



RED CLIFFS PROJECT

Case Study



Hands Up Mallee (HUM) is a community-led collective impact initiative in the Mildura LGA, far northwest Victoria. Local leaders started HUM in 2015 when they realised the need for a different way of working to address social, health and wellbeing equity issues in the community.

HUM is a partnership involving the community, local service providers, agencies and all three levels of government, supported by a local Backbone (or support) Team. The initiative uses a place-based approach to co-design solutions for local issues, centring the community's voice and combining it with local data and current research to develop collective action for a better community for children, young people, and their families. HUM is dedicated to their community aspiration of 'a connected community where families matter, and children thrive'.

Some partners and the Backbone Team are continuously involved in the HUM collaboration, while other organisations and individuals contribute to specific HUM initiatives that align with their purpose, activities, interests, and expertise.

Hands Up Mallee's Overarching Theory of Change and associated Key Evaluation Questions serves as a guide to its work.

Figure 1: Simplified Levels of Journey of Change



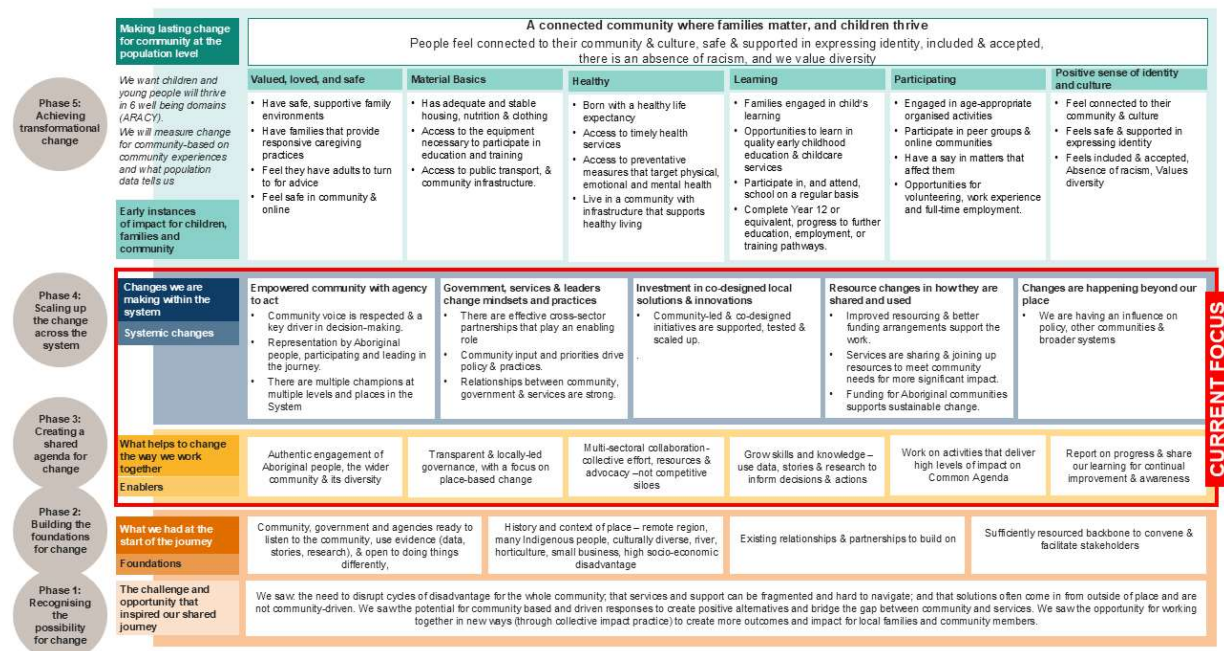
The HUM community identified in 2021 that by working on the enabling conditions there will be a greater likelihood of creating systemic changes, which in turn will lead to creating impact for children, young people and families, and in the longer term create lasting change in the NEST ARACY outcomes at the population level.

Three years on, three case studies:

- The Red Cliffs Project
- HomeBase Hoops
- The Covid Active Outreach Vaccination and Testing Response

have been chosen to illustrate the tactical work undertaken by the HUM Backbone Team to improve the enabling conditions and identify signs of early systemic changes as a result of this work. They, along with the evaluation report, will serve to inform funders, stakeholders and secondary audiences about the essential, independent and flexible role of the Backbone Team as a facilitator for place-based change.

Figure 2: Hands Up Mallee's Over-Arching Theory of Change



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SUMMARY



The **Red Cliffs Project** was a co-design initiative developed by the HUM backbone team to explore how to improve the rich home learning environment¹ for pre-school children in Red Cliffs where the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data had been trending downwards over a series of collection points. Hands Up Mallee contracted The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) to assist in building and applying a co-design approach to working with families and local Early Years service providers. This initiative began with families identifying challenges and opportunities in fostering rich home learning environments. Initial mapping with families to identify all the child and family friendly places in Red Cliffs that were low or no cost revealed the local sparsity of these and the reliance on travelling to the closest regional centre Mildura, a 20 minutes' drive away, with limited public transport options, for this need to be met. Families prototyped some big ideas and then prioritised those they felt they could pilot within the local community, and identified others for which they wanted to advocate over the long term. The co-design approach for the Red Cliffs Project generated far more outcomes than imagined at the onset. These include increased confidence of families in advocacy, and community leadership, and increased family engagement in key infrastructure developments that support the health and wellbeing of children and families in Red Cliffs.

What HUM means by 'equity'

Equity refers to the principle of creating the conditions for fair and just inclusion of all individuals based on their specific needs and circumstances.² Unlike equality, which means giving everyone the same resources or opportunities, equity recognizes that people start from different places and may require different kinds of support to achieve similar outcomes. It means identifying gaps in opportunities, outcomes, and representation, and taking targeted actions to address those gaps not just for individuals

¹ The definition of Rich Home Learning Environments used within the Red Cliffs Project comes from Education Scotland (2023) and is defined as "the combination of everything you and your family do and the spaces your child has access to that affect your child's development and learning. This includes opportunities your child has to play and interact with books, objects and everyday experiences to help them make sense of their world."

² Glover, A. (2015). *Equity Matters in Collective Impact*.

but systemically so that everyone can have a good life.³ HUM has a strong equity focus and works on the assumption that solutions to complex challenges will only be effective and sustainable with the active and meaningful involvement of community, particularly community members experiencing inequity.

Types of changes covered in this case study

This case study distinguishes between two types of Red Cliffs Project changes:

- **Direct changes:** observable and measurable changes that happened right away because of something specific from the Red Cliffs Project.
- **Ripple effects:** the indirect changes including new initiatives and outcomes that emerged because of the Red Cliffs Project. These effects go beyond the immediate, observable outcomes and include broader changes that were significantly shaped by the insights, co-design, and practices introduced by the Red Cliffs Project. Ripple effects may manifest over time and can extend to areas or stakeholders not initially targeted, demonstrating the wider reach and influence of the Red Cliffs Project.

Ripple effects can also contribute to or be a part of systems change, especially when multiple ripple effects accumulate over time to create significant shifts within a system. For example, small changes in community advocacy, influenced by the Red Cliffs Project, might eventually lead to larger changes in social norms or policies, contributing to systems change.

