



Red Cliffs Early Years Hub Co-Design Project

Progress Report

December 2024

Acknowledgement to Country

We acknowledge the Latji Latji as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the Country on which we are. We also acknowledge their near neighbours the Barkindji.

We pay our respects to the Elders past, present, and emerging and to the ancient connection they hold with their Country.

We acknowledge there are also other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live, work in and contribute to the cultural heritage of the Mildura region.

About Hands Up Mallee

Hands Up Mallee connects community, government and services to create real change for children, young people and their families. We are a collective impact initiative based in the Mildura Local Government Area, on Latji Latji country and close to Barkindji country in north-west Victoria. As a collective impact initiative, we bring together different groups to tackle complex social problems in new ways. Our work covers areas like health, education, family services and youth services. Since 2015 we have partnered with communities, service providers and government to create ways for people to have a real voice in decision-making processes that impact them.

Contributor Acknowledgement

Hands Up Mallee recognises the generosity of all partners and community members who share their time, words, insights, and support to work collaboratively and create change. Their contribution is essential to our work. The stories and information shared, and outcomes achieved in our journey together to create a connected community where families matter and children thrive, belong to them and the Northern Mallee.

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Background

The successful funding bid to support the development of an Early Years Hub in Red Cliffs was a result of collaborative efforts and strong advocacy from Red Cliffs families, community, and Mildura Rural City Council. <https://shorturl.at/oXtBt>

The project was identified through deep engagement with local families and services to understand both the needs and aspirations of the local community in relation to the early years. Since 2021, Hands Up Mallee has partnered with local families, community, and services to connect, learn and co-design new and innovative ways to support families and support children in Red Cliffs to be developmentally ready for school. <https://shorturl.at/vlq1F>

The new Hub will create an opportunity for multiple early years services to operate from one facility and better meet the demand of the growing Red Cliffs community.

The new Hub will include:

- Four kindergarten rooms which will allow twice as many local children to attend kindergarten programs in Red Cliffs
- Two Maternal and Child Health (MCH) and allied health consulting rooms
- Toy Library facilities
- Multi-use community space, including an outdoor space
- Breastfeeding room
- Large foyer area
- An upgraded kindergarten playground

During 2024, Hands Up Mallee continued to partner with Red Cliffs families, community and services through a co-design project centered around the new Hub.

The purpose of the project is to bring together local families and services to explore and develop ideas that support or enable the community space within the Hub to:

- Engage children and families
- Support social connection

- Be informed by what local families need
- Support families to engage with other early years services within the Hub
- Be led by or have strong leadership and partnership with local families.

Partners in the co-design project include:

- Red Cliffs families
- Red Cliffs Kindergarten (YMCA) staff
- Mildura Rural City Council (MRCC) Early Years Coordinator & Hub Project Manager (Facilities).



What We Did

Community Engagement Phase | February - April 2024

An equity-based approach was taken to engage Red Cliffs families and carers to ensure that the co-design group was representative of community, with time spent endeavoring to reach community members who bring different types of experience and expertise of raising children in Red Cliffs.

Methods undertaken to reach community members included:

- Social media (Facebook and Instagram)
- Flyer letter box drops in Red Cliffs West and East
- Via local primary schools (to post on Compass and school newsletters)
- Posters in local shop windows
- Engaging with MRCC Red Cliffs Supported Playgroup
- Holding an info marquee at the Red Cliffs market (with children's activities, balloons, the building design, flyers and provided the opportunity to chat with locals and make a connection).

Connecting and Exploring Phase | May - July 2024

Getting to know one another and building trust was important in the early phase of the project, laying the basis for deeper work.

This phase included:

- Icebreakers, developing group norms and social time to connect
- Exploring local context, research and data evidence to understand and determine key opportunities in relation to the community space at the Hub
- Developing a collection of ideas in response to 'how might we?' generative questions
- Selecting five ideas for prototyping - through voting, feedback and collaborative decision-making using criteria
- Developing a Theory of Change for the five ideas, to support next phase and evaluation.

The five ideas included:

- Activities and events to foster social connection
- Welcomer and Connector role at the Hub
- Services and information at the Hub
- A Hub 'Working Group' - community-led collaborative decision making
- 'Cuppa Time' to create social connections.

