



# Red Cliffs Early Years Hub Project

## Pilot Report

**May – July 2025**

## Acknowledgement to Country

Hands Up Mallee acknowledges all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people where we work, live and connect with the community.

We pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging and the ancient connection they hold with their Country. We value their knowledge, wisdom and legacies that continue to guide our work towards positive social change.

## About Hands Up Mallee

Hands Up Mallee connects community, government and services to create 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 in north-west Victoria. Since 2015, we've been bringing together local people, services, and government to work differently, leading to better outcomes for children, young people and families.

Our work covers areas like health, education and family child services. Our place-based approach is guided by community voice, backed by evidence, data and research. By listening, learning and acting together, we're building a stronger, more connected future.

## 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.

### Hands Up Mallee

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# Contents

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<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Background .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>About the Project .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Purpose of the Report .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>What Happened .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Highlights and Key Learnings.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Across the Pilots.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Recommendations and Next Steps .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Evaluation Methodology.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Cuppa Time - Theory of Change .....</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Appendix 3: Hub Leadership Group - Theory of Change .....</b>	<b>1</b>

# Executive Summary

The Red Cliffs Early Years Hub Pilot Report captures the piloting of activity within the newly opened Hub, building on several years of co-design work led by families, services, Mildura Rural City Council (MRCC) and Hands Up Mallee (HUM).

The pilot sought to test three community-driven initiatives that bring to life the vision the co-design group had—that the Hub be a place where children and their carers feel comfortable and supported, that they feel a sense of belonging and have a lead role in guiding how the Hub operates.

Between May and the end of July 2025, three pilots were implemented:

- **Cuppa Time**—sessions offered families a relaxed, low-cost way to connect at the Hub during kindergarten drop-off and pick-up. Free drinks, snacks and use of the community and outdoor spaces helped some parents and children feel welcomed and form early peer connections. Timing, promotion and highlighting benefits for children need further refinement to boost participation.
- **Hub Leadership Group**—families, services and MRCC staff came together regularly to guide the use of community spaces and shape the ways of working at the Hub. The group established shared values, trialled collective decision-making processes and strengthened relationships across sectors.
- **Red Cliffs Connected Events**—two community events “Fun at the Pool” in January and a NAIDOC celebration in July with the latter showcasing the Hub as a place for culture and connection. The events were well attended and celebrated by families, Elders, and local organisations, with learnings around catering, age-appropriate activities, and promotion timings and distribution to strengthen future events.

## **Key Achievements**

- Families, services, and MRCC worked well together, keeping the original co-design vision at the centre of Hub development.
- A set of shared Hub values, purpose, group norms and purpose, scope of influence, a decision-making process and a draft induction booklet for new members were created, providing a solid foundation for collaboration.
- Families gained confidence and pride through visible leadership roles, building trust between community and services.
- Cultural leadership by Elders was embedded in Hub activities, fostering inclusivity and understanding.
- The Hub demonstrated its potential, particularly on busy days when multiple services and families were present.

## **Challenges and Lessons**

- Clarifying the scope and decision-making power of the Leadership Group is critical to managing expectations and strengthening influence.
- Communication and promotion required refinement to reach all families, especially those less connected to existing services.
- Limited resources and the absence of a funded Welcomer or Coordinator role created constraints in making the family space consistently welcoming.
- Practical issues such as building access, car parking, and safety procedures absorbed significant energy and require shared solutions.

## **Looking Ahead**

This pilot phase has demonstrated the early impact of community designed and led initiatives. The learnings captured in this report will continue to inform future work — strengthening collaborative decision-making, refining supportive activities, and continuing to deliver community-led events.

# Background

The Red Cliffs Early Years Hub is the result of strong community advocacy and collaboration between families, services, and MRCC. The vision for the Hub began in 2021, when HUM partnered with local families and services to understand community aspirations for supporting children to be developmentally ready for school. Through the [Rich Home Learning Environment Project](#), families co-designed and tested ideas to strengthen learning at home and in the community, increase social connection, and create more accessible local opportunities.