Acronyms

There are multiple acronyms used in this case study:

Acronym	Description
AEDC	Australian Early Development Census
CBM	Connected Beginnings Mildura
HUM	Hands Up Mallee
LGA	Local Government Area
MFC	Mallee Family Care
MRCC	Mildura Rural City Council
RHLE	Rich Home Learning Environment
TACSI	The Australian Centre for Social Innovation

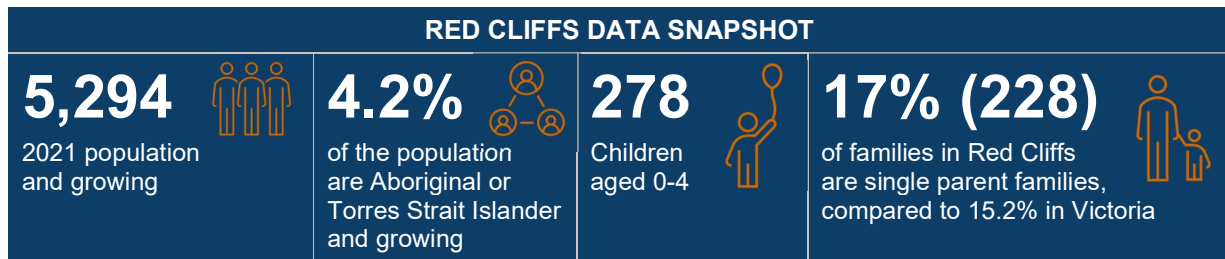
Starting information and context: The Red Cliffs Community

Red Cliffs is a small satellite town with a population of approximately 5,000 people⁴ a 20-minute drive from Mildura, the closest regional service centre, in the Australian state of Victoria. Red Cliffs residents experience socio-economic disadvantage with a median weekly household income approximately 30% lower than the Victorian state average, a growing population and 55.6% employment rate.⁵

³ Kania, J., et al. (2022). *Centering Equity in Collective Impact*.

⁴ Australian Bureau Statistics, (2021). Census All persons QuickStats, Red Cliffs.

⁵ Australian Bureau Statistics, (2021). Census All persons QuickStats, Red Cliffs.



In 2021, three playgroups and a kindergarten were operating in Red Cliffs. The town does not have a childcare or daycare facility, the nearest facility is over 20 kilometres drive away. Within the broader Loddon Mallee Region there are three children (aged 0-5) for every centre based daycare facility.⁶ In Red Cliffs specifically, the combined number of centre-based day care, family care and dedicated pre-school facilities is less than a fifth of the number of children aged 0-5 within the area.⁷⁸ Few Early Years and Family Services were delivered in Red Cliffs requiring families to travel to Mildura, a 40-minute round trip. Many young families in Red Cliffs lack their own transport with public buses leaving approximately once an hour.



The need for a local equity-focused and collaborative response to identify ways to improve growth and development opportunities for pre-school children in Red Cliffs

With **278 children between the ages 0-4 years old**, AECD data for Red Cliffs between 2009 and 2018 demonstrates an overall downward trend in developmental vulnerability across all domains.⁹ AEDC is a nationwide census of early childhood development to examine how children have developed by the time they start school. It looks at 5 areas of early childhood development: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communication skills and

⁶ Productivity Commission, (2023). A path to universal early childhood education and care.

⁷ Productivity Commission, (2023). A path to universal early childhood education and care.

⁸ Sunraysia Daily, (2023). Childcare failure.

⁹ Australian Early Development Census, (2021). Number and percentage of children developmentally vulnerable in 2021, Mildura. (Mildura LGA (2009-2021))

general knowledge.¹⁰ AEDC 2009-2018 data was utilized by the HUM backbone to evidence the need to improve opportunities and outcomes for young children in Red Cliffs. For example, developmental vulnerability on one or more of domains demonstrated a downward trend from 26.3% in 2009 to 32.4% in 2018 for Red Cliffs children 0-4 years old. By comparison, Irymple another satellite town also within the Mildura LGA experienced an upward trend from 16.2% in 2009 to 13.5% in 2018 against the same measure of developmental vulnerability on one or more domain.¹¹

Collectively, AEDC data trends and limited range of Early Years' service spaces and delivery in Red Cliffs demonstrated the need to work with local families experiencing disadvantage to co-design solutions to support the developmental needs of young children and generate more opportunities to improve the educational outcomes for children and families in Red Cliffs

Methodology

This case study forms a crucial component of a broader evaluation encompassing, the Hands Up Mallee Mid-Term Evaluation Report and two further case studies covering Active Outreach COVID-19 Testing and Vaccination Response and HomeBase Hoops initiatives.

The Red Cliffs Project case study was developed using a mixed methods approach for data collection drawing on six semi-structured interviews with key Red Cliffs Project stakeholders, 23 survey responses, and a comprehensive desktop review of 30 documents including:

- Two specific Red Cliffs Project publications detailing the initiative's learnings, insights, outcomes, and success factors: the independent Rich Home Learning Environments Evaluation Report (2022) by Clear Horizon as well as HUM's Red Cliffs Connected Events Summary Report (2022).
- 28 additional academic and grey literature resources including articles, websites, public reports, videos, local Mildura LGA data sets, media releases and advocacy documents.¹²

Data analysis

To create the Red Cliffs Project case study, an applied inductive approach was used informed by a combination of methods to meet HUM's unique needs. This included Significant Instances of Systems and Policy Improvements (SIPSI), Outcomes Harvesting, and Most Significant Change. Qualitative data was analysed thematically and cross-referenced against quantitative data from the surveys and documents. Using an evidence table, the results from different data sources were synthesised and coded. Data from the different datasets was triangulated to make the case study more robust.

To assess the significance of Red Cliffs Project outcomes, the HUM backbone team and partners' level of contribution to outcomes, and the strength of the supporting evidence, three rubrics were utilised. These rubrics were designed by Clear Horizon with input from the HUM backbone team and were adapted from those used in the 'Logan Together Community, Maternal and Child Health Hubs'

¹⁰ Australian Early Development Census, (2021). Number and percentage of children developmentally vulnerable in 2021, Mildura.

¹¹ Australian Early Development Census, (2021). Number and percentage of children developmentally vulnerable in 2021, Mildura.

¹² A complete overview of all data sources can be found in the evidence section.

contribution analysis evaluation.¹³ The rubric's can be found in Annex 5 in the Hands Up Mallee Mid-term Evaluation Report.¹⁴

Joint sensemaking and verification

To ensure comprehensive coverage and accuracy of the case study content and findings, two sensemaking workshops were conducted: one with the HUM backbone team and another with key stakeholders involved the Red Cliffs Project. These workshops were instrumental in gathering feedback on the preliminary findings, identifying potential inaccuracies, and uncovering opportunities for improvement.

To further validate the case studies and assess the significance of the Red Cliffs Project's outcomes, HUM's contributions, and the robustness of the evidence, a verification panel comprising four independent experts in place-based systems change was convened. This panel participated in two assessment rounds:

- **Round 1:** was used to identify opportunities to enhance the case studies. Insights from this session prompted the collection of additional evidence through further desktop review and follow-up conversations with interviewees and other key stakeholders involved in AOCTVR or the ripple initiatives covered in this case study.
- **Round 2:** was used to undertake independent assessment of the case studies against the three verification rubrics and provide final judgments.



¹³ Dart, J. (2021). Contribution Analysis – Logan Together.

¹⁴ Jongsma, F., O'Connor, K. & Gregg-Rowan, C. (2024). *Hands Up Mallee Mid-term evaluation report*. Prepared by Clear Horizon for Hands Up Mallee, September 2024.

ABOUT THE RED CLIFFS PROJECT

In 2021, Hands Up Mallee initiated a co-design process with families with young children and Early Years Services to trial the Rich Home Learning Environment Project (now known as the Red Cliffs Project) in Red Cliffs, a satellite town in the Mildura Local Government Area. In its initial phases the project was supported by The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) who provided coaching and mentoring to the HUM backbone in facilitating the co-design process. Clear Horizon provided support in evaluating both the co-design processes and the testing of prototypes. The project also brought together the expertise of:

- 10 Red Cliffs families with pre-school aged children
- 6 Early Years Service professionals
- Rich Home Learning Environment and Core Care Conditions Research
- AEDC and local demographic data



Utilizing a co-design approach where family's expertise and lived experience is valued, local service providers were invited to collaboratively work together with parents to identify and co-design solutions for improving outcomes for young children. A working group was established to identify challenges and opportunities in fostering rich home learning environments, meeting every three weeks to build a strong foundation for success. Initial phases of the project involved the team working with the AEDC data, their own lived expertise and relevant research to develop ideas that they recognised as having potential for improving rich home learning environments in Red Cliffs, and ultimately leading to improvements in the town's AEDC data over time. This involved the development and implementation of prototyping of Five Big Ideas with a view to piloting at least one within the local community. For each idea they developed a 'Story of Change'. Like a Theory of Change, these Stories of Change described the short-, medium- and long-term changes for families, services and communities that would be expected as a result of successful implantation of an idea. These Stories of Change were then combined into an overarching Story of Change for the entire Red Cliffs Project (Figure 2). All elements of the project aimed at achieving core outcomes within the Story of Change, namely that children feel loved and safe in the community, children grow and learn well, and all cultures are strong and proud.

