewhouse precinct represents an emerging piece of food and beverage infrastructure where the value-add concept could be developed further through research partnerships, packaging and branding support, and integration with the wider food sector. Its realisation depends on capacity, a solid business case integrated with local economic and community development support, and a clear collaborative framework with broader supply-chain participants. Across engagement points, the broader opportunity is connection between the producers, processors, distributors, and markets that currently operate as a sector through individual relationships.

Food systems



Debrah Novak, Chair Clarence Valley Food Inc., plays an integral role in food systems in the Clarence.

Lifelong learning



Who we connected with

Aaron Dewhurst, Clarence Valley Country Universities Centre.

What we heard

The Country Universities Centre was a prominent and respected role in the community. The CUC's existing function in providing supported study space for regional students enrolled at metropolitan universities was well established. There was an interest and need to connect the CUC more deeply with the business sector and the wider community, beyond its core role as a study venue.

What we observed

The CUC operates as a recognised piece of community infrastructure with strong physical and digital capability, providing supported study space for regional students enrolled at universities elsewhere. Its visibility and relational reach outside its current student cohort and immediate institutional networks were limited, with the lifelong learning concept holding interest among individual leaders but not yet supported by a coalition or convening structure that could carry it across the business, education, and community sectors.

What the data shows

Educational attainment in the Clarence Valley is at 10.2% of residents aged 15+ holding Year 12 as their highest qualification and 11.8% holding a Bachelor degree or above (ABS Census 2021). Within the town of Grafton, Year 12 attainment is slightly higher at 11.0%. Tertiary education infrastructure in the LGA includes TAFE NSW Grafton, the TAFE NSW Coffs Harbour Education Campus (Grafton), and the Clarence Valley Country Universities Centre. The CUC opened in August 2019 and has since supported over 900 residents in higher education across any Australian university.

Readiness Reflections

Clarity & Understanding

There was clarity specific to the education sector, but less clarity across education, business, and community sectors.

Connection & connectivity

There was strong connection with the CUC and the school systems, and the CUC was actively expanding connection across the Clarence with a location in Yamba. The CUC also hosted events in areas related to students including health. However, while the business and community sectors were aware of the CUC, structured connections through events or convenings were not evident.

Capability & Capacity

The CUC had strong capability in its leadership and team and federal support. Capacity was also strong, while allocated to delivering on its primary mandate of young people in schools.

Collaboration for purpose

There were limited collaborative structures for boundary-spanning activities related to lifelong learning.

Advocacy & promotion

The CUC provided strong advocacy for education provided by an established evaluation framework, but still required support for a shared advocacy of learning outcomes in the region.

Initiatives

Lifelong Learning concept and community meetup

The Lifelong Learning focus area emerged from early one-on-one conversations between Ready Communities and Aaron Dewhurst, manager of the Clarence Valley Country Universities Centre. The CUC's role as a supported study space for regional students enrolled at universities elsewhere was well established, and the conversation explored how the CUC might extend its reach into the broader business and community sectors.

The concept of Lifelong Learning was developed as a frame across three levels: the individual level of personal development, the institutional level of learning organisations adapting to a changing environment, and the community level of a region oriented toward continuous learning across generations and sectors.

A community meetup was convened aligned to a meeting of CUC leaders to test whether the concept would attract a group beyond the initial conversations. The session did not attract additional external attendees, with a severe hailstorm on the day a contributing factor combined with other considerations being event promotion, positioning, and interest.

The Lifelong Learning conversation continued through individual engagements rather than as a collective initiative, and the CUC remained connected to the wider Ready Communities network through subsequent SIITR25 engagement including hosting a youth meetup, presenting at the Investor Showcase, and hosting other subsequent community meetings including the first Op Shop Collective.

Outcomes and Opportunities

Outcomes

While there was activity and outputs to support the conversation of lifelong learning in the Clarence Valley supported by the CUC, more work will be required to produce outcomes. While **clarity** was raised as to the value of integrating education and the business sector, this did not expand to the wider community. **Connections** were made but required further development. Limited **capability and capacity** could be seen as a contributing factor to limited engagement, with a need to invest time in building relationships across diverse groups. The result was limited **collaboration**, impacting the ability to **advocate and promote** the concept.

Opportunities

While the initiative did not gain traction before the SIITR conference, the lifelong learning concept remains available as a frame for future engagement. The three-level articulation (individual, institutional, community) offers a way to organise work that the focus area did not advance this time. **Clarity** would benefit from earlier engagement and more time, with the absence of a shared self-help or referral infrastructure in the community pointing to a practical entry point. **Connection** between the CUC and the business sector, particularly through the Chamber of Commerce, is the most immediate opportunity to extend the CUC's relational reach beyond its current student cohort and institutional networks. The emerging Grafton Chamber of Purpose provides a potential convening structure that the lifelong learning focus area lacked, offering a forum where cross-sector conversation about education, workforce, and community development could form without requiring a dedicated coalition to be built from scratch. **Capability and capacity** gaps point to the need for a leader or small group with both the institutional positioning and the available time to carry the convening role. This is a constraint shared across many of the focus areas but particularly limiting where the concept itself is still being defined or requires explaining. **Collaboration** and **advocacy** at the regional level remain open, with no shared narrative or coordinated voice around lifelong learning beyond the CUC's own institutional advocacy for tertiary access. The CUC's role as a cross-sector convening space, demonstrated through hosting the Op Shop Collective meeting and other community gatherings, is itself an emerging opportunity to position the Centre as community infrastructure.

Lifelong learning



Aaron Dewhurst and the Clarence Valley Country University Team work with learners across all ages.

Community engagement



Who we connected with

Jacaranda Festival Committee

What we heard

The Grafton Jacaranda Festival is a significant annual event in the Grafton community. The commitment to community development the festival committee makes each year that is strongly supported, but perhaps not recognised for the full value it brings. Conversations about the Festival focused on community pride and collaboration value as much as the event itself.

What we observed

While the 90-year-old Jacaranda Festival is an annual event, the Jacaranda Festival committee runs a year round community engagement program that touches every aspect of the business and social impact community. The Festival's year-long Candidate program provides hands-on leadership development for young people, creates inter-generational connections, and develops business and community connections across the region.

