



VicHealth - The Big Connect

FUSE Evaluation Report

The Big Connect program is a VicHealth funded program launched in 2021 which aims to create opportunities for Victoria's young people as part of the future healthy initiative.

Victoria Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) invested 5 million dollars into 27 programs aimed to create social connection opportunities for Victoria's young people.

These place-based and youth-led programs are being delivered with a range of organisations including Victoria's sports, active recreation, arts, cultural, youth, health promotion and the community food sectors.

Moyne Shire Council in collaboration with YACVic Rural, Glenelg Shire Council, Glenelg Southern Grampians LLEN, Food & Fibre Great South Coast, Community South West and Barwon South West Public Health Unit were successful in the grant application for 'FUSE South West'

Partner organisations formed a project advisory group to assist with the governance, management, marketing, and advocacy of the project.

What is FUSE SOUTH WEST?

Fuse South West, a rural small towns place-based vocational and mental health connection training program.

The program aimed to provide opportunities for social connection through place-based programs and hands on learning in small rural towns leveraging off local industry expertise and regional community service partnerships.

"Through FREE workshops and hands-on learning, there will be more opportunity to connect".

Our Approach

The successful realisation of the FUSE program was made possible through a collaborative and inclusive approach, exemplified by place-based co-design workshops conducted with young people across the Local Government Areas of Moyne, Southern Grampians and Glenelg.

The co-design teams were made up of young people between the ages of 14 and 24. Representation included LGBTIQA young people, young people living with a disability and young people living in rural and remote areas across the LGA's. The young people advised Council on the planning, development, integration and implementation of FUSE

Additionally, the project responded explicitly to needs identified by young people in the development of the Moyne Youth Plan, the Beyond the Bell "Youth Conversations" survey and report where young people provided input via online, paper-based surveys, public forums, face-face consultations, focus groups and existing programs and events.

Through these comprehensive channels, the project ensured that the FUSE program was shaped by the genuine needs, aspirations, and perspectives of the young individuals within our communities.

Why was the Program Needed?

Research shows young people living in small rural towns and isolated areas are disproportionately affected by barriers to participation, such as lack of access to transport and the internet.

They are also more disconnected from their local communities, with Covid-19 lockdowns of the past few years taking a toll on their mental health.

Drivers of the program

- Supporting young people to feel like they belong to their community or their local neighbourhood.
- Creating opportunities to address barriers to participation (e.g. transport and internet access)
- Destigmatising and increasing the understanding of loneliness, social isolation, and mental health issues.
- Increasing skills and training providing further opportunities for employment and community involvement.

Short-term goals of the program

- Developing the skills, confidence, connections, mental health resiliency and work readiness of the youth involved.

Long-term goals of the program

- Help break down barriers that contribute to youth isolation, community disconnection and poor mental health, through the creation of pathways into permanent work opportunities that help young people achieve their full potential.

Program Budget - \$344,410

Vic Health Grant
\$244,410

In Kind - Contribution
\$8,000
(project management & governance)

In Kind - Contribution
\$54,000
(partner contribution)

In Kind - Support
\$38,000

Our Reach

A diverse range of opportunities were delivered as part of the FUSE program, enriching participants with skills, connections, personal growth self-confidence and wellbeing.

Number of Workshops held in each LGA and attendees

LOCATION	# WORKSHOPS	# PARTICIPANTS
Southern Grampians Shire	15	228
Glenelg Shire	14	179
Moyne Shire	16	228
Corangamite Shire	2	36
Warrnambool	9	357*
TOTAL	56	1,028

***NOTE:** some workshops needed to be held in Warrnambool due to availability of facilities or through in school programs. **70% of these participants listed a residential address outside of the Warrnambool area.**



Workshop Locations

- 1 Koroit
- 2 Portland
- 3 Casterton
- 4 Mortlake
- 5 Timboon
- 6 Port Fairy
- 7 Hamilton
- 8 Balmoral
- 9 Camperdown
- 10 Warrnambool

Workshops provided



FIRST AID TRAINING



RESPONSIBLE SERVICE OF ALCOHOL



TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT



WHITE CARD (CIC)