The Red Cliffs Project is a core initiative which demonstrates HUMs commitment to community-led and co-designed initiatives which are supported, tested and scaled up. This project demonstrates the significance in valuing and celebrating community expertise and lived experience, resulted in the piloting of Red Cliffs Connected free community events for families and young children, and families influencing the advocacy by Local Government for significant Early Years infrastructure developments and a commitment to create an Integrated Early Years Hub in Red Cliffs.

Co-Designing Ideas and Story of Change



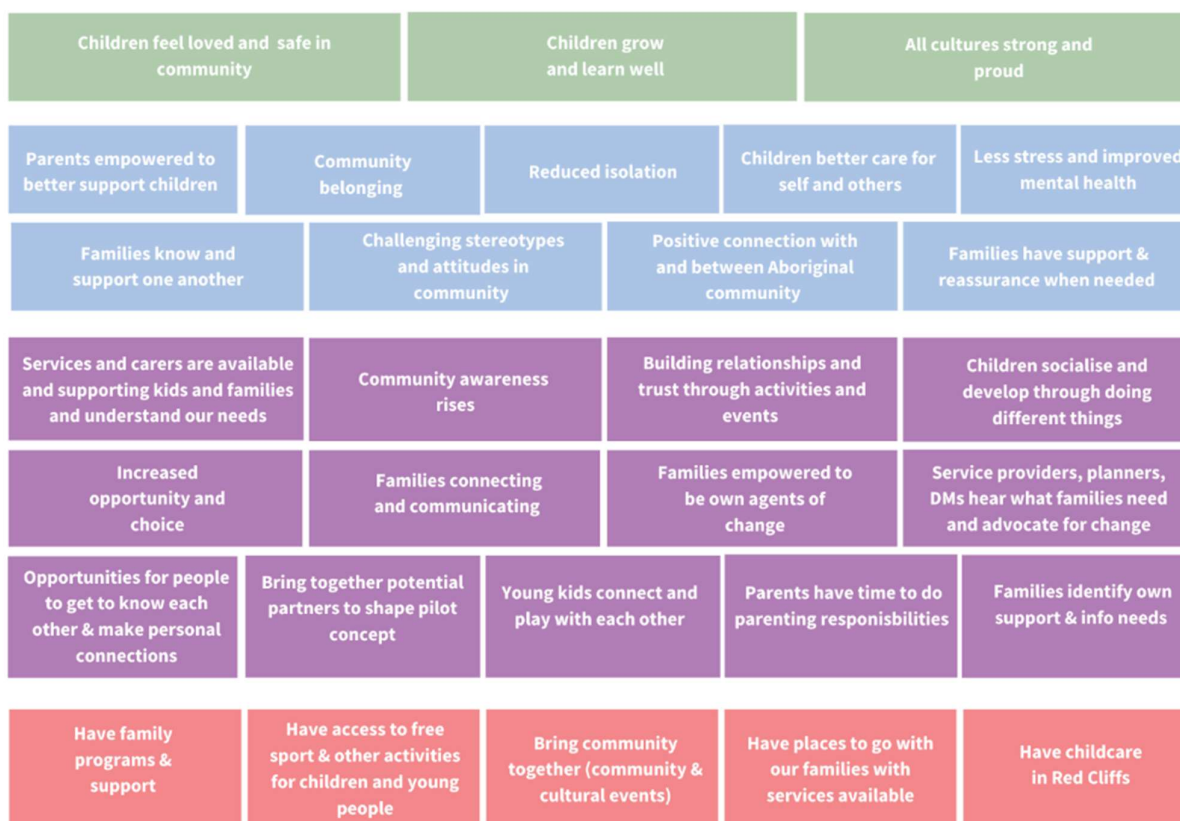
In 2021 the Red Cliffs Project team met every three weeks to engage in the co-design process. Throughout this process which brought together lived expertise, local data and research and support from expertise in co-design and evaluation, the project team identified five Big Ideas from three broad concept areas and selected four Big Ideas for prototyping:

- No and low-cost activities for children at home and in the Red Cliffs community
- Family and parent support sessions/programs
- Family and community events: bringing families and community together
- An integrated hub in Red Cliffs to support children and families
- Childcare facilities in Red Cliffs (deemed beyond the scope of prototyping)

Each Big Idea had a linked Story of Change, collectively informing the overarching project Story of Change.



Figure 2: Red Cliffs Project Story of Change



The Red Cliffs Project Partners

Key stakeholders involved across all phases of the Red Cliffs Project include:

STAKEHOLDER	ROLE
Families living in Red Cliffs	Project Team – parent
Services operating in Red Cliffs (including Mildura Rural City Council, Mallee District Aboriginal Services, Mallee Family Care, Connected Beginnings Mildura)	Project Team – service providers
Red Cliffs Focus Group, Red Cliffs Resource Centre, Red Cliffs Lions Club, Red Cliffs Rotary Club	Local Stakeholders
Aunty Colleen	Volunteer providing cultural knowledge and support for families
The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI)	Coaching and mentoring support for co-design
Clear Horizon	Coaching and mentoring support for evaluation, developed the Rich Home Learning Environment evaluation report
Paul Ramsay Foundation	Funder

Contribution of the HUM Backbone Team to the Red Cliffs Project

The HUM backbone team played a critical role in initiating and supporting the Red Cliffs Project as well as capturing learnings and impact. The role of the backbone was to strengthen the enabling conditions that in time, will lead to systemic changes and create impact. The role included:

- **Securing a \$150,000 grant** from the Paul Ramsay Foundation to successfully kickstart the project and enlist the expertise of TACSI and Clear Horizon to support co-design and evaluation and reporting.
- **Conducting a literature review on rich home learning environments** and studying available and relevant data to inform the project scope and design.¹⁵
- **Undertaking authentic engagement of families, Aboriginal people and the wider diversity of the community** through deep community connections, rather than taking the approach of only engaging with individuals already connected to focus groups or steering committees linked to Early Years Services, thus ensuring a broader reach to support equity and empowerment.
- **Engaging TACSI to bring their co-design expertise** into the project through two workshops and an ongoing coaching role with the backbone staff.
- **Creating a trusting and supportive environment** using codesign principles as norms.
- **Engaging Early Years Services to promote collaborative and collective effort and to share resources, efforts and knowledge.**
- **Facilitating the project** whilst employing and learning about co-design practices to build this approach into other HUM project work.
- **Maintaining continuous communication** through trusted relationships in a climate of extensive pandemic lockdowns.
- **Gathering evidence and working with independent Understanding, Measurement, Evaluation and Learning** experts Clear Horizon to apply a developmental evaluation approach, reporting on progress and shared learnings for continual improvement and awareness.
- **Assisting families to know who to advocate** to at MRCC and Government and advocating for families to be engaged in subsequent infrastructure processes.
- **Elevating learnings and applying them** to the Red Cliffs Connected pilot, Fun in the Park and youth engagement in the Red Cliffs Free Pool Access Pilot.
- Collating relevant **data** for MRCC to support the advocacy efforts.
- **Elevating the need to advocate** for the State funded Childcare Centre to be placed in Red Cliffs to MRCC when a State Government Funding Program was announced.¹⁶