What the data shows

The Grafton Jacaranda Festival, established in 1934, is Australia's longest-running floral festival, anchored by jacaranda trees planted from 1879. It runs across ten days from late October, alongside Plunge Art and Culture Festival as signature LGA cultural events. Tourism is a \$181.4 million industry in the Clarence Valley supporting almost 2,000 local jobs, with the Destination Management Plan 2024–2030 setting the strategic frame for the visitor economy. Accommodation and Food Services accounts for 8.8% of the resident workforce.

Readiness Reflections

Clarity & Understanding

As a major community-wide festival, the Jacaranda Festival is recognised across the community. While Grafton did not have a visible backbone organisation, the festival provided visibility into diverse aspects of the community and a representation to those outside the region.

Connection & connectivity

The Jacaranda Festival provided a strong connectivity network across the community, including the social infrastructure of organising committee, organisation connections of the Candidate program, and national and international boundary spanning connections of the event itself. While connected around the function of the conference, additional connection with related youth and social impact services were not as evident.

Capability & Capacity

The Festival event developed collective leadership capability across the community and mobilised capacity through sponsorship and funding. However, like many volunteer-run committee and expansive programs, the Festival wrestles with both capacity and funding and volunteers for sustainability as well as capability to work on the business such as evaluation and strategy as compared to in the business for program delivery.

Collaboration for purpose

Collaboration was evident with the Festival working across the community, but due to capacity further integration with other social structures and various industry networks were limited.

Advocacy & promotion

The Festival's role in advocacy and promotion for the region was significant. However, advocacy for the Festival itself was dependent on resources and focused on the story of the event as compared to the broader impact on community cohesiveness and youth development.

Initiatives

Partnership

The Jacaranda Festival was a natural connection with Ready Communities and the Social Impact in the Regions conference based on shared functions and assets for major events. Over the ten months leading up to SIITR, readiness was shared both ways through formal event training by Ready Communities and professional engagement of local event resources, and the Festival Committee sharing valuable local knowledge.

Over the course of the partnership, there was an increased awareness of the value of the Jacaranda Festival for community development and in particular connections and capability development with young people.

The Jacaranda Festival shared at the Impact Presentations prior to the SIITR conference and was the topic of the Impact Lab facilitated by Jesse Taylor from Mission Australia exploring how community celebrations bring people together, build pride of place, and create opportunities for participation. The focus was on how to ensure the Festival energy extends beyond the event with strategies for embedding community voice, participation, and leadership into local initiatives.

The Why Leave Town Shop Local card was branded as the Jaca Card to further support a legacy with the Festival.

Following the presentations at SIITR, the Jacaranda Festival was awarded funding from the Seaton Family Foundation, auspiced through Caringa Australia, to involve young people in the delivery of a localised social impact event.

Outcomes and Opportunities

Outcomes

The Ready Grafton work raised **clarity** around the Jacaranda Festival's role as community development infrastructure in addition to its function as an annual event, highlighting the year-round Candidate Program and the inter-generational, business, and community connections the Festival carries. **Connection** developed through the Festival's presentation at the Impact Showcase and the Impact Lab, which explored how community celebrations build pride of place and create opportunities for participation, and through the two-way exchange of event capability between Ready Communities and the Festival Committee over the ten-month lead-in. **Capability and capacity** was developed through formal event training and the professional engagement of local event resources, the securing of funding to expand the focus in 2026, and the Jaca Card rebrand that tied Grafton's shop-local program to the Festival as a legacy asset. **Collaboration** was already strong, with potential for further integration into broader community development social infrastructure. The Festival's strong **advocacy and promotion** was strengthened through visibility at SIITR25 and the subsequent Seaton Family Foundation funding to involve young people in delivering a localised social impact event.

Opportunities

The Festival's contribution could be made more visible through evaluation and impact measurement that captures its year-round broader community impact. This would support increased collaboration and support advocacy that speaks to community cohesion and youth development rather than only the event story. Connection with youth and social impact services remains an opportunity, linking the Candidate Program and the Festival's broader engagement to formal services not always evident in the current network. The Festival's reliance on volunteers points to capacity and succession risk, where the capability to work on the business (strategy, evaluation, and sustainable funding) can be limited relative to existing strong delivery capability. There is scope for deeper integration with other social structures and industry networks, where capacity has so far limited the Festival's collaborative reach. The Jaca Card offers a legacy mechanism linking local spend to the Festival, with potential to grow through ongoing sponsorship and local ownership.

Community engagement



Grafton Jacaranda Festival produces important community and economic outcomes in the Clarence Valley.

Cross-focus: Chamber of Purpose



Who we connected with

Leon Ankersmit, Caringa; Lesley Grant, Anglicare; Ursula Tunks, Mend and Make Do; Aaron Dewhurst, Clarence Valley CUC; Kylie Murgatroyd, Liveable and numerous other service providers and local business owners.

What we heard

While various interagency groups connected local service providers, their primary purpose was to share program information, support case work, and bring efficiencies to domains such as housing or youth. Other groups such as the Chamber of Commerce were valued but leaders in organisations that were primarily impact-focused did not always feel connected. The New School of the Arts Neighbourhood Centre provided good cross-sector support programs, but capacity and program funding focused collaboration instead of broad general impact. There were additional functions not being provided for shared mentoring, individual support, and bringing together like-minded people focused on making a social impact.

What we observed

During the Ready Grafton program, the local Impact Facilitators saw value in coming together for shared support and work towards common causes. After the SIITR conference, there was a desire for leaders to come back together for continued pursuit of goals.

What the data shows

Health Care and Social Assistance is the Clarence Valley's largest employing industry at 3,431 jobs (17.8%), the sector within which many of the not-for-profit and trading-for-purpose organisations that provide social impact operate. Formal volunteering in the Clarence Valley sits at 14.5%.

Readiness Reflections

Clarity & Understanding

There was clarity in roles and activities in individual focus areas such as youth, housing, health, and education. However, there was less clarity, including shared vision, awareness of roles and policies, and missing perspectives.

Connection & connectivity

There were informal networks within focus areas and emerging and established formal networks, but limited opportunities for cross-focus area services to come together.

Capability & Capacity

Leaders in the community had strong capabilities for leading in their respective areas, but lacked capacity for wider engagement. This could be misinterpreted as lacking leadership capability, when the time and institutional resources were lacking.

