Creative Change Project

# How Community Singing Fosters Belonging, Reciprocity, Cohesion, Wellbeing, and Social Equity in Communities Challenged by Division and Disadvantage

## Insights From the Creative Change Project's Case Study of Play It Forward Choirs in Wyndham and the Latrobe Valley, Victoria, Australia

GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY | CREATIVE ARTS RESEARCH INSTITUTE
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PLAY IT FORWARD

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We acknowledge the Yugarabul, Yuggera, Jagera, and Turrbal Peoples, who are the traditional custodians of the lands on which we have housed this project at Griffith University. We pay respect to the Elders, past and present, and extend that respect to traditional custodians of the lands where we have worked across the country, including the Bidjara, Bunurong/Boonwurrung, Gunaikurnai, Kunja, Ngarluma, Wadawurrung, Wurundjeri, and Yindjibarndi Peoples. We also pay our respects to our First Nations team members, Advisory Group members, Elders and Cultural Advisors, partners, and project participants.

*CULTURAL CARE WARNING*: First Nations readers are advised that this report may contain images of people who have passed away.

*The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the ARC nor the project's partners.*

## Front cover image

The Latrobe Valley Choir singing at the 2023 Melbourne International Singers Festival. Image by Sarah Waight

## For additional information on the Creative Change Project

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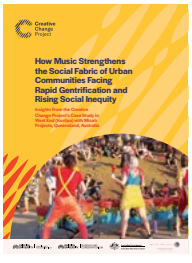
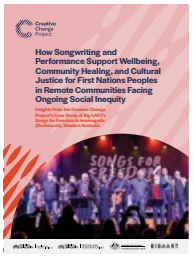
## About this report

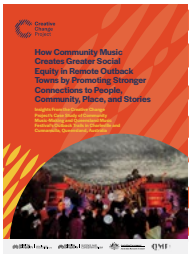
This report has been prepared for a general readership of musicians, community members, sector leaders, government departments, funders, and colleagues from diverse industries and disciplines, along with those with a general interest in harnessing the power of music to support social change in their communities.

The Creative Change Project has a wider suite of resources and outputs, all publicly available, including peer-reviewed academic articles, book chapters, conference presentations, videos, creative outputs, and the doctoral thesis accompanying this summary report. These can be found on the Creative Change Project's resources page:

## Other case study reports from the Creative Change Project




Report design by Ben Chew in Liveworm Studio
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# How Community Singing Fosters Belonging, Reciprocity, Cohesion, Wellbeing, and Social Equity in Communities Challenged by Division and Disadvantage

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# Executive Summary

**Community singing groups can promote greater social equity by creating inclusive environments in which voices are valued and heard. They achieve this by offering dynamic spaces in which community members can voice and listen to their shared histories and local identities in ways that promote individual and collective wellbeing. Insights featured in this report come from an in-depth community music study of Play It Forward's (PIF) choirs in the City of Wyndham in the south-western suburbs of Naarm (Melbourne), Victoria, and the rural area of Latrobe Valley, Victoria, as one of the Creative Change Project's four major case studies. Together, these case studies provide a comprehensive investigation into the role that community music plays in creating greater social equity in Australian communities, particularly in contexts of entrenched disadvantage. This case study was chosen because PIF supports and operates numerous community choirs and community singing projects with an emphasis on place-based group singing and inclusion. This study focuses on two choirs within the organisation because of their particular engagement with issues relevant to social justice and equity in a rural and a metropolitan area in Victoria. The Peace Choir Project Wyndham is a choir project designed to promote harmony across a multiculturally diverse local government area, and the Latrobe Valley Choir is a community group of 10 years' standing, serving a geographically diverse region. Both Wyndham and Latrobe Valley face diverse challenges in relation to social equity and socio-economic disadvantage, and each choir has sought to create beneficial community outcomes in ways that are unique to their location.**

This case study used a qualitative ethnographic approach, conducted in close collaboration with community partner organisation PIF. Data were generated through engagement with 170 participants, including choir participants, facilitators, key community stakeholders, and audience members, and researcher observation and engagement at key community rehearsals, performances, and festivals.

Key insights from this case study centre on five interrelated areas ranging from the individual to the collective.

### 1. Individual wellbeing

The process of singing alongside other community members can promote a wide range of physical, psychological, emotional, and cognitive benefits that promote individual wellbeing.

### 2. Inclusion and belonging

By incorporating bespoke songs of place, community singing becomes a powerful tool for grounding participants in shared histories and local identities, contributing to a sense of belonging and de-othering.

### 3. Dynamic reciprocity

The dynamic interplay of listening and voicing within these groups promotes reciprocity, which affords mutual understanding, respect, and acceptance.

### 4. Social cohesion

An emphasis on diversity and inclusion, cultural exchange, and co-creating repertoire of and for the places in which these communities live can bridge divides, celebrate differences, and contribute to enhanced social cohesion across communities experiencing marginalisation and division along ethnic, cultural, or geographic lines.

### 5. Creating social equity

The enhanced confidence, self-expression, belonging, connection, a sense of family, and increased civic engagement precipitated by group singing contribute to greater social equity by fostering inclusive participation, mutual support, and access to community resources.

### Implications

This report highlights the important role that community singing can play in enhancing the quality of life of all community members, but especially those who may be experiencing social inequity resulting from marginalisation and socio-economic hardship. Insights from this case study suggest that by providing opportunities for community singers to feel a sense of belonging, reciprocity, and social cohesion with their fellow community members, community singing initiatives can foster inclusive environments in which all voices are valued and listened to both literally and metaphorically. This process can promote greater social equity in communities.

## Visualising Our Creative Change Insights: Our Imagining Instrument

The Creative Change Project has sought to describe the relationship between music and social equity in ways that reflect music's creative, generative, adaptive, and iterative nature. We have created an 'imagining instrument' to help us show the dynamic and relational way music simultaneously works at individual and collective levels to create greater social equity. In each of our case studies, the surfaces of this 'imagining instrument' feature slightly different concepts, reflecting what emerged as significant in these place-based contexts and what was considered salient by our team members and their community collaborators. In all cases, the *relational* nature of this shape echoes the interconnected way that community music operates, whereby individual processes and outcomes are always connected to the collective and vice versa. The *continuous* nature of this shape reflects the temporal way music functions—blurring boundaries between past, present, and future. When making music, we are attuned to the present experience, but we also keep the sonic memories of the past in the loop and can imagine future potentialities at the same time. This shape also reminds us of the knock-on effect when internal or external disruptions have an adverse effect on the community music experience.

