

Case study: Leading change towards inclusive practice

Promoting volunteering in an area of population growth

Goonawarra Neighbourhood House launched Sunbury Neighbour Day to address social isolation and strengthen community connections amid rapid population growth in Sunbury, Victoria. The initiative introduced flexible, short-term volunteer roles and fostered partnerships with local businesses and housing estates, creating an inclusive, community-led approach to volunteering.

Background

Goonawarra Neighbourhood House is a local community hub located in Sunbury, Victoria, northwest of Melbourne's CBD. Sunbury is experiencing a population boom, with many new estates being built across town. Our neighbourhood house is situated close to some of the highest growth areas in Sunbury, and we're committed to our mission of being responsive to the needs of community members, even as our local population grows. Our House is in a prime position to offer these new residents support, a place for belonging, and avenues for volunteering and community engagement.

While this growth has brought thousands of new residents to the area, many individuals and families don't know their neighbours or have established local connections. More broadly, social isolation and loneliness are at an all-time high across Australia, impacting both mental and physical health. These realities motivated our House Manager to create an initiative that supports connection within the local community.

Neighbour Day

"Our communities are only as strong as the people who live in them, which is why Neighbour Day provides a chance to pause, reflect and celebrate the people who live around us." – Andrew Heslop, Neighbour Day founder.

Andrew Heslop founded Neighbour Day in 2003 after learning that an elderly woman had died

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alone and remained undiscovered for nearly two years. The initiative encourages Australians to connect with neighbours and foster social cohesion. Now championed by Neighbours Every Day and Relationships Australia, Neighbour Day continues to be a national, annual day of connection, occurring on the last Sunday of March.

Sunbury Neighbour Day

Our team really connected with the idea of this annual day and created Sunbury Neighbour Day to encourage local connections. Residents could participate by greeting neighbours, hosting events, or attending free community activities such as open days, sausage sizzles, and housing estate gatherings with food trucks and children's activities. Local businesses got on board by offering discounts on food and drink items to encourage people to share meals or organise a picnic with neighbours.

Our volunteers

In the spirit of Neighbour Day, we wanted the initiative to be community-led, so involving local volunteers was essential, as they brought their own ideas and perspectives that guided the project.

The nature of the project led us to explore new types of volunteer roles. Up to this point, most of our volunteer roles were for our regular ongoing programs, but Sunbury Neighbour Day gave us a chance to engage volunteers in a short-term and project-specific role. These roles were more flexible, allowing volunteers to give what time they could, when they could.

As a new initiative, we knew that a huge part of our work would be getting the word out and getting people on board. Volunteers helped promote the event by distributing flyers, posting on social media, and leveraging their networks. Volunteers also supported us during the Sunbury Neighbour Day community events. One of our newer volunteers worked in marketing, so she captured photo and video content of the many different events happening around town, which we

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used across our social media platforms. It's always fantastic when a volunteer brings valued skills and their own interests to a role.

One volunteer quickly became one of the project's strongest supporters. After recently moving back to Sunbury into one of the new housing estates, she was keen to build new connections. She strongly resonated with the mission of Sunbury Neighbour Day and believed in its potential impact on the township.

A confident communicator with a passion for community and partnership building, she brought these strengths to her volunteering. She became the driving force behind her housing estate's own event, convincing estate management to take part, printing her own invitations, and personally visiting neighbours to invite them along. She also spoke with local businesses and organisations, distributing flyers and encouraging them to get involved.

This was a strong example of a volunteer connecting deeply with a cause, understanding its impact, and channelling her time and energy into making it a success.

Key tips for the sector

There is always room to grow and learn, and we're committed to improving Sunbury Neighbour Day as it evolves into an annual local tradition. Here are some key learnings from engaging volunteers in the project's first year.

1. Welcome locals to lead and guide projects in a volunteer capacity

Encourage volunteer leadership and ownership.