Collaboration for purpose

The collaborative structures supported individual focus areas. Inter-agency groups spanned organisational boundaries to an extent, but were limited in influence on broader systemic impacts.

Advocacy & promotion

Structured advocacy focused on areas such as local business from the Chamber of Commerce, or diverse voices on shared areas of health and disadvantage from different faith-based organisations or service providers. There was a limited voice to represent social impact that spanned the community and diverse organisations that could be seen as addressing the common good while at other times might compete for scarce funding.

Initiatives

Grafton Chamber of Purpose

The Chamber of Purpose emerged from a recognition that business and social impact in the Clarence Valley were operating in parallel rather than in partnership. The concept was developed as a network built around a simple but deliberate idea: that profit and purpose are not opposing forces, but complementary ones.

Three types of members were identified as the core audience: local businesses seeking to deepen their community impact, not-for-profits and social enterprises looking for like-minded collaborators, and organisations ready to grow through shared networks and knowledge.

The Chamber was designed to operate across three functions: connecting members through intentional relationship-building, facilitating the exchange of networks, knowledge, and opportunities, and anchoring that activity in a shared commitment to making the Clarence Valley a stronger, more connected, and more prosperous place. Underpinning the model is a broader shift in how business success is measured not by bottom line alone, but by the tangible difference made in the communities in which businesses operate.

The Chamber of Purpose has met regularly through 2026.

Outcomes and Opportunities

Outcomes

The Chamber of Purpose has potential to improve **clarity** as leaders gain visibility of each other's work and developed a shared language for strategic collaboration. **Connection is expected to** shift as the engagement process links people across sectors who have not previously interacted despite living and working in the same community. The group is forming on the **capability** of the individuals involved while developing leadership **capability** in the collective, with an open question around the **capacity** of a volunteer-run group as it looks for support models. **Collaboration** moved from informal goodwill to a named and growing structure with its own identity, oriented toward shared community outcomes rather than individual organisational interests. **Advocacy and promotion** is an emerging consideration, with the group weighing its role in advocating for social impact work across the region. The Chamber has met four times, established a Terms of Reference, and is building toward a formal launch in 2026.

Opportunities

Whether the Chamber of Purpose takes on a genuine backbone function or remains a lighter coordinating body is an open question. The Chamber's value lies in being a structure the community arrived at on its own terms rather than one appointed, funded, or imported. Its continuation depends on a sustainable support model for a group that is currently volunteer-run and forming on the capability and capacity of a small number of individuals. There is scope for the Chamber to act as a channel for coordinated investment attraction and reducing fragmentation in how funders and investors engage with Grafton's social economy. The Chamber also offers a convening structure that other focus areas lacked, a forum where cross-sector conversation about lifelong learning, youth, and social enterprise could form without each building a coalition from scratch. There is also space to develop a shared advocacy voice for social impact work across the region.

Cross-focus: Chamber of Purpose



The emerging Chamber of Purpose brings together community members focused on social impact.

PART 3:

Looking ahead

May 2026-April 2027



3.0 Ready Stanthorpe Flagship 2026

3.0.1 Ready Stanthorpe

Following a selection process that started in August 2025, Stanthorpe, Queensland was selected for the 2026 Ready Communities flagship program.

Reasons for Stanthorpe as the Ready Communities flagship region include:

- A move from NSW to a new state that was still accessible to the past two flagship communities;
- A different population size to previous communities to provide a different point of reference on the ‘gap in the map’;
- A different industry mix in the local economy, highlighting the agribusiness / tourism cohesion and tension and highlight challenges across staff, a transient population, housing, and ebbs and flows in the local economy for small business;
- Proximity to Brisbane airport for the SIITR conference; and
- An invitation from the community.

In January 2026, Ready Communities established an office in Stanthorpe and relocated to the community. Per our commitment to ‘the work’, concentrated time in the community in which we are working is essential.

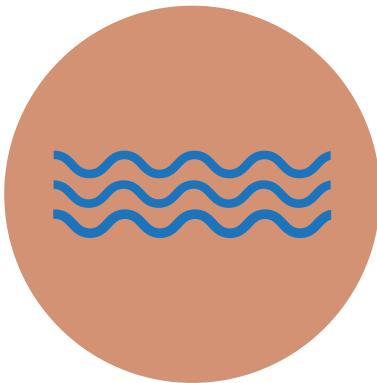
Following a series of introductory meetings late in 2025, the program has been delivered from January to May, 2026.

At the time of this report (May 2026), the community engagement has included: **4** public forums; **45** one-to-one meetings; **6** different community activities; **4** community group meetings; **5** tourism activities; **3** industry events; a number of media interviews; and **7** interviews for short films on Stanthorpe.

These activities have informed **6** focus areas:

- Cultural practices
- Sustainability,
- Local economy,
- Intergenerational connection,
- Community contribution, and
- Liveability.

These focus areas informed the national challenges and connect the national impact community to local outcomes.



Cultural Practices



Sustainability



Community Contribution



Intergenerational Connection



Local Economy



Liveability

3.0.2 Stanthorpe and the Granite Belt

The three Ready Communities flagship communities in table 11 are presented for reference rather than comparison. The geographic scope for Ready Communities engagement varies with each community's focus and needs - Suburbs and Localities (SLA), Statistical Area (SA), or Urban Centre/Locality (UCL). The regions are reported here at UCL level as much of the work focuses on urban centres, while focus areas extend the remit to the surrounding region.

Stanthorpe is a small, long-settled community of 4,873, older in profile, where the working population rises and falls with harvest and the tourist season. Formal volunteering runs well above the national rate supported by dense informal networks developed over time. The community is highly networked, connected through sport, industry, and diverse interest groups. At the same time, changes in demographics from population shifts and a need for renewal in volunteer networks highlight a need for new approaches to community engagement.



