Infoxchange

START WITH INCLUSION: THE CONNECTED COMMUNITIES APPROACH TO DIGITAL INCLUSION

This resource outlines the Connected Communities approach to digital inclusion and its outcomes for participants and community workers. It has been written for digital inclusion advocates, practitioners, and those who fund digital inclusion work, and presents a more impactful way to plan and deliver digital inclusion activities, side-by-side with community.

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AN INTRODUCTION

MESSAGE FROM THE TEAM

Over the past three decades, advancements in digital technology have revolutionised human communication and interaction, transforming the way we connect with one another. With the introduction of the world wide web, and the accelerating digitisation that followed, we find ourselves living in a world where a person's access to digital tools and skills can determine whether or not they are able to participate in social, economic, and political life. The Covid-19 pandemic sharply accelerated this trend, creating an even sharper divide between those that are able to benefit from digital tools, and those that are not.

This rapid expansion of online services is accompanied by an exponential growth in demand for technology related support, and for addressing the gaps in skills, knowledge and agility that our increasing complex digital lives demand.

There are many programs and services on offer to support people to better navigate the digital landscape, but all too often the people who may be most in need of this support are the least likely to be able to access it. No single training package, website or set of resources could possibly keep up with the diverse range of needs, and increasing rate of technological change that our communities are experiencing.

With these conditions, challenges and service gaps in mind, we set out to contribute a new offering to the digital inclusion program ecosystem, creating an 'un-program' of sorts. A different 'doorway' to welcome people who have not found their place in existing digital support programs and services. Connected Communities is a relationship-driven approach to help people make sense of technology in a way that harnesses their existing knowledge and skills. It puts people's hope, ambitions, stories and challenges at the centre of the conversation. It promotes the use of digital technology as a tool (one of many) to support the flourishing of people, their sense of wellbeing, relationships and connection with their community.

The Connected Communities project was made possible thanks to a great number of people with many skills from a range of communities and organisations. By working across a diverse set of community contexts, our ideas, practices and methods have been tested, broken and reinvented. These conditions are true of the world, where no two organisations, communities or people are alike.

This resource is not a playbook, or a set of instructions to help you replicate this work. What we offer (at this stage) are insights, discoveries and evidence-based practices - flipped around, applied in new spaces with novel applications.

A final point we wish to emphasise: this work revealed to our team the significant pressure that community workers now face due to the digitisation of government and private sector services. Consequently, we feel it is imperative to not only analyse and address the needs of the community, but also to focus on understanding, resourcing, and better supporting those who provide community services. Further investment in resources and research in this area is necessary to make any progress on the issue of social and digital inclusion.

We hope that by reading this report you will find hope, inspiration and see new opportunities for how we may address the issue of digital and social inclusion together. We encourage you to reach out to our team and share your own practices, ideas, insights, challenges and ambitions so that we can collectively create a more integrated, inclusive, vibrant and connected community.

THE CONNECTED COMMUNITIES TEAM

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TERMINOLOGY AND NAMING IN THIS DOCUMENT

The authors of this report acknowledge their contribution is a part of the ongoing discussions regarding digital inclusion, social justice, community development, and critiques of power structures in and outside the social and community sector. As authors, we acknowledge our privilege of receiving significant philanthropic funding, payment for time spent thinking and developing skills in this area, and higher levels of digital inclusion compared to other program participants.

To help readers understand the parties involved in the program, we will use terms such as "the team," "participants," or "community worker." However, these terms may not align with personal identification and reflect deep systems of institutional power and bureaucracy.

While we use **"community workers"** to describe individuals in various roles in social work, healthcare, education, and other services in the community, we recognise that it does not reflect the diversity of skills and occupations in this field.

The primary goal of this report is to propose tools and methods that dissolve, decolonise and deinstitutionalise these distinctions to create an authentic community of individuals working together towards shared and individual goals. To do so, we will prefer the use of **"people"** instead of **"participants"** and **"the group"** or **"the community"** wherever possible.

We refer to the Connected Communities **project** when discussing the work done so far, but our ultimate aim is to support the ongoing flourishing of the **program** as a continual process of community co-creation for digital inclusion.

INTRODUCING THE CONNECTED COMMUNITIES TEAM

This project and the Connected Communities workshops were developed and delivered by Infoxchange in partnership with Star Health, Australian Red Cross and Greenhills Neighbourhood house in communities across Victoria. Through these partnerships we connected and worked alongside people living in public housing, migrant workers, community sector workers, leaders and volunteers.

We were able to complete this project with generous funding from the TPG Telecom Foundation.

INFOXCHANGE

Infoxchange is a leading not-for-profit social enterprise that has been delivering technology for social justice for over 30 years. Infoxchange works with community, government and corporate partners to address issues around homelessness, family violence, mental health and disability, as well as supporting First Nations communities, women, youth and families.

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES PARTNERS

DELIVERY PARTNERS

Australian Red Cross
Australian Red Cross is a humanitarian organisation that mobilises the power of humanity to bring people and communities together in times of need, and builds on community strengths.

Star Health
Star Health is a leading provider of Primary Health services in Victoria which exists to champion health equity for communities across Victoria.

Greenhills Neighbourhood House
Greenhills Neighbourhood House provides a welcoming community place that fosters the well-being of local residents. Greenhills provides a space for all people to come together to connect, grow and learn.

PROJECT SNAPSHOT

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES IN A NUTSHELL

"Social inclusion is a process which ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living that is considered normal in the society in which they live. It ensures that they have greater participation in decision making which affects their lives and access to their fundamental rights" (Commission of the European Communities, 2003, cited in United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016, p. 19) [1].

Connected Communities is a project run by Infoxchange in partnership with the Australian Red Cross, supported by funding from the TPG Telecom Foundation.

The Connected Communities project aims to:

- Strengthen the capacity of people experiencing low social and digital inclusion
- Form meaningful connections between community members, in order to facilitate the exchange of experience and knowledge
- Support the development of new skills and insights within communities, and open new avenues for people to engage with their community

The central values of the Connected Communities project include:

- Highlighting the strengths of people, not their needs
- Digital inclusion starts with inclusion, not digital
- Going slowly means going further
- Working to be responsive and open, not linear and prescriptive
- Prioritising the building of relationships
- Respecting the principle that we all have things to learn and knowledge to share

The Connected Communities approach starts from an acknowledgement of three core principles.

- Firstly, that there is no 'silver bullet' approach to addressing the issue of digital inclusion, and that "numbers served" alone, is a poor indicator of efficacy.

- Secondly, community members already possess significant knowledge, experience and skills which is rarely identified or valued in 'top down' approaches to digital inclusion.

- Finally, Connected Communities recognises that both our communities, and the technologies we use, are in a constant state of change. This places significant demands on our collective ability to make sense of things, to produce and maintain static learning resources, and to generally 'keep up' with cultural and technological change (an issue present both in 'expert' fields and in the broader population).

From these three core principles, Connected Communities embodies an approach that looks to community members themselves (and the workers that support them) to lead the conversation. Discussions, activities and technical skill development are anchored around those topics that are most pressing for each community, and community wellbeing is always prioritised.

Digital inclusion is a vital component of social inclusion, and digital capability is one aim of this work. It is important to remember however, that the issue we are facing is not solely or even primarily digital in nature, it is very much human.

Many of us will recognise that feeling of not being able to "keep up" with the pace of change in modern society, and the feelings of disorientation, frustration and sometimes shame that come with grappling with an unfamiliar system, process or interface. Ultimately, our main goal in engaging with these systems is to achieve some kind of positive outcome, whether that be connecting to family or accessing vital community services. The digital aspect of this is, at best, a helpful mediator, and at worst an insurmountable roadblock.

The outcomes we support for participants includes a greater awareness of the uses, benefits and risks associated with digital technology. More than this though, we see the aim and goal of Connected Communities' as being very literally, i.e. to create opportunities for connection within communities in digital and real-world settings, and to give community members and sector workers the confidence and knowledge to harness this technology in ways that serve their own particular goals and needs.

This is not a 'one and done' approach; it requires care, flexibility, empathy, and effort – but the rewards it reaps and the lasting impact it has, extend far beyond digital inclusion.

Outcomes for Sector Workers

Access to digital skills support and practices

Opportunity to share knowledge and skills

Participation in a community of practitioners

Participation in planning, delivery and evaluation

Confidence translating existing skills to technology

Outcomes for Community Participants

Confidence and ability using technology

Leadership experience and recognition of skills

Social supports and community participation

Opportunity to solve problems collectively

Safety and confidence in a group environment

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In 2020 Infoxchange led the Connected Future project. This work aimed to address digital technology skills and knowledge gaps in disaster prone areas of regional Australia.

Our goal was to support these communities to more effectively utilise technology to stay safe and connected in times of natural disasters.

Through this research, it became clear that without a way of connecting both digital inclusion and disaster resilience to people's day to day needs, **no app, resource, or training course was likely to be able to make a significant impact** [2].

Key findings from the research for Connected Future included:

- Community members were interested in exploring digital inclusion in ways that were immediately relevant to them. Digital skills and resilience building were a secondary priority.

- Community members appreciated being asked what they felt and thought about the topics discussed. Older participants in particular, felt they were rarely considered to be 'subject matter experts' in anything, despite their accumulated knowledge and wisdom.

- The sharing of stories and experience, hearing what other people thought about issues like technology and disaster responses, and discussion of other local issues were all key to keeping people engaged in the experience.

All of these elements contributed to breaking down the traditional "teacher" and "learner" paradigm, and made space for people to explore both the gaps in their knowledge and to recognise the strengths already present in their community.

The Connected Future project incorporated extensive community consultation, in which Infoxchange spoke to 130 community members from three states to learn about their needs and aspirations related to digital technology. Over 30 social services sector experts working in the field of social inclusion and equity were also consulted.

The research undertaken as part of the Connected Future project was the basis for and led to the development of the Connected Communities program.

In 2022, the Connected Communities team, with the support of funding from the TPG Telecom Foundation, formed a number of community sector partnerships to deliver the next iteration of the program.