Building on this foundation, in 2024 HUM facilitated a co-design project alongside Red Cliffs families, MRCC and early years services during the construction of the new Hub. Together they explored how the community spaces within the Hub could be activated to:

- engage children and families,
- support social connection,
- connect families with early years services, and
- ensure strong family leadership in shaping Hub values and operations.

The co-design group generated and tested ideas through prototyping, refining them into three priorities for piloting in 2025: a collaborative decision-making group (Hub Leadership Group) to guide the Hub, Cuppa Time as a welcoming social connection activity, and Red Cliffs Connected community events. These pilots reflect years of groundwork in Red Cliffs, with families' ideas moving from prototyping to test concepts, and now to real-world trials within the Hub.

# About the Project

The Red Cliffs Early Years Hub Pilot Project was designed to test and refine new ways of working that place families at the centre of decision making and ensure the Hub is a place where children and families feel welcome, connected, and supported.

Following 8 months of co-design and prototyping, the project moved into a pilot phase in 2025 to trial three family-led initiatives:

- Cuppa Time — a low-stress, low-cost activity held around kindergarten drop-off and pick-up, designed to help parents and carers feel comfortable in the Hub, build peer networks, and connect with information and services.
- Hub Leadership Group—bringing families, services, and MRCC together at one table to share responsibility for guiding Hub operations and ensuring decisions reflect community needs and values.
- Red Cliffs Connected Events—free, family-friendly community events at the Hub and in public spaces to strengthen social connections, celebrate culture, and showcase what the Hub offers.

## Partners and Contributions

<b>HUM</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Supported the pilots by providing facilitation, project management, and evaluation</li></ul>
<b>Families</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Designed and led activities, contributed their expertise to the Hub Leadership Group</li></ul>
<b>MRCC, Y Kinder, Sunraysia Toy Library</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Contributed their expertise and organisational requirements to the Hub Leadership Group and supporting activities</li></ul>

# Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to document the journey of the Red Cliffs Early Years Hub pilot projects in 2025, capturing what was tested, what was learned, and the early signs of impact for families, services, and the broader community.

It provides:

- a record of how the three pilot initiatives were designed, implemented, and experienced,
- insights into what worked well, what challenges were encountered, and what improvements are needed,
- recommendations to inform future planning, sustainability, and scaling of family-led approaches at the Hub.

## Key Audiences

The report is intended to inform Red Cliffs families and community members, partner services, MRCC and funders.

## Methodology

The evaluation and report have been designed, developed and prepared by the HUM Backbone.

See Appendix 1 for more details of the evaluation methodology.



# What Happened

## Community Engagement Phase

A community engagement phase was undertaken as some members of the 2024 co-design group were unable to continue with the project due to changing circumstances.

Methods undertaken to reach community members included:

- Social media (Facebook and Instagram)
- Engagement with parents and carers during drop off and pick up time at kindergarten and school. Posters in local shop windows
- Via local primary schools (posters, school newsletters, and parent communication portal Compass).

An equity-based approach was adopted to engage a diverse range of Red Cliffs families to ensure the pilot groups represented the community's varied experiences and expertise in raising children. New members were onboarded to understand the group's prior work and align their involvement with their interests and capacity.

## Cuppa Time

### The idea

Cuppa Time was designed to create a casual, low-stress and low-cost opportunity for parents and carers to connect with each other. It aimed to help families feel comfortable in the Hub, build peer support networks, and provide a safe, accessible, and welcoming space where children could play while adults connected.

### How it was tested

Over a 6-week period, 11 sessions were trialled, scheduled around kindergarten drop-off and pick-up times to make it easier for families to participate. Promotion happened through flyers, hub TV screens, and social media via the kindergarten, HUM, and Toy Library. The team also spoke directly with parents and carers in the

foyer and invited them to join. Adjustments were made during the trial, including aligning morning sessions with Toy Library opening hours, trialling earlier afternoon sessions, offering take-away cups, providing snacks for children, and creating space in the foyer for conversation.