	Grafton, Clarence Valley (UCL113005)	Kempsey, Macleay Valley (UCL113006)	Stanthorpe, Southern Downs (UCL315090)
Population	17,155	11,073	4,873
Families	4,357	2,528	1,235
Median Age	42	39	50
Aboriginal/TSI population	11.1%	22.2%	3.6%
0-4yrs	5.8%	5.6%	3.7%
Unemployed	7.3%	9.8%	5.4%
Not in the labour force	6,022	4,644	1,900
Not in the labour force	43.3%	51.4%	46.2%
Median weekly income individual	\$602	\$519	\$560
Median weekly income household	\$1,100	\$997	\$953
SEIFA Rank - Relative Advantage and Disadvantage (out of 2,350; 1 most disadvantaged) (IRSAD, SA2)	190	73	215
SEIFA Score - Relative Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD, SA2)	884	845	890
SEIFA Rank - Relative Disadvantage (out of 2,350; 1 most disadvantaged) (IRSD, SA2)	255	116	280
SEIFA Score - Relative Disadvantage (IRSD, SA2)	907	857	913
Formal volunteering	14.0%	10.9%	20.30%
Australian Defence Force Service (current)	0.10%	0.10%	0.10%
Australian Defence Force Service (previous)	3.6%	3.0%	3.9%
Lone person households (count)	2,332	1,206	772
Lone person households (pct)	34.2%	32.2%	37.7%
Median Rent	\$300	\$280	\$250
Rental stress	44.3%	45.7%	38.1%
Unoccupied dwellings	542	329	389

Table 11 ABS Census Data 2021 - Urban Centre/Locality level (UCL), Social-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) data, ABS 2021

Agriculture is the base of Stanthorpe's economy. Sitting high on the Granite Belt with four distinct seasons, the district grows crops uncommon elsewhere in Queensland including apples, stone fruit, strawberries, vegetables and cool-climate wine grapes. Across the Southern Downs, agriculture is the largest employer and most productive industry, around 22.5% of economic turnover and close to half the value of the region's exports, with horticulture and viticulture centred on Stanthorpe. Production runs in seasonal waves, with the region taking in around 8,000 seasonal workers a year. The same climate that makes the country productive also exposes it to drought, frost and fire.

Tourism is roughly 6% of the regional economy. The Granite Belt is Queensland's main wine destination with more than 40 cellar doors and a defined niche in alternative grape varieties. Local events such as the Apple and Grape Festival bring the community together and tourists to the community, while also concurrently building and placing pressure on the volunteer network. The "Strange Bird" trail includes more than 30 producers whose wines are often available only at the cellar door. Wine, food, national parks, and a cool-climate identity about two and a half hours from Brisbane draw visitors to the source.

Beyond these, the resident economy is smaller and older, weighted toward local services and an established population.

The combination of agriculture and tourism and strong community spirit are an attraction to the community, while challenges from climate risks and a need for support of social structures highlight a need for greater clarity, connection, capability, capacity, collaboration, and advocacy.



Industry - by LGA	Clarence	Macleay	Southern Downs
Top Industry GRP 1	Construction \$1.057B (14.3%)	Construction \$0.632B (15.5%)	Manufacturing \$1.216B (21.1%)
Top Industry GRP 2	Manufacturing \$0.941B (12.7%)	Manufacturing \$0.530B (13.2%)	Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing \$0.918B (16%)
Top Industry GRP 3	Rental, Hire and Real Estate \$0.827B (11.2%)	Rental, Hire and Real Estate \$0.427B (10.6%)	Construction \$0.747B (13%)
Top employing industry 1	Health Care & Social Assistance 3431 jobs (17.8%)	Health Care & Social Assistance 2106 jobs (19.5%)	Health Care & Social Assistance 2,163 (14.8%)
Top employing industry 2	Retail Trade 2,171 jobs (11.3%)	Retail Trade 1,333 jobs (12.3%)	Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing 2,079 (14.2%)
Top employing industry 3	Public administration & Safety, 2027 jobs (10.5%)	Education & Training 1,171 jobs (10.8%)	Retail Trade 1,714 (11.7%)

Table 12 Regional Economic Data from REMPLAN

3.1 An annual regional readiness engine



3.1.1 National Regional Challenges

Part 1 of this report introduced challenges as calls to action within localised focus areas, with the potential to build the enabling conditions of readiness through the identification and pursuit of specific outcomes.

Each challenge connects Stanthorpe’s focus area as the host community to the systemic drivers described in Part 1, grounds it in national evidence, and names a direction for collective work in 2026. They are designed to be read as a portfolio rather than a list. Each challenge follows a consistent structure:

- The systemic driver it addresses
- The local link to Stanthorpe
- The national evidence that frames the opportunity, what the Stanthorpe community said, and the mission for 2026.

Each challenge is defined by the affected systemic drivers of change, the national, state, and local context, the community inputs that informed the challenge, and the language of the challenge.

Each challenge also includes a “Challenge Engine” that provides actionable outcomes from three perspectives:

Case Studies: We are looking for exemplar case studies that represent insights through success or failure, framed from a lens of the five readiness enabling conditions of how clarity, connection, capability and capacity, collaboration, and advocacy and promotion. These are submitted through an expression of interest and presented at a national forum in September. One case study from each challenge will then be invited to present at the 2026 Social Impact in the Regions National Pitchfest in Stanthorpe.

Mapping and current context: Each challenge will be supported with mapping and definition that will apply to the national, state, and local level in Stanthorpe.

Challenge statements to invite participation: Each challenge will include challenge statements that will invite participation over the next 12 months following the Social Impact in the Regions conference. We will track progress against these challenges to present at Social Impact in the Regions 2027.



Sustainability
Show Australia how your region keeps tourists coming even when the water runs low.

CLICK HERE



Community Contribution
Show Australia how your community keeps its volunteer heart strong.

CLICK HERE



Local Economy
Show Australia how your region keeps its money working locally.

CLICK HERE



Cultural Practices
Show Australia how your community tells a story that belongs to everyone.

CLICK HERE



Liveability
Show Australia how your region solves its own housing problem.

CLICK HERE



Intergenerational Connection
Show Australia how your generations learn from each other to build something stronger.

CLICK HERE

3.1.2 Investment Readiness workshops, engagement, and mapping

In November 2025 the Ready Communities team delivered Readiness Workshops to 75 community members through regional NSW. In June 2026 the Ready Communities team will re-commence with a renewed focus on investment readiness. The workshops will be delivered in Dalby, Roma, Charleville and Monto (QLD) and Forbes and Armidale (NSW).

Not only do our tours provide valuable insights for workshop participants, they also enable us to extend our body of knowledge on regional readiness across regional Australia.