DIGITAL INCLUSION: THE CONTEXT

The Evidence

Though we will point to relevant sources of data where appropriate, much of what we know about how digital exclusion is experienced in the community is anecdotal. To our knowledge, very little relevant data is currently being collected by community organisations. We have gathered our insights in situ, through regular conversations with workers and community leaders, in libraries and neighbourhood houses and other community organisations. These workers regularly reach out to us in search of resources, advice, and solutions.
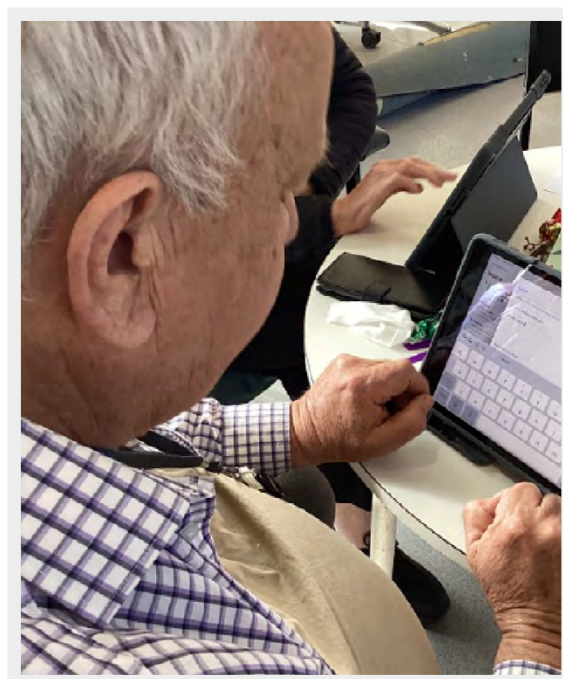
DEFINING DIGITAL INCLUSION

Digital technology plays a central role in our lives, but access to it is not evenly distributed. As essential services are increasingly being delivered online, it is crucial that no one gets left behind.

In Australia, digital inclusion is based on the premise that everyone in this country should be able to use the digital technologies they need to manage their health and wellbeing, access education and services, organise their finances, and to connect with friends, family, and the wider world.

Becoming digitally included requires more than simply owning a computer, or having access to a smartphone and an internet connection. Despite the huge leaps we have made in gaining digital skills through the pandemic, according to the Good Things Foundation's Digital Nation Australia 2021 Report [3], fewer than 40% of Australians feel confident that they can keep up with the pace of change in technology. Some populations are more likely to experience challenges in navigating digital technology than others.

At its heart, digital inclusion is about social and economic inclusion, using online and mobile technologies to improve skills, enhance quality of life, connect, educate and promote wellbeing across the whole of society.

DIGITAL INCLUSION IN AUSTRALIA TODAY

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index measures Australia's "digital divide" across three main dimensions: **Access, Affordability, and Ability** [4].

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index shows that while online participation is increasing across Australia, gaps continue to exist between those who are digitally included and excluded – linked closely to social exclusion and disadvantage. 2021 data shows that more than 1 in 4 (28%) people in Australia are either "digitally excluded" or "highly digitally excluded". It is important to note as well that 65% of these people say they have "no need to use the internet more often" [5]. Although broad measures of digital inclusion show some small increases, measures such as confidence in personal digital ability have actually decreased in some groups.

In 2022, the Victorian Government produced its own Digital Inclusion Statement [6]. This document identifies the most digitally disadvantaged Victorians as being (using the Victorian Government terminology):

• Senior Victorians

• public housing tenants

• people who are not working

• people with low educational attainment people in low-income households Victorians with disability

• regional Victorians

• First Peoples
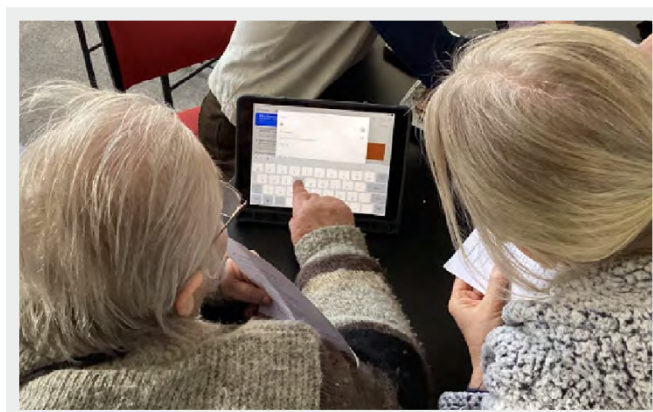
Research from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare shows that people in these communities are also highly likely to experience loneliness and social isolation [7], which can be compounded by an inability to access community-based services and to connect with friends and family online. People in these communities are also often labelled by government and the community sector as being 'hard to reach' and therefore much less likely to be included in more 'mainstream' digital inclusion programs and initiatives.

THE DIMENSIONS OF DIGITAL INCLUSION

We live in an era of increasing digitisation of service delivery, with many services now delivered in part, or even exclusively, through online interaction. Although they may have lagged initially, government and community services are rapidly playing catchup, a trend sharply accelerated by COVID-19 and the associated lockdowns.

Digital inclusion supports access to necessary physical, social and economic resources, and ensures that people remain connected to their friends, families and communities. People who experience digital exclusion may be impacted in the following areas of life.

Access to social services

The people who rely most heavily on social services often experience high levels of digital exclusion. This can result in a restriction or complete loss of access to social support, leading to significant impacts on people's social, health, and financial wellbeing.

Health

Personal and family health management poses a challenge for people experiencing digital exclusion. Activities such as booking medical consultations, managing prescriptions and accessing public health insurance are increasingly difficult without technical know-how.

Education and Employment

Access to both employment and formal/informal education is more difficult for people who are digitally disadvantaged, and can contribute to the perpetuation of a cycle of unemployment and low educational attainment.

Connection to community

A lack of digital inclusion negatively impacts basic communication and connection with friends and family. Those who are unable to use technology to contact friends and family are often socially isolated from the communities that sustain them. This was highlighted throughout the various lockdown experiences in Australia throughout 2020-2021.

Civic participation

Individuals and communities that experience digital exclusion are also highly likely to experience exclusion from other social and civic forums. Digital platforms can be powerful tools for facilitating civic discussion and amplifying community voice, but without increasing the reach of digital inclusion, it is likely we will further compound the exclusion of people in these communities.

Consumer choice

The COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 saw over 70% of sales in Victoria moving online [8]. An inability to access and navigate online marketplaces means a person is faced with fewer purchasing choices, higher prices, and sometimes reduced ability to address unfair trading practices. These issues are compounded for those that face transport or mobility issues, or who are not comfortable transacting in English.

Community safety and disasters

Digital technology plays a critical role in our community in times of emergency. A multitude of applications, websites and online communities have emerged to support members of our community to stay safe and connected in times of disasters. For those with limited digital skills, navigating this sea of constantly evolving technology is a difficult and often frustrating task. The inability to access this information can have serious, sometimes life-threatening consequences.

Online safety and security

In 2021, 20% of excluded and highly excluded Australians reported being so concerned about privacy and scams that it limited their internet use [9]. This response seems reasonable in the face of the ACCC's estimate that up to $2 billion was lost to online scams in 2021 [10]. Australians who experience digital exclusion are much less likely to have the skills and tools necessary to identify and avoid risks to their privacy and security.

CURRENT APPROACHES TO DIGITAL INCLUSION

Currently, the main responses to address digital skills gaps and needs in Australia are through ad-hoc one-on-one support and structured community programs, for example the Be Connected program delivered by Good Things Foundation and funded by the Australian Federal Government. These skills-based approaches are complemented by an array of grants and discounts for the purchase of devices and telecommunications services, for example the Low-income Measures Assessment Committee (LIMAC)[11] which is legislated at the Federal level in Australia.

Digital inclusion programs are often based on the uplift of specific device or application skills, within a pre-determined and pre-scheduled curriculum. Curriculum design and approach is often heavily influenced by funding and reporting requirements, which may target a specific demographic, outcome (e.g. employment or vocational skills), or number of participants.

These classes take place in community and public spaces such as public libraries, neighbourhood houses, and other informal settings such as church groups and social clubs. There are also a number of private providers in this space, particularly focussing on support for older Australians. Many of these places also offer ad-hoc, issue-based support on a one-on-one basis. The purpose of these sessions is often less about upskilling or sense making than it is about helping a community member to tackle an isolated problem or task e.g. paying a bill online, registering for NDIS support, listing an item for sale on Facebook Marketplace etc.

BARRIERS TO DIGITAL INCLUSION

Existing digital inclusion programs support tens of thousands of people in Australia every year to troubleshoot and develop new digital skills and knowledge. This report does not aim to provide a detailed description or assessment of these programs [12], some of which have significant reach and have been positively evaluated for not only their technical outcomes, but their impacts on social aspects such as loneliness and community cohesion. We know however from evidence in the Australian Digital Inclusion Index, and our own work in this space, that there are communities of people who for various reasons are not well served by, or excluded from, current programs and initiatives.

Three possible barriers to accessing digital inclusion activities are discussed below.

1. Social exclusion

There is substantial evidence to demonstrate that high levels of social and economic exclusion exacerbates digital exclusion.

A variety of factors may influence digital exclusion. These may include:

• limited finances and transportation options care and parenting needs

• poor mental or physical health

• low literacy or numeracy

• low English language skills

• negative prior experiences in educational or institutional environments

• stigma attached to homelessness or substance addiction

These all influence whether a community member will walk through the door of a local library, or register for a group program at a neighbourhood house. People dealing with one or more of the above factors in their life, are less likely to know where and when such events might take place, much less be actively "recruited" into them.

Members of this diverse population may present with a range of complex challenges, both technological and otherwise, that are not straightforward to address or resolve. Community workers often cannot support the breadth of issues (in a group setting or one-on-one settings) or provide the necessary resources or expertise to support such community members. These community members may not have access to appropriate technology (or the power/credit to make them work) and may be instructed in the use of machines such as desktop computers that do not give them day-to-day transferable skills to their own mobile phone or tablet.

These roadblocks can also create frustration, anger and sadness for community members, particularly when these technology related issues actually create more barriers to accessing finances, services or support.