### Who it involved and their roles

<b>Families, community members and HUM staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Acted as welcomers, facilitated sessions, and created a friendly, safe environment</li></ul>
<b>Sunraysia Toy Library</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Supported sessions by allowing Cuppa Time to trial running during their Wednesday session</li></ul>

### What worked well

- Talking directly to parents in the foyer encouraged participation.
- Parents were more motivated to attend when they saw benefits for their children.
- Moving the afternoon session earlier made it easier for families to fit in before other commitments.
- Having two welcomers created flexibility—one could remain in the foyer while the other moved with families into the community room.
- Consistency of the same people in the role-built trust.
- Food, toys, and small activities (e.g. colouring) helped children engage and supported parents to relax.
- Smaller groups made some people more comfortable.

**“Smaller groups help those with social anxiety who currently sit in their cars.” - Parent Volunteer**

### What didn't work

- Morning sessions clashed with family routines and experienced lower engagement.
- Thursday afternoons clashed with sport commitments, limiting participation.
- The flyers and posters did not achieve the desired visual impact or effectively convey the purpose and benefits of Cuppa Time to the target audience.
- Promotion primarily highlighted benefits for parents rather than children, which limited engagement and overall effectiveness. Refine promotion to highlight child benefits and use more eye-catching designs.
- Find ways to better reach and communicate with kindergarten community.

**“In some schools, they have a parent who has put up their hand to be the class connector or communicator — the ‘class mum’.”**

**- *Community Volunteer***

- Test alternative times that avoid clashes with sport and family routines.
- Continue to provide food and age-appropriate activities for children to help parents participate comfortably.
- Explore more themed or structured sessions to increase engagement and showcase what the Hub offers.
- Consider ways to sustain a welcoming presence, such as training or supporting volunteers in the role.

## **Hub Leadership Group**

### **The Idea**

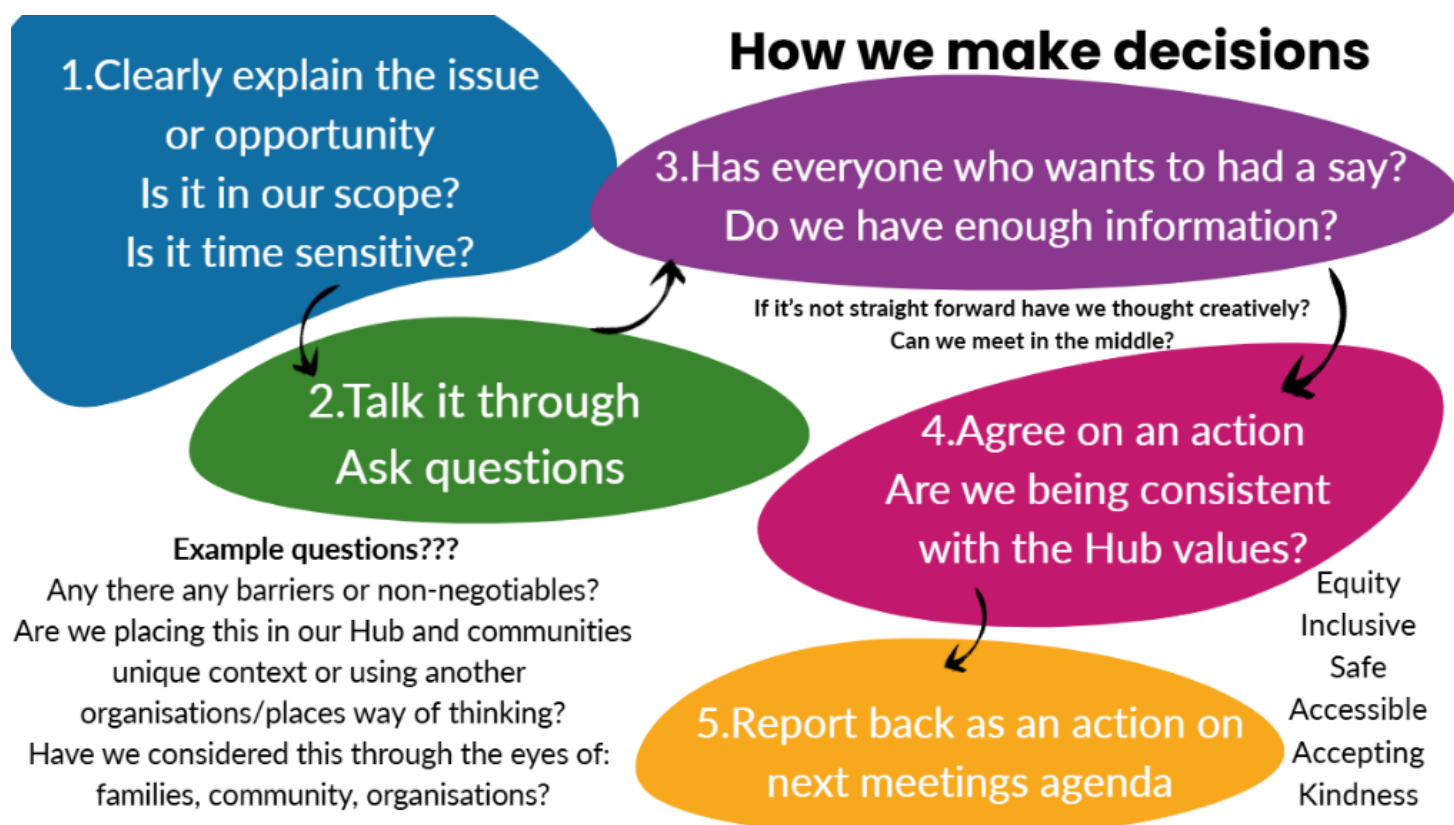
The Hub Leadership Group evolved from the 2024 co-design work. It aimed to bring families, services, and MRCC staff together to guide decisions about the community spaces and ways of working at the Red Cliffs Early Years Hub. The idea was to create a shared decision-making table where families sit alongside services and