3.1.3 Alumni and Partner activation

Ready Communities has a large and growing alumni of over 630 people who have attended a Social Impact in the Regions conference. These people are regionally based changemakers from the not-for-profit and business sectors, they represent government, philanthropy and intermediary services. The common thread is that they care about sustainable change in regional communities.

In 2026 we will launch an alumni platform which will better enable alumni to connect, share resources and build alliances. While we do not have current capacity to manage an online community, we recognise our alumni network is an important, and core part of our broader vision.



Get involved...

Regional Communities

Host a flagship program

Start a conversation about hosting a Ready Communities Flagship Program (Including SIITR Conference).

Host a workshop

Bring investment readiness into your region.

Submit a local case study

Share what is working in your community with our National Regional Challenges.

Start a conversation

Funders and policy makers

Back readiness

Fund the conditions that make readiness last.

Support a year of national regional change

Get involved across National Regional Challenges, SIITR and our ongoing advocacy and research.

Use the evidence

Draw on the report for policy and investment design.

Start a conversation

Practitioners & Supporters

Attend SIITR26

Join us, and a national cohort of regional changemakers in Stanthorpe QLD 2-4 Sept.

Tell us about your work

Submit a case study to the National Regional Challenges.

Share the work

Apply our learning in your own work.

Start a conversation

Appendix: Drivers of Change

What drives transition?



1.1.2.1 Population & demographics ⁶⁻¹⁶

Population across regional Australia is shifting in composition, distribution, and age structure, with the pace and direction of change varying significantly between places. In regional communities this is experienced as:

- Young people leave for education and employment.
- Engagement in work or study is consistently lower in regional and remote areas than in cities, and structured local pathways and return rates vary.
- Median ages in regional areas are climbing faster than in capital cities, with the gap projected to widen further over the coming decade, concentrating institutional knowledge in fewer hands while growing demand for health and aged care services.
- Migration patterns are diversifying communities through international arrivals, disaster-displaced households, and lifestyle movers, though the post-COVID internal migration surge has moderated and overseas migration is now the primary driver of regional population growth in several states.
- First Nations communities hold the youngest demographic profile in many regions, with a median age roughly fifteen years below the national average, and cultural governance, self-determination, and youth leadership expanding alongside persistent outcome disparities.
- Communities are moving toward or away from population thresholds that determine whether critical services such as schools, GP clinics, and bank branches remain viable, often without clear visibility of the trajectory they are on or the proximity of the next tipping point.

Sub-topics	Factors	
Youth and young people	• Accelerating out-migration • Narrowing local pathways	• Shifting youth participation • Evolving aspiration narratives
Ageing & life stages	• Rising median age • Loss of shared knowledge	• Growing service demand • Community contribution
Migration & mobility	• Lifestyle migration • International pathways • Disaster displacement	• Diversifying skills inflow • Population churn
First Nations communities	• Strengthen cultural governance • Growing youth advocacy • Increased youth representation	• Advancing self-determination • Persistent outcome disparities • Growing youth population
Population thresholds & viability	• Service tipping points • Growth economic and social costs	• Compound service withdrawal • Low planning and threshold visibility
Demographic composition	• Shifting gender ratios • Changing household structures	• Workforce-population gaps • Diversifying cultural profiles

Table 2 Population & demographics drivers of change subtopics and factors



1.1.2.2 Environment & climate ¹⁷⁻²⁷

Environment and climate are reshaping what is viable in regional Australia based on where people live, what industries are possible, what infrastructure is needed, and how communities recover between events.

- Australia is warming faster than the global average and is experiencing more frequent and intense extreme weather, with fire seasons lengthening, flood events compounding, and the interval between disasters shortening in many regions.
 - The growing cumulative toll is evident as insurance claims from catastrophic events have risen by nearly fifty per cent in the past five years.
 - Nearly one in eight households now experience insurance affordability stress, with premiums in northern Australia more than double those in the south.
 - Australia's National Climate Risk Assessment released in 2025 found that the country faces severe risks to regional and remote communities by 2050, with compounding, cascading and concurrent hazards becoming more likely.
- Agricultural systems are adjusting to changed rainfall, temperature and water availability at varying speeds, while energy transition is transforming host communities and intensifying expectations around local benefit-sharing.
 - Land use competition is sharpening as renewable, extractive, agricultural and conservation interests converge on the same regional landscapes, and water allocation grows more consequential and more contested.
 - Climate adaptation and planning responses are diverging across jurisdictions, with states building legislative frameworks and risk assessment cycles and local governments integrating climate into planning without consistent resourcing.
 - Climate is becoming a population driver, reshaping liveability geography through insurance costs, property values and migration patterns in ways that compound every other demographic and infrastructure pressure.

Sub-topics	Factors	
Disaster exposure & recovery	• Increasing event frequency • Compounding cumulative toll • Diverging resilience capacity	• Overlapping recovery cycles • Distorting recovery-driven economic effects
Climate adaptation & planning	• Accelerating agricultural adjustment • Integrated climate planning • Opening adaptation-driven opportunities	• Upgrading infrastructure resilience • Expanding community-led adaptation • Diverging institutional response
Natural resource management	• Intensifying land use competition • Valuing ecosystem services	• Contesting water allocation • Expanding Indigenous land management
Energy transition	• Transforming host communities • Regional economic activity • Emerging community energy models	• Benefit-sharing expectations • Fossil fuel transition
Climate as a population driver	• Shifting liveability geography • Rising insurance and cost burden	• Redirecting migration patterns • Altering regional identity

Table 3 Environment & climate drivers of change subtopics and factors



1.1.2.3 Infrastructure & access 28-34, 35-46

Infrastructure can determine what is possible in a region and who can participate:

- Housing is now a systemic constraint across most of regional Australia, with affordability deteriorating across both capital cities and regional areas, new supply falling to its lowest point in a decade, and a projected shortfall of more than 260,000 dwellings against the national Housing Accord target.
- Housing availability directly shapes workforce attraction, population retention, service delivery viability, and community composition.
- Transport options are contracting, deepening car reliance while freight costs rise and links between smaller centres fragment.
- Digital connectivity is improving but unevenly. A 21-point digital access gap persists between major cities and very remote Australia, one in five Australians remain digitally excluded, and affordability and capability barriers compound the infrastructure gap, particularly for First Nations communities, older residents and low-income households.
- Health and social services continue to centralise into larger regional centres, tightening a circular constraint where service access depends on workforce, workforce depends on housing, and housing depends on liveability, with enabling services such as childcare functioning as hard prerequisites for participation.
- Shared community spaces sit with underutilised potential in many regions with varying models of ownership, management, and volunteer staffing impacting space sustainability.
- Energy costs remain higher in regional areas even as regions host a growing share of the national renewable transition, with benefits not realised in regions impacted by regions with displaced industries.
- Water and wastewater systems are ageing and capacity-constrained, impacting development in communities where governance and investment can be fragmented across multiple authorities.
- Waste and resource recovery face persistent distance and scale penalties, with landfill capacity declining, compliance costs rising, and the cost burden falling locally.