2. Traditional teaching and learning structures

Although interactivity is obviously a key component of any modern digital skills course, the environment and dynamics of a conventional classroom in some digital inclusion programs can be a deterrent or barrier to participation. Additionally, the way some digital skills activities are framed and advertised (heavily featuring computers and traditional 'cyber' imagery) can be alienating and threatening.

Our work in the Connected Communities program, prior research and program design/delivery have shown that many people are not singularly motivated or interested in developing 'digital skills'. All they want to know is how to access or navigate social and financial services/supports, connect with family and friends, or pursue their hobbies and interests. These goals may not align with the pre-determined outcomes of the program, which might focus more on completion of specific tasks or obtaining specific skills.

If they do make it past the front door, some participants find the set curriculum with lock-step activities over a predetermined span of time can further deter engagement. For example, they may feel that an 'entry level' course focused on specific technology (e.g. Facebook) is irrelevant to their needs and beyond their abilities. They may be recovering from complex past trauma, have had prior negative experiences in a school setting, or be generally unfamiliar with the social norms of learning or classroom culture in Australia. Often these programs are delivered under a 'professional service' model that does not allow time and space for the development of a relationship or trust between the instructor and learner or take into account the complexities of inter-cultural and inter-language interaction. This lack of trust and rapport can leave participants feeling uncomfortable or unwilling to: share personal information, participate in group conversations, ask questions or overcome the vulnerability and shame that can come with being a novice at a particular skill or area of knowledge.

3. The scale and complexity of demand for support is growing

As the range of activities that can, or must, be done online grows, so too does the demand placed on social and community services to provide ad-hoc, immediate, one-on-one support to the communities that they work within. It's important to distinguish this from activities that take place in scheduled, (sometimes) funded, group and individual programs. These engagements are initiated by community members attempting to access support to resolve specific technology related problems, 'on the spot'. People with these issues can present at any moment. They can consume significant amounts of unfunded time and resources*, with problems that may not be resolvable within this environment. This further exacerbates digital and social exclusion.

This challenge occurs against a backdrop of an ever-expanding array of devices and applications, which span the range from cutting-edge to completely obsolete. Community sector workers are rarely supported or trained to deal with changes to technology, and have minimal opportunity to plan or strategise new responses, build staff capacity or develop data systems to understand and report on the technology-related needs of the community. Library staff we spoke to as part of this work spoke of feeling like "under resourced digital case workers".

Library workers are one of a handful of sector professionals that we have identified as undertaking large volumes of this ad-hoc technology support. Community workers (aged care, disability, and social workers) and Workforce Australia employees (formerly Job Active Network) are also reporting that technology 'trouble-shooting' is becoming an unofficial but core part of their role. These organisations report that entities with access to much greater levels of funding (such as government departments and utility companies) actively refer community members to libraries as a "one stop shop" for free tech support. This shift in demand, gives little consideration of the impact that this referral might have on an already stretched and underfunded service.

*It is worth noting that our evidence for this activity is largely anecdotal, based on conversations with workers in libraries, neighbourhood houses, and other community centres. The nature of this work means that it is difficult to record, much less report on, the time put into providing this kind of assistance.

THE CONNECTED COMMUNITIES RESPONSE

The Connected Communities approach recognises that to be successful, digital inclusion programs must be developed within a community's specific context, driven by the needs and aspirations of that community, and built on the foundations of strength and skills that already exist therein.

Connected Communities ensures that long-term digital inclusion outcomes emerge from a collaboration that creates a familiar, flexible and inclusive space where ideas and experiences can be shared within a safe and trusted environment.

Importantly:

• It does this in an environment where community members already feel comfortable and is centred around the discussions they want to have, or are already having.

• It builds off and strengthens structures of mutual support based on the skills, knowledge and abilities that already exist in the community.

• It abandons adherence to a rigid timetable and procession of 'modules', allowing the group to decide where they want to go, and take breaks where necessary for people to eat, tend to their physical and mental needs, or chat with a curious friend who has dropped in to say 'hi'.

• It builds in flexible entry points to support people who are only willing or able to engage at certain times or places, who are curious but hesitant to commit, or who want to join the program when it is already underway.

The program also emphasises and seeks to amplify the efforts of those who support the community in a professional capacity, whether that be in an ad-hoc moment at a library, or as part of a long term social work relationship. We know these workers are an essential conduit between the world of 'digital skills' and the day-to-day lives and needs of community members. Connected Communities aims to provide these people with much needed resources and opportunities for coaching to increase their digital knowledge, ability and planning processes.

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES IN PRACTICE

THE CONNECTED COMMUNITIES PROGRAM: MEET THE TEAM

An overarching goal of the Connected Communities program is to challenge and where possible remove some of the distinctions between "teacher" and "learner" or "expert" and "novice". That said, we know that different people will take up different roles in the program depending on their skills, available time and resources, and factors such as whether or not they are attending as an "employee" of some organisation, or as a community member first and foremost. This section outlines the characteristics of each main participant group:

1. Facilitators

Connected Communities is a team sport, but every team requires skilled coaches and trainers that can dedicate their time to making sure the team has what they need to achieve success. In the Connected Communities project, this role was performed by staff from the Community Impact team at Infoxchange, supported by specific knowledge and experience from our program partners.

Future iterations of Connected Communities might see this role taken up by people who are themselves embedded members of a particular community. Regardless of who is taking on this role, there will always be a need for a sufficient level of skill in the particular methods and mindsets employed by Connected Communities, and for facilitators to be able to commit the time required to hold the space for the other participants.

2. Community workers

As mentioned previously, social workers, healthcare professionals, librarians and other community workers, say they are commiting increasing amounts of time and effort to assisting people to access online services and address other technology related issues. This is rarely their core job and as such, they are neither able to access resources nor training to advance their own digital skills. Despite this, they provide a vital, undervalued but often invisible link between those people experiencing digital exclusion, and the digital services they seek. Connected Communities explicitly invites these people into the process, with the intention of supporting and amplifying the strengths that they bring to the communities they work with.

"Our team now spends more time than ever assisting residents with their phones and digital tasks. It has always been on our radar to look beyond the ad-hoc support and find ways to help residents to develop better tech skills. Finding the right resources and setting aside time to plan is difficult when we are busy addressing the immediate needs of the residents."
Jackie Redlich, Senior Social Worker, Star Health

Connected Communities works to support community workers to think critically, curiously and expansively about technology, resourcing and collaboration. It presents tools, methods and mentoring to help them move towards more participatory approaches to strengthening digital skills in the community.

3. Community members

In a traditional learning environment, community members would be the 'recipients' of digital skills and knowledge imparted by the 'experts'. In Connected Communities, community members are active participants in the design, delivery and evaluation of the program, and ultimately the final arbiters of whether or not it has been successful.

Connected Communities explicitly acknowledges and allows for the fact that every community is made up of diverse individuals with different goals and ambitions. They may need different levels of support in order to participate, and may have specific time constraints.

What works for a group of active retirees attending a neighbourhood house, may be very different to what works for a group of people in a public housing estate, who face high levels of social exclusion.
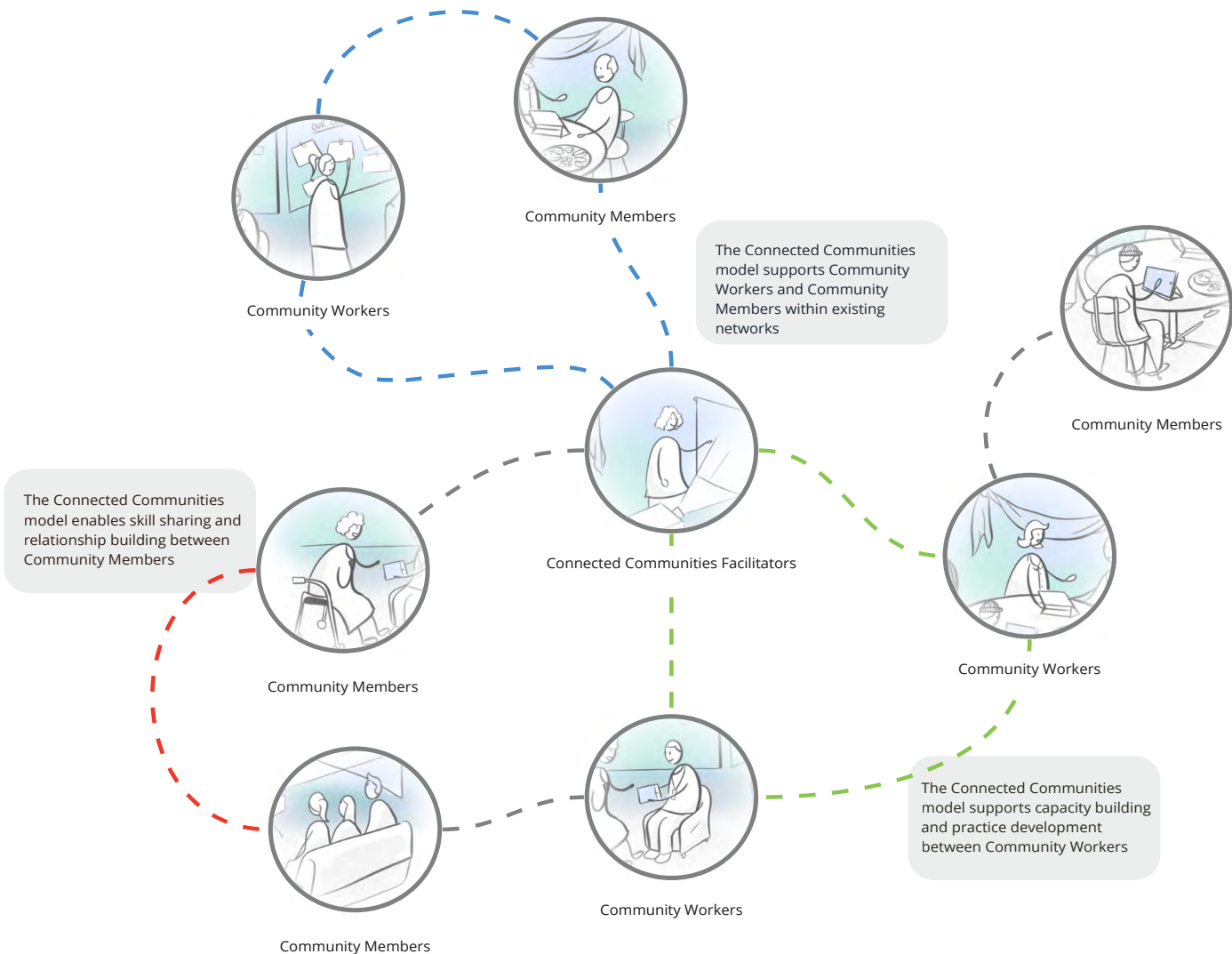
This underscores the importance of effective facilitation to provide the 'connective tissue' between these diverse needs and contributions.