Proto-typing Phase | August - December 2024

During this phase, the co-design group tested and refined their ideas utilising creative prototyping methods such as:

- Role play
- Visual activities
- Discussion
- Emotional and touch point Journey Mapping
- Information and Q&A session with researcher - Paul Prichard (Centre for Community Child Health).

Following the prototyping process and utilising collective decision-making methods, the co-design group selected two ideas as priorities to pilot in 2025:

1. A Hub 'Working Group' - community-led collaborative decision making
2. 'Cuppa Time' to create social connections (and incorporate testing/developing the Welcomer & Connector role).

Red Cliffs Connected Events, which are community-led social events designed by families from earlier co-design work will also continue in 2025 with a plan to:

- Pilot Community Connected events at the Red Cliffs Early Years Hub
- Deliver a Community Connected event at Red Cliffs pool to promote and utilise free pool access for 17 years and under
- Deliver another Community Connected NAIDOC event in June following on from a successful first-time event in 2024.

2023-2024 <https://shorturl.at/h0OFq> 2022-2023 <https://shorturl.at/PqHBJ>

Early Learnings

Experience in Co-design

- Initially many participants expressed that they felt nervous or unsure as they did not know others, had not previously been part of co-design work or how to balance their 'many hats', representing a service whilst also being a member of the Red Cliffs community. They reflected that time spent with the facilitator prior to helped to settle these concerns.
- Participants who had been part of the 'Rich Home Learning Environment' co-design project were unsure if those new to this work in Red Cliffs would 'get it' or be 'as awesome as our first group'.

Emerging Challenges and Frustrations

Some of the challenges along the way included:

- Building completion dates and delays affected plans for community and for the co-design work.
- Participants who joined the group later, expressed that they always felt a bit behind.
- Maintaining focus on early years. The need for supports for youth were consistently raised but did not fall within scope of this project.

The facilitator found it challenging to support the co-design group along the way to realise the deeper opportunities for change. By adopting different approaches and utilising external resources this supported a shift from more surface level ideas (e.g. activities) to deeper systemic level change (leadership).

Some of the frustrations along the way included:

- The difference between depth of knowledge of the topic between participants and the time needed to re-visit, summarise and clarify previous workshops.
- The group had so many ideas that the necessity to keep refining and narrow these down at times.

What Helped and What Worked

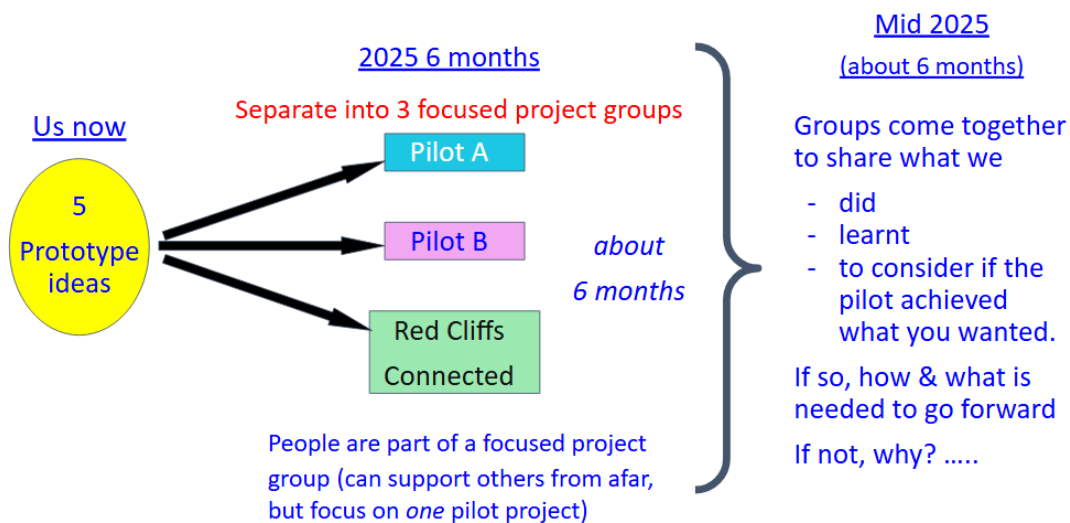
- Strong cultural representation and guidance from a community Elder and emerging leader.
- Having participants in the group who were not born in Australia and were able to explain how different norms can be, from cultural to everyday.
- Taking the time in the early workshops to build solid connections and trust in the group was an enabler for participants to move beyond their comfort zone at times and think beyond their own experiences.
- Allocating a team member to care for children allowed parents to take part in the group.
- Having the flexibility to include a new member later in the process brought this person's experience and voice to the group.
- Families who were members of previous co-design work in Red Cliffs naturally took on the role of mentors, were viewed as knowledge keepers by the group, and assisted facilitation at times.
- Participants said the data workshop helped them to better understand the diversity and barriers of people living in their community. This, and the activity creating personas, were key to their thinking beyond their own needs.
- Families expressed that the recognition of their time and expertise through honorarium payments made their contributions feel valued.
- A private project Facebook page helped for ease of communications. Participants could catch up on or to revisit content for deeper consideration, discussion, or contributions.
- Having Paul Prichard from the Centre for Community Child Health run a zoom session with the group focused on Family Leadership and Decision Making in Early Years Hubs helped broaden people's understanding beyond their personal experience and supported their own decision making. Participants also provided feedback that Paul validated their own ideas and experiences.
- Having the Hub Project Manager involved in the co-design group supported MRCC's ongoing community engagement during the build phase and increased trust with families and the kindergarten due to the way they showed up, listened, and acted upon feedback.