Sub-topics	Factors	
Housing	• Tightening supply-demand balance • Diverging affordability • Cascading systemic effects	• Narrowing stock diversity • Shifting investment dynamics
Transport & mobility	• Deepening and unequal car reliance • Rising freight costs • Inconsistent local public transport	• Reorganising transport networks • Fragmented inter-community links
Digital connectivity	• Uneven improvements • Increased economic opportunity	• Lagging digital capability • Accelerating platform dependency
Health & social services access	• Widening distance-based gaps • Expanding telehealth reach • Tightening workforce-enabling services	• Centralising service geography • Tightening circular constraints (housing, workforce, health access)
Shared spaces & community assets	• Mixed utilisation rates for existing assets • Fragmenting ownership and management	• Enabling shared use and connection function
Energy	• Rising regional energy costs • Expanding transition hosting	• Contesting benefit distribution • Opening distributed possibilities
Water & wastewater	• Ageing and capacity-constrained systems • Development-gating supply • Shifting allocation pressures	• Uneven service standards • Fragmented governance and investment
Waste & resource recovery	• Distance and scale penalties • Declining landfill capacity, rising compliance • Emerging waste stream challenges	• Limited resource recovery pathways • Cost burden falling locally

Table 4 Infrastructure & access drivers of change subtopics and factors



1.1.2.4 Workforce & employment ⁴⁷⁻⁵⁹

Whether someone can find meaningful work, whether an employer can fill a role, and whether the support structures exist to make both possible depends on housing, transport, childcare, education, liveability, and community connection.

- Almost a third of assessed occupations nationally are in shortage, with 139 occupations persistently unfilled since 2021 and 21 in shortage exclusively in regional areas.
- Trades remain the hardest to fill, with a vacancy fill rate below 55 per cent, while trade apprenticeship commencements declined over 2024 as demand intensified.
- Regions offer genuine lifestyle attractors such as space, connection, pace of life, but housing is a hard constraint on attraction and dual-income household decisions complicate relocation.
- Beneath headline employment figures, insecure work concentrates in seasonal and care sectors, participation barriers compound for those without access to childcare, transport or affordable connectivity, and a growing number of employed people do not earn a liveable income.
- Youth pathways are uneven: structured transitions between school and local careers are present in some regions and limited in others, and the apprenticeship pipeline is not keeping pace with replacement need.
- Communities remain deeply reliant on volunteers for emergency services, sport, events, governance and social support, with succession thinning and the economic value of this contribution often unrecognised in workforce planning.
- Technology is changing regional jobs with more than six million Australians now working from home at least part of the time, while emerging roles in energy transition, environmental management and digital services appear where enabling conditions exist even as digital capability diverges sharply across regions.
- Artificial intelligence is expected to significantly reshape the task composition of work across all sectors, creating new roles and augmenting others while displacing entire sectors.
- Opportunities created from generative AI will concentrate in places with existing digital infrastructure, higher-skilled workforces and service-sector density, reinforcing rather than closing the gap between metropolitan and regional labour markets.

Sub-topics	Factors	
Shortages & mismatches	• Persisting critical vacancies • Widening structural mismatch	• Mismatch in qualification pathways • Shifting wage dynamics
Attraction & retention	• Strengthening lifestyle proposition • Tightening housing constraint • Rising turnover costs	• Complicating dual-income decisions • Fragmenting professional development
Underemployment & participation	• Underreporting workforce strain • Compounding participation barriers	• Concentrating insecure work • Expanding working poverty • Gating participation through care access
Youth pathways	• Weakening school-to-work transitions • Lagging apprenticeship pipeline	• Opening entrepreneurship access • Widening engagement spectrum
Volunteer workforce	• Reliance for critical services • Thinning succession pipeline	• Persisting recognition gap • Adapting engagement models
Future of work	• Recomposing regional jobs • Unlocking location-independent work	• Diverging digital capability • Emerging roles and job-types

Table 5 Workforce & employment drivers of change subtopics and factors



1.1.2.5a Industry & economic structure: export focused

Regional export economies generate gross regional product and bring external revenue into communities, with each sector in structural transition.

- Agriculture, fisheries and forestry have grown 45 per cent in real terms over the past two decades to exceed \$100 billion in production value, yet growth driven by commodity prices rather than production volume can mean headline figures do not always translate proportionally into local employment, farm numbers, or community-level economic activity.
- Farms continue to consolidate, income streams diversify into carbon, biodiversity, renewables, and agritourism, and workforce requirements shift toward technology, environmental management, and business skills alongside traditional agricultural capability.
- Mining is expanding geographically as critical minerals extend the sector's footprint into remote and previously undeveloped regions, with 124 investment-ready projects identified nationally, while commodity price volatility creates boom-bust dynamics in host communities and the interface between projects and local populations intensifies..

- Tourism spending patterns have shifted post-COVID in composition, length of stay, and distribution, with micro-business resilience under strain, workforce gaps persisting, and the tension between economic benefit and community pressure sharpening in high-visitation regions.
- Manufacturing is changing in composition, with value-added and processing activity concentrating where enabling conditions of freight, energy, workforce, and supply chain proximity align, and growing policy attention on supply chain sovereignty.
- Creative industries contribute \$67.4 billion to GDP nationally, with creative employment growing at more than fifty per cent above the rate of the broader workforce.
- Regional creative workers earn almost a third less than metropolitan counterparts and the sector's economic contribution is significantly wider than its institutional footprint, with more people working in creative occupations outside the creative industries than within them.