Placing as much control as possible in the community's hands of issues like scheduling, content and pace of learning, creates the conditions that foster effective engagement and stronger community bonds.

4. Partners and subject matter specialists

The Connected Communities project relied on a number of partners for funding, expertise, skills uplift, and to introduce us to communities that might be open to collaborate on this experiment with us.

The needs of any particular community will dictate what sort of support is needed. However, but it's important to understand what knowledge and skills exist within the broader community, and how you might use these to support specific activities or areas of inquiry.

Community Members

The Connected Communities model supports Community Workers and Community Members within existing networks

Community Members

Community Workers

Connected Communities Facilitators

The Connected Communities model enables skill sharing and relationship building between Community Members

Community Members

Community Workers

The Connected Communities model supports capacity building and practice development between Community Workers

Community Members

Community Workers

AN ILLUSTRATION OF HOW THE CONNECTED COMMUNITIES APPROACH PRIORITISES RELATIONSHIPS AND THE SHARING OF KNOWLEDGE.

THE ELEMENTS OF A CONNECTED COMMUNITIES PROGRAM

It is not our intent to detail a step-by-step playbook of how to "do Connected Communities" in this document. For those who are interested, we have included more detail on the specifics of the approach we took later in this document (see '*An example of the Connected Communities project approach*'). As such, the approach outlined in this document is intended to be a foundation on which to build an ongoing and distributed network of connected communities, the Connected Communities project was a finite piece of work with requirements around timing, scale, etc that are specific to the context in which the work was done at that time.

This section outlines the key components (both in terms of physical assets, and program phases) that we believe must be present to undertake a successful Connected Communities program. It is worth restating here the central values of the program, which are:

• Highlighting the strengths of people, not their needs

• Digital inclusion starts with inclusion, not digital

• Going slow means going further

• Working to be responsive and open, not linear and prescriptive

• Prioritising the building of relationships

• Respecting the principle that we all have things to learn and knowledge to share

What this hopefully shows, is that the content of any particular occurrence of the Connected Communities program (and we hope there are many in future) cannot be known or planned for in a detailed manner ahead of time. What is most important is approaching the work with the right mindset, supported by the tools and methods that are detailed in the Underpinning mindsets and practices section.

SOME PHYSICAL NECESSITIES

We believe that Connected Communities is a program that can (and must) scale up or down in response to available resources and needs of the community in which it is being deployed. The elements below are all likely to be necessary in some shape or form, but we would emphasise again here, the need to take an asset-based approach and ask how you might provide:

1. A safe space

Many digital inclusion programs recognise the advantages of "going where the people are" when delivering digital inclusion programs. This is only more acute when dealing with those facing high-levels of social exclusion. Even nominally 'open' community spaces like libraries and neighbourhood houses may feel unsafe or unfamiliar to some members of the community.

A good space for Connected Communities is one in which community members are already comfortable and familiar, one which supports people's biological and health needs (including food!), one which provides sufficient flexibility for people to come and go as they need, and that allows for interested passers-by to understand how they might join in.

There is no inherent reason why Connected Communities could not be adapted to a digital/remote format if that was identified by a particular community as being the optimal/preferred mode. To date however, Connected Communities has worked in a face-to -face setting, removing the barrier for those who do not have the skills, access to devices, or confidence to join an online session.
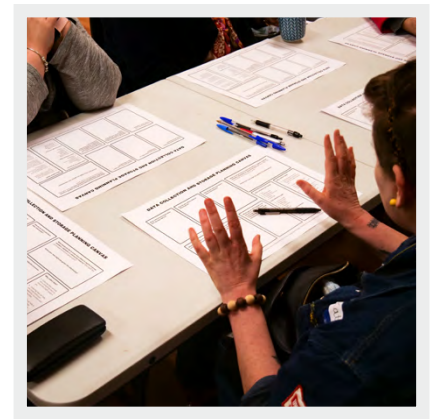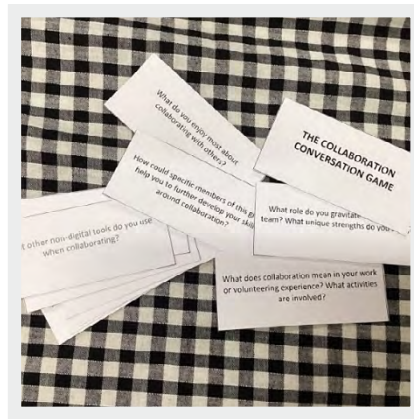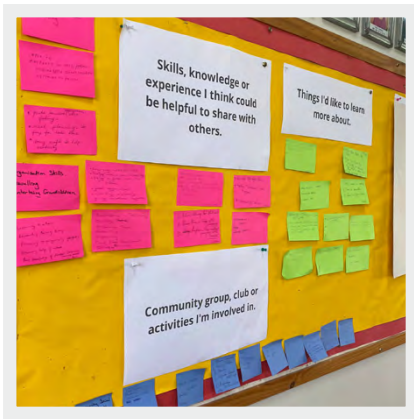
2. Non-digital tools for expression

Digital tools such as iPads are obviously a key element to increasing digital skills and confidence, however it is important not to overlook more basic (and flexible) tools that allow participants to articulate their ideas, ambitions and interests, and to share their strengths with other members of the community. Pens, paper and whiteboards all have a critical role to play in supporting group activities and building trust and rapport. This is of particular importance for those to whom even touching a digital device is an anxiety provoking experience.

"Having a visual breakdown of the activities we planned to do together (in the workshop) and images of apps with a description of what they do in plain language helped. Whenever residents felt lost, we just went back to this information as as a group." Maria Georgiou, Senior Social Worker, Star Health

3. Some (quality) devices

There will come a time of course when 'digital' needs to enter the digital inclusion picture. People who experience social and digital exclusion are often doubly disadvantaged by having to use slow, damaged or near-obsolete technology, which increases levels of frustration and difficulty in completing tasks. This is also true of the technology that is often deployed by community organisations - either because they do not have funding to acquire suitable devices, or because of the perception that to have a digitally excluded person use a brand new iPad is somehow excessive; that they should be happy with any old device that can be found.

Recognising that we need to "start with what we have" - the Connected Communities team strongly recommends getting hold of the best devices you can. Although we want learners to eventually be comfortable with any device (which may not be the most recent model), we don't want them to have to clear the hurdles present with older devices before they can even understand the ways in which technology might be of benefit to them. Also, by removing 'admin' as an experience in their early interactions with technology, we can focus instead on helping them uncover ways that these devices can support their goals and aspirations. This in turn provides the motivation to persevere through the hard or dull tasks we all face with technology from time to time, such as setting up new accounts etc.

"We clear the path for folks who are new to digital technology. This can mean stepping through all the admin processes and setting up an activity, such as a word search, so that the activity is straightforward, without pop-up ads or logins, for example. By setting people up to win we find that they develop momentum quickly and are more determined next time they use technology. They see the benefits and then want to return to learn more" Anna Morgan, Connected Communities Project Lead
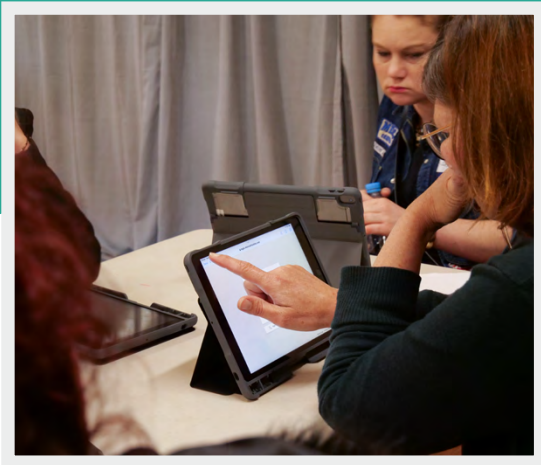
4 . A reliable internet connection

Those of us that are used to high levels of digital inclusion can often take for granted access to reliable, ubiquitous internet. Many of the spaces in which the Infoxchange team worked were equipped with ageing wifi hotspots attached to lowest-cost internet plans, if any provision for public wifi was made at all. We believe it's likely that at least some resistance to uptake of digital tools is based on prior experience of poor internet performance - it's hard to see what the big deal is if you're just watching a loading bar.

As with devices, it is important to remove this hurdle for new learners, and to have a realistic understanding of the internet needs of say a dozen people simultaneously trying to access the internet. For this reason the Connected Communities team procured a number of 5G wireless hotspot devices which, although they represent an upfront and ongoing cost, were invaluable in ensuring that participant's formative experiences were based on what they could see and do online, not on struggling to connect to the internet.

5. Food and beverages and other human needs
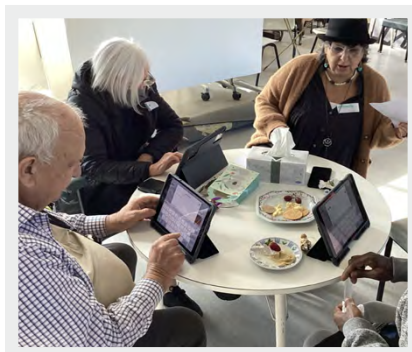
We are all familiar with the experience of spending a day in training or at a conference, and being 'treated' to stale biscuits, underwhelming sandwiches, and hot beverages that are identifiable as coffee or tea only by the label on the urn. It is understandable that a digital inclusion program will want to maximise both its spend and the use of time on learning digital things, but looking at refreshments as an 'extra' or nice to have expense (to be kept as low as possible) misses an important fact.