SAVING & BORROWING



SELECT A SAFE VEHICLE



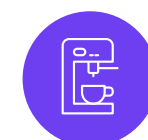
BUDGETING WORKSHOP



DEFENSIVE DRIVER TRAINING



FOOD HANDLERS



BARISTA BASICS



STOP MOTION ANIMATION

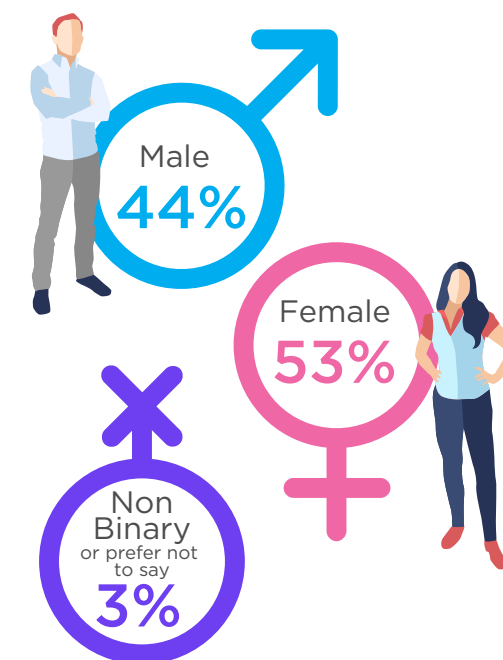


INTRODUCTION TO SHEARING



POOL LIFEGUARD TRAINING

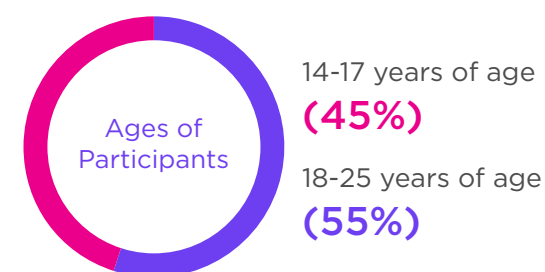
Of the 1028 Participants



3% Identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Origin

4% Identified as having a disability

(Hearing impaired, vision impaired, learning disability, Asperger syndrome, autism, dyslexia, dyscalculia, anxiety)



Our Reach

The program lead to increased engagement with the broader community including, industry, community group representatives, schools and local businesses.



We Engaged
3,069

- Participants
- Community Groups
- Community Members
- Local Businesses
- Facilitators
- Co Design Teams



Broader Audience
5,000+

- Newspapers
- Radio
- Social Media
- Websites



Almost 6% of the total youth population across the South West participated in a FUSE workshop.

FUSE South West provided invaluable support to Vocational Major students, facilitating their achievement of VET nominal hour and learning outcomes through accredited programs, tailored guidance, and hands-on workshops.

"The FUSE program was an excellent initiative that supported our Yr 11 and Yr 12 students of Casterton Secondary College to achieve Certificates, whilst arming students with skills and knowledge that provide employment opportunities and fill skills shortages within the region. It was fantastic to have this opportunity at our school because to achieve a certificate like this our students would have to travel over 60 km to find a similar course."

Chelsea Carter,
Casterton Secondary College

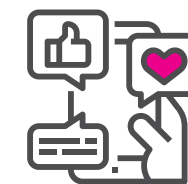
Various marketing strategies were employed to promote courses:



FUSE website



Newspapers



Social Media



Radio



Word of mouth



Posters



Partner Network

Participant Insights

Upon project completion, the project participants provided feedback via online forums, face-to-face interactions, and surveys.



Feel more confident to participate in various activities and events within their communities

82%

Feel more confident to get involved in community and volunteering

70%

Increased their social connections

53%

83%

Told us FUSE will help them to get a Job

83%

Expressed that FUSE will be beneficial for accessing further training and skill development opportunities

We Changed

Barriers to Participation

Young people in small rural and remote towns are disproportionately affected by key barriers to participation including transport, lack of income, school disengagement, or exclusion because of their gender, race, sexual orientation, level of disability or religion.

The program offered free training to young people aged 14-25, accessible both publicly and through schools in rural and remote areas. Partnering with education and youth service providers, as well as local service providers, enhanced accessibility and diversity.

Co-design workshops with young people with disabilities, school workshops at Portland Bay School (a special education facility), and transport support eliminated participation barriers, promoting inclusive engagement.

Pool Lifeguard Course, Port Fairy

"So important, so accessible, so educational, so useful, so thank you!"

Program participant



RSA, Barista Basics and Safe Driving, Mortlake

"We at Mortlake College are very pleased that our students had access to the following courses in 2023 (RSA, Barista Basics and Safe Vehicle). The FUSE initiative has provided a platform for our rural students to engage with facilitators and other key stakeholders which will support them in possible future employment. We strongly advocate for our students to make the most of these opportunities to build lifelong skills. We hope that this initiative is available for students in 2024 and beyond. Finally, the implementation and correspondence in the delivery of these programs has been exceptional"

Nathan Jones, Mortlake P-12 College



We Changed

Social Connection and Wellbeing

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health challenges faced by young people in small towns have been exacerbated, with an increasing risk of isolation and disconnection from their local communities. FUSE South West was a transformative initiative specifically designed to address the unique needs of young individuals in rural and remote areas.