MRCC ensuring the Hub develops as a truly integrated, family-led space. **How it was tested.**

### How it was tested

Between March and June 2025, the group met regularly in the Hub community room, supported by HUM. Meetings focused on foundational work: building strong relationships, creating group norms and beliefs, clarifying values, setting up communication channels, and trialling collective decision-making processes.

Members included Red Cliffs families, Sunraysia Toy Library, Connected Beginnings, MRCC Early Years and MCH and Y Kinder



## Who it involved and their roles

<b>Families</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Brought lived experience of raising children in Red Cliffs and contributed to shaping decisions</li></ul>
<b>Sunraysia Toy Library</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• As an organisation run by family volunteers, this group provided lived experience, organisational values and requirements, and experience in child development focused methods</li></ul>
<b>Community Elders</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provided cultural knowledge and continuity with earlier advocacy for the Hub</li></ul>
<b>Services and MRCC</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provided practice knowledge, organisational requirements, and helped test how collaborative decision-making could work in practice</li></ul>
<b>HUM</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Facilitated, supported communication, and ensured meetings were safe, inclusive, and productive</li></ul>

## What worked well

- The flexibility of bringing children to meetings
- Careful thought was given to who should be at the table, ensuring a balanced mix of family, service, and MRCC representatives. Flexibility was also important, as representation needed to adapt to availability, decision-making requirements, community knowledge, and experience.

**“So far, the right people are at the table, and the structure has merit and can play a valuable role.”- MRCC Staff Member**

- Families felt their voices were valued, and the group helped keep the original co-design vision anchored.

- Building shared values, norms and relationships laid the groundwork for effective collaboration.

**“HUM provides structure and purpose that enables the work. Facilitation is helpful and important.” - MRCC Staff Member**

- Shared problem-solving has created more considered solutions and processes (e.g. room use, traffic flow in the hub, risk reduction)
- Benefits of integrated hub use became visible on busy days when multiple services were operating at the same time.

**“It was exciting today as there were lots of families using the spaces...we could really see how the place could be of value to families as an integrated Hub.” - Y Kinder Staff Member**

- Members reported feeling comfortable discussing difficult topics and contributing to discussions.
- Changing the agenda to allocate a set amount of time for members to bring pressing issues to the group. These matters can be addressed or tabled for more complex matters to be worked through when possible and through the most appropriate channels.