Moreover, we find this shape evokes a certain wonder and curiosity that embodies the creative spirit of community music and speaks to its potential to advance social equity efforts in highly distinct ways. As you read the insights of our suite of research reports, we encourage you to keep this 'imagining instrument' in mind and consider how the reported outcomes interact with one another in dynamic ways such that they are not isolated outcomes on a linear trajectory but rather reflective of a dynamic and relational process that is constantly unfolding.

Through songs of local significance, community singing allows participants to experience a shared sense of place and belonging. The dynamic interplay of listening and voicing that occurs when groups sing together can model reciprocity in ways that promote mutual understanding and respect for one another. In communities characterised by diversity, experiences of marginalisation, and division along ethnic, cultural, or geographic lines, this inclusive practice can help bridge divides, celebrate differences, and contribute to enhanced social cohesion. This experience of belonging, reciprocal exchange, and social cohesion promotes meaningful connections between community members in ways that promote both personal and collective wellbeing outcomes. As such, these community singing groups can promote greater social equity by creating inclusive environments in which all voices are valued and listened to.


**Figure 1: Insights from this case study**

# Introduction

## Creative Change Project

The Creative Change Project is an Australian Research Council Future Fellowship that has explored the role of community music in addressing social inequity across the country (www.creativechange.org.au). Based at the Creative Arts Research Institute and Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, the Creative Change Project has aimed to build on the mounting international evidence base that documents the social, emotional, physiological, cognitive, cultural, and economic benefits that can come from participating in music and how this might be harnessed to support real impact in contexts of entrenched social inequity (Bartleet & Heard, 2024; Bartleet & Higgins, 2018; Heard et al., 2023).

Community music can be broadly defined as participatory music-making by, for, and/or with a community. At its heart, community music involves the creation of inclusive, locally embedded, and community-led opportunities for engagement in music. Rather than being characterised by a particular style, genre, medium, or aesthetic, community music is distinctively reflective of its cultural context and shaped by its participants and local setting. Given its focus on community agency, musical practices within this field customarily work to uphold values of inclusion, access, equity, justice, and self-determination (Bartleet, 2023).

For the Creative Change Project, social equity is about ensuring every person has the opportunities and resources to reach their fullest potential and live a fulfilled life. Inequity can be understood as differences in the resources, opportunities, rewards, and rights a person has based on their position within society, which lead to disparities in health and wellbeing that are unjust and avoidable. Structural systems of power (i.e. the way our society is organised and operates) cause certain groups to thrive at the expense of others. Social inequity has multiple and intersecting causes and symptoms such that to achieve equity, we must work across individual, community, and systemic levels.

This report features insights from one of four Creative Change Project case studies. This case study partnered with Play It Forward (PIF) to investigate the role of group singing in community choirs as place-based creative efforts to enhance social equity. Since 2001, under the artistic direction of Dr Jonathon Welch AM, PIF has been leveraging the diverse benefits of singing in the broader context of social justice. They support multiple place-based community singing initiatives (currently 19 community choirs in Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland), massed choir events (Cover Me in Sunshine in 2023; Sing for a Cure in 2023), new choral works (Ecotorio in 2023; Reverse Anthem in 2021), and


**Figure 2: Cover Me in Sunshine—PIF massed choir event, Naarm (Melbourne), Wurundjeri and Bunurong/Boonwurrung Country, Victoria, 2022. Image by Brydie-Leigh Bartleet**

the nationwide Social Inclusion Week. The organisation often works in collaboration with government, corporate, community, and philanthropic sectors to provide tailored, inclusive arts programs to communities in urban and regional Victoria, Queensland, and New South Wales, often serving disadvantaged Australians in diverse contexts.

This case study focused on two initiatives within the PIF family of choirs of varying durations: The Peace Choir Project Wyndham (PCPW) in the City of Wyndham west of Melbourne, and the Latrobe Valley Choir (LVC) in Gippsland in regional Victoria. PCPW was a short project designed to promote harmony across a multiculturally diverse local government area experiencing rapid urban development and complex structural challenges in infrastructure, services, and investment. The 10-year-old LVC has supported connections across this geographically diverse region and addressed a wide range of community issues in this region undergoing significant economic and social transitions, as its long-standing industries of coal-fired power generation have declined.

## Wyndham: A Brief Introduction

The City of Wyndham is situated on the lands of the Bunurong/Boonwurrung and Wadawurrung Peoples of the Kulin Nation.[1] The city covers a 542 km$^2$ area and is around 20 km from the centre of Naarm (Melbourne). It includes

1 The Creative Change Project makes every effort to use First Nations place names in their reporting. While the Wyndham area in Victoria is predominantly known as Wyndham, parts of the area (including a suburb) are known as Werribee. The name Werribee in Wadawurrung is 'Weariby Yallock', which translates to 'spine' (Weariby) and 'stream' (Yallock). The Werribee River, a key feature of the area, is also referred to as 'Werribee Yalook' (The Loop, 2025).

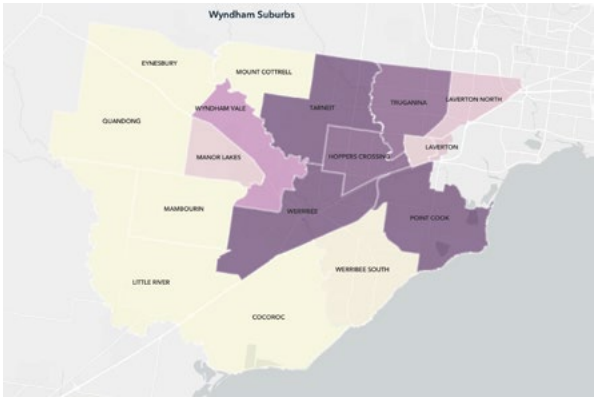


**Figure 3: Map of Wyndham. Image courtesy of Wyndham City Council**

16 suburbs, ranging from Laverton and Quandong in the north and north-west to Point Cook, Werribee South, and Cocoroc in the south on the shores of Port Philip Bay. The historic town of Werribee is the main service and business centre and includes the City of Wyndham council headquarters and the Wyndham Community and Education Centre (WCEC).