FUSE South West played a pivotal role in enhancing access and opportunities for meaningful social connection among young residents of small rural and remote towns. Through face-to-face workshops and training sessions, the program has successfully bridged the gap, fostering connections and relationships among participants who share common interests. Additionally, the program addressed challenges faced by homeschool students providing a vital opportunity for them to connect with peers, fostering meaningful relationships and sense of community.

The impact is not only immediate but extends to create lasting bonds, strengthening local connections, and instilling a profound sense of belonging.

The program's ripple effect is evident in the collaboration with local employers and community service organisations, providing a support system for participants. Beyond social connections, FUSE South West has become a catalyst for career pathways by facilitating access to permanent work opportunities in the local area.

This symbiotic relationship between the program and the community ensures not only personal development and growth but also economic empowerment for the region.

FUSE South West has empowered young individuals to break free from cycles of isolation and mental health challenges. The training provided has not only imparted valuable skills but has also served as a platform for boosting self-confidence and overall well-being. Participants, equipped with newfound skills and confidence, have become architects of their own success stories, embodying the transformative impact of the FUSE South West program.

The demonstrated success of FUSE South West underscores the program's efficacy in breaking down barriers, creating opportunities, and fostering a stronger, more connected community.



Defensive Driving Course, Warrnambool

"the defensive driver course was fantastic! Team was awesome and I feel really accomplished from co working"

Program participant

Barista Basics, Hamilton

"It was really great to get out in a group setting to learn something again face to face"

Program participant

First Aid Training, Mortlake

"The first aid course was an amazing, rewarding experience, and something I would definitely do again! The course instructor was a fantastic teacher and always made sure to provide us with all the information we needed to complete the training. Learning was really easy with the information on the screen, and I was able to take notes with no trouble. While the paired activities were different from my normal learning being a homeschool student, it was an enriching experience to work with the other students and communicate to achieve the set goal.

All in all, this was such an interesting course, and everything was organised so well that it made the course run smoothly with no distractions"

Homeschool participant

We Changed

Addressing Local Skills Shortages

Workforce shortages have been identified across all regional areas with vacancies increasing and businesses struggling to fill positions and stay open. Young people face significant and unresolved barriers in accessing and sustaining employment in small rural, regional towns.

This project strategically addressed these challenges by providing targeted workshops that not only responded to the immediate needs identified by young individuals but also fostered social connections crucial for community vitality.

Workshops were provided locally assisting to 'grow our own' attracting participants who live locally are more likely to stay in their local communities.

The impact of these training opportunities extends beyond immediate employment gains. Young participants acquired lifelong skills, enhancing their employability, and establishing social connections vital for personal and professional growth.

The emphasis on basic life skill readiness further prepares these individuals for a more sustainable future mitigates workforce shortages and directly supports the retention of operational hours for these essential community services.

Barista Basics, Port Fairy

"The Barista Basics course was fantastic and a great first step towards a new part time job!"

Program participant



Introduction to Shearing, Hamilton

"It opened my eyes to all the different pathways in the wool line and can't wait for another course. So important, so accessible, so thank you!"

Program participant



In addressing the persistent challenge faced by regional pools and sporting facilities in securing qualified staff, particularly from the local community, the FUSE program has emerged as a transformative solution. The scarcity of local staff often led to shorter opening hours and a truncated pool season, adversely affecting community connections and overall wellbeing.

A tangible success story from the project involves two sisters from Macarthur, who successfully obtained their first aid and pool lifeguard certificates through the FUSE program in Port Fairy.

Had this opportunity not been available through the program, the sisters would have been compelled to travel to Geelong or Melbourne, incurring course and travel expenses exceeding \$1,170 (out of reach of many rural families).

The acquired qualifications proved instrumental as both sisters secured jobs at two regional pools, directly enhancing the operational capabilities of these facilities.



Pool Lifeguard Course, Port Fairy

The mother of the two sisters expressed gratitude, stating:

"The FUSE program was a great opportunity for Chloe and Sky to obtain their qualifications FREE of charge and gain employment locally."

This testimonial not only underscores the program's significant impact on providing cost-free qualifications but also highlights its role in bolstering local employment opportunities, fostering community resilience, and positively influencing general wellbeing.

Program Partners

We would like to thank our program partners for their valuable time, networks, support, problem solving and advocacy which played a crucial role in the success of the program as well as all our facilitators, local service providers and participants.



We extend our sincere appreciation to all the young co-design participants who generously shared their insights and ideas, contributing to the development of a program that truly resonated with the aspirations of the local youth.



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