

Role of a Neighbourhood House

Local health and wellbeing eco-systems

Neighbourhood Houses play an important part in the health and wellbeing eco-system of more than 400 communities across Victoria. Neighbourhood Houses combat social isolation and loneliness by being accessible, non-threatening and inclusive spaces that welcome people from all walks of life, regardless of age, gender, sexuality, ability, religion or economic status. They provide the opportunity for people to mix, learn from each other, and support each other.

In many communities, Neighbourhood Houses are already one of the 'doors' people enter when they are thinking about living and ageing well, particularly in rural localities. However, because of their recurrent funding structure (making them relatively stable) and way of working, they are also well placed to nurture community-led healthy ageing initiatives – as well as strengthen the connections between them. **Attitude. Ageing Well in Clunes' journey from civic movement to a Living and Ageing Well Hub is a perfect example of what is possible.**

Community development prepares the ground

Neighbourhood Houses are mandated community development organisations whose role is to contribute to all people's capacity to live full and active lives. In many rural communities, most of the population are often older. Community development is a holistic approach grounded in principles of empowerment, human rights, inclusion, social justice, self-determination and collective action (Kenny & Connors, 2017). Its objective is to empower community members of all ages and abilities and create stronger and more connected communities – **and that is critical to a sustainable Living and Ageing Well Hub.**

Community development is a process where community members – *like Attitude. Ageing Well in Clunes* - take collective action on issues that are important to them. This might be done with or without the support of a community development organisation (like a Neighbourhood House) but often the results are accelerated if such work is supported. **This is one of the objectives we sought to demonstrate through the partnership approach in the Living and Ageing Well in Hepburn project.**

Working 'with, not for'

Different from community-based work, community development is **community-led**. In the words of the community in this project, it's about working 'with, not for'. In broad terms, community 'groups' (or collectives) identify important concerns and issues, and plan and implement strategies to mitigate these.

The community development work lies in supporting people to achieve their objectives, and often this means identifying and building on their assets, using a strengths-based approach rather than focusing on deficits and employing place-based initiatives such as collective impact to nurture capacity for community-wide change.

Attitude – a state of mind, a building and a great example of what is possible

In 2020, Clunes Neighbourhood House responded to a request from older people in our community who had identified the importance of having a place (or building) of their own where they could lead and participate in social, intellectual and physical activities. As a result, we entered a lease with the local council for the Attitude building (previously known as the Senior Citizens). This 'held' the space for our older citizens so they could explore strategies to use the building, as well as encourage participation in activities as they emerged.





Drawing together other informal groups (such as the Clunes Writers Club and the Clunes Artist Group) who were affiliated with Clunes Neighbourhood House via our community-led groups framework (providing space, promotion and insurance coverage), the organisation underwrote activities for two years to assist Attitude. Ageing Well in Clunes to build momentum and nurture sustainability. This was also designed to provide the community with time to decide how they would like to operate.

Such practices (see www.clunesnh.org/groups) are typical of a neighbourhood house and therefore easy to replicate in other communities. However, while these practices aligned with Attitude. Ageing Well in Clunes needs, it wasn't until the Living and Ageing Well in Hepburn project that we (collectively) were able to see what was missing - **and that was the importance of also employing explicit age-friendly practices.**

How?

The partnership approach to explore how our town could develop a place-based Living and Ageing Well hub enabled all of us to:

1. Openly negotiate and re-negotiate the power relations between the organisations and community members (often at the heart of ageism and dependence for older people)
2. Ensured each problem or issue was first named by older people in our community, and then defined in a way that advanced shared interests of all
3. Recognise that the work we were doing would be long term, not a quick fix
4. Recognise that the desired outcome was an increase in older people's capacity to have agency in addressing their needs
5. Understand that what we were doing would ideally result in change at a neighbourhood or community level.

These are common characteristics of community development collaborations, but when looked at in the context of the World Health Organisation's eight domains of an age-friendly environment, resulted in Attitude naming the real barriers to a community-led Living and Ageing Well Hub – **ageism and dependence.**

Many of the older community members involved in shaping Attitude. Ageing Well in Clunes are at a stage of life where they are self-sufficient, valuing agency and a place of their own. In unpacking the joys that led them to live active lives, they realised that the burdens of governance typically associated with incorporated organisations are neither sustainable nor enjoyable. Having led the evolution of Attitude – both as a state of mind and a building - they would now rather be users of the building, activating and participating.

On paper, the framework that a neighbourhood house uses for community-led groups (not requiring onerous governance) should therefore be ideal, but policies, procedures and even lease documents (all designed, albeit importantly, to manage risk) can reduce agency and create dependence commonly associated with later stages of ageing. While some of these documents; particularly those managing risk, are necessary it is possible to ensure those documents operate in an age-friendly context to protect and support all.

Conclusion and recommendation

The outcome seems startlingly simple. The co-design and adoption of an **Age-friendly Practices Policy** that informs not only the use of the Attitude building, but Clunes Neighbourhood House as a whole. Like Neighbourhood House's community-led group framework, it's a policy that can be easily replicated and which, for us, has real meaning because of the journey we undertook to get here. If you are looking to nurture a community-led Living and Ageing Well Hub in your community, we encourage you to explore doing the same.

Reference: Kenny, S., & Connors, P. (2017). *Developing Communities for the Future* (5th ed.). South Melbourne: Cengage Learning Australia.

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