

# Case study: Leading change towards inclusive practice

## Becoming a Community Compass for Volunteering

**Mill House Neighbourhood House is rethinking what it means to support volunteering in a regional community. Rather than focusing solely on recruiting volunteers for its own programs, the organisation is helping connect people with opportunities across Maryborough, celebrating service in all its forms, and sharing practical guidance with local community groups. Through this shift, Mill House is creating a more inclusive and connected approach to volunteering, making it easier for people to find meaningful ways to contribute while strengthening the wider community sector.**

For years, Mill House Neighbourhood House has been a familiar, welcoming fixture in Maryborough. Known for community lunches, shared spaces for games, crafts and activities, and a food assistance program, it has long helped residents find support and connection. Like many neighbourhood houses, it relies on a steady group of volunteers to deliver these services. While volunteering is central to its work, Mill House had not yet focused on strengthening volunteering across the wider community. That is now changing.

The Board and staff recognised changes in both community needs and volunteering. Many people want to contribute but are unsure where to start or how their skills could best help. A new strategic vision for Maryborough, supported by the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal 'Investing in Rural Community Futures' program and expressed through a community 'RoadMap', accelerated this thinking.

Mill House decided to play a distinct role: not only accepting volunteer help, but actively cultivating volunteering across Maryborough and surrounding districts.

*"We realised we had a responsibility beyond our own four walls. Our building is a trusted space – how can we use that trust to help people volunteer anywhere, not just here?"*

– Board member, Cathy Schwager

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This work is structured around three key priorities:

1. Connecting people with volunteering opportunities across the region
2. Celebrating service across the whole community, and;
3. Providing trusted guidance on best practice in volunteer engagement.

### Connecting People with Volunteering Opportunities

One of the most visible changes was an overhaul of how Mill House shares volunteering opportunities. The reception area now features a Volunteer Information Hub, a regularly updated display of roles from organisations across the Maryborough region – far beyond Mill House's own needs.

Partnerships with the local Volunteer Resource Group and Volunteering Loddon Mallee help keep listings current and credible. Staff are encouraged to think beyond filling Mill House's own volunteer vacancies. Through simple conversations, they help people identify opportunities that match their interests, skills and goals.

*“We had someone come in wanting to help with Food Assistance... When I learned she wanted to be part of a retailing experience, I connected her with one of our local Op Shops. She still comes here for coffee mornings – and tells everyone we helped her find the perfect role.”*

– Coordinator, Sarah Maclean

### Celebrating Service Across the Community

Mill House has also taken a new approach to recognising volunteers. Rather than hosting a small annual morning tea for its own volunteers, the Board has reimagined the event as a community-wide 'Celebration of Service', to launch on International Volunteer Day in December.

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Invitations will be extended to smaller, often unaffiliated groups, including community theatre volunteers, those running the local craft shop, and independent volunteers supporting socially isolated seniors through the Community Visitors Scheme. The aim is to ensure recognition reflects service in all its forms.

*“The response has been incredibly positive. Some groups operate on a shoestring and have never had the capacity to properly thank their volunteers. Being recognised alongside everyone else means the world to them.”*

– Chair, John Williamson

### **A Trusted Source for Best Practice and Rights**

Mill House is also becoming a practical source of information on the “how” of volunteering. The centre provides free, accessible information on volunteers’ rights and responsibilities, including police checks, position descriptions, and the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement.

For leaders of small community organisations, Mill House also shares best-practice resources from Volunteering Loddon Mallee, drawing on guidance developed by Volunteering Victoria and Volunteering Australia. Staff participate in and host workshops on topics such as recruitment, retention, induction, youth engagement, and insurance – areas that can be hard for volunteer-run groups to navigate alone. Expertise is also available on-site through a shared office arrangement.

*“We were always winging it when it came to managing people. Mill House shared simple templates and helped us understand duty of care. It gave us confidence and made the group feel more secure.”*

– A leader of a local walking group initiative

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By providing this support, Mill House is helping strengthen local organisations, encourage collaboration, and build a more sustainable volunteering culture across the region.

### A Blueprint for the Future

Mill House Neighbourhood House's journey shows how a community house can be more than a venue. By shifting from simply relying on volunteers to actively promoting volunteering, it is multiplying its impact – supporting its own programs while strengthening other groups, empowering individuals, and building a more connected, resilient Maryborough.

*“The biggest change is the conversations we’re having. People don’t just come in to ask for help. They come in to ask how they can give help. We’re becoming the compass for anyone wanting to make a difference in Maryborough.”*

– Coordinator, Sarah Maclean

The approach is simple and replicable. Start by seeing volunteering as a community-wide opportunity, build strong local partnerships, and invest in helping people and organisations contribute in ways that work for them.

This International Volunteer Day, the new Celebration of Service will mark not just a date on the calendar, but a lasting change in how one neighbourhood house serves its whole region.

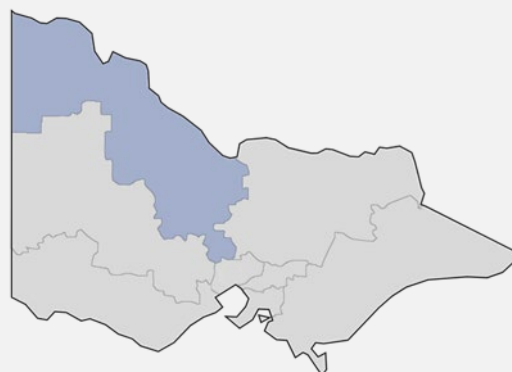
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<https://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au/leading-volunteers/vma-2022-2026/>



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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.*