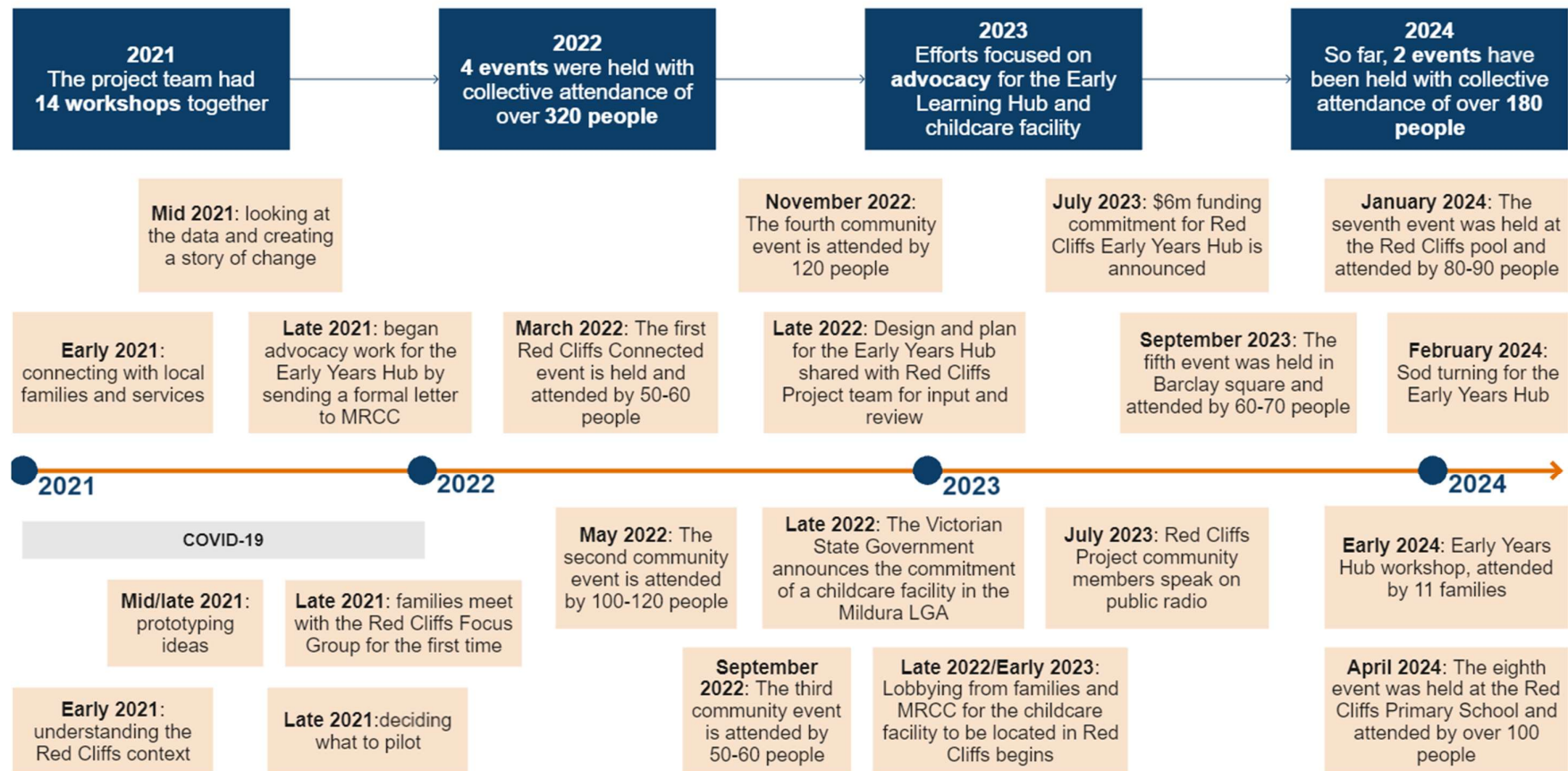
¹⁵ Key literature reviewed included: Santora (2024). *How can you create a learning environment that respects diversity?*, Action for Children (2021). *What role does the home learning environment play in supporting good child development in the early years and positive outcomes in later life?*, Yu and Daraganova (2014). *Children's early home learning environment and learning outcomes in early years of school*

¹⁶ Victorian State Government, (2023). Bigger better kinders for our youngest Victorians.

Journey Map

A visual map of the Red Cliffs Project Journey

Figure 3: Red Cliffs Project Journey Map 2021-2024¹⁷



¹⁷ This journey map was developed for the purpose of this case study and draws on relevant program documentation, interviews conducted with project team members and sensemaking workshops with individuals involved in the Red Cliffs Project.

HUM TOC Enablers and Systemic Changes covered in this case study

Outcome level	Outcomes achieved
Which of HUM's systems change outcomes are addressed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An empowered community with agency to act • Government, services, and leaders think and act differently. • There's investment in locally co-designed solutions / innovations • Resources are shared and used in different ways • Changes are happening beyond the Mildura LGA
Which of the enablers are present in this case study?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authentic community engagement (Aboriginal, CALD, LGBTIQ+, etc.) • Transparent and locally led governance. • Multi-sector collaboration (collective efforts, resourcing, advocacy) • A focus on growing skills and knowledge / Evidence-informed decision making. • A focus on activities that deliver high levels of impact. • Sharing of progress and learnings for improvement and awareness raising.

Key outcomes

The key outcomes that were achieved by HUM's Red Cliffs Project collaboration are:

Outcome 1. Red Cliffs families feel more connected to their local community and each other.

Building supportive relationships, and strong connections through shared decision-making and co-design has ensured that families and service partners are invested in the project and feel valued for their role and contribution. Respecting and celebrating the diverse culture and identity of Red Cliffs, strengthening community voice, and increased recognition of lived expertise and cultural identity has helped families to become more confident and empowered and plan for the ongoing success of Red Cliffs Connected events, one of the Five Big Ideas piloted.

Outcome 2. Strong community co-design is positively changing the way Government and local services meaningfully engage with families and acknowledge their expertise.

Local Government and service providers are starting to shift their approach to more considered co-design and meaningful engagement and acknowledgement of community expertise. Significantly, this has led to families advocating to Mildura Rural City Council to secure funding for an Integrated Early Years Hub and the placement of a State Government Childcare Centre in Red Cliffs.

Outcome 3. A strong foundation of co-design and inclusive community engagement is contributing to long-term outcomes for the Red Cliffs community.

Through the Red Cliffs Project, a strong foundation of connected co-design and inclusive community engagement is contributing to emerging long-term outcomes for Red Cliffs families. Confidence gained through being part of the Red Cliffs Project has propelled individuals to extend their advocacy to other areas, including the Red Cliffs Focus Group, leading to significant updates to the Red Cliffs Community Plan and increased engagement and involvement of families in future outcomes for their children.

KEY OUTCOMES OF THE RED CLIFFS PROJECT

This chapter provides detailed descriptions of each outcome, highlighting their significance and the contributions made by HUM's Red Cliffs Project collaboration partners in achieving these outcomes.

Outcome 1: Red Cliffs families feel more connected to their local community and each other



Building supportive relationships, and strong connections through shared decision-making and co-design has ensured that families and service partners are invested in the project and feel valued for their role and contribution. Respecting and celebrating the diverse culture and identity of Red Cliffs, strengthening community voice, and increased recognition of lived expertise and cultural identity has helped families to become more confident and empowered and plan for the ongoing success of Red Cliffs Connected events, one of the Five Big Ideas piloted.

The initial six-month process of the Red Cliffs Project, which emphasised mutual understanding, listening, learning, and building a strong foundation, had a profound impact on the whole project team. It instilled confidence, empowerment, and active involvement in co-designing community prototypes. The Red Cliffs Project also places a strong emphasis on inclusion and cultural safety, ensuring that all families feel heard and that their cultures are respected. The diversity of the participants, coming from various social and cultural backgrounds, is seen as one of the project's greatest strengths. This approach has forged strong, enduring foundations and relationships among participants throughout the three-and-a-half years the project has been running. Families feel confidence and pride in the outcomes they are achieving and feel that their voices are finally being heard. Once listened to and respected, families become strong and empowered advocates for their local community.