### **What didn't work**

- The group's role sometimes leaned more towards consultation than true decision-making, leaving participants uncertain about their level of influence.
- There were differences in members' capacity to attend, along with varying levels of understanding about what an integrated hub model involves.

**“While we have been prepared for the leadership table, some people still find it a bit hard to fully understand the purposes.” - Parent Member**

- Practical challenges such as building access, car parking, and safety procedures, absorbed much of the group's focus.

- Limited resources (with no budget to furnish or resource the family space) created frustration and constrained ambition.
- Communication was inconsistent at times.
- Additional preparation during onboarding could help new members better understand the group's purpose and build confidence to participate fully.
- As processes continue to be refined, this can at times affect how effectively the space is utilised.
- Define the group's scope and level of decision-making authority to establish realistic expectations and enhance the impact of members' contributions.
- Strengthening the onboarding process will help new members quickly understand the group's purpose and feel empowered to participate confidently.
- Develop clearer agendas and focus areas to make the most of meeting time.

**“We are at a stage now to tighten up the agenda and focus of the meetings to make them more purposeful. Two hours is a long time to ask.” — MRCC Staff Member**

- Resource the family space better (toys, books, welcoming environment) and identify who will maintain it.
- Continue to trial communication methods and continue to encourage consistent participation.
- Explore the feasibility of a funded Welcomer or Coordinator role to support smooth daily functioning of the Hub.
- Without a single central body running the Hub, questions remain about funding, governance, policies, and risk management. These issues are complex and take time to resolve but need to be a priority.
- Help facilitate promotion of the Hub to families and the Red Cliffs community.

## Events at the Hub

### The idea

Red Cliffs Connected events were designed to provide no/low stress, no-cost opportunities for families and children to meet, connect and have fun. These events aimed to strengthen community connections, celebrate culture, and showcase the Hub as a welcoming and inclusive community space.

### How it was tested

Two events were delivered in 2025:

- **Fun at the Pool (January 19)** included sensory art by Mallee Arts, inflatable pool toys, music and dancing, games, and shared food. Around 250 people attended.
- **NAIDOC Event at the Hub (July 20)** featured cultural activities such as Uncle Will's didgeridoo and toolmaking, Uncle Peter's smoking ceremony and art, Taya's cultural dancing, Tamara's kangaroo tail soup, the Toy Library, Lions Club BBQ, and Rotary welcomers. Around 50–60 people attended.

### Who it involved and their role

Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Co-planned and supported the events</li></ul>
Community Elders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Led cultural elements and created an inclusive atmosphere at the NAIDOC event</li></ul>
Local organisations (Toy Library, Lions Club, Rotary, Mallee Arts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Contributed activities, food, and welcoming roles</li></ul>
HUM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Coordinated planning, risk management, promotion, and delivery</li></ul>

## What worked well

- Both events were well attended and created a positive community atmosphere.
- The pool event benefited from being well-established (third year running), with strong promotion and community awareness

**“Community loved the event and its vibe; everyone just got into it. Lots more teenagers, really a mix of ages from grandparents to children.”**

**— *Community Elder***

- Free entry and food encouraged participation and made the events accessible

**“We heard so many great stories from community members about the lifeguards at this pool. Also, stories about their childhood and family life at the pool,” — *Family Volunteer*.**

- Welcomers at the NAIDOC event helped create a safe and inclusive atmosphere. While the Welcomers were there, the front gate could stay open.
- Cultural activities led by Elders engaged all ages and promoted greater understanding and harmony.

**“It was the atmosphere, everyone coming together. It was warm, we all connected, I was yarning to everyone. It was good to see the white people having a better idea of what it is all about,” — *Community Elder*.**

- Use of Toy Library equipment supported inclusive play.
- The events provided opportunities for informal conversations, storytelling, and cross-generational connection.



