



Mernda

NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE

The story of Mernda Neighbourhood House

From its early beginnings to the establishment of the new MNH Incorporated Association



ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

This booklet recognises the development of **Mernda Neighbourhood House** and the people who have contributed to its growth.

It has been prepared as Whittlesea Community Connections supports the House's transition to the independent Mernda Neighbourhood House Inc.

The story of Mernda Neighbourhood House is much more than participation, programs and activities. It is a story of engagement, encouragement, and the development of community confidence, skills, and leadership.

Over time, local residents moved from participating in activities to helping shape programs, contributing as volunteers, representing their community and taking on leadership and governance responsibilities.

This booklet documents that journey and acknowledges the residents, volunteers, staff, groups, funders and partner organisations who supported it.



Acknowledgement of Country

Whittlesea Community Connections and Mernda Neighbourhood House Inc. acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which Mernda Neighbourhood House operates, the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to land, waters, culture and community.

INTRODUCTION

Building a community-led place

Mernda Neighbourhood House began with a simple process: being present in the community, listening to residents and understanding what was needed.

Early conversations identified a need for more opportunities for local people to meet, learn, participate and feel connected to their community.

MNH worked with community members to develop a place that responded to these priorities.

Programs and activities provided practical opportunities to bring people together. At the same time, the House supported community members in sharing their ideas, contributing their experience, and taking a more active role in local decision-making.

As community involvement increased, so did local confidence and leadership.

The transition to an independent association is an important next step in this process.

“
Mernda Neighbourhood House was developed with the community, not simply for the community.”



THE EARLY BEGINNINGS

Listening to the Mernda community

In August 2017, with the support of the City of Whittlesea, WCC began providing community information, referral and casework services from the Mernda Villages Community Activity Centre three days each week.

This local presence helped WCC develop a deeper understanding of residents' experiences in the rapidly growing Mernda area.

Through conversations with community members, WCC identified a need for more accessible opportunities for social connection, learning and community participation.

Residents wanted places where they could meet others, share their interests, learn new skills, and become more involved in their local area.

These early conversations helped shape the idea of establishing a neighbourhood house in Mernda.

An early local newspaper article also helped raise awareness of the initiative and introduce the idea to the wider community.

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ESTABLISHING THE HOUSE

From community need to a local House

In October 2018, with agreement from the City of Whittlesea to lease WCC the “House” at 2 Heals Road, WCC secured Victorian Government funding to establish a new Neighbourhood House in Mernda.

Mernda Community House began operating from this location in February 2019.

The first activities included opportunities for English language skills, health and wellbeing sessions, gardening, arts and crafts, children’s activities and practical skills development.

A local Advisory Group was established to provide community input into the direction of the House. Members participated in a planning day in July 2019 and helped identify priorities for future programs and activities and the overall vision for MNH.

From the beginning, the House aimed to respond to local interests and build on the knowledge and experience already present in the community.

Programs were important, but the broader goal was to create a place where residents could connect, contribute and help shape what happened next.

Mernda Community House
began operating in February 2019.

COMMUNITY VISION AND PRINCIPLES

A shared vision for the House

The early community vision reflected what residents wanted Mernda Community House to provide.

The vision focused on five main areas.



Social inclusion

A welcoming, inclusive and accessible place for people across the Mernda community.



Social connection

Opportunities for residents to meet, build relationships and develop a stronger sense of belonging.



Intercultural connection

A place where people from different cultures and backgrounds could meet, learn from one another and provide mutual support.



Health and wellbeing

Activities and opportunities that supported physical, social and emotional well-being.



Lifelong learning

Accessible opportunities for people to develop skills for employment, participation and everyday life.

These principles
helped guide
decisions about
programs,
partnerships and
the future

THE OFFICIAL OPENING

A community celebration

Mernda Community House was officially opened on 8 December 2019.

The event brought together residents, volunteers, community groups, local organisations and government representatives.

Whittlesea Unit SES supported the barbecue and event set-up, using equipment provided by the Mernda and District Residents Association.

Sarah Kerr facilitated kite-making and craft activities for children, and Kellie Hunter delivered a Welcome to Country.

Guests included then Mayor Emilia Sterjova, Rob Mitchell MP and Danielle Green MP.

Mernda Strummers and Singers performed during the celebration, and local volunteers helped welcome visitors and support the event.