"I have never felt so comfortable in a beautiful, mindful group in a community that was so set on what this actual community wanted." (Project team - parent)¹⁸

"Community members are empowered by the work and see themselves as agents for change. Locally based solutions to continuing issues have been demonstrated to be powerful and effective." (Project team - service provider)¹⁹

¹⁸ Clear Horizon (2024). *Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews*.

¹⁹ Clear Horizon (2022). *Rich Home Learning Environment evaluation report*.

HUM's contribution to enabling a culturally safe and inclusive environment for all cultural identities was led by the HUM backbone team and is central to HUM collaboration's approach more broadly. In addition, TACSI's co-design support and groundwork on embedding cultural safety during the initial project workshops has helped the project team develop and set a strong foundation. Fostering a space of safety and inclusion, particularly for local Aboriginal families, is significant and helps create a space where Aboriginal project team members feel empowered and listened to.

"The main important thing that I've seen Hands Up Mallee do is having our Aboriginal community involved and having them have a say and listen to what they have to say, because not many organisations for an Aboriginal person will listen and will do those things, will go ahead and acknowledge what that person said and do something about it. That's number one important thing that I really love about the Hands Up Mallee" (Project team - parent)²⁰

"There were women who I think gained much richer insights about Aboriginal culture, and the importance that it has to them and their families. Because they kept getting reminded from the Aboriginal ladies there...And starting to have these conversations; a non-Aboriginal person might say, "I don't really understand the Aboriginal flag, because no one ever taught me that at school". And just all this feeling it's a safe place to start to talk about those things." (Project team - backbone)²¹

For others, the sense of value and belonging they experience through this project and the ways this leads to them feeling empowered again in their own lives was significant.

"My husband was one who made the comment to me...he said, 'You found where you belong now. You found this adding value in the community and getting things happening, this is you, and this is the good you.' And I'm like yeah, I didn't really think about that. Yeah, and it is, it is about people listening to you." (Project team - parent)²²

The Red Cliffs Project has enhanced and strengthened connections between individuals and the Red Cliffs community more broadly. Through piloting one of the Five Big Ideas, 'Family and Community Events: Bringing Families and Community Together,' Red Cliffs Connected was formed as HUM and local families partnered to deliver a series of free, fun events for families and children in Red Cliffs. **Eight community events and BBQs have been held in Red Cliffs between 2022 to 2024.** Across these events, **over 500 individuals have attended.**

²⁰ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

²¹ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

²² Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.



The Red Cliffs Connected pilot highlights ways of working that were critical to this phase of collaborative work; empowering families to co-design and engage with community in a different way which supported and facilitated stronger community connection was a key outcome. This unique approach saw families leading in design, organisation, learning and replication of these events, which has led to direct positive outcomes for project team members by improving their connections with other families and service providers and giving them a sense of meaning and contribution to their local community.

"I feel for the first time, so much more part of this community, and I've been here for 12 years."
(Project team - parent)²³

"The community all understands and are more connected and know each other's values. There is nothing of, "Who are you? Where do you come from?" Instead, it is, "Come on in and have a yarn. You are all welcome." (Project team - parent)²⁴

"Family said they feel really proud of putting things on in the community, for locals. And I think they felt really pleased with the way they went down in community and felt that there's a bit of life back into the community after the lockdowns." (Project team - backbone)

A profound sense of pride and confidence emerges from being advocates for local families within the community. Through Red Cliffs Connected free community events, families have had the opportunity to lead the design, organisation and delivery of these events, which heightened their sense of empowerment and belief in their capacity to make a difference within their community.

"There is a noticeably increased confidence and awareness of their own skills and expertise and confidence to use those for the good of community in Red Cliffs... It was really a privilege to observe this kind of building of community within a project, so I think you bringing together individuals who are driven by their own sort of individual experiences, but by working together over a period of time you start to build this kind of community where the focus is quickly much bigger than individual." (Project team - backbone)²⁵

The increased confidence and empowerment of parents involved in the project have had **positive ripple effects on their families**. One mother noted that her children now view her more as a leader, which has boosted their own confidence. Additionally, the involvement of parents in the project has led to strong youth participation in the co-design of other HUM-led initiatives, such as the award-winning Red Cliffs Pools Pilot.²⁶

²³ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

²⁴ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

²⁵ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

²⁶ Hands Up Malle (2023). Red Cliffs Pool Pilot Evaluation.

"My oldest daughter, she's been involved in a couple of the leadership youth programs out here, she was making decisions around the pool parties." (Project team - parent)²⁷

Being part of the Red Cliffs Project provides an avenue for parents to build deeper and more meaningful connections with other families and local service providers who are also part of the project team. The safe, inclusive environment created in this group was instrumental in enabling close and trusting relationships to form. Research suggests that a strong sense of community and connection for parents is essential for developmental and educational outcomes for children.²⁸ A strong community lays the foundation for an important relationship environment, promotes belonging, a sense of identity and learning and connects children and families to supportive relationship and resource networks.²⁹

"It was really nice that it was somewhere safe that people could be and talk...it became a little support group really." (Project team - parent)³⁰

A direct outcome of families being more connected to their local community is their **children becoming more at home in Red Cliffs**. Red Cliffs Connected events are creating spaces for families and children to meet and build new social networks.

"The more I interact out in the community, the more meetings I go to, the more they see me engaging in the community, the more they feel connected as well." (Project team - parent)³¹

"People knew who to come to when the barbecues were happening and just to have a bit of a yarn to know what it was all about, what it's for, just having a feed and walking back out. Just building that connection with the community, whoever comes in and joins in, just to create that safe environment with community. For our younger youth, mainly for our children because our children are seeing parents connecting and having those yarns and conversations. It makes them realise, oh, my mum or dad is having a conversation with someone else, maybe I can go and make friends with their kids. Connect with them and create a friendship, even though they maybe don't go to the same school but it's a connection they're building and a community" (Project team - parent)³²

The contribution of the HUM backbone team to this outcome is significant. The Red Cliffs Project, led by the HUM backbone team, creates strong and meaningful relationships by focusing on co-design, trust and rapport-building as foundational elements of the project. The team's unique approach and emphasis on establishing a robust foundation of trust, respect, and a culture of listening from the outset are pivotal in enhancing and strengthening connections between families, service providers and the broader community.

For HUM, relationality and knowledge and skills exchange are essential to effective collective impact work and enable place-based change to be effective.³³ By creating a safe space for community engagement and prioritising relationship-building before moving on to piloting ideas, the HUM backbone team played a crucial role in fostering lasting and strong connections within the project team. Other

²⁷ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

²⁸ Livingstone, R. (2018). It takes a village to raise a child: the role of community

²⁹ Hope, K. (2020). Community participation in early childhood education.

³⁰ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

³¹ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

³² Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

³³ Hands Up Mallee, (2022). Red Cliffs Connected Events Summary Report.

stakeholders within the HUM collaboration, including Connected Beginnings Mildura and Mildura Rural City Council also contribute to connecting families through their direct involvement in the Red Cliffs Project and their role in planning and supporting Red Cliffs Connected events.

Other contributing factors to this outcome include mentoring and coaching support from TACSI on co-design approaches which also contributed to the strong foundation and deep connections formed within the Red Cliffs Project team. This coaching approach significantly built the co-design capabilities of the backbone team, which has enabled this way of working to become embedded across other initiatives and areas of work that the HUM backbone team contribute to. For example, the place-based change approach, and co-design tools developed within the Red Cliffs Project have gone on to be adapted for the Red Cliffs Pool Pilot³⁴, HomeBase Hoops³⁵, Fun in the Park³⁶ and the community co-design of the Family Child Hub in Mildura. Learnings from the Red Cliffs Project have also informed co-design and community expertise approaches to the Family Child Hub development in Mildura.

"That way of working then influenced how we did our strategic work... it has literally shaped up how we've done all of our projects from then and how we've involved people in what we've done together so that's a massive ripple internally." (HUM backbone)³⁷

Support from Clear Horizon to co-design a Story of Change for the project also played a small role in developing shared goals and aspirations. This measurement, evaluation and learning support has grown the capabilities of the HUM backbone and positively impacted other HUM evaluation processes.