The lands on which the City of Wyndham now stands first caught the attention of colonial explorers Hume and Hovell in 1824 (Werribee History, n.d.). In 1835, John Batman 'traded' with the Indigenous people of the area 'an annual tribute of 100 pairs of blankets, 100 knives, 100 tomahawks, 50 suits of clothing, 50 pairs scissors, five tons flour, and some looking glasses. … Thus a tract of over 500,000 acres was obtained for a trifle' (*Early History of Werribee*, 1924, p. 6). European colonisation thereafter grew rapidly through agriculture and other industries. The pastoral lands of the Western Plains supported cattle and sheep farming for meat and textile production. Other significant industries of the Wyndham area included building materials, metal foundries, chemical production, and manufacturing (Doyle et al., 2021). Although much of the industrial landscape has changed since the 1980s, Wyndham's current economic base still connects with its historical roots in manufacturing and agriculture while also experiencing rapid growth in service and technology sectors and tourism through major attractions such as the Werribee Open Range Zoo, Werribee Park Mansion, and the Victoria State Rose Garden. At the time of writing, the top three employment sectors in Wyndham are transport and warehousing, retail trade, and construction. Health care is also a significant growth sector for the city (Wyndham City Council, 2024).

Wyndham is one of the fastest-growing local government areas (LGA) in Australia: the current population of 324,087, 0.9% of whom identify as First Nations (Australian Bureau of Statistic [ABS], 2021b), is forecast to reach 500,000 by 2040 (Victorian Government, n.d.). Wyndham is also one of the most culturally diverse areas in Australia. Of the population, 48% are migrants from 162 different countries. Much of this migrant population has arrived from India (17.3% of Wyndham's total population), Philippines, China, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Bangladesh, along with several African countries, chiefly South Sudan, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Kenya (Wyndham City Council, 2016). Moreover, Wyndham is one of the top LGAs in Victoria for humanitarian arrivals, receiving arrivals from 49 different countries (Wyndham City Council, 2024). Approximately 36% of refugees in Wyndham are from Myanmar, with many being of Karen and Chin ethnicity, and 20% are from Thailand, likely Burmese refugees born in camps along the Thai-Myanmar border (Wyndham City Council, 2016). There are also refugees in Wyndham from Ethiopia, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran (Wyndham City Council, 2016).

**Figure 4: Werribee River in the centre of Werribee, Bunurong/ Boonwurrung and Wadawurrung Country, VIC. Image by Pearly Black**

Wyndham has a vibrant arts and music scene that is richly multicultural, with First Nations, Indian, African, Middle Eastern, and South American music, dance, and arts present in a variety of ways across the city. The busy Wyndham Cultural Centre and Wyndham Art Gallery are centrally located in Werribee, presenting music, visual art, and theatre by local and national creatives.

Wyndham's economic status and health statistics compare favourably with the rest of Victoria (ABS, 2024); however, the city's significant rate of population growth creates challenges for social equity, infrastructure development, and, increasingly, social cohesion. The rapid expansion puts pressure on housing affordability, transportation

networks, and community facilities. Housing affordability and homelessness represent two of the most pressing social challenges in Wyndham (Wyndham City Council, 2024).

While the cultural diversity of Wyndham is a source of strength and vibrancy, ethnically diverse members of the community face several distinct challenges. Experiences of racism, language barriers, lack of social networks, and economic exclusion can contribute to social isolation and negatively impact mental health and wellbeing. Not only are such experiences prevalent in public places such as parks, shops, and public transport hubs, but they are also drastically underreported because of a lack of support, inadequate promotion of support services, and concerns that they will not be taken seriously (Peucker et al., 2021).

Figure 5: WCEC. Image by Pearly Black

Wyndham City Council and local partners such as WCEC have risen to these challenges via initiatives such as the Wyndham Anti-Racism Support Network and Council's Multicultural Policy and Social and Economic Inclusion Framework. Wyndham City Council also seeks to 'harness the impact of arts and culture to help address challenges related to social cohesion, economic growth, health, and education' (Hodyl & Co & Renton and Co, 2024, p. 10)

## The Latrobe Valley: A Brief Introduction

The Latrobe Valley is located approximately 150 km south-east of Melbourne on the lands of the Brayakaulung People of the Gunaikurnai Nation. Its population of 77,168 people (ABS, 2021a), 2.2% of whom identify as First Nations, is spread across several communities, including Moe, Morwell, Traralgon, and Churchill. Latrobe City was formed in 1994 through the amalgamation of several smaller shires in the Latrobe Valley (Latrobe City Council, n.d.) and is distributed across four major urban centres—Moe–Newborough, Morwell, Traralgon, and Churchill—along with several smaller settlements, including Boolarra, Callignee, Glengarry, Toongabbie, Tyers, Traralgon South, Yallourn North, and Yinnar (Latrobe City Council, n.d.). The region is bound by the Latrobe River to the north, the foothills of the Victorian Alps to the east, and the Strzelecki Ranges to the south. There are numerous national parks in the region encompassing diverse habitats, from high alpine bush to temperate rainforests, and coastal landscapes are easily accessed.

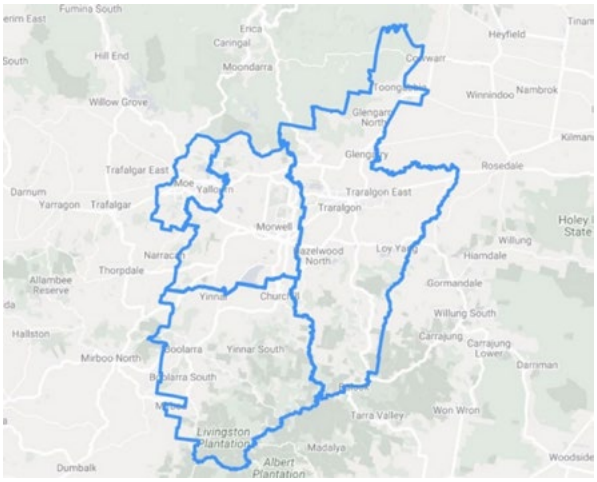


Figure 6: Map of Latrobe Valley. Image courtesy of Latrobe City Council

European colonisation began displacing local First Nations Peoples in the 1840s (Latrobe City Council, 2010). Colonisation of the region developed through agriculture such as sheep grazing and dairy farming, forestry for wood products and pulp and paper milling, and extraction of the area's other natural resources. The area's abundant brown coal deposits have powered Victoria's electricity generation for decades, supplying approximately 90% of Victoria's electricity and making the region central to Victoria's energy sector (Regional Development Victoria, n.d.).

Figure 7: The post office in Traralgon, Gunaikurnai Country, VIC. Image by Gavin Guan

The cultural landscape of Latrobe City is rich with both grassroots community initiatives—such as the Latrobe Orchestra, the Boolarra Folk Festival, and the Latrobe Theatre Company—and professional arts programming at the Gippsland Performing Arts Centre and other commercial music venues. The Latrobe Regional Gallery, along with numerous arts and crafts galleries throughout the Valley, offers the opportunity to engage with the work of local artisans and craftspeople. LVC is a long-standing part of the rich cultural life of the city.