The shared preparation and eating of food is one of the most fundamental tools we have as humans for building trust and rapport within groups of people. Additionally, the time spent sharing recipes and favourite foods is an opportunity for community members to share the skills and experience that we're seeking to enhance alongside digital skills.

There are a range of other human needs that also need to be accounted for if you are to create a safe and welcoming space. Physical facilities such as accessible toilets go without saying, but it is also important to create "accessible time" so that different people with different needs, attention spans, energy levels, and outside commitments can participate in ways that work for them.

AN EXAMPLE OF THE CONNECTED COMMUNITIES PROJECT APPROACH

We must note again that this is not intended to be a blueprint or set of steps to follow to reproduce this work - every community will have its own context and will need to develop its own process based on the strengths and ambitions of its members. We provide the following as an example of how the various methodologies outlined in this report meld and converge in practice. Some of these steps take longer than others, and the order in which they appear does not imply that they are linear - rather they ebb and flow in response to what is happening in the project at any given time.

1. Connecting and understanding

In preparation for each workshop series, the Connected Community team spent over 20 hours listening to the concerns, ideas, insights and ambitions of each participant (12 people per group) in pre-workshop interviews.

Along with building trust, these discussions helped the team understand individual and shared experiences around community participation, and the participants' ambitions and barriers related to digital technology.

The goals of each individual were different, but many of the group members tended to converge around two key goals: to meet new people and to learn new things about technology.
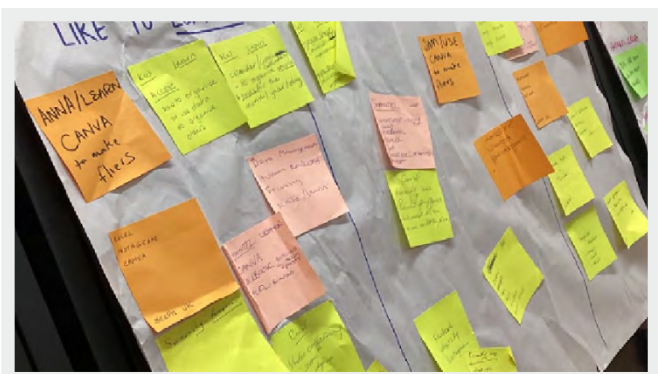
2. Building safety and setting direction

The initial meeting of the community group was focussed on establishing rapport, as well as identifying and validating the strengths and motivations of the community (as identified in the pre-workshop interviews). Together, the group learned about their collective ambitions, strengths and challenges, and identified topics to focus on in the workshops ahead.

3. Community conversation and technical skill development

During the 'body' of the program, each session was spent divided into group conversations and digital skills activities, diving into the participants' needs and experiences, as well as developing new skills and learning from individuals with relevant expertise.

4. Pause and reflect

This was an ongoing process, undertaken through group discussions, feedback sessions and conversation driven games. It was an opportunity to step back from the workshop activity, check in with each other as a group to discuss progress and to make any changes to how we were working together.

5. Consolidate learnings and consider next steps

Over the final few weeks of our project, we started discussions around future goals/opportunities, and set intentions for continuing to build skills and stay connected.

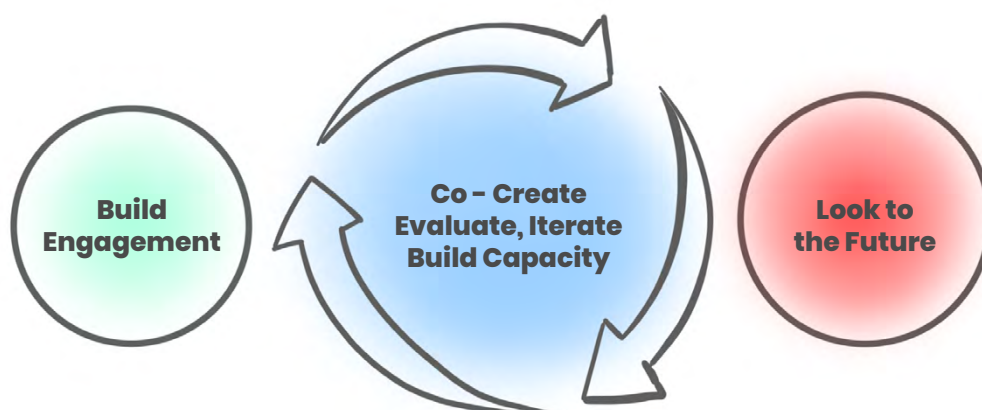## 6. Celebration and recognition

At key moments throughout the workshop we paused to celebrate the progress and the work undertaken together. We incorporated meaningful group artefacts and storytelling into this ritual to strengthen the social bonds in this group experience.

ENGAGEMENT AND CO-CREATION PROCESSES

5 SIMPLE (NON-SEQUENTIAL, NON-LINEAR) STEPS TO SUCCESSFULLY CONNECTING A COMMUNITY

### 1. Facilitators as learners first - building engagement

Before we go near an iPad or a phone, we focus on developing trust and strong relationships with our partners and community members. This stage is essential, but not necessarily easy, and often excluded from place-based initiatives where an 'expert' is expected to parachute in with all of the answers. Engagement means working in an embedded manner, spending time in the workspaces of our collaborators and in community spaces. This helps the team to learn about the daily rhythms, constraints and opportunities present for the organisation and community. We facilitate planning workshops and activities that help us to understand the goals, aspirations, and preferences of those we are working with. These actions are vital to setting up the group for successful collaboration, and building and understanding of what will and won't work in this particular context.

In this stage, the Connected Communities team led workshops to forge a strong relationship with our partner organisations. During these early discussions, we identify common goals, skills, constraints, strengths, fears, expectations and strategies around communication and conflict.

2. Continuous co-creation
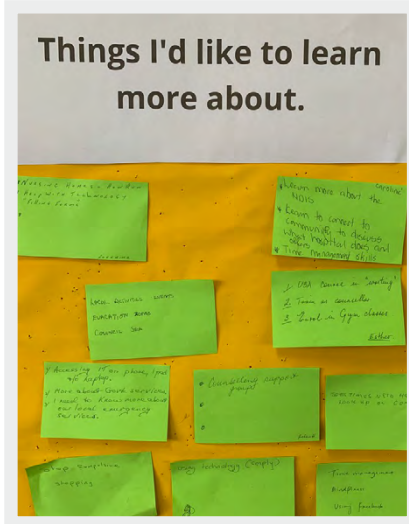
The actual 'curriculum' of the Connected Communities program emerges from the group itself, guided by the experience of facilitators and those with greater levels of digital inclusion, but driven by the ambitions and interests of the community members. The goals of the program are discussed and developed, with a focus on life and community outcomes for participants, over specific technical skills (e.g. "I want to speak to my family overseas" is a much more compelling proposition than "I want to sign up for a Whatsapp account").

It is important to note that this process of co-creation is not a 'phase' of the engagement to be 'completed' before learning can take place. Rather, co-design and co-creation are integral and continual practices that take place every time the group is together, subject to positive feedback loops as individual confidence and group cohesion grows.

Some expertise is required to manage this well, helping the group to shape their own outcomes without unduly influencing the result, or allowing the group to be pulled in too many directions simultaneously. By working in small groups, facilitators are able to connect people's goals to possible technical solutions, and support the group in exploring these, then sharing with the wider community.

3. Evaluate, reflect, iterate

One of the key differences between Connected Communities and other approaches to digital inclusion, is that the work of designing and developing effective materials and processes for learning is never 'done' and packaged up as a curriculum. This mode of continual evolution requires us to think differently about how, how often, and what we evaluate. This is a dymamic circle of action and reflection.

Connected Communities leverages the Results Based Accountability (see Methods and Mindsets) framework to ensure that a rigorous and collaborative approach to goal identification and measurement is followed. The goals that are set by the group are kept front of mind throughout the process, and frequently (ie weekly/fortnightly) reflected upon. These reflections give rise to opportunities to improve the tools, activities and processes employed, acknowledging that an activity that works really well for one group at one time, may fail spectacularly in another. This process of reflection and iteration allows Connected Communities to flex and adapt to the needs of the group as new ideas and ambitions emerge.

The success of a Connected Communities program may include standard measures of digital confidence and competency, as well as dimensions of social inclusion and community connectedness of participants. If you take only one thing from this entire document however, we would like that to be the fact that everyone involved in the Connected Communities process is a participant, and that we need to evaluate the growth in capabilities of all parties, according to their specific goals and aspirations. In practice this goes beyond "Four people can use email now" to "Ahmet feels more confident that he can critically assess a new technology and decide whether it would be useful to introduce it to the community members he supports through his social work".

4. Building lasting community capacity
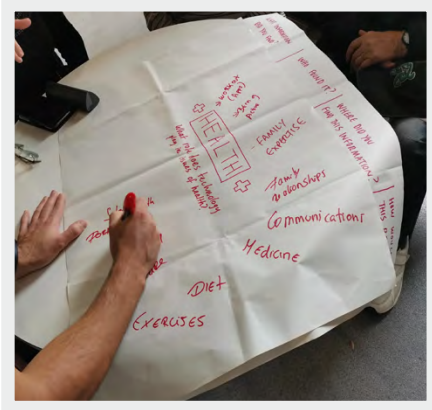
Although any project team running Connected Communities events will bring necessary skills and expertise that don't exist in the community they are working with, if progress is to be sustained after the project team leaves, then some of this capacity must be transferred to the community.

Connected Communities invites community sector collaborators into the planning and delivery of the community workshops, and 'works out loud' sharing our tools and methods. Connected Communities makes clear the theoretical underpinnings of the work, and all the necessary background activity that is critical to the program's success. This action boosts our partner's skills in program and event planning, resource development, evaluation, team leadership and facilitation. This might include formal training and professional development, such as the 6 month, multi-session, capacity building workshops that Jeder Institute facilitated during the initial Connected Communities Project.