The opening was an important opportunity to introduce the House to the wider community and recognise the people and organisations involved in establishing it.



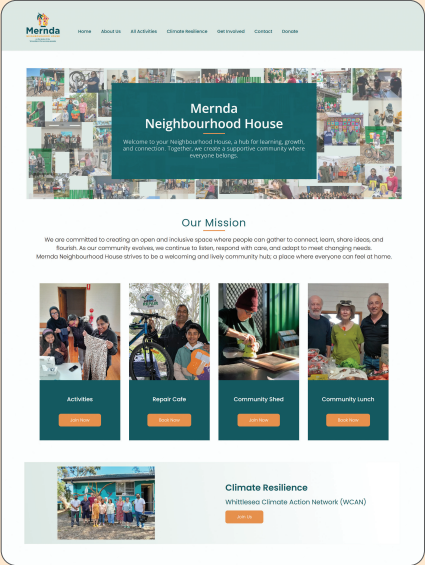
Mernda Community House was
officially opened on 8 December 2019.

The striking artwork on the front door was created by Saima, a local Mernda resident and student, beautifully capturing the strong sense of togetherness and connection at MNH.



RESPONDING TO COVID-19

Maintaining connection during disruption



The COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed how the House could operate.

When face-to-face activities were restricted, programs moved online where possible. These included children’s art activities, ukulele classes and other opportunities for learning and connection.

The House also supported community initiatives such as an online Multicultural Dinner Party, the Weaving Community Harmony project and community singing activities.

The Women’s Shed began to develop during this period, and a dedicated website was launched in December 2020.

These activities were supported by volunteers, Advisory Group members, WCC staff and Working for Victoria community development officers.

The period demonstrated the importance of strong community relationships. The House was able to adapt because people were willing to contribute ideas, skills and time.

Plans for a larger facility could not proceed because of broader site and infrastructure decisions. WCC and community members continued to consider other ways to develop programs within the available spaces.

The period demonstrated the importance of strong community relationships.



COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

From participation to leadership

As the House developed, community members took on a wider range of roles.

The Advisory Group met regularly and provided advice on programs, partnerships, advocacy and the future direction of the House.

Volunteers supported administration, activities, events, communications, gardening, repairs, community meals and other areas of the House.

By 2022 to 2023, 25 volunteers were contributing to programs and activities.

During the same period:

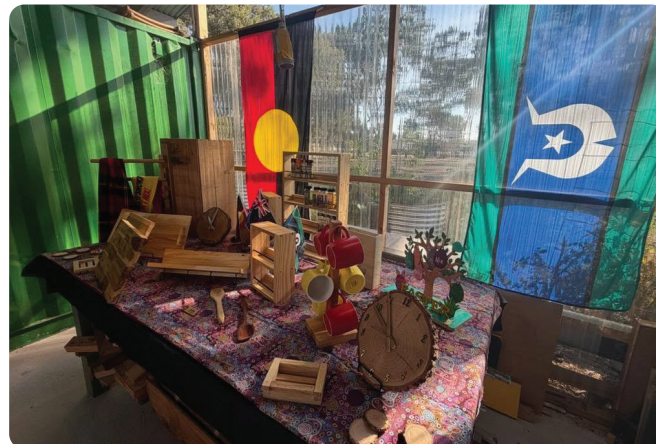
- Three volunteers moved into paid roles.
- Two Learn Local facilitators taught for the first time.
- Other volunteers developed skills and experience that supported their transition into employment.

These outcomes show how local participation can create pathways to confidence, employment and leadership.

The House encouraged people to move beyond attending activities and to become active contributors to their community.



WOMEN'S SHED AND SISTERS WOODWORK



Building practical skills and confidence

The Women's Shed began with limited equipment and space. In its early stages, participants used garden benches to cut and work with timber.

Over time, it developed into a more suitable space where women could learn practical skills, use tools and complete their own projects.

The program was particularly valuable for women who wanted to become more confident in completing practical tasks independently.

Sisters Woodwork was established as a culturally safe and practical program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Participants could meet, yarn, develop design skills and learn to use different tools and equipment.

Projects included serving trays, wind chimes and decorative mobiles. Participants gained experience using drills, hand saws, drop saws, jigsaws and sanders.