Although the Latrobe Valley exhibits cultural richness and natural beauty, the region faces significant social and economic challenges that impact community wellbeing. The region is one of the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas in Victoria (Latrobe City Council, 2024), and its unemployment rate of 6.6% is higher than Victoria's average (ABS, 2021a). As Victoria moves towards renewable energy, Latrobe Valley's long-term reliance on the energy sector leaves the region vulnerable in terms of employment and economic stability. This transition away from reliance on coal-fired power stations led the Energy Brix Power Station to be decommissioned in 2014 and the Hazelwood Power Station to be decommissioned in 2017 (Regional Development Victoria, n.d.). This shift is causing anxiety about the future of the region's economy, with some locals feeling that schemes to transition electricity workers into other employment are unsuccessful, and the region has suffered significant decline across multiple domains as a result (Kutchel, 2024).

**Figure 8: Loy Yang Power Station. Image by Daria Nipot**

Additionally, communities in the Latrobe Valley also face several health and wellbeing challenges. The rates of chronic physical health conditions (such as arthritis and emphysema) are higher than those for Victoria and Australia, as are the rates for mental health conditions (ABS, 2021a). Disasters such as the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, the 2014 Hazelwood Power Station fire, and the 2019–2020 Black Summer bushfires have also severely affected the region. The ongoing Hazelwood Health Study has found that physical (e.g. respiratory and cardiac health), psychological (e.g. trauma, anxiety, depression), and community (e.g. socio-economic impact, failing trust in authorities) wellbeing were adversely affected for six to eight years after the power station fire and that, while many of the physical health impacts have largely resolved, the disaster has had a lingering impact on community wellbeing (Ikin et al., 2024).

## Case Study Aims

This case study aimed to investigate the role that community music, especially community singing, plays in the two contrasting locations of Wyndham and the Latrobe Valley. Drawing on the perceptions and experiences of participating singers and people in the region, the case study aimed to examine how community singing can support a sense of inclusion and belonging, dynamic reciprocity, and social cohesion in these diverse locations. It has sought to unpack how these experiences of both singing together and listening to one another can promote individual and collective wellbeing and create inclusive environments that promote greater social equity.

The PhD candidate (Pearly) leading this case study is a professional singer with 30 years of experience across diverse non-classical genres. She is also a Masters-qualified vocal pedagogue with 25 years of experience, including in vocal ensemble leadership. Through diverse experiences of participation in vocal ensembles, including specialisation in group vocal improvisation, Pearly's deep immersion in collaborative singing contexts informs her understanding of the dynamics of shared singing.

The Project Leader (Brydie) accompanied Pearly at the beginning and on several occasions up to the end of the case study. As a non-Indigenous, first-generation migrant from South Africa, she has worked hand-in-hand with communities across the country to study the benefits of community music. This has included researching numerous choirs, singing groups, and massed vocal ensembles of diverse cultural backgrounds. This case study builds on Brydie's extensive portfolio of projects exploring how communal music-making can open up pathways for greater social justice, equity, inclusion, and wellbeing, especially in communities where entrenched social disadvantage, displacement, and division exist.


**Figure 9: Patrick Burns, Jonathon Welch, Pearly Black, Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, Rev. Ric Holland, and Jan Hamilton (left to right)**

Figure 10: top: Pearly Black (right) with PIF Project Manager Sarah Waight (left); bottom left: Pearly Black (right) with Tineke Thijs Westwood (left) from PIF, 2023; bottom right: Pearly Black (left) with Jonathon Welch (right) at Melbourne International Singers Festival, Naarm (Melbourne), Wurundjeri and Bunurong/Boonwurrung Country, Victoria, 2023. Images by Pearly Black

During this case study, Pearly engaged extensively with PIF through field visits, building relationships with key members, and participating in singing activities to engage directly in the collective experience alongside participants. Pearly's shared professional language with facilitators and participants created rapport, enabling nuanced discussions about vocal pedagogy and the effects of singing. Care was taken to mitigate potential power imbalances arising from Pearly's expertise dominating interactions with participants, insofar as she only offered insights when asked or when these were clearly beneficial.

Figure 11: Pearly Black with WCEC team (left to right): Jennie Barrera, Pearly Black, Lesley Nallawalla, and Jonathon Welch

Pearly's insider perspective as a singing practitioner provided familiarity and understanding of the experience of participants and facilitators alike, while her outsider status as a researcher required a degree of neutral observation. Intentional reflection through keeping a journal while engaged in fieldwork afforded reflexivity to critically examine assumptions, track emotional responses, and assess how their background shaped observations. This insider–outsider role, which drew on practical knowledge while maintaining some analytical distance, allowed Pearly to interpret findings through both experiential and scholarly lenses.

## Partner Organisation Profile

Originally launched in 2012 as the School of Hard Knocks programs by Dr Jonathon Welch AM, PIF now mobilises professional music industry and community arts practitioners and disciplines, together with the health, education, research, welfare, volunteer, government, and corporate sectors, to deliver a range of diverse, tailored inclusive arts programs and events nationally. In addition to delivering locally based community choirs, projects, and events (e.g. Peace Choir Project, Men Aloud, No More Excuses) and large-scale national events (e.g. Social Inclusion Week, Melbourne International Singers Festival), PIF focuses on addressing community needs alongside pressing social issues through music.


Figure 12: The School of Hard Knocks choir, Redlands, Quandamooka Country, Queensland, 2023. Image by Pearly Black


**Figure 13: Standing ovation for *Ecotorio* at Deakin Edge, Naarm (Melbourne), Wurundjeri and Bunurong/Boonwurrung Country, Victoria, 2023. Image by Pearly Black**

This case study focused on two PIF choirs. First was the Peace Choir Project Wyndham (PCPW)—a one-off, cross-sector collaboration between PIF, WCEC, and the City of Wyndham. The involvement of WCEC was crucial because many of the choir participants were either directly involved with WCEC or were informed about the choir via friends and family who were involved with WCEC. PCPW aimed to contribute to the repair of community division across racial and ethnic lines in the highly multicultural Wyndham community, with a rich diversity of ethnicities in the choir's membership. This project came about in response to an intense media campaign in Naarm (Melbourne) in 2017–2018 that disproportionately focused on crimes allegedly committed by 'African gangs', particularly those with Sudanese members (Budarick, 2018; Puot, 2025). The result was widespread negative stereotyping and stigmatisation of African-Australian communities, which led to increased anxiety, fear of racial attacks, and a diminished sense of belonging among multicultural populations in Naarm (Melbourne). Given the prevalence of people born in African nations who now live in Wyndham, the pain of this media campaign was acute in the community.