- Emerging industries including renewables, circular economy, and digital are generating new regional economic activity, but this activity can cluster in regions where infrastructure, workforce, and institutional support already exist.
- Emerging sectors can disrupt land use and widening rather than close equality gaps. Policy attention flows to export sectors, yet their viability depends on the foundational economy of health, education, retail, construction, and government services that make a region liveable.

Sub-topics	Factors	
Agriculture & agribusiness ⁶⁰⁻⁶⁵	• Diverging value from volume • Accelerating climate adaptation • Evolving workforce requirements	• Diversifying income streams • Consolidating farm structures
Mining & resources ⁶⁶⁻⁷¹	• Expanding geographic footprint • Fluctuating commodity viability	• Growing yet complex downstream capture • Intensifying community interface
Tourism & visitor economy ⁷²⁻⁷⁴	• Shifting spending patterns • Deepening workforce gaps	• Broadening the offering • Intensifying community-tourism tension
Manufacturing & processing ⁷⁵⁻⁷⁹	• Shifting sectoral composition • Tightening enabling conditions	• Concentrating regional advantage • Supply chain sovereignty
Creative industries ⁸⁰⁻⁸⁵	• Embedding creative value across sectors • Persisting workforce precarity • Concentrating digital distribution	• Anchoring through festivals and events • Expanding First Nations creative enterprise • Diverging investment and recognition
Emerging industries ^{86,87}	• Generating new regional activity • Concentrating in enabled regions	• Disrupting existing land use

Table 6 Industry and Economic Structure - Export-focused industries drivers of change subtopics and factors



1.1.2.5b Industry & economic structure: population focused

Industries that serve the local population including health, education, retail, construction, professional services, and government are the foundational economy of regional Australia. They require a baseline population to sustain, they determine whether people stay or leave when the export economy contracts, and they are where most regional Australians actually work.

- Health care and social assistance is now the largest employing industry nationally at over 14 per cent of the workforce, and in many regional local government areas it accounts for more than one in five jobs making it simultaneously a service, an economic anchor, and the sector most exposed to workforce competition as every region recruits from the same constrained pool.
- Education institutions are evolving their roles beyond teaching, functioning as community anchors, but access can be difficult as campuses consolidate and alignment between training offerings and local employment needs widen.
- Emerging education delivery models provide physical connection and access to multiple structured university programs.

- Local retail and main street activity functions as a visible signal of community confidence where vacant shopfronts either mark decline or become sites for activation. Regional retailers navigate online competition, changing consumer behaviour, and proximity to larger centres.
- Construction faces escalating and concurrent demands from housing, post-disaster rebuild, infrastructure investment, and energy transition, even as a constrained workforce pipelines impacts outcomes across other areas of regional development affecting how fast housing can be built and infrastructure delivered.
- Professional and financial services such as banking, legal, accounting, and insurance are withdrawing from regional communities at a pace that can be missed in policy discussions. Almost 40 per cent of bank branches closed since 2017, fewer than 10 per cent of solicitors practice outside metropolitan areas, and each closure removes local knowledge and commercial capability that supports other economic activity on top of the service.

- Government and community services continue consolidating toward larger centres, widening access trade-offs and expanding the load carried by local government, while communities organise through new collective models to fill gaps left by institutional withdrawal.
- Policy attention can appear to flow to export sectors, even as the population-focused economy makes a region liveable and impacts the necessary workforce, services, and social fabric.

Sub-topics	Factors	
Health & aged care ⁸⁸⁻⁹³	• Expanding as economic anchor • Intensifying workforce competition	• Widening service variation • Expanding and testing telehealth boundaries
Education & training ⁹⁴⁻⁹⁸	• Evolving anchor functions • Fragmenting access	• Widening alignment • Emerging structures to access qualifications
Local retail & main street ⁹⁹⁻¹⁰⁷	• Signalling community confidence • Adapting to competition	• Activating vacant spaces
Construction & trades ¹⁰⁸⁻¹¹⁴	• Escalating demand • Depleting workforce pipeline	• Bottlenecking other outcomes
Professional and financial services ¹¹⁵⁻¹²⁰	• Accelerating physical withdrawal • Deepening access inequality • Compounding community-level effects	• Shifting to digital and remote delivery • Eroding local commercial capability
Government and community services ¹²¹⁻¹³¹	• Consolidating service footprint • Widening access trade-offs	• Expanding local government load • Shifting governance dynamics with collective impact

Table 7 Industry and Economic Structure - Population-focused industries drivers of change subtopics and factors



1.1.2.6 Social infrastructure & community ¹³²⁻¹⁴⁹

Social infrastructure includes the relationships, organisations, leadership, and shared norms through which communities organise and support each other. It is often invisible in economic development strategy and easy to take for granted until it fails.

- National social cohesion data shows that while trust in government has declined, local connections through neighbourhoods, workplaces and community groups remain the primary force holding communities together through difficult periods.
- Trust and cohesion are being tested as communities navigate rapid demographic change, economic pressure, and widening internal divides, with the Scanlon Institute finding that cost-of-living stress and concern over inequality are now among the strongest predictors of weakening belonging.
- Leadership is concentrating onto fewer people carrying more roles, reducing boundary-spanning connections between organisations, sectors, and external systems that hold local networks together.
- The not-for-profit sector is the backbone of community service delivery, employing 1.54 million people (over 10 per cent of the national workforce) while drawing on 3.77 million volunteers. More than half of all registered charities now operate with no paid staff, the highest figure on record.
- Many NFPs are performing coordination and convening roles that extend beyond their funded mandate, absorbing community backbone functions without recognition or resourcing. Funding models can reward compliance over responsiveness and the sector competes for the same constrained workforce as every other industry.
- Civic participation is shifting as traditional committee memberships decline and informal and project-based engagement remain. Barriers compound for those already excluded through cost, transport, childcare, and digital access, and communities can withdraw from engagement processes that are perceived as having bias or not leading to visible action.
- Wellbeing trajectories are diverging between places and within them, with escalating mental health demand compounding alongside housing stress, financial pressure, and isolation.

- Community-led responses expand to fill gaps left by formal services. The sense of what a place is and who it is for is being actively reshaped by demographic change, shared crisis, and the growing recognition that place attachment is itself a force that drives participation, retention, and willingness to invest in community life.