Both programs created opportunities for women to learn, share knowledge and develop confidence in a supportive environment.

The Community Shed currently runs four classes that focus on women, first nations women, people with a disability and men.

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MERNDA REPAIR CAFÉ

Sharing repair skills and reducing waste

Mernda Repair Café was established in 2021 to 2022 under the coordination of Maylei Hunt.

The program brought together volunteer repairers and community members who needed household items repaired.

Repairers contributed a wide range of practical skills and supported residents in extending the life of items that might otherwise have been discarded.

Workshops and demonstrations also gave community members an opportunity to learn basic repair skills.

In its first reported year, the Repair Café diverted 164.96 kilograms of waste from landfill.

The program recognised the value of the repairers’ knowledge and experience. In some cases, involvement in the program also helped repairers consider small-business opportunities.

Mernda Repair Café later received the Climate Action Award at the Neighbourhood Houses Victoria Annual Awards.

164.96
KILOGRAMS

Waste diverted from landfill from 2021 to 2022.



LEARNING AND EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS

Learning in a community setting

Learning activities have been an important part of Mernda Neighbourhood House.

English Conversation, delivered through a long-term partnership with PRACE, supported participants in developing language skills, confidence, and social connections.

Other activities included sewing, sustainable gardening, children's art, crafts, horticulture and practical skills programs.

These programs provided accessible learning opportunities within a familiar community setting.

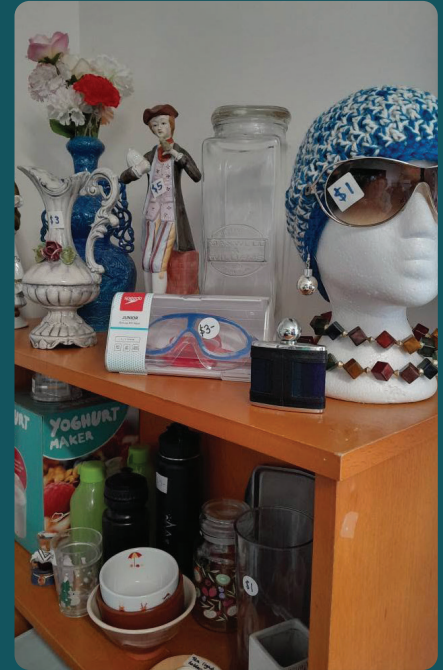
For some people, participation led to volunteering. For others, volunteering provided experience that supported employment, further education or the development of a small business idea.

Community members also had opportunities to become tutors or facilitators and share their own skills with others.

The value of these programs extended beyond the skills taught in each class. They also supported confidence, participation and stronger community relationships.



COMMUNITY LUNCH, GARDEN AND MINI OP SHOP



Practical activities that bring people together

Many important relationships at Mernda Neighbourhood House were developed through regular community activities.

The Community Lunch, delivered in partnership with Mernda Uniting Church, where the lunches are delivered from and supported by local partners, provided an opportunity for residents to share food and meet people from different backgrounds.

In 2023 to 2024, volunteer cooks prepared Iraqi, Italian and Sri Lankan meals and served more than 500 people.

The community garden gave residents a place to learn about growing food, share gardening knowledge and work together.

The Mini Op Shop helped extend the life of donated clothing and household items while providing affordable items for local residents.

These initiatives responded to practical community needs while also creating regular opportunities for connection and participation.

They gave community members different ways to contribute, including cooking, gardening, sorting donations, welcoming visitors and helping with events.

These initiatives responded to practical community needs while also creating regular opportunities for connection and participation.

WHITTLESEA CLIMATE ACTION NETWORK

Supporting community-led climate action

Whittlesea Climate Action Network, known as WCAN, began with an idea connected to Mernda Neighbourhood House.

With seed funding from the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation and the involvement of local community leaders, the network began building relationships and supporting community climate action.

WCAN created opportunities for people to share information, participate in advocacy and become involved in local environmental initiatives.

Its development demonstrates how an idea raised within a neighbourhood house can grow into a wider community initiative.

Mernda Neighbourhood House provided an early place for discussion, connection and planning.

Repair Café, sustainable gardening and community education also supported the House's broader focus on environmental responsibility.

WCAN is an example of local knowledge being supported with resources and partnerships so that community members can take collective action.