**Figure 14: PCPW rehearsing with Patrick Burns**

Second was LVC, which for the past 10 years has provided a stable hub for cohesion across the Latrobe Valley region. Although it does not have an explicit social justice agenda, LVC has supported numerous social causes within the community, including bushfire recovery, mental health, domestic violence, sexual assault, homelessness, and health promotion.


**Figure 15: LVC being conducted by Patrick Burns. Image by Pearly Black**

Information about PIF's history and current work can be found on their website: https://playitforward.org.au/

## Research Design

This case study used a qualitative ethnographic approach. In line with the Creative Change Project's ethos of valuing the collective creativity, expertise, wisdom, and dynamism inherent in communities, this case was designed and conducted in close collaboration with community partner organisation PIF and community mentor Dr Jonathon Welch AM. A range of qualitative and arts-based methods were used, including interviews, online surveys, focus groups, and observation of choir rehearsals, workshops, and concerts (see Table 1 for details) across four field trips. Participation in choir rehearsals and workshops allowed Pearly to use her singing practice as a tool of inquiry. A total of 170 participants contributed to data generation (see Table 2 for participant demographics). The Creative Change Project received ethical clearance through Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee (GU Ref No: 2020/679).

**Table 1**

*Summary of Methods*

| Method | Participant Type | Aim | Number of Participants / Field Trips / Events |
|---|---|---|---|
| Interviews | Choir participants, facilitators, and key informants | To understand the experiences and outcomes of current community singing initiatives from participant, facilitator, and organiser perspectives. | 13 |
| Interviews | Adjacent | To understand the aim and outcomes of current community singing initiatives from cross-sector collaborator perspectives. | 5 |
| Online survey | Choir participants | To understand the experiences and outcomes of current community singing initiatives from participant perspectives. | 134 |
| Focus group | Choir participants | To understand the experiences and outcomes of current community singing initiatives from participant perspectives. | 5 |
| Field observations | Conducted by PB | To understand the aims, outcomes and mechanisms of current community singing initiatives from a participant–observer perspective. | 4 Field trips<br>2 local events |
| Vox pops at choir events and performances | Audience members | To investigate the interaction of the community music initiatives in their places with the community. | 13 |
| **Total** | | | **170 participants**<br>**4 field trips**<br>**2 local events** |

**Table 2**

*Participant Demographics*

N = 170

| Gender | % |
|---|---|
| Woman | 50.97 |
| Man | 17.42 |
| Gender-diverse[1] | 0 |
| Not reported | 31.61 |
| **Cultural Background** | **%** |
| Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander | 0.01 |
| CALD[2] | 0.05 |
| Cultural background reported[3] | 57.42 |
| Not reported | 42.58 |
| **Sexuality** | **%** |
| Heterosexual | 55.48 |
| Queer[4] | 0.03 |
| Not reported | 44.49 |
| **Housing** | **%** |
| Owner-occupier | 58.06 |
| Renting | 9.68 |
| Other (self-described) | 3.23 |
| Not reported | 29.03 |

| Age | % |
|---|---|
| Under 18 | 0 |
| 19–29 | 1.94 |
| 30–39 | 5.16 |
| 40–49 | 7.1 |
| 50–59 | 8.39 |
| 60–69 | 25.81 |
| 70+ | 21.29 |
| Not reported | 30.31 |
| **Disability** | **%** |
| Yes | 8.39 |
| No | 54.84 |
| Prefer not to say | 2.58 |
| Not reported | 34.19 |
| **Employment** | **%** |
| Full-time | 19.35 |
| Part-time | 19.35 |
| Retired | 25.81 |
| Volunteering | 0.65 |
| Unemployed | 0.65 |
| Pension | 1.94 |
| Studying/training | 0.65 |
| Not reported | 31.6 |

Note: Demographics for audience participants were not recorded.

1. We use the term 'gender-diverse' to indicate myriad genders that sit outside the heteronormative colonial gender binary, recognising that the term remains imperfect.
2. Culturally and linguistically diverse.
3. Participants were asked to identify their cultural heritage according to how they interpret this term. We do not indicate whether participants were born in Australia. Responses included Australian (n = 33); English (n = 12); European (n = 3); South Asian (n = 1); Kareni (n = 3); Italian (n = 5); South Sudanese (n = 3); Filipina (n = 2); Chinese (n = 2); Fijian Indian (n = 1); Irish and Dutch (n = 1); Irish and English (n = 2); Irish, Welsh, and Scottish (n = 3); Dutch (n = 3); Italian and German (n = 1); Germn and Irish (n = 1); mixed (n = 1); Irish, English, and German (n = 1); Dutch and English (n = 1); white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (n = 1); German (n = 1); Maltese (n = 1); Ukranian (n = 1); French (n = 1); New Zealander (n = 1); and Irish (n = 1).
4. As with 'gender-diverse', we employ the word 'queer' as an umbrella term describing sexualities that range from gay to pansexual to asexual and beyond. In doing so, we do not wish to elide the important differences between the ongoing histories, experiences, and struggles of each sexuality. Nor do we mean 'queer' to be interchangeable with the more expansive LGBTQIA+ acronym. Responses included bi (n = 2), gay (n = 2), and straight <-> asexual (n = 1).
5. Some participants listed multiple forms of employment in their responses. In such cases, the participant's first type of employment is included in the statistics for employment. Examples of multiple forms of employment included retired and carer (n = 1), retired and volunteering (n = 1).

After initial thematic analysis of the data, which was managed using NVivo 14, preliminary themes were identified and prepared for sharing with the partner organisation. Participants also had opportunities to provide input when preliminary findings were shared with facilitators and participants at two sessions. Additionally, all members of the Creative Change Project team provided insights from their diverse personal and disciplinary backgrounds during shared data analysis days.

# Key Insights

**Insights from this research reveal the ways that singing together can create opportunities for community members to experience wellbeing, belonging, mutual respect, cultural exchange, and a sense of social cohesion. Intentional and altruistic facilitation, tailored repertoire, and collaborative creative processes can lead to bespoke songs of place that foster spaces and opportunities for community members to share their voices and stories and listen to one another. Bringing insights from both choirs together to explore each of these four themes (individual wellbeing, inclusion and belonging, dynamic reciprocity, and social cohesion), the findings highlight different ways that community music might work to build social equity within communities facing challenges of division and disadvantage.**

## Community Singing

Community singing can facilitate a powerful means of connection in a far more efficient way than many other forms of collective artistic practice (Pearce et al., 2017). The voice is the 'democratic' instrument in that nearly all people possess the instrument regardless of socio-economic status, and nearly all people can easily 'play' it with little to no explicit instruction. It makes sense, then, that singing in many forms is a prevalent activity in community music practice, with Australia boasting several thousand community choirs across the country.