Sub-topics	Factors	
Trust & cohesion	• Tension in relational bonds • Navigating insider-outsider dynamics	• Fluctuating institutional trust • Diverging community trajectories
Leadership & keystone roles	• Concentrating leadership load • Thinning boundary-spanning capacity	• Uneven recognition and support • Emerging new leadership pathways
Not-for-profit sector	• Stretched delivery capacity • Widening viability gap • Competing for workforce	• Funding models reshaping practice • Expanding beyond funded mandate
Civic participation	• Shifting participation forms • Compounding participation barriers • Concentrating governance representation	• Demanding authentic engagement • Evolving youth involvement
Safety & wellbeing	• Diverging wellbeing trajectories • Shifting safety perceptions • Activating community responses	• Escalating mental health demand • Compounding contributing factors
Community identity & belonging	• Deepening place attachment • Diversifying belonging experience	• Reshaping through shared experience • Strengthening as retention asset

Table 8 Social infrastructure & community drivers of change subtopics and factors



1.1.2.7 Governance & investment ¹⁵⁰⁻¹⁶³

How regions are governed, funded, and included in decisions can determine what might be considered as possible.

- Funding structures organised by department and issue can be inefficient for complex and intersecting challenges.
- Program cycles of one to three years run against needs that require systemic, long-term investment.
- Application and reporting requirements require capacity and capability often not available in smaller impact-driven organisations.
- Competitive program design can incentivise communities to compete against each other rather than collaborate. Local government faces tightening fiscal positions as Financial Assistance Grants have halved as a share of Commonwealth taxation revenue over 30 years, from one per cent in 1996 to just half a per cent today, even as responsibilities expand often without commensurate resourcing. Nearly one in four councils rely on grants for more than 20 per cent of their annual operating expenditure.
- Local government expenditure per capita has flatlined over the past decade while spending by state, territory and Commonwealth governments has continued to rise.
- The place-based program landscape is proliferating, bringing both opportunity and coordination strain as multiple programs operate in the same geography, community engagement capacity is stretched, and backbone organisations that hold coordination together lack sustainable funding models.
- Philanthropic interest in regional Australia is growing, with over \$13 billion donated to charities nationally in 2021 and government targeting a doubling by 2030.
- Funding distribution gaps persist with access concentrating through existing networks and skills and relationships to engage with philanthropic capital can remain centralised rather than distributed across regions.
- Policy alignment across three levels of government can compound complexity, with portfolio boundaries between economic development, community development, health, education, and environment making cross-cutting problems difficult to address.
- When included in policy design, regional voices can be inconsistent in depth and authenticity.

- Communities are increasingly expected to lead their own change within governance structures through which they operate not consistently being designed for that purpose.
- The degree to which external support builds local agency rather than creating dependency varies significantly across programs and places.

Sub-topics	Factors	
Funding structures	• Shortening cycle against system need • Fragmenting across portfolios • Shifting to outcomes with uneven method	• Incentivised competition competes with collaboration • Escalating compliance load
Philanthropy & impact investment	• Growing regional interest • Concentrating access through networks • Navigating partnership dynamics	• Persisting distribution gaps • Emerging alternative models
Place-based program landscape	• Proliferating programs • Straining community engagement capacity • Building shared practice	• Complicating coordination • Testing backbone sustainability
Local government	• Tightening fiscal positions • Diverging institutional capability	• Expanding responsibility without resourcing • Anchoring democratic participation
Policy alignment	• Compounding multi-level complexity • Inconsistent regional voice in policy design • Opening alignment opportunities	• Hardening portfolio boundaries • Lagging evaluation frameworks
Decision-making & agency	• Concentrating institutional access • Underrepresenting diverse voices	• Trading off external support against local agency • Eroding or rebuilding trust

Table 9 Governance & investment drivers of change subtopics and factors



1.1.2.8 Identity, culture and narrative [164-172](#)

Identity, culture, and narrative informs how a community understands itself and what it believes is possible. They can influence whether people feel they belong and whether they come, stay, and invest.

- First Nations culture is deepening in recognition and visibility across regional Australia, with living culture being vitalised through language, art, governance, and enterprise.
- Over 1,000 registered First Nations businesses now operate within arts and heritage industries, accounting for an estimated 20 per cent of all First Nations businesses.
- Truth-telling processes advance unevenly and the relationship between cultural authority and institutional structures continues to be negotiated.
- Arts and culture function as social infrastructure in addition to their economic contribution, building connections, shared experiences, and sense of place.
- Place identity is strengthening as a recognised attractor for population and investment, with communities seeking to own and shape their story rather than have it defined by external media, data, or deficit narratives.
- The number of Australians for whom journalism is their primary occupation fell by 19 per cent over the decade to 2021, with regional newspaper closures accelerating as digital platform revenue shifts away from local publishing.
- Communities diversify their own storytelling through social media, podcasts, and community platforms, partially filling the gap but with different reach, accountability, and sustainability.
- The Australian Government's Revive cultural policy and News Media Assistance Program represent institutional responses, but the pace of contraction continues to outrun the scale of support.
- Heritage provides shared memory that grounds identity and connects generations, though that heritage can carry contested meaning within a community.
- The willingness to engage with different experiences of shared history varies by place. Regional voice remains uneven. Some communities have effective advocacy infrastructure, established networks, and the capability to contest for national visibility, while others do not.

- The diversity of who is represented in community voice varies significantly, with effort required to include perspectives beyond established organisations and individuals.

Sub-topics	Factors	
First Nations culture & heritage	• Deepening cultural recognition • Vitalising living culture	• Advancing truth-telling • Expanding economic and cultural presence
Arts, culture & creative industries	• Evolving as social infrastructure • Growing economic contribution	• Expressing community identity • Persisting investment and recognition gaps
Place identity & pride	• Strengthening as attractor • Building internal confidence	• Shifting external perception • Agency in narrative control
Media & storytelling	• Contracting local media presence • Diversifying community storytelling	• Persisting deficit framing • Developing strategic communications
Heritage & history	• Drawing on shared memory • Navigating contested histories	• Leveraging heritage assets • Connecting across generations
Regional voice & representation	• Contesting national visibility • Varying advocacy effectiveness	• Broadening or narrowing voice diversity • Convening for collective voice

Table 10 Identity, culture & narrative drivers of change subtopics and factors

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