A core facet of our organisation's mission is working with the local community to create initiatives that benefit them. This project gave us an opportunity to encourage volunteer leadership and ownership from the outset.

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2. Position volunteering as a way to connect

Highlight social benefits to attract volunteers in growth areas.

Those of us who manage or participate in volunteering understand its value in building meaningful connections and a sense of neighbourliness within the community. In new growth areas like ours, highlighting these social benefits can help attract new volunteers who are keen to meet people and strengthen their local connections.

3. Allow flexible volunteering

Offer short-term roles to suit diverse schedules.

Recognising its popularity, we were keen to explore more flexible, short-term or project-based volunteer roles for Sunbury Neighbour Day. This approach suited the project, as many tasks could be completed on weekends or around work and other life commitments, such as distributing flyers or helping at events.

Offering this flexibility allowed us to engage volunteers who couldn't commit long-term, including skilled volunteers working full time and those with family responsibilities.

4. Ask yourself: "What am I doing that a volunteer could lead or support me with?"

Avoid doing everything yourself – identify tasks volunteers can own.

As a brand-new project, it was easy to fall into the mindset of doing everything ourselves during the early stages. In hindsight, there were tasks where volunteers could have provided supported or even taken the lead. While some discernment is needed when involving volunteers, it's always worth asking whether a task could be supported or led by a volunteer.

5. Build partnerships across different sectors

Collaborate with businesses and other community groups to broaden impact.

We wanted Sunbury Neighbour Day to be something the whole town could get behind. This meant connecting not only with like-minded community organisations, but also businesses operating in different sectors. By identifying shared goals and learning how to speak each other's

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language, we were able to build meaningful partnerships. These connections help grow awareness of your organisation in new spaces and can lead to new volunteers, supporters, or mutually beneficial collaborations.

Volunteer reflection

Following the conclusion of Sunbury Neighbour Day this year, one of our volunteers shared a written reflection on the project, highlighting both her commitment and the impact she felt it had:

“On March 30th we have celebrated Sunbury’s Neighbour Day. During November 2024 till March 2025, we delivered posters and pamphlets, walked the Sunbury business district, new estates, knocking [on] doors around Sunbury’s neighbourhoods promoting the event.

During those days I made many new friends and had the opportunity of getting to know many families that, like me, made [this] estate their home. An indeed special day if one considers the importance of a united, aware neighbourhood made of different but contributing cultures that, in the end, can only enrich Australia’s social tapestry.

I hope next year we will have a bigger and better Neighbour Day, your ideas to make it even better will be appreciated. Also, if you have a few free hours to spare in your calendar, come to the [Neighbourhood] House and be part of our groups, there are plenty of activities to choose from (singing, cooking, painting, also just for coffee/tea and a chat, etc).”

Learn more

For more information about Goonawarra Neighbourhood House and our Sunbury Neighbour Day initiative, visit: <https://www.goonawarranh.com.au/> and <https://sunburyneighbourday.org.au/>

For more information about the national Neighbour Day campaign, visit <https://neighbourseveryday.org/day-of-action/>

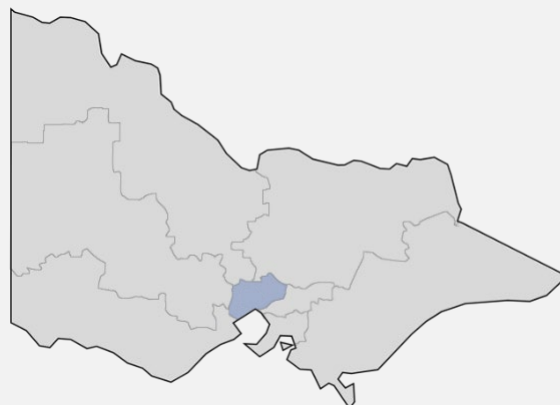
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<https://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au/leading-volunteers/vma-2022-2026/>



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Volunteering Victoria acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to Elders past and present.