PIF has emerged as a prominent arts organisation responding to community needs through community singing initiatives. These include community choirs, projects, and events (e.g. The Peace Choir Project, Only Women Aloud, and Yes, I Can! Gippsland Choir) and large-scale national events (e.g. Social Inclusion Week). PIF creates and presents major new choral works aimed at precipitating social justice. These include *Ecotorio* (a response to climate change) and *The Reverse Anthem* (a reworking of Australia's national anthem centred around reconciliation and inclusion).

The voice as an instrument is implicitly linked to a singer's sense of self (Harrison & O'Bryan, 2014) and is connected to the 'most profound sense of who we are' (Thurman & Welch, 2000, p. 175). The singing instrument is made of and housed in the body of the player. The voice is inseparable from its physical home and is integrated with a person's intricate inner physical, mental, and emotional processes. It is intimately connected to their sense of self, such that when they sing, they both make the music and embody the music. When they sing for change, they are the change. This is then amplified when people sing collectively together for social change.

**The simple activity of singing together is gently powerful. Sharing and accepting our own and each other's voices is a wonderful combination of connection and freedom: connection to community and place and the freedom to be ourselves and enjoy it. Freedom to be authentic within a group enhances our own wellbeing and deepens our capacity to care for others, contributing to environments in which everyone has the opportunity to thrive.**


**Figure 18: The Only Women Aloud choir (conducted by Jonathon Welch) performing in Redlands, Quandamooka Country, Queensland, 2023. Image by Pearly Black**

**‘What is so special about singing? Well, I think it’s that we are our own instrument. And we’re not, you know, hitting a keyboard … or beating a drum, or whatever. It’s that we are the instrument … we are the instrument of change.’**

**(PiF001, choir facilitator)**

## Individual Wellbeing

Group singing in community contexts can promote a wide range of biopsychosocial wellbeing outcomes for participating individuals, along with a positive sense of self-identity (Bartleet et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2018). Studies have shown that group singing has positive health benefits across multiple domains, contributing to the physical, social, emotional, psychological, and spiritual wellbeing of individual singers (Ansdell & DeNora, 2012; Cunningham et al., 2024; Dingle & Clift, 2019). As a PIF participant noted, ‘Singing for me is a great output of art. It allows me to voice my feelings and emotions. Music … allows me to just let it out, all of [what] I am feeling’ (PCPW participant survey response).

For the individual, positive experiences of their own voice can engender feelings of calm and joy and have ‘the potential to help us learn about ourselves in new and creative ways’ (Kleinberger, 2014, p. 3). Singing with others is shown to have psychosocial benefits, such as a meaningful sense of camaraderie with other participants and experiencing a ‘sanctuary for self’ (Densley & Andrews, 2021). Group singing can boost oxytocin levels (Fancourt et al., 2014; Grape et al., 2002)—the neurochemical associated with social bonding. Shared singing can facilitate social bonding to the extent that it can be seen as ‘a resource where people can rehearse and perform “healthy” relationships, further emphasising its potential as a resource for healthy publics’ (Camlin et al., 2020, p. 1). It is clear that singing and voice have broad and deep implications for the individual’s relationship with themselves and for the relationship between the individual and the collective, community, and society. Likewise, a facilitator commented, ‘The only way I’ve been able to make sense of the world is through music and singing’ (PiF001, choir facilitator).

Participation across multiple PIF community singing activities enhanced individuals’ confidence and enjoyment of self-expression through singing. Participants reported finding the experience deeply meaningful and valued the opportunity to engage fully, regardless of their perceived skill level, highlighting the equity of access to the benefits of singing that is offered by these community music activities. As a participant described, ‘So, singing—I’m not very good at it. I mean, I love doing it in a group setting. I feel like at least it all comes together and somehow sounds amazing’ (PIFPCPW301, PCPW participant). This sentiment is echoed in the philosophy of the PIF facilitators:

> **The door is always open in my choirs. Doesn’t matter what background, whether you can sing, can’t sing. The fact [is] that you’ve decided to walk through the door. That I hold is one of the greatest honours a human being can give to you, to say, ‘I want to contribute.’ (PiF002, facilitator)**

**‘I think there’s something very profound about us feeling that we have a sense of control over our voice. … What I try to do is help people, give them a sense of more control over their voice. And, you know, I’m talking about the singing voice. But, of course, the metaphor around that is that, “Wow, I can actually … have the power within me to control this in my singing. Then, therefore, how that translates into other parts of my life” can be exceptionally powerful.’**

**(PiF001, choir facilitator)**


**Figure 19: The Yes I Can! Choir, which is inclusive of all abilities, performing at the Spring Gala in Latrobe Valley, Gunaikurnai Country, Victoria. Image by Pearly Black**

## Inclusion and Belonging

By including bespoke songs of place, community singing can be a powerful means for grounding participants in shared histories and local identities, contributing to a sense of belonging and de-othering. For example, PCPW was created to re-harmonise the intensely multicultural community of Wyndham in the aftermath of divisive and racist media outputs. PCPW deliberately recruited participants from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including refugees living in the community, in a cross-sector collaboration with the Wyndham City Council and WCEC. Participants reported feeling represented and valued within the community through both musical participation and cultural acknowledgement.

With the input of ethnically diverse choir members, Jonathon Welch and Stephen Blackburn worked with PCPW to create a new song for the community called 'Our World In Wyndham'. This song used culturally significant musical instruments and included poetry by one of the members of the South Sudanese community. One participant said, 'Wyndham belongs to everyone, and it was expressed in the song' (PCPW participant survey). Another explained,

> **We incorporated things like the traditional harp, which is an ancient spiritual instrument … and was, I think, really interesting for people and a really pretty sound. The Kareni found their place in the space. They were able to introduce their beautiful harp that is very special to them and only certain people know how to play, but it's something that is being passed on now from generation to generation. … I'm sure many of them went home and said to extended family members and friends, 'You know, today in our choir, we had this Karen harp. I've never seen such a thing before.' (PiFPCPW101, PCPW key informant)**

The composers and choir members also drew on sensory-grounded imagery tied to the sights, sounds, cuisines, and smells of the diverse local environment to celebrate the myriad cultures of Wyndham. In addition to instruments, musical elements were also incorporated to resonate with cultural influences prevalent in the area—for example, a reggae-style groove that could reach across potentially shared aesthetics among the various African nationalities in the community. The song's celebratory tone offered inclusion and representation and made many participants feel seen in welcome new ways. Nearly all of the participants felt that the song expressed the voice of the community very well and that it made them feel connected as a community.