WCAN created opportunities for people to share information, participate in advocacy and become involved in local environmental initiatives.



PARTNERSHIPS



Working with community partners

The development of Mernda Neighbourhood House was supported by many people and organisations.

WCC provided staff support, organisational systems, funding management, governance support and community development experience.

Government and Council investment supported the establishment and operation of the House.

Local organisations contributed venues, equipment, food, sponsorship, training and connections to other parts of the community.

Residents and volunteers contributed local knowledge, practical skills, ideas and time.

These partnerships developed over several years and helped the House respond to changing community needs.

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Government and funding support

- Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing – Neighbourhood House Coordination Program
- City of Whittlesea
- Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation
- Victorian Women's Trust
- Heidelberg Materials (Hanson Australia)
- Costa
- Sustainability Victoria
- Honda Foundation
- Yarra Valley Water
- ANHCA

Sector and community partners

- PRACE
- Mernda Uniting Church
- Whittlesea Wellbeing Local
- Local library services
- Neighbourhood Houses Victoria
- Whittlesea Unit SES
- Mernda and District Residents Association
- Mernda Strummers and Singers
- North East NH Network
- Local volunteers, tutors and community groups



TIMELINE

Key stages in the development of the House

2017

WCC begins providing local information, referral and casework services in Mernda and identifies a need for more community activities.

2020

Programs adapt to online delivery during COVID-19. Community arts and connection activities continue, and the Women’s Shed begins to develop.

2023-24

The House becomes Mernda Neighbourhood House. Community lunches, learning activities and Shed programs continue to grow.

2018

Victorian Government funding is secured to establish a Neighbourhood House in Mernda.

2021-22

Mernda Repair Café and the Community Shed grow. Volunteers share practical skills, reduce waste and support community learning.

2024-25

WCAN develops from a local idea, and the Advisory Group begins taking formal steps towards incorporation.

2019

The House opens at 2 Heals Road. A local Advisory Group is formed, and the official opening is held in December.



2022-23

Twenty-five volunteers contribute to the House. New pathways into paid work and facilitation roles are created. The garden and Mini Op Shop continue to develop.

2026

WCC supports the transition to the new MNH Association.

2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023 2024 2025 2026

THE TRANSITION

Moving towards community governance



WCC established and supported Mernda Neighbourhood House to build local participation and leadership.

Over time, WCC provided staffing, funding support, systems, partnerships, facilitation and governance guidance.

Community members increasingly influenced the House’s vision, programs, partnerships, and priorities.

The MNH Advisory Group also gained experience in planning, community representation, advocacy and decision-making.

The establishment of the new MNH Incorporated Association reflects this growth in community capability.

The transition recognises that local residents are ready to take greater responsibility for the future direction and governance of the House.

The new association will build on the relationships, experience and community involvement developed over the previous years.

This transition is an important outcome of WCC’s community development approach.

The community is moving from participation and advice to formal leadership and governance.

The new association will build on the relationships, experience and community involvement developed over the previous years.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mernda Neighbourhood House has been shaped by many people, groups and organisations.

WCC thanks every participant, volunteer, tutor, facilitator, cook, gardener, repairer, Advisory Group member, neighbour and community supporter who contributed time, knowledge, ideas and practical support.

The following names have been identified through WCC Annual Reports and other materials reviewed for this booklet.

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- Jackie Mathew
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- Shweta Bhatti
- Richard Bergami
- Tatjana Este
- Matthew Stephenson
- Rob Mitchell MP
Member for McEwen
- Danielle Green
Former Member for Yan Yean
- Lauren Kathage, Member for Yan Yean
- MNH staff, teachers and facilitators
- WCC staff and volunteers

Groups and organisations

- Whittlesea Community Connections
- City of Whittlesea
- Victorian Government
- PRACE
- Mernda Uniting Church
- Whittlesea Wellbeing Local
- Heidelberg Materials and Hanson Australia
- Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation
- Neighbourhood Houses Victoria
- Whittlesea Unit SES
- Mernda and District Residents Association
- Mernda Strummers and Singers
- Costa
- Local library services
- Working for Victoria
- Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH)
- Bunnings Mernda
- Mernda Uniting Church



Mernda

NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE

on the lands of the Wurundjeri, Woi-wurrung peoples

Established through community consultation.
Developed through participation and partnership.
Moving forward under community leadership.