The Connected Communities program does not aim to train every participant or worker to become a Connected Communiities facilitator or leader. Instead, for some, the program will help them to strengthen or develop skills and capacity that can be more useful in supporting their jobs or day-to-day social interactions.

By expanding people's ideas of what effective collaboration and creative use of technology can achieve, we hope to enable participants to discover new ways of problem-solving, decision-making, and planning. This, in turn, can have a positive impact on other areas of their personal and working lives.

5. Looking to the future

Those that work to support marginalised communities are all too familiar with the way in which changes in government policy, philanthropic priorities, and availability of grant money can impact the sustainable delivery of services and initiatives in the communities they serve.

The success of a program in any one place and time is no guarantee of further or additional support, and some programs rely heavily on external expertise and labour, with little skills transfer to those that will remain in place once the program is complete. Many promising initiatives are abandoned for the simple reason that there is no more money in the pot.

The demands of program delivery in terms of achieving predetermined goals, specific evaluation and reporting requirements, and overall project administration, leave little time to look beyond the horizon of the current funding round to what might happen next.

In recognition of this, Connected Communities facilitates 'next steps' workshops to consider the resources and actions that communities might need to continue and scale the momentum built. This includes exploring new (but similarly spirited) initiatives that may be achievable at a time when resources are scarce, and building roadmaps and documentation to support communities in communicating their successes, and advocating for future support and funding.

UNDERPINNING MINDSETS AND PRACTICES

The evolution and development of the Connected Communities project to date has been driven by the needs and desires of people experiencing high levels of digital exclusion, through partnerships with community organisations.

As detailed elsewhere in this report, the effects of digital exclusion are far reaching and profound, and current solutions fall short of addressing the sometimes critical needs of these people. Working with those in the greatest need and experiencing the most severe consequences of digital exclusion was a priority for the project team, and for Infoxchange as an organisation.

Having said this, Connected Communities was also successfully co-created and delivered in the comparatively more privileged setting of Greenhills Neighbourhood House. There were obvious and sometimes significant differences between the two groups in terms of things like levels of social inclusion, economic participation, and access to technology. Despite this, both groups shared a desire to understand how they could come together and learn about technology in ways that support the specific goals they have for staying connected and contributing to their communities. Neither community felt they had been well served by digital inclusion programs to date, and in both cases the inclusion and upskilling of those that work to support the community was essential.

Regardless of setting or the specific community being brought into the process, the Connected Communities program employs tools and methods from well established community development methodologies including **Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), Participatory Community Building (PCB), and Results Based Accountability (RBA)**.

These methods are strengths-based practices and this mindset forms the foundation of the Connected Communities program. This does not mean we ignore the real challenges that people face, or that we use 'positive thinking' to spin struggles into strengths. It means we value the capacity, skills, knowledge, connections and potential in individuals and communities in facing and co-creating solutions to these challenges.

Practitioners working in this way have to work collaboratively - supporting people to do things for themselves. In this way, people can become co-producers of support, not passive consumers of support. There is a growing body of evidence that a strengths-based approach can improve social networks and enhance well-being. These methods stand in contrast to deficit-based models of community and program development that are often employed in these situations.

	Deficit Based Approach	Connected Communities Approach
We focus on the…	Problem	Possibilities
We are led by	The "provider"	The community
Our goal is to	Address needs	Draw upon and amplify assets, strengths, capacities
Participants are	Clients or service users Passive recipients of knowledge	Community members Co-producers of knowledge
Success means	Participants have achieved an externally imposed benchmark	Participants are better off in some way that is meaningful to them

ASSET BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

ABCD is an approach to sustainably developing communities based on their strengths and potentials. Instead of looking at communities as having deficiencies and needs, ABCD invites us to look at individuals and communities as having capacities and assets that they can use to pursue their goals and aspirations.

ABCD is based on three principles:

1. Everyone has gifts
2. Relationships build a community
3. Start with what you have In the context of the Connected Communities approach, Asset Based Community Development may look like:

- Clearing the path for engagement - recognising that as facilitators we have skills and insights that can remove hurdles (e.g. installing an app on an iPad) for community members, supporting them to develop momentum, achieve success and explore the benefits of technology before moving on to more technical activities.

- Working with both group facilitators and community members to understand and share their knowledge and abilities.

- Building understanding about the 'transferable' nature of all skills, knowledge and assets - for example by applying social work skills in addressing technological problems, or by having a community member lead their own workshop based on an area of knowledge or interest.

- Supporting community members to explore local options to develop further skills around technology usage, and to shift away from reliance on 'service providers' who may only be able to address the symptoms of digital skill gaps or technology problems.

PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY BUILDING

Participatory Community Building describes an approach to the how of bringing groups together to effectively utilise their shared strengths and assets. It combines processes from Asset Based Community Development, Art of Hosting, Appreciative Inquiry, co-design, and other strengths-based methodologies [13].

In the context of the Connected Communities approach, Participatory Community Building may look like:

- Allowing program participants to define their own group culture and social norms, and determine their own conditions for safety and success.

- Facilitating opportunities for distributed leadership within the group.

- The project team invests the time to understand the nature of the community they are working with, as described by that community themselves, so that they are better able to participate in and support community-led discussions and initiatives.

- Ensuring consideration is given to longer term strategies and planning that will allow the work to continue in a way that is sustainable for each unique community.

RESULTS BASED ACCOUNTABILITY (RBA) FRAMEWORK

The Results Based Accountability framework, developed by Mark Friedman, seeks to invert traditional models where a project team is primarily or solely accountable to a funder or governing body [14]. Under an RBA framework, the project team (and the participating group as a whole), are accountable to the community in which they are working to create positive impact. The community works to determine what success looks like for any given initiative, and is the final arbiter of whether or not that success was achieved.

This has important implications in areas such as evaluation, impact measurement, and the kinds of evidence and data that needs to be collected in support.

In the context of the Connected Communities approach, Results Based Accountability may look like:

- Encouraging collaboration between all project contributors and the sharing of ideas about what is and is not working to make evaluation a transparent, 'living' practice that is responsive to the (often changing) needs of the community.

- Weekly evaluation of project goals (including the goals of individuals, and those of supporting partners) and the use of these evaluations in planning future workshops and activities.

- Collection of qualitative insights throughout the project - real stories from participants highlighting their challenges, successes, and future ambitions for the program.

SUSTAINING AND GROWING CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

For philanthropically or grant funded social innovation projects like Connected Communities, there are three main outcomes when they reach the end of their funded period:

1. **They stop.**

2. **They seek additional grant funding, committing significant time and resources to doing so, and often entering periods of dormancy or reduced capacity when these funds are scarce.**

3. **Rarely, they achieve 'scale' which usually means they are deemed replicable and measurable enough to drawsome kind of government or other long-term funding.**

All of these are possible outcomes for Connected Communities, but none are desirable. Even the much idealised 'scaling' of Connected Communities into a government funded program would come with significant trade-offs in terms of program rigidity and focus on digital outcomes (over the social and community outcomes that we know are essential to success in these communities).

The overarching purpose of this document is to propose a different approach to sustaining and growing Connected Communities. This approach takes into account the unique strengths of the program, the need for it to be constantly adapting to changing circumstances, and the centering of things that other models may treat as peripheral concerns such as trust, capacity building, and social connection.

OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

You will not see a table of costs here, though unavoidably, this is to a large extent a question of money. Making a program like Connected Communities sustainable requires investment in knowledge, capacity building and in establishing networks that can support and reinforce each other (not simply the creation of resources or the delivery of training).

We are optimists, but informed by our own and our partners' combined experience in this sector, we are also pragmatists. We believe that for a program like Connected Communities to have lasting impact, there will need to be real changes in the way that funders, facilitators and participants think about evaluating success, and the kinds of outcomes that they seek.

Ultimately we hope to see Connected Communities blossoming* across Australia in many different forms - some may look very much like the process described in this document, other programs may be much smaller in scale, or focussed on building capacity for communities that look very different to the ones that we engaged with. This is not something that we believe any one organisation can do alone, though there will be important roles for any organisation willing to support and promote this work in their communities.

*We use this word intentionally, with it's associations with gardening and human development, over "scale" which has come to imply much less nuanced growth in numbers of "users" or levels of funding.

The Connected Communities project ran from January 2022 to January 2023 with the support from the TPG Telecom Foundation.

We are extremely grateful for the trust and support of our partners which allowed us to undertake a process that took some risks and stepped outside of the bounds of digital inclusion programs that had previously been delivered by Infoxchange, or those in the wider sector.

MOVING FORWARD: STRENGTHENING CAPACITY

Moving ahead, the key change we seek to influence in how digital inclusion programs are funded and supported is to shift away from funding a **central provider** (of training and resources) and towards strengthening the **capacity of an ecosystem of people and organisations** in different contexts, with different ambitions, skills and interests, who can share information, knowledge and experience to learn together.

Initially a 'lead' organisation (such as Infoxchange) is necessary to attract funding and establish the infrastructure of the initiative. We understood from the outset however, that if Connected Communities were to have a life beyond any particular cycle of funding, we would need to continue to work alongside, coach and strengthen the capacity of workers and organisations (ideally in situ), in ways that are often poorly supported by existing funding models.

Over time however, we would aim to see other organisations outside of what is typically considered to be the 'digital' space join us in growing this effort and network. In this way the 'lead' organisation does not swell to service more and more people with more and more resources in a central repository, but should over time diminish in relative importance (though likely never disappear) as the network grows.

The ongoing provision of a Connected Communities program will also require some of the same basic elements that any other digital inclusion program will - chiefly the provision of appropriate devices and internet access. Existing grant programs may exist to support community groups in acquiring these items.

As this model evolves, we see potential in adopting some elements of a fee-for-service model. However, we are acutely aware of the need to ensure that it is equitable for the most under-resourced sector. Therefore, we recognise that careful consideration must be given to devising strategies that make this approach accessible and affordable.

While we do not have a fixed roadmap for the next stage of this work, we believe that any successful funding model must be guided by a set of core principles. These principles (outlined on the following page) will inform our approach to develop a project model that supports the flourishing of communities and promotes both digital and social inclusion.