> **'This is, I would say, a national anthem for Wyndham area.'**
>
> **(PiFPCPW307, PCPW participant)**

The sense of connection and belonging was valued by participants from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds who have directly experienced race-based discrimination. As a choir participant described, 'Because being a person, you know, ethnic minority from Burma, you know, growing up with a very challenging situation … full of racism. And bullying, harassment, loss of identity, and sense of belonging was very meaningful' (PiFPCPW305, PCPW participant).

**Figure 20: Patrick Burns conducting PCPW. Image by Pearly Black**

Participants in PCPW felt that the choir served as a positive model for others in their community who may feel culturally adrift or caught between their heritage and their new home, perhaps enabling them to more fully invest in their new community. For example, a choir participant told the following story:

> **They get stuck in a world that they're not fully Sudanese, they're not Australian, and they start to create their own culture, you know—they start to make up their own things. But if they see that, 'Okay, these people call this home. I have few people who**

**call this home,' I think it makes a huge difference for them, and they start telling their parents, who are telling them all, 'You do this and do that'—they will start saying, 'No, this is home; I need to invest here.' (PiFPCPW307, PCPW participant)**

Participation in PCPW led to a greater sense of entitlement and belonging among participants in terms of civic, social, and community services in Wyndham. This contributed to participants' sense of welcome to civic spaces and supports, thereby promoting greater equity of access to public and community sector services.

'[PCPW] brings the sense of togetherness. ... As an African... I think, the fourth largest group in Wyndham, we're not very much involved, not involved very much in the city council. And there's that feeling of, well, ... we just feel different. A lot of community members feel different, or they feel like our city council is a government place. We don't belong there. And through this program, I think it gives a sense of belonging to people. If someone else from the community sees the video, and they've seen some faces there, they feel [they] belong as well. They feel like, "Yeah, we part of that." For me, it feels like when I hear this song, I will know that, "Yes, we [are] part of it. Yes, that's us. Yes, *we* [emphasis added]. I am Wyndham." ... That's what I like about [PCPW].'

(PiFPCPW307, PCPW participant)

PCPW also offered longer-term residents and multigenerational Australians connection and insight into the nature of their community and the experiences of people newly arriving into the shared space of Wyndham. As a song of place, 'Our World In Wyndham' was an effective way of grounding the community music initiative in the unique socio-spatial context of its location and capitalising on the strengths of cultural diversity. As participants described, 'Just, just a real connection. Like, you felt, like, a sense of belonging' (PiFLVCVP03, LVC participant).

**It gives me a world of belonging, that I belong to Wyndham, just like 'Our World In Wyndham'. We're not thinking about the outside world, but just put me into a circle—this is my world. The people around me in Wyndham—this is our world. 'Our World In Wyndham, moving on' [lyric from 'Our World In Wydham']. Living together. (PiFPCPW308, PCPW participant)**

**Somehow [the choirs] attract the people, sometimes, that have no other... They don't fit in any other of the social group norms and that... They find choir, and they find their safe space. I think because the voices are all equal straight away singing in a choir, even someone sings louder, softer; otherwise, that you're coming in and putting one voice in equally. So, you know, for an individual, I think one [important factor] is that sense of community, the sense of belonging. (PiF002, choir facilitator)**

## Dynamic Reciprocity

The interplay of listening and voicing within community singing groups promotes a sense of dynamic reciprocity. This kind of reciprocity can be thought of as the active process of receiving the voices of one's fellow singers while simultaneously contributing one's own voice, creating a dynamic and responsive human exchange through music. When enacted through singing, the concurrent processes of listening and voicing can help promote feelings of mutual understanding, respect, and acceptance among fellow community members. This listening–voicing dynamic for mutual understanding was strongly present in PCPW's cultural exchanges and LVC's trauma-responsive singing.

'Our World In Wyndham' contributed to new ways of thinking about the people of various cultures in the community and promoted consideration of their experiences. As a participant explained,

**The Wyndham Peace Choir sang a song of celebration of Wyndham and its diversity. This is not something I have heard done before in my time of 30 years living in this community. Wonderful song but I did find it very emotional to sing. (PIF general participant survey)**

Turning to the Latrobe Valley, this sense of providing meaningful reciprocal service to others through singing inspired greater confidence and enhanced the capacity

**Figure 21: PCPW participants rehearsing with choir and instruments**

of individual singers. This is illustrated through a story shared by an LVC participant:

> **I'm a great believer in music and singing being the best and most effective healer [because] I'm a retired nurse. [One] of the situations I was [working] a lot in [was] dialysis. A lot of the patients don't live very long, and I attended as many funerals that I could because I was the manager. … One of the ladies said, 'Oh, look, when I die, I want, you know, can you sing Ave Maria at my funeral?' And I went, 'Oh, really?!' Yeah, because I'm not an overconfident person, as you say, singing solo. In an ensemble or group, it's a lot easier. But anyway, I did. And I just felt, 'Oh, my goodness, I'm doing this for a person that is part of an extended family. This is what she wanted me to do.' And it was almost ethereal. I just was sort of outside myself. I was singing because she wanted it, and it was very special. (PiFLVC101, LVC participant)**

This sense of reciprocity and service to community is also a collective motivation for participation and ongoing engagement in these community choirs, enabling people to respond to current social issues and traumas in ways that promote mutual understanding, as was expressed by an LVC participant:

> **I know with the 2009 fires[2] and in the area… It wasn't just only an impact on us and a healing process but other people who come up and said that if it wasn't for [LVC's performance] [their] depression would have lasted a lot longer. And this was sort of like an immediate release, even though, you know, the traumas and the ongoing effect of that still, to some degree, stayed with them. They said just that the music, the singing, was, yeah, the impact was really positive. (PiFLVC303, LVC participant)**

2 The Black Saturday bushfires claimed the lives of 173 people. Another 414 people were injured, more than 450,000 ha were burned, and 3,500 buildings—including more than 2,000 houses—were destroyed.