## What didn't work

- Catering quantities were lower than required, with active children needing a wider range of food options. Limited activities for older children (e.g. volleyball or more age-appropriate games).
- Promotion for the NAIDOC event could have started earlier and utilised opportunities such as flyers to kindergarten families.

## Improvements to make

- Plan to cater for the pool event to better match the size and energy of the crowd.
- Include more structured activities for older children and young people.
- Start promotion earlier and broaden communication channels for future events.
- Continue to embed cultural leadership and ensure Elders have a central role.
- Explore ways to use these events to further showcase the Hub's services and opportunities.

There was also a **First Steps to Learning (June 19)** event, held by MRCC in partnership with Connected Beginnings and Mallee District Aboriginal Services. This event aimed to support families to complete kindergarten registrations, obtain immunisation statements and birth certificates, have immunisations if required, or see a Maternal and Child Health (MCH) nurse.

The event was successful with:

- 26 families attending
- 10 people immunised
- 5 new kindergarten registrations.

While this event was not part of the pilot work, the learnings contributed to how the NAIDOC event was run and will inform design of future events at the hub. Key learnings from the First Steps to Learning event include:

- Survey feedback suggested that holding events during school holidays may increase attendance, especially of working parents.
- Allowing space for child-focused, fun and interactive activities at a stall may create time to interact more effectively with parents.
- Families may take advantage of the availability of services if they are present, and their children are comfortable in the space.



# Highlights and Key Learnings

## Across the Pilots

### Highlights

#### Cuppa Time

Although on a small scale, Cuppa Time showed early signs of providing a space that was supportive for carers and children. A few carers returned on several occasions, who “quite often were those who really needed to talk about what they were struggling with.” *-Family Volunteer.*

The families who had been part of the earlier co-design work envisioned that the hub would be a place that children and parents want to spend time. Through utilising the community room and outdoor area Cuppa Time started to create that space and work through some initial challenges.

**“Cuppa Time gives families a comfortable place to chill. It is warm in winter, air-conditioned in summer, safe and handy to the kindergarten, Toy Library, toilets and coffee shop. There are so few places to take your child in Red Cliffs where you can feel at ease and not have to rush.”**

**- Parent**

Consistent with previous work in Red Cliffs, families reflected that the experience of actively leading and contributing helps to increase confidence and connection to community.

**“I felt well and truly prepared for this...It has been good for me to get myself out more and into community instead of just being home minding children” — Parent Volunteer**

#### Hub Leadership Group

Families, services, MRCC, and Elders have come together around one table to ensure community voices are central to Hub decisions. Shared values of equity,

inclusivity, kindness, honesty, and patience provide a solid foundation for collaboration, with the Leadership Group aspiring for the Hub to evolve into a truly integrated space. This groundwork will enable the group to work through challenges and complex topics with reference points to return to and guide the work.

**“The leadership table helps to link me and the initial ideas of the original co-design group with the Hub and how it is going to be working... I can see this helps to keep the original ideas anchored.” — *Parent***

## Key Learnings

Across all three pilot projects, several ongoing challenges emerged:

### Operational

- With no single organisation overseeing the Hub, questions regarding funding, governance, policies and risk management remain. These are complex matters that will take time and collaboration to work through while ensuring this does not create a barrier to Hub activities.
- Balancing safety, risk, and community needs in the early years sector is complex and ever-changing space regarding regulations. For example, a locked gate provides security but can feel unwelcoming, and decisions about who can use Hub spaces require careful consideration.

### Engagement and Communication

- Timing of events and meetings is a constant challenge, needing to accommodate both stay-at-home and working carers, as well as organisational staff whose duties may clash with Hub commitments.
- Communication and promotion remain difficult. Each project aimed to reach a diverse audience, but methods previously utilised didn't always work in this instance.

- Reaching families who aren't yet involved in Hub activities requires building rapport, creating welcoming spaces and readiness to try alternative approaches.
- It is important to engage the kindergarten community effectively around hub activities and events. This may be through simple methods such as notes in a child's kindergarten bag can be effective or talking with people in the foyer.
- Teaming up with another group or organisation on a project increases reach for example, holding Cuppa Time during the Toy Library sessions resulted in people staying and having a chat, and increasing the knowledge that the community room can be utilised by the public.