1. Supporting scaffolding is important (but scaffolds are meant to be removed)

It is not the intent of Connected Communities that all community workers become experts in facilitation, codesign, digital skills, and the other myriad things required to do this work well. There will always be a role for a specialist agency (or agencies) with the requisite skills to understand and support the strengths present in communities and community workers, and these agencies will require access to funding. However, one key difference between Connected Communities and other digital inclusion programs is that growth can only be achieved through lifting the skills of all participants in the network, not by increasing the size and reach of the central agency. Connected Communities will be a success if over time the role of the 'digital specialist' agency becomes less important in relative terms, and shifts to a focus on supporting the network and it's participants, as opposed to leading or organising the wider program itself.

2. Mutual investment is required

Another key component of this approach is that participating organisations are not passive recipients of digital skills training and materials, nor just sources of 'feedback' or participants in evaluation. In order to grow the Connected Communities network, there needs to be a degree of buy-in from all participating organisations. What this will look like will differ according to the skills, time and resources available to that organisation. An example from the Connected Communities project was the willingness of Star Health staff that participated in the program, to join future iterations of the program being deployed by other community health organisations. This is not only an invaluable infusion of skills into the facilitation team, it increases the speed at which we can establish trust and collaboration within the sector, as new participants can see that organisations like their own (and facing similar funding and resourcing challenges) are prepared to invest in co-development.

3. Fund capability over curriculum

In any community based effort, the highest cost will always be human hours worked (even if this cost is not paid). The Connected Communities approach recognises that large repositories of resources and curriculum (which these days includes things like video and digital learning tools) are costly to create and maintain, and may not be sufficiently flexible to deal with the varied needs within a particular community, and how these needs change over time.

For this reason, Connected Communities prefers a 'just enough' approach to learning resources, preferencing what can be made quickly in response to emerging needs, and by tapping into the vast repositories of information freely available online. We believe strongly that a skilled facilitator with an engaged community, some sharpies, paper and a few shared devices, can do a lot more to respond to the digital inclusion needs and interests of a group, than a passionate, but under-resourced worker with access to a bank of computers and a library of instructional PDFs.
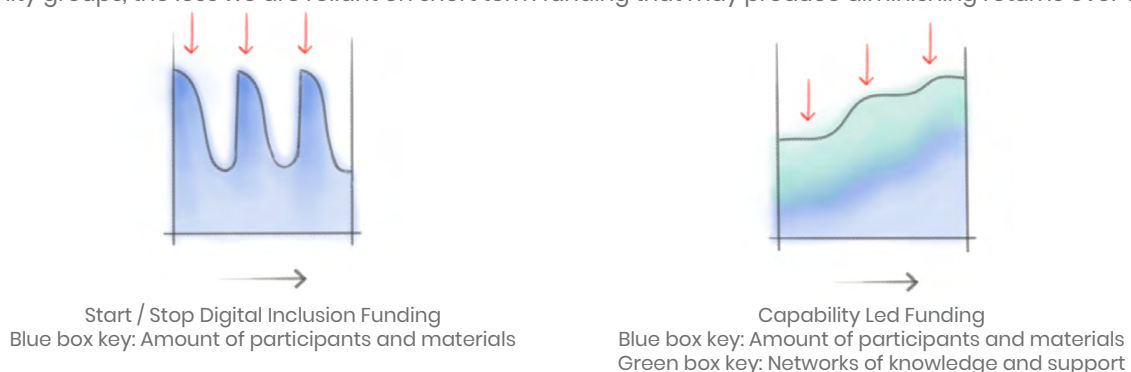
4. Growth may be slow at first, but exponential. Expectations need to be set accordingly

If you've read this far into this report, you may have already formed the impression that this work is difficult. It is. The work of forming a base level of understanding and trust with a community, creating rapport within a group, and allowing the community to lead the program where they want it to go cannot be rushed or accelerated. When measured against a program that promises to teach 1000 seniors a year how to use their ipads, it can look like a very expensive investment of time and money indeed.

There are two responses to this. One is that we still have a significant population of digitally excluded people in this country, and we believe that large scale 'one size fits all' approaches are part of the reason for this. Second is that, if we do it well, Connected Communities becomes a program that grows exponentially and builds momentum as it grows.

Conventional program expansion	Connected Communities program flourishing
Expanding a program rapidly across multiple contexts, sectors, partners, communities and territories using a standardised approach.	The growth of a community of practice, development of place based knowledge (strategies and resources) and growth of connections at each point in the network (i.e. each community).

As illustrated by the diagrams below, the more we are able to embed these practices into the day to day activities of community groups, the less we are reliant on short term funding that may produce diminishing returns over time.

Start / Stop Digital Inclusion Funding
Blue box key: Amount of participants and materials

Capability Led Funding
Blue box key: Amount of participants and materials
Green box key: Networks of knowledge and support

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES
COMMUNITY IMPACT STORIES

ANTOINELLA – STAR HEALTH (VOLUNTEER AND UNION STREET RESIDENT)

Antoinella moved into one of the High Rise buildings a year before Connected Communities came along. She was integral in getting the Community Room open again after COVID and she ended up helping to facilitate the sessions.

I was a facilitator for the sessions. I helped get the Community Room open after COVID and I talked to the people from Star Health and I told them: we want a meal, we want to do classes. So we started to work on what activities we would want to have.

I saw a lot of depression in the building. People knew each other in passing but weren't friends. The sessions put people together with others they would never usually communicate with and it ended up being great!

Early on, someone from the team asked about my computer skills, and then they asked me to be a facilitator, so I was helping with all the classes, and I ran some of the groups. It was the best way to do it, to do it in small groups. It was easier for people to listen and connect. If people had a question we could relate it individually.

"The words "computer" and "technology" - people look at that and think "oh it's too complicated! I don't know how to do that. I'm not going to go to a class on that." That's where the comfort part came into it, because the way it was run wasn't complicated. It was done in a fun way and everyone was really comfortable."

Everyone wanted to learn something different. So many people were from different backgrounds so learning how to use translation tools to pick up on new words in English was really great.

We got them to look on Google Maps so we would ask them what they wanted to find in their area. Someone wanted to learn how to get to Prahan market, someone else was interested in finding a gym - things that make their lives better.

I also asked if I could show the group how to do a video chat by calling my son and they loved the idea. Everyone got really excited and involved because they knew me a bit already so it was easy to listen to me. Now they can communicate with their own families.

The team was so pleasant with everyone, no one looked down on us. They never made anyone feel like they weren't capable so everyone felt safe to ask questions. The social workers were also helping in the classes which was great because many of the people in the building already knew them.

I would love for it to continue because it's really needed. You don't learn how to send an email by doing it once off, we need repeated lessons. It has to be consistent.

MARLENE – STAR HEALTH (PARTICIPANT AND UNION STREET RESIDENT)

Marlene is one of the residents of the High Rise apartment buildings who took part in Connected Communities. Marlene loves to keep busy; she goes to the gym, to different social groups, and loves seeing her friends and family. After spending 10 years as an aged care nurse, Marlene is now the team leader at a bar kiosk at the footy.

I nursed in aged care for ten years which was a real privilege, so I know what it's like to work with older people, it can be tough but the people teaching us about computers were really there to help us, I just loved going there.

I'm really glad that I went because I learned a lot, I think everyone did. I learnt a lot about my iPhone, my computer and I got to learn new ways to use it, like for finding discounts on food and what's on special. Without workshops like this, I couldn't learn about this stuff. I've got to be shown what to do, I can't just figure it out myself. I liked that it was ongoing too, and it has to be. I have memory problems so I wouldn't be able to go to a one-off thing.

"What happened in the group was that they were just there for us, any concerns we had, any feelings people wanted to express - they just invited us into it all."

After COVID, things were different in the buildings, people didn't go out. When we went to the computer classes they helped us a lot in every way. Some people were standing back a bit at the beginning, but at the end everyone became involved.

Meeting the people there was great, there were all different kinds of people too. There were all kinds of nationalities and everyone there got involved. Some people wanted to go overseas and needed help using the internet to do it. The people that were there to help us were always available. They were so great to us! We had lunch together and had fun.

I went there for eight weeks and it was fabulous, I didn't want to leave. If there were more of these classes I'd be there! I'd tell people in the building about it too, we don't all know each other but I know they'd love these classes.

ROMY, MICHAEL & KALISITO – STAR HEALTH (PARTICIPANTS AND UNION STREET RESIDENTS)

"I was very depressed. Staying at home all day, not talking to anyone. When I started taking the computer classes I came out of my apartment. I started to meet people, learn, and even help the others learn. I came alive again…I have a life I did not have before."

"In a way I like technology but I'm a bit intimidated by it. You don't want to be taught by someone who is too smart or knows too much, because they cannot understand why you don't understand. The people were really good at handling the group, they were very friendly and approachable - I've been in a lot of environments where people aren't nice. A lot of the people who went were suspicious as hell in the beginning, and it was really good for them too. I found it was quite social, and I loved the food!"
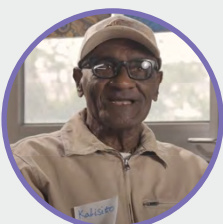
"Everybody that lives here comes from different countries. Some people just feel sad all the time because nobody talks to them. Now we do other things in the community room, now we do dancing!"

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES
PARTNER IMPACT STORIES

STAR HEALTH (WINDSOR, VICTORIA)

In 2021, we contacted Infoxchange to seek support for the elderly residents in Union Street high-rise estate, who were hit hard by the COVID pandemic and the sudden shift of services online. While we tried our best to help, we recognized the need for a more deliberate approach to address the digital skills and technology challenges faced by our residents.

Initially, we expected a more traditional approach to technology skill-building, but the Infoxchange team surprised us by involving us in every step of the process, from workshop design to delivery and evaluation. We were impressed by their attention to the needs, ambitions, and preferences of our team and residents. Before the workshop series, Anna met with each resident to gain an in-depth understanding of their background, experiences, and challenges, and the team worked to bring the entire person into the community room during each workshop, with a focus beyond just apps or digital devices.