## Social Cohesion

An emphasis on inclusion and belonging, along with reciprocity and cultural exchange in these community singing groups, can help contribute to enhanced social cohesion across communities experiencing marginalisation and division along ethnic, cultural, or geographic lines. Simple yet powerful gestures of translating lyrics into multiple languages fostered mutual understanding among diverse ethnic groups. Moreover, the co-creation of singing repertoire for the places in which these communities live can also help bridge divides and celebrate differences. The power of place-based song is also a major theme in relation to LVC. PIF created a bespoke song for the Latrobe Valley, 'My Valley, My Home' (composed by Jonathon Welch). Participants spoke about how this 'anthem' also plays a unifying role in relation to building community identity and contributes to social cohesion. Participants spoke of the sense of community support this brings:

> **And it just feels like one big family. Like, we are family, and I've got all my choir with me. It's just one big family, and I just feel not only protected but secure and safe and, like I said, supported… And it makes me feel good. (PiFLVCVP102, LVC participant)**

**Figure 22: Jonathon Welch conducting the Only Women Aloud choir. Image by Pearly Black**

PIF engages a diverse range of participants across multiple projects in various states and regions. Remarkably, despite this geographic and demographic diversity, PIF consistently fosters a strong sense of family, cordial connection, and joy in shared purpose whenever participants come together, even if only sporadically. This sense of belonging and emotional connection contributes to prosocial cohesion and positive interactions among members, which in turn enhances collective wellbeing at both local and broader scales. In data generated through engagement with the entire PIF participant cohort, the value placed on this sense of family was a recurring theme.

Figure 23: In the studio to record 'Our World In Wyndham'. Image by Jonathon Welch

> **I thoroughly enjoy being part of the amazing team of the PIF family. It always has been an absolute highlight to my week, and I'd always get so excited of what we get to do, and I've made so many beautiful friendships throughout the time I first started and the choir projects have always been so amazingly fun and I can't wait to participate in more choir projects! Being part of my choir has always made me feel really happy and I'm very grateful to call them all my choir family! (PIF general participant survey)**

PCPW created an enhanced sense of collective self-esteem and pride in the community, which sits in stark contrast to divisive media portrays of the place. As a participant explained,

> **You know, I'm proud of that community because this is our Wyndham; this is, you know, the song. Tell us about ... the diverse society we are in Wyndham. Yeah... What I have seen beyond the community is just like, people, you know, when that song itself is being listened to, people who doesn't live in Wyndham, it might give you that inspiration that 'I want to be like, you know ... part of that community... I want to move to that place where I can see everybody's welcome, and, you know, people are, you know, a community where they all have that peace and love and, you know, harmony and all that.' You probably will love to go to that community even if you don't live here. (PiFPCPW308, PCPW participant)**

As a bespoke place-based song, 'Our World In Wyndham' has become the community's 'anthem' and a way of reinforcing connection to the place and the people in celebratory and loving ways. 'Our World In Wyndham' is akin to a sports club song, but instead of championing a team, it is championing diversity and multiculturalism in this community. 'My Valley, My Home' also celebrates place and community. Jonathon Welch says that he 'really wanted to capture the beauty of the Latrobe Valley region, the amazing warmth, talent and resilience of the community' (PIF, 2020). This speaks to the potential capacity of this musical place-making to counter structural inequity by mitigating divisive othering.

## Creating Social Equity

Creating a sense of individual wellbeing, belonging, reciprocal exchange, and social cohesion promotes meaningful connections that promote social equity outcomes through a shared sense of relationality. PIF participants and community members spoke about the very distinct way music and, in particular, singing create the space for this to happen.

> **Well, if you had a group of people of all different nationalities in one room, and there was no singing, you would find that some would go over there, or they wouldn't mingle. But when you're singing together, it brings you all together. And you feel like you're one in a sense. (PiFPCPW306, PCPW participant)**

Beyond building these stronger interpersonal and community connections, which are important foundations for creating greater social equity, this case study demonstrates that these choirs have been effective in repairing division and othering based in racist views and that they offer new insights into the experience of diverse members of the community. Participants of diverse backgrounds felt seen and de-othered. In the case of PCPW, a community leader observed,

> **I think a lot of people in our community are scared of people from Africa… This [Peace Choir Project] would have shed a completely different light on what people from South Sudan are really like. (PiFPCPW101, PCPW key informant)**

> **'In the Wyndham Peace Choir, the specially written song about the diversity and inclusion of community was excellent for this. This was highly amplified [with] a written word piece by John, one of the members of African descent, about how he represented what future Australians would be. Being older and white, I found it really made me think.'**
>
> **(PCPW participant survey)**

While this community music initiative had a limited lifespan and relatively small participation numbers, these limitations have in large part been mitigated by PIF's generous gifting of 'Our World In Wyndham' to the City of Wyndham so that it may serve the community of Wyndham in as many different contexts. The song will be—and has already been—used at civic and cultural events, in citizenship ceremonies, in schools, and on local radio (PIF, n.d.; WCEC, 2020; Wyndham TV, n.d.) This is a potent way to extend the benefits and equity outcomes of a community music initiative that, despite its humble scale, was highly impactful. Now that the song is 'owned' by the community, this further amplifies the place-based strengths of this project.

Turning back to the Latrobe Valley and recognising the importance of cross-sectoral work in working towards social equity outcomes, over the years LVC has been part of collaborations with social sector organisations and local government community engagement around homelessness, street violence (Street Requiem in 2016), mental health, and family violence. The choir played a key role in a public event offered to commemorate those who experienced the Black Saturday bushfires (Hand in Hand in 2019). LVC has also been involved in events such as No Excuses in 2016 and ensuing efforts to raise public awareness about family violence and sexual assault. As an LVC member explained,

> **Maybe having these projects around some social justice theme… It may show people of the community that have come to the concerts that, 'Hey, we're all in this together.' And they may feel more supported because of us raising awareness. A part of raising the awareness as well is we did have handouts, especially for No Excuses, for the different social groups and service groups around the area. So, if someone did come to the concert, and they felt, 'Okay, I'm supported here,' they may have felt the confidence to grab a leaflet and go and seek help. (PiFLVC301, LVC participant)**

This service to the community is something that is highly valued by the LVC participants and cross-sector collaborators.

> **Well, the trust… They needed something to connect to, and it meant that there was trust. During the [choir] sessions, you know, people felt safe enough, and often they made disclosures about their experience, you know. … [At public choir performances] they come up during the break and then have a look at the materials, you know; we might have brochures or something, and then they'll say, 'You know, this happened to me.' (PiFLVC201, LVC social sector collaborator)**

Collectively, these outcomes—including enhanced confidence, self-expression, belonging, connection, a sense of family, and increased civic engagement—contribute to greater social equity by fostering inclusive participation, mutual support, and access to community resources. These experiences help strengthen support networks for all participants, particularly those who may feel marginalised, disconnected, or isolated. This, in turn, promotes fairer access to the benefits of community life and supports collective wellbeing within these communities and across Australian society more broadly.


**Figure 24: LVC, the Yes I Can! choir, and the children's choir at the Spring Gala in Traralgon, Gunaikurnai Country, Victoria, 2023. Image by Pearly Black**

**Figure 25: A happy community