

## Knowledge Gathered from our Healthy Ageing Hubs Project

### A place for us

Attitude. Ageing Well in Clunes came about when, during COVID-19, the Clunes Senior Citizens disbanded and the local shire moved to sell the building. Under a lease negotiated together through the Clunes Neighbourhood House, groups and clubs who catered largely for the 60+ community that were meeting either in a private home or who were having to pay hiring fees in other public buildings were invited to make use of the building rent-free.

Other groups and activities sprung up – a film night, talks, a ukulele group, bus trips, a walking group, a publishing group and so on. Gradually, more and more groups asked to hold their meetings at Attitude. The only constraint was the timetable. The criteria for groups and activities are:

1. The activity caters for the 60+ but anyone can come
2. There is space for it in the timetable
3. It is a legal activity
4. The group manages themselves and uses the building in a way that is mindful of other users.

A meeting is held quarterly to organise the upcoming program with a call for ideas, events and suggestions. These are collated and printed in the seasonal *What's On in Clunes* guide. The building is kept clean and comfortable. It is accessed by key-code and facilitators of the groups have the code. Groups can have special events at Attitude subject only to timetable constraints. These can be parties, fundraisers, workshops, etc. Some groups are constituted and have membership fees, others are not. A management group works with the Neighbourhood House on building management issues. All expenses, including film and alcohol licenses, are paid from the takings of the bar at the Sundays@Attitude weekly social gatherings which are entirely run by volunteers.

The model, which is constantly emerging, works extremely well with the building being used by a large range of activities and community members. It works because it is emerging, the building is comfortable and clean, the kitchen is adequate and central and the furniture home spun. It is more clubroom than institutional and that is one of its strengths. Most importantly, there is significant ownership of the space by the groups and individual participants. In a recent exercise to speak with each of the user groups, large and small, we encountered a strong, and often emotionally charged, sense of the building being 'our place'.

### Changing language to combat ageism

In our interactions with various people working in the ageing field over the past year we, at one time, were asked if we would like a helicopter ride. We stared back blankly and said, 'What we want is help to facilitate an open conversation with other senior community leaders in this sector.' What we wanted was a chance to share knowledge and experiences that could enrich all our lives and help shed further light on this new frontier of ageing well in place. Instead, the helicopter ride remained on offer. It was something *for* us. The round-table discussion was a chance to do something *with* us and did not eventuate, perhaps because it was too hard or not fully understood.

When you do something *for* someone you are potentially denying their agency. And if you are doing something *for* someone *because of their age*, then, uncomfortably, your good deeds and intentions can be constituted as ageism. When you do something *with* someone you are engaging with their agency. You are crediting that person with wants, opinions, decision making, knowledge, companionship, compatibility and the like. You are crediting them with personhood.





But be warned. This language shift is as hard to adopt as any of the other language shifts we have engaged with over the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries concerning class, race, gender and sexuality. We bump into it, we need to be mindful of it and we stumble over it. It is awkward. It requires a fundamental understanding that *wrinkles do not signify loss of personhood*.

In short, don't create an event or program *for* us, create an event or program *with* us. Working 'with not for' is a difficult but essential language and conceptual shift for those alert to the pitfalls of ageism.

## Strength is in community

No one organisation can be everything to everyone. While our focus at Attitude. Ageing Well in Clunes has been on the 60+ population, that group, just under a third of the population of Clunes, is not homogenous. (Under the Living and Ageing Well in Hepburn project the demographic was extended to 50 and over, and 45 years or older for First Nations people.) People naturally gravitate to different organisations, some like the crowd at the bowls club, others prefer the Friday night raffle at the pub, and so on. Clunes has up to 30+ groups, clubs and societies, some formally constituted and large such as the Football and Netball Club, others small and ad hoc, such as the crochet group. They all form a function in the well-being of the community by keeping people active and connected. This is what we recognised as the *spider web of community*.

Post COVID-19, community infrastructure faulted. The monthly community newsletter struggled for significance against the on-line Facebook community pages with their immediate, but often false and misleading, information. Annual community gatherings slipped away. Groups in Clunes, like other country towns, suffered and, under stress, communication between the groups fractured. The spider web of community had been damaged.

We engaged in a deliberate, year-long strategy to rekindle the trust and communication between the groups. To this end we:

1. Conducted quarterly forums for executive members of the groups to come together to share information
2. Encouraged groups to advertise their special events in our quarterly *What's On in Clunes* guide.
3. Hosted a shared pavilion at the Clunes Agricultural Show to promote clubs and activities
4. Floated the idea of setting up a Clunes Community Trust to pursue long-term opportunities.

Each community has its own way of networking across its clubs and organisations. The methods will vary, but what is important is to work towards mutual trust, respect and support, and to stay connected. The spider web is only as strong as its smallest link. Keeping the links strong and flexible goes a long way towards ensuring a community is vibrant and healthy with plenty of ways for people to stay engaged and active as they get older.

## Collaboration is complex

It took us some time to realise that our understanding of what collaboration was, and how to implement it, varied significantly between the partners. Impediments included our use of different language; coming from different working cultures and the power gap between volunteer groups and staffed organisations. Specifically:

1. The different models and working cultures within the three organisations – a government health service, a neighbourhood house and a loosely formed community group
2. The difference between having paid and unpaid resources – with the health service having all paid staff, the neighbourhood house being a hybrid of part-waged, part volunteer and part government subsidy (Jobseeker/Mutual Obligation arrangements) and the community group being entirely volunteer
3. Time and resource allocations varying significantly between the three groups
4. Generational difference, with the three partners sometimes out of step in their corporate behaviour, approaches and expectations.

We all had to really dig deep to collaborate – it can be clunky and awkward and cannot be assumed. It is about building trust and finding a shared language. This takes time. In hindsight, we advise addressing these issues at the beginning of a project. The question: '*How will we work together?*' is complex and on-going and is far more important than '*What will we do?*'. The secret to success is tackling collaboration and developing trust and respect, recognising each other's strengths and limitations and bringing these to a positive outcome.

***Prepared by the Attitude. Ageing Well in Clunes working party***