### **Working in New and Different Ways**

- Moving from co-design, prototyping and piloting to embedding requires facilitation and engagement, which balances and supports the evolution /shift from ideation to processes and structure that enable this.
- Understanding the rhythm of a new space and developing fit-for-purpose solutions requires time, creativity, flexibility and testing, for example -the booking system for community and consultation rooms is still being trialled, with work needed to refine how it is communicated and accessed.



# Recommendations and Next Steps

## Cuppa Time

Continue to trial how to engage families with ongoing opportunities to come together using the hub as a central point. Some parents noted that sitting in one place can feel intense, so a walking group was put forward as something to trial, starting and ending at the hub with a cuppa at the end if anyone wants to stay.

## Hub Leadership Group

This group will continue as is, with the following changes because of members' feedback:

- Foundational work will continue to be refined and developed, but not as the central piece of work.
- Work through group priorities — identify who will lead each area and how actions will be implemented.
- Moving to a more traditional documentation format and providing prompt meeting minutes will support clearer communication and timely action follow-up.
- Prioritise Hub risk strategy as this will be an enabler for future work.

## Events at the Hub

HUM has the capacity to financially support two community-led Hub outreach activities/events over the next year. The group may want to also be involved supporting other events that are held at the Hub.

Taking on feedback, communication methods for any events will include going through the kindergarten newsletters, socials and dropping flyers in bags.

# Appendix 1: Evaluation Methodology

## Purpose

The purpose of evaluating this project was to pilot three ideas from co-design work with families conducted in 2024 and:

- Demonstrate any early progress toward intended outcomes.
- Capture any early learnings to inform the next stage of this project
- Capture learnings to inform future action and improvement.

## Scope

The scope of evaluation includes:

- Cuppa Time: the 6-week of 11 sessions from May to July.
- Hub Leadership Group: the 4 meetings from March to July.
- The 2 Red Cliffs Connected Community events: 19<sup>th</sup> January and 20<sup>th</sup> July.
- The experience of Families, the Toy Library participants, services, MRCC and HUM Backbone

## Key Evaluation Questions

The Key Evaluation Questions (KEQ) are selected from the [HUM 0-8 nested Measurement and Evaluation Framework](#) and guide the wording and interview questions for project partners, including family and community volunteers, and community group, service and local government partners.

### **KEQ 1. Impact – To what extent is our collaborative work achieving change?**

- What if any early signs of systemic change are we noting?
- To what extent is our work collaborative and community-led?

- Is equity embedded in the way our work is designed and implemented?

**KEQ 2. Effectiveness – How effective are we in the implementation of our collaborative approach?**

- How well are we working together?
- How well are we engaging children and families in our collaborative work?
- How well are we implementing our joint activities?

**KEQ 3. How well are our learnings and insights being used to improve our collaborative work?**

- To what extent are we creating a learning culture?
- Have we created a safe space to make mistakes?
- Are we learning from different perspectives and overcoming biases?
- What are the key learnings from our collaborative work?
- How are we using our learnings for improvement?

**Theory of Change**

A Theory of Change outlines the outcomes that are being sought, as well as the guiding principles, opportunities and early and intermediate change and how these are enabled.

The approach and evaluation of these projects are guided and informed by:

- Hands Up Mallee Overarching Theory of Change
- Hands up Mallee 0-8 Nested MEL and Theory of change
- Cuppa Time Theory of Change—see Appendix 2
- Hub Leadership Group Theory of Change – see Appendix 3