³⁴ Hands Up Mallee. (2023). Red Cliffs Pool Pilot Evaluation.

³⁵ Hands Up Mallee. (2022). HomeBase Hoops Evaluation Report.

³⁶ Hands Up Mallee. (2022). Fun in the Parks Pilot Evaluation.

³⁷ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

Outcome 2: Strong community co-design is positively changing the way Government and local services meaningfully engage with families and acknowledge their expertise.

Local Government and service providers are starting to shift their approach to more considered co-design and meaningful engagement and acknowledgement of community expertise. Significantly, this has led to families advocating to Mildura Rural City Council to secure funding for an Integrated Early Years Hub and the placement of a State Government Childcare Centre in Red Cliffs.



The Red Cliffs Project has led to a noticeable increase in service providers' willingness to support meaningful community engagement and co-design. Through considered co-design, valuing community expertise, and supporting families to become strong advocates, the Red Cliffs Project has contributed to improved connections between Red Cliffs families and service providers and government and demonstrates early signs of shifts in how government and service providers understand and engage meaningfully with community.

"This project has highlighted to me that community led projects are the way to create change within communities. The passion the community has brought to the project is inspiring. It creates a real insight to the needs and wants of community at a grassroots level. In the beginning the group sessions were led by services while everyone was still grasping the concept of the project. When attending group sessions now it is evident that community is leading the way and we are learning from them." (Project team - service provider)³⁸

"The community takes the lead and voices their thoughts on what the families of Red Cliffs would benefit from most. Personally, this project so far has been such an inspiring story of creating change" (Service provider)³⁹

"The work in Red Cliffs has and will continue to provide better services to meet the community need." (Local government)⁴⁰

The co-design process embedded into the Red Cliffs Project, and seeing community drive the initiative also had an impact on services involved. This is not uniform across services – which relates in part to the fact that not all services were able to engage regularly with the project.⁴¹ Nonetheless, services are keen to take the learnings they have developed through the co-design project and try to bring them into their

³⁸ Clear Horizon. (2022). Rich Home Learning Environment evaluation report.

³⁹ Clear Horizon. (2022). Rich Home Learning Environment evaluation report.

⁴⁰ Clear Horizon. (2022). Rich Home Learning Environment evaluation report.

⁴¹ Clear Horizon. (2022). Rich Home Learning Environment evaluation report.

work. One service was so committed to the co-design process that they noted that they would like to **turn the process for the co-design approach into a service policy, a significant ripple** of the project outcomes.

“What has been captured could also be turned into a policy of how to create a safe space and distributed among the areas – oh if every service could do this – it was community written – so powerful – never heard something so naturally flow that could be such an amazing policy. ... You’re not going to have community questioning policy because it’s written from voice of community. I’ve seen pushback when policies are written by people in offices, and they have no understanding of what’s going on.” (Service provider)⁴²

Furthermore, extensive engagement in the co-design and piloting of the Red Cliffs Project prototypes has empowered families to extend their advocacy efforts more broadly. **A significant ripple of this outcome is the role local families have played in advocating for two infrastructure projects that support families and children in Red Cliffs.** While the establishment of an Integrated Early Years Hub emerged as a priority idea within the Red Cliffs Project, it was seen as beyond the short-term scope of the prototyping phase. However, families have expanded their advocacy to include other services and worked with the Mildura Rural City Council to advance this vision, extending beyond the initial prototyping and embedding the strong leadership and advocacy skills developed in the early phases of the project into this next stage. This collective advocacy has played a significant part in securing \$6 million dollars in funding to build an Integrated Early Years Hub which includes four kindergarten rooms, maternal and child health consultation rooms, toy library facilities, community multi-use space and a breastfeeding room.⁴³ Families have also successfully worked alongside MRCC to advocate for the announced State funded Childcare facility for the Mildura region to be placed specifically in Red Cliffs.⁴⁴

“I think the advocacy work that [families] did around the Red Cliffs Integrated Early Years Hub, has really strengthened Council’s realisation how powerful it is when community members actually do advocacy work, and what it can do to leverage their grant applications. The joint application with the Department of Education, they would never have got that extra \$2 million if the families hadn’t been involved. And we’ve heard that directly from the Mildura Rural City Council.” (Project team - backbone)⁴⁵

Staff from Mildura Rural City Council are the first to acknowledge the unique and important contribution strong community advocates through the Red Cliffs Project have made in successfully receiving funding for the Integrated Early Years Hub. When the community clearly articulated their needs, it drew significant attention from all levels of government. Despite initial scepticism about the feasibility of securing \$6 million in funding for the Integrated Early Years Hub at various levels; within the Red Cliffs Focus Group, MRCC and other service providers, strong community advocacy and unwavering commitment to achieving positive outcomes for their children led to achieving this ambitious goal.

⁴² Clear Horizon. (2022). Rich Home Learning Environment evaluation report. t

⁴³ Victorian State Government (2023) Bigger, better kinders for our youngest Victorians. Media Release, Ingrid Stitt MP and Sunraysia Daily (2024) Building finally under way. News article (13/03/2024)

⁴⁴ Sunraysia Daily (2023) Childcare failure. News article

⁴⁵ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

"I truly did not believe the state government would ever give us \$6 million. So, when they came back and gave us \$6 million, I was like, what? But we wouldn't have got that result without community input, to tell you the truth, I would've put a more realistic black and gold kind of request in. But community, they told us, no, no, no, we want the Taj Mahal. So, I was like, okay, we'll do it." (Local government)⁴⁶

Recognising and prioritising community engagement, families have now been invited to contribute to the planning and co-design of community spaces within the new Integrated Early Years Hub in Red Cliffs, underscoring the importance of involving local community members in decision-making processes.

"Three years ago we started this and it's a blessing to be part of...we live here and we know what was missing and what was needed – this is our community... and we just want a brighter future for Red Cliffs." (Project team - parent)⁴⁷

When delivering a keynote speech at ChangeFest24 a national place-based systems change gathering in Mildura in early 2024, the Australian Treasurer, the Honourable Dr Jim Chalmers spoke about the significance of local community co-design and collaboration with the Red Cliffs Integrated Early Years Hub.

"We were talking this morning about Red Cliffs Early Years Hub and the significant \$6 million dollars from the Victorian State Government...what's different about this infrastructure is the communities shared in the decision making, having a genuine say about the build and how its done and when it's done. And now what we are trying to do is take those kinds of examples and make them the norm so that shared decision making is a feature of more of these decisions that involve government investment" (Treasurer Dr Jim Chalmers)⁴⁸

Having the Australian Treasurer tell a crowd of over 480 people that Red Cliffs is an example of how shared decision making should look **demonstrates the significance of this project** and ways of working with community in a meaningful approach to co-design can lead to deeply influential ripples.

A childcare centre in Red Cliffs was identified as the fifth Big Idea within the Red Cliffs Project but was not selected for prototyping due to the scale and scope. However, families committed to advocating for a childcare centre, conducting research, building relationships, and lobbying government officials. When the Victorian State Government announced a funding commitment to build a State funded childcare

⁴⁶ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

⁴⁷ Sunraysia Daily (2023) Build finally under way.

⁴⁸ Collaboration for Impact. (2024). The honourable Dr Jim Chalmers MP Speech ChangeFest24.

centre within the Mildura LGA, families, alongside HUM and Mildura Rural City Council, advocated specifically for this centre to be built in Red Cliffs as an identified childcare desert.^{49 50}

The impact of the Red Cliffs Project in influencing infrastructure upgrades to child and family facilities is significant. Research demonstrates significant inequalities in developmental and education outcomes exist between children experiencing socio-economic vulnerability and their peers.⁵¹ Early intervention has the potential to shift a child's trajectory and educational outcomes.⁵² Child and Family Centres have the potential to meet many of the needs of children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability, helping to shift outcomes and fill major gaps in the current Early Years landscape. Integrated early childhood services are essential in ensuring that families facing multiple adversities have positive social networks and access to key services during their children's early years.⁵³ Both the Integrated Early Years Hub and commitment to building a new childcare centre in Red Cliffs suggest such shifts and will have long lasting positive impacts on developmental and educational outcomes for children in Red Cliffs.