Although we were initially unsure of how it would work, the sessions were transformative. While the technical skill element was an important part of the workshops, there was a strong focus on getting to know each other, sharing experiences, and building a sense of community. After a few weeks, the residents and staff were excited to attend each session, arriving early to lend a hand and share news of their latest discoveries, breakthroughs, or frustrations on their digital devices.

We were amazed to discover how many talented and skilled people we had in our building, from leaders and advocates to musicians, chefs, dancers, and linguists. The workshops brought these skills to light and gave residents the opportunity to showcase their talents, whether by preparing food for the group or leading discussions and activities. Everyone felt safe, supported, and valued for their life experience, skills, and talents.

The Connected Communities project was groundbreaking for our workers and community at Union Street high-rise and Star Health, and we hope it's just the beginning of a long collaboration with Infoxchange. We see many opportunities for this kind of community-focused work in public housing estates and community spaces around Australia.

Jackie Redlich, Maria Georgiou, Bruno Guerreiro
Older Person Highrise Support Program
Star Health

GREENHILLS NEIGBOURHOOD HOUSE (GREENSBOROUGH, VICTORIA)

It's been a tough journey finding momentum after a gruelling few years. Like many community organisations, the pandemic has taken a toll on the neighbourhood house sector, leaving staff exhausted and volunteers and community members struggling to reconnect with community activities. When Infoxchange approached us about this project, we were hopeful that it might ignite some new energy into our team and provide fresh ideas for program planning and collaboration. Our workshop participants included staff, volunteers, and community members with varying levels of skill and learning aspirations. Despite this, we found that co-design and participatory community building practices helped us find common ground and work together as a team to support each other.

During the workshops, we explored a wide range of topics through hands-on activities, partner and group conversations, and games. We didn't cover everything, but we decided together where to focus our attention, giving everyone a voice and shaping the experience. The workshops were designed to help people connect, share expertise, and discover new ways of thinking about and maximising the benefits of digital technology.

Our Connected Communities collaboration with Infoxchange was a game-changer for us. We discovered new ways of planning and delivering community engagement, and we were able to tap into the expertise and resources that exist within all of us. The workshops also opened up new applications of digital technology for advocacy, planning, engagement, organisation, connection, and fun.

Janelle Dunstan, Steph Morison
Greenhills Neighbourhood House

AUSTRALIAN RED CROSS (MORWELL AND ORBOST, VICTORIA)

This collaboration with Infoxchange has represented a time of growth for our Victorian Community Mobilisation Team. We started this journey in 2019 with the Connected Future project and have continued to partner with Infoxchange in the Connected Communities initiative.

The topic of digital inclusion has never been more important for our Australian Red Cross volunteers, members and the broader community. The Covid-19 era brought about new challenges and we saw many people rise to these challenges and find new ways to support each other and stay connected using digital technology. For some people in our communities, digital technology remains a theme of great frustration; factors such as access, affordability and ability are issues compounding the existing challenges present in our community.

We feel optimistic that Connected Communities and similar community led approaches will deepen the conversation around technology and create space for people with different abilities, ambitions and outlooks to come together. When educational and community engagement approaches support people to share ideas, skills, experiences and frustrations, this creates a rich space for curiosity and momentum to take root. Beyond simply building technology skills this approach has resulted in an array of other social outcomes, such as stronger social connections, improved wellbeing, a greater sense of belonging and improved self confidence.

We see this moment as just the beginning of a new way of working with our community. Asset based Community Development and participatory practices now shape so much of the work we undertake side by side with Australian Red Cross volunteers, members and the broader community.

Christine Crosby and Carolyn Ratnik
Victorian Community Mobilisation Team

MEET OUR TEAM

Our project has grown to be what it is today thanks to support and participation of the following community members, volunteers, workers and organisations:

Infoxchange

Anna Morgan

Sam Horman

Laura Notman

Ilkay Dere

Ben Shaw

Australian Red Cross

Carolyn Ratnik

Christine Crosby

Carissa Beavis

Orbost workshop participants

Morwell workshop participants

Gippsland Multicultural Services

Leanne Heard

Greenhills Neighbourhood House

Janelle Dunstan

Steph Morison

Sarah Willits

Steph Kerven

Kellie Wishart

Lynne McHutchinson

Ros Demetrios

Kat Veilgaard

Carol Doherty

Katherine Forrest

Nikki Bonfati

Steph Kerven

Kate Doyle

Janneane Connelly

Star Health

Jacqueline Redlich

Maria Georgiou

Bruno Guerreiro

Patrick Cahill

Sarah Street

Mel Whelan

Emily McLeod

Natasha Wasilewski

Antonella Rubinimatutini

Douglas Stewart

Kalisito Togalevu

Romy Bronson

Michael Warnock

Marlene Smart

Lyubov Chernega

Lev Kats

Sofia Kats

Shura Tsibushnik

Bosiljka Vujnic

Steven Potter

Marie Rawson

Sharmaine Fisher

Asia Wahaf

Dorene Fisher

Nataliya Verkholomora

Ioudassia Margolina

Nenad Vorkapic

Hassan Darrou

Stephen Peck

Supporters of Connected Communities

These Australian Red Cross members and volunteers worked with us to establish the foundations of the Connected Communities model through their participation in the Connected Future project:

Barbara Morrisey	Patricia Warren	Esther Waters
Beth Robinson	Bev O'Brien	Lorraine Judd
Christine Walker	John Morrissey	Faye Pike
Elaine Anderson	Judy Goddard	Helen Ritchie
Harry Schonewille	Rosie Blake	Lynne PowersNewton Friends of Red Cross
Iris Field	Pam Alyward	Dunkeld Red Cross Branch
Judith White	Peter Doyle	Ballendella Red Cross Branch
Jeanette Wallace	Wendy Crebbin	Deans Marsh Friends of Red Cross
Margaret Finch	Helen Hogan	Members of the Aireys Inlet
Linda Rogers	Karen Ashton	Anglesea Red Cross Branch
Leanne Lovel	Caroline Dougherty	Red Cross Surf Coast Emergency Services Team

The Jeder Institute

Fiona MIller

Beth Stockton

The TPG Telecom Foundation

Jacqueline Brewer

Consultants

Esther Semo

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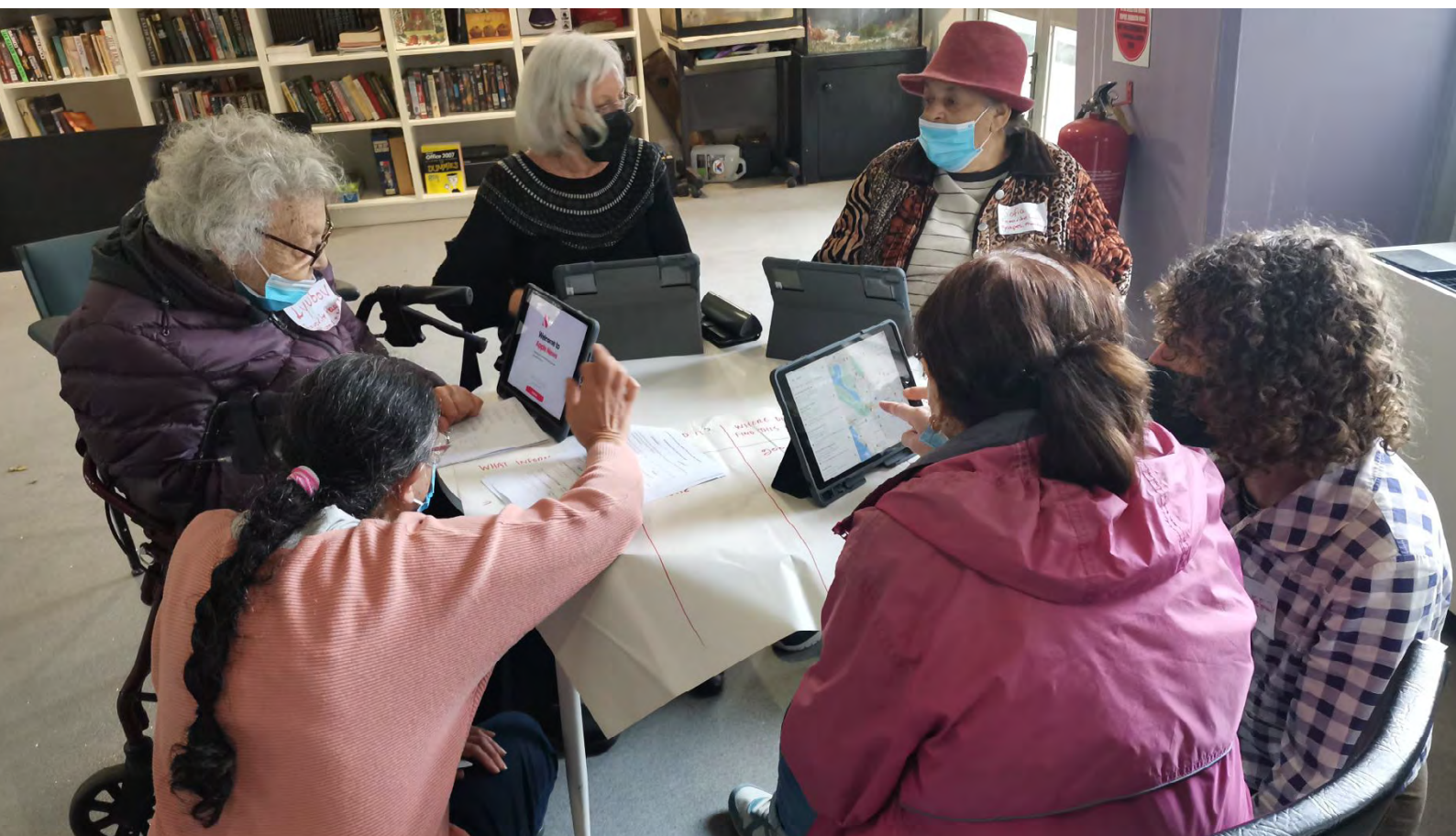
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