**Evaluation Tools**

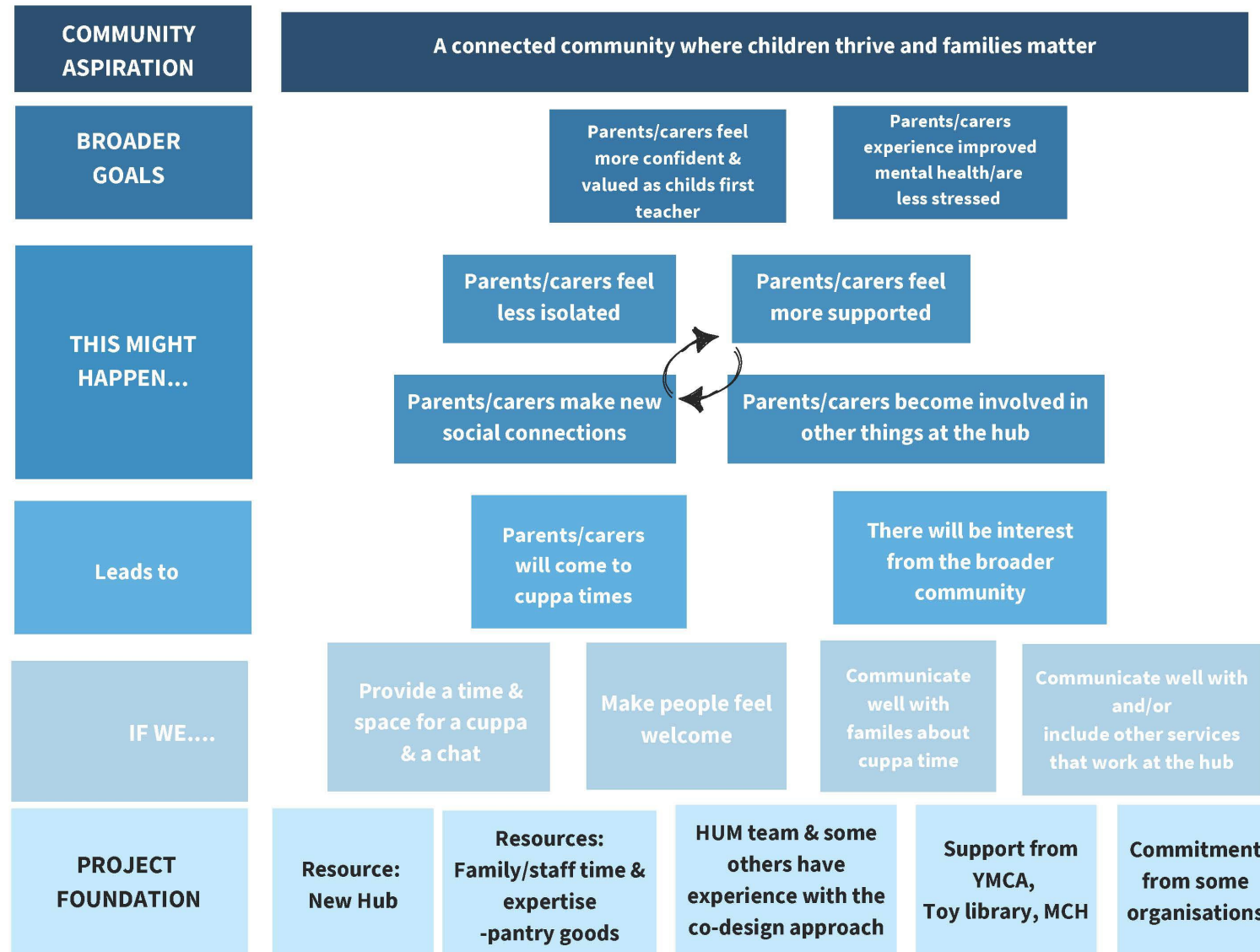
- Reflection, activity and observation logs
- Counts and participation data
- Group reflections and observations
- Interviews
- Evidence of group work
- Evidence of interest from organisations

### **Limitations**

The piloting of the ideas that emerged from the co-design work with families is developmental in nature. Therefore, it is too early to be able to measure signs of impact for families and children.

# Appendix 2: Cuppa Time - Theory of Change

## Red Cliffs Early Years Hub - Cuppa Time for social connection



# Appendix 3: Hub Leadership Group - Theory of Change

## Red Cliffs Early Years Hub - Collaborative decision making