"Red Cliffs is a really good example of how Hands Up Mallee's work is actually changing the governance processes, I guess within organisations... Everyone just could not believe how well it had worked." (Local government)⁵⁴

"The work in Red Cliffs has provided the feedback and consultation with families to support what they want and need in their community. This information has provided the support for the build of the Red Cliffs Early Years Hub. The work of HUM and conversations models and supports further discussions and how best to work with families and their children." (Local government)⁵⁵

The **contribution of the HUM collaboration** in building a strong cohort of empowered voices through extensive co-design and meaningful engagement has paved the way for other services to engage, centre and recognise community expertise and voice. This has led to strengthened connections with other organisations and service providers such as Mildura Rural City Council and Mallee Family Care who contributed to the Red Cliffs Project as part of the project team.

"Also, another thing I've realised with Hands Up Mallee, it's not judgmental. They're a loving and caring space in that backbone. It's been adding a help to the community. For me, I'm grateful for what they've been able to have done in the past few years for our community, particularly for here in Red Cliffs. Without them, we wouldn't have gotten so far to have the kindergarten upgraded." (Project team - parent)⁵⁶

The HUM collaboration and backbone team play **an important role in bridging relationships and connections** between local community, services and government, which is a core feature of their unique ways of working that take a community-centred approach.

⁴⁹ Hurley, P., (2022). Deserts and Oasis: how accessible is childcare in Australia.

⁵⁰ Productivity Commission (2023) A path to universal early childhood education and care.

⁵¹ Sunraysia Daily (2023) Childcare failure.

⁵² Social Ventures Australia (2023) 'Happy, healthy and thriving: enhancing the impact of our Integrated Child and Family Centres in Australia'

⁵³ Honisett et al. (2023) 'Child and family hubs: an important 'front door' for equitable support for families across Australia'

⁵⁴ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

⁵⁵ Clear Horizon. (2022). Rich Home Learning Environment evaluation report.

⁵⁶ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

“I’ll tell you what it is, it’s [HUM] that bridge between community and council because if we’d just gone to council it wouldn’t have worked in the same way, but Hands Up Mallee in the way that they are so respectful and collaborative, and interested and are then able to take that back to council, then there’s that bridge, is, I believe, what’s going to make or break a lot of the projects that we want to roll out with.” (Project team - parent)⁵⁷

“HUM really have an important role ...bringing so many people together and telling that human story how important it is to that community...And that’s the facilitator of HUM to bring those different organisations and bring those different community members together as well. People that aren’t part of the organisation but are a part of the community to get them together and make sure that they have a voice is a great thing that the organisation does.” (Mayor -Mildura Rural City Council)⁵⁸

The HUM backbone with its distinct ways of working, including-design and meaningful community engagement, is a **key contributing factor to the securing the \$6 million dollar funding** to develop the Red Cliffs Integrated Early Years Hub which would not have been achieved without the direct lobbying and advocacy of families from the Red Cliffs Project, supported directly by the HUM backbone.⁵⁹ However, **other service providers, Mildura Rural City Council and all levels of government also played unique roles in achieving the funding** required for important infrastructure upgrades in Red Cliffs.



⁵⁷ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

⁵⁸ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

⁵⁹ Sunraysia Daily (2024) Build Finally Underway.

Outcome 3: A strong foundation of co-design and inclusive community engagement is contributing to long-term outcomes for the Red Cliffs community



Through the Red Cliffs Project, a strong foundation of connected co-design and inclusive community engagement is contributing to emerging long-term outcomes for Red Cliffs families. Confidence gained through being part of the Red Cliffs Project has propelled individuals to extend their advocacy to other areas, including the Red Cliffs Focus Group, leading to significant updates to the Red Cliffs Community Plan and increased engagement and involvement of families in future outcomes for their children.

The confidence gained through the Red Cliffs Project has propelled members to join other groups in Red Cliffs and become even stronger public advocates for their local community. This **direct ripple** of the Red Cliffs Project has resulted in two members taking on active roles in the Red Cliffs Focus Group. The Red Cliffs Focus Group is an active group of local representatives from local community groups and businesses who meet every two weeks to convene conversations, develop community plans and work with local government and services to improve Red Cliffs. Historically, this group has been primarily attended by long-term, retired members of the community with no voice or membership from younger community members or families. Building the confidence and empowerment to join this group, and overtime become committed and engaged members, with one of these women ultimately leading the Community Plan, demonstrates a significant ripple of the Red Cliffs Project and the ways in which it supported individuals to expand their advocacy to become strong and empowered community driven voices for families in Red Cliffs, maintaining the vision developed through the Red Cliffs Project that all families and children are connected and have access to rich learning spaces within their community.

“We supported each other, became part of the community plan and we made sure all the initiatives that we came up with [in the Red Cliffs Project] were put into this next community plan.” (Project team - parent)⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

“They’ve just gone from wondering about who’s around those leadership, community leadership tables, to being right in amongst it and not only participating but championing, focusing on children and families. And when you hear that after, like, one of my first sort of thoughts about what you see and feel when you go to Red Cliffs is that the very old community, like it’s a lot about the history and the older generations, and the resource centre, there’s no child or family activities there, like, to see and hear about how they’re pushing for that was, yeah, incredible.” (Project team - backbone)⁶¹

“Those kinds of traditional community structures have a lot of power in our small community and the way how a meeting operates also holds that power in place. You’re allowed to talk, but you only have this amount of time and need to stick to the agenda. We’re breaking into that group and challenging the old ways of doing things. HUM gave us that confidence.” (Project team - parent)⁶²

Members of the Red Cliffs Project have shared their experiences with broader audiences through panel discussions and on the radio, discussing the importance of inclusivity and community collaboration for better outcomes for children and families. These efforts exemplify the strong, meaningful community voice, leadership, and empowerment fostered by the project and represent a **significant ripple** of cultivating spaces where community members' voices are elevated, and their expertise is recognised.

“So, I said, ‘we’ve got an example of a community-led project which led to shared decision making that resulted in a really good outcome for the community.’ So, we just shared the story of the early years data and how we worked with council, and there was a bunch of initiatives that came up, but we got this big one, the \$6 million, and as I was sitting there with my microphone in front of these 130 people and I said, ‘Yes, and we’ve got a \$6 million grant’ and everyone just started clapping. After we talked, I had all these people running up to me...Because we had a really positive example.” (Project team - parent)⁶³

Some community members who were part of the project team have gone on to receive employment opportunities with partner service providers. For example, one key Aboriginal project team member has gone on to work with Connected Beginnings Mildura as a result of the strong connection and relationship formed with this service provider through the Red Cliffs Project. This employment is a **direct ripple** of both the increased confidence and empowerment instilled through this project, as well as the strong opportunities to develop rapport and relationships between services and community members the Red Cliffs Project provides.

The increased levels of confidence and empowerment of Red Cliffs families involved in co-design through the Red Cliffs Project can **be linked and attributed to the unique and considered ways of working that were established by the HUM collaboration at the outset of the project**. The initial strong emphasis on building relationships, connections, and trust between everyone involved in the project built a steady base from which empowerment and confidence grew. Many people referred to the generous and warm way that the HUM backbone team make the space safe and welcoming as key to their confidence and self-belief in their personal expertise and voice.

⁶¹ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

⁶² Clear Horizon. (2023). Hands Up Mallee Progress Mapping Report.