What's Next

The pilot phase of the project will occur during the first half of 2025. Given the varying degrees of complexity for each of the three projects (two new pilots, one continuing project) and the late April Term 2 opening of the Early Years Hub, the commencement date for each project will differ.

The co-design group will become three smaller groups as of early 2025, with each focusing on a single project and reporting back to the broader group at the end of piloting.

At the completion of the pilot phase an evaluation will be completed which will consider the projects impact and effectiveness, learnings, early signs of systems change and determine next steps.



Pilot Project 1: Community-led collaborative decision making at the Hub

Local families shape up and are a core part of a hub ‘working group’ to ensure their expertise and lived experience is included and equally valued in guiding how the Early Years Hub is set up, its values and how it works.

Partners roles and contribution

Family Partners	With support from HUM take a lead role in creation of, and function of Hub ‘Working Group’
MRCC – MCH, Early Years YMCA Toy Library	Commit consistent representative/s Authentically participate in process
HUM Backbone Team	Support families, project management, facilitation, communication, lead evaluation,

Other partners proposed but not yet engaged:

Local doctors, Mallee Family Care Playgroup representative, Community Elders, Dept. of Education.

Other community and service providers will be kept informed and consulted but not included in the core working group.

Proposed Timeline 2025

Jan to Feb	Project group members and HUM – engagement and planning
March to mid-July	Working Group established and meeting regularly
July	Evaluation and report, determine future action.

Pilot Project 2: ‘Cuppa Time’ to create social connections

‘Cuppa time’ creates an informal opportunity around kinder drop off and pick up time to meet, have a chat and spend time together with no expectations, and at a place where families are already going to and know about. This also gives an opportunity to trial a Welcomer role.

Partners roles and contribution

Family Partners	2-3 project members. Lead organisation and delivery of Cuppa Time
YMCA Toy Library	Kindergarten staff liaise with project members. Toy Library contribute when schedule allows.
HUM Backbone Team	Support families, project management, facilitation, communication, lead evaluation,

Proposed Timeline 2025

March	Planning phase by project members and HUM
April – mid July	Pilot phase
July	Evaluation and report, determine what’s next.

Project 3: Red Cliffs Connected Events

A continuation of this successful pilot. These events aim to create free, low stress opportunities for families and children to create social connections. 2025 will see these events delivered in both Red Cliffs public spaces and at the Early Years Hub.

Partners roles and contribution

Family Partners	2-3 project members. Lead organisation and event delivery
Service and Community Partners	Take part in events in form of providing activities or information
HUM Backbone Team	Support families, project management, facilitation, communication, lead evaluation,

Proposed Timeline 2025

19 th January	Community Connected event at Red Cliffs Pool
Feb– April	Planning and delivery of event/s at Hub
June	NAIDOC event.
July	Evaluation and report, determine what's next.