⁶³ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

"It was the trust that was built, I think, not only with our group, but with the facilitators, like Catherine and Fiona, who were just gems. It was respect and I remember Fiona always saying, 'Oh, you're the experts.'" (Project team - parent)⁶⁴

Beyond HUM as both a backbone and collaboration, **other contributing factors** to this outcome include other service providers and Mildura Rural City Council who supported and encouraged families to share their voice, expertise and contribute to the planning and co-design of new infrastructure within Red Cliffs. Support and encouragement from key individuals within these services played a role in ensuring that doors were opened, and opportunities presented for families to be key drivers for change in Red Cliffs beyond the HUM-led project.

TACSI's contributions to laying the foundations of cultural safety in their early workshop facilitation has also contributed to this outcome.

The co-design processes embedded in the Red Cliffs Project strengthen families, empower them, and helping them connect better to the community, each other and service providers. The community's unwavering commitment to long-term transformation in Red Cliffs is evident through its active participation in the project and comprehensive understanding of the necessary steps to bring about lasting change.

From the onset of the project, the ongoing commitment to collaborative co-design processes reflects a profound dedication to creating lasting systemic change within the Red Cliffs community. It is widely recognised that to achieve meaningful place-based systems change buy-in, commitment and co-design at a community level is necessary.^{65 66} This strategic approach continues today as families remain committed to establishing a strong foundation for change, with a focus first on achieving better outcomes for young children. Such efforts are a direct result of the co-design process embedded in the beginning of the Red Cliffs Project, fostering a robust framework where everyone feels empowered, involved, and dedicated to achieving enduring community-wide outcomes. HUM takes a deliberately informal and community centred approach to engaging families and community in Red Cliffs.

"I felt like there's no-one looking at the strategy of Red Cliffs apart from us to me, I'm like, let's get the foundation right, that's why the Early Years are so important... so that families and children are supported here." (Project team - parent)⁶⁷

"I hate to say it, but I've never really seen any organisation do it and then, once I jumped on board with Hands Up Mallee, I'm like, yes, yes, this is what needs to happen, yes, this is what you need to do. Bring the community together, build a strong policy for our community, let them know that there is someone there behind them to be able to push them forward to make a better future, which Hands Up Mallee has been doing." (Project team - parent)⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

⁶⁵ Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). Collective Impact.

⁶⁶ Cabaj, M. & Weaver, L. (2016). Collective Impact 3.0.

⁶⁷ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

⁶⁸ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

Families from the Red Cliffs Project, who have been advocates on the Red Cliffs Focus Group have created **direct ripple effects**. As more younger families become involved, they **change mindsets and challenge entrenched approaches** within The Red Cliffs Focus Group. Previously, the focus group primarily focused on small scale change that created impact but did not contribute to systemic change. With the strong vision, leadership, and advocacy of Red Cliffs Project team members now holding leadership positions in this Focus Group there is willingness to extend the groups capacity to develop a community plan that holds high aspirations for the families and children of Red Cliffs. This has resulted in attitude shifts in the community and a growing respect and awareness of these parents' capacity to be strong and successful advocates for their local community.

"They (families from the Red Cliffs Project) then played an integral role in developing the next Red Cliffs plan. The Red Cliffs small town plan is now being held as one of the best bloody plans in the history of these small-town plans. They have already got so many things funded and I certainly receive correspondence now from others in that focus group who probably wouldn't have reached out to before Council to say, what do you think about this? Can you help me with this?" (Local government)⁶⁹

"I think building the co-design approaches into our way of working has enabled other work to be much more community centred, and community led, and therefore has a generative power about it, in that these are the families that get to have their say and get their confidence and shake things up and make things happen. And then turn around and say, 'Oh, count me in as a volunteer next time, if you do this again,' or 'I want to do this kind of work,' and starting to look for opportunities for how they can do community type work. So, I think that's something that shouldn't be underestimated." (Project team - backbone)⁷⁰

HUM's commitment to meaningful co-design and long-term engagement with local families is the core contributing factor to this outcome. Taking time to develop trust, rapport, and respect has been fundamental to this approach. As such, developing an honorarium allowance so that families' expertise is recognised and remunerated also supports this ongoing commitment positively.

"So, if you're going to call on community expertise, and they're the only ones in the room not being paid, that doesn't seem fair to us. So, she's shaped up a policy and process for that to work. And that then has informed the other work, where we ask community to work with us in our structures like governance and our Yarning Group." (Project team - backbone)⁷¹



⁶⁹ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

⁷⁰ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

⁷¹ Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

“HUM has a really important role in telling the human story, and often this isn’t just statistic based. We (Council) identified an early learning desert in Red Cliffs, but often what the government do is they put things where the most population is, that’s just the cookie cutter approach. But HUM getting involved and bringing so many people together and telling that human story about how important it is to that community out there, helped to make sure that (funding was for in Red Cliffs) was a huge task.” (Mayor – Mildura Rural City Council)⁷²

Beyond HUM’s contribution to this outcome, there is a growing commitment to meaningful community co-design and expertise among other local service organisations and local government. This practice is becoming more common as its impact on securing funding and gaining community support and buy-in becomes more recognised.



⁷² Clear Horizon (2024). Hands Up Mallee evaluation interviews.

CONCLUSION

The work of the HUM backbone team was vital in building a deeper understanding of the challenges facing families and 0–5-year-old children in Red Cliffs, facilitating the families' ideas into successful pilots and empowering them to advocate to Government and Early Years Services for their ideas to come to fruition.

The Integrated Early Years Hub, currently under construction, and the planned State funded childcare centre in Red Cliffs both present opportunities for families to be involved in the co-design of these significant infrastructure developments. These two separate funding commitments, influenced directly by families leading the Red Cliffs Project, aim to improve services for families in Red Cliffs and are promising infrastructure for the future. The significance of an Integrated Early Year Hub in Red Cliffs is yet to be seen, however research from across Australia demonstrates the positive impact integrated hubs have on developmental and educational outcomes for children, particularly those facing socio-economic vulnerability.^{73 74 75} The success of these two infrastructure developments would not have been possible without the pivotal role of the HUM backbone, and the co-design work of the Red Cliffs Project more broadly.

Scaling the Red Cliffs Project to more directly contribute to the design, implementation and delivery of the Integrated Early Years Hub will likely require sustained support from the HUM backbone. Some parents initially involved in the project are now working or have other commitments. Ensuring that new members are also given the opportunity to be fully engaged in the Red Cliffs Project journey is important as it allows them to build rapport, trust, and relationships, which have been key contributors to the success of the project so far. As some families have also raised, while the \$6 million dollar funding for the Integrated Early Years Hub, and the commitment to building childcare are necessary and exciting steps in ensuring greater equity in Red Cliffs this is not the end of the journey. Sustained advocacy, leadership and a strong community voice into the future must be maintained to ensure that Red Cliffs becomes a place where all children have access to rich home learning environments.

An ongoing challenge within the Red Cliffs Project itself is staff changeover within service provider organisations, which results in varying levels of willingness to meaningfully engage and listen to community voices. This can limit the future outcomes of the Red Cliffs Project. Working closely with services to build their capacity and respect for community expertise and co-design is necessary to create enabling environments for families to be able to have a seat at the table.

Consideration of how community expertise, leadership and voice in Red Cliffs can continue and grow as the HUM backbone team moves to other priority initiatives in the region is necessary to ensure the longevity and ongoing commitment to place-based systems change which is emerging through the Red Cliffs Project.

Early signs of stronger relationships between Government, local services and families suggest an ongoing commitment to greater co-design and more meaningful recognition of community expertise and voice. The securing of funding for both an Integrated Early Years Hub and a State funded Childcare Centre suggest positive steps towards shifting AEDC data for Red Cliffs.

⁷³ Honisett et al. (2023). *Child and family hubs: an important 'front door' for equitable support for families across Australia*.

⁷⁴ Social Ventures Australia, (2023). *Happy, healthy and thriving: enhancing the impact of our integrated child and family centres in Australia*

⁷⁵ Hurley, P., (2022). *Deserts and Oasis: how accessible is childcare in Australia*

Collectively, the outcomes of this case study demonstrate the unique and significant early signs of change, suggesting more positive outcomes of families and young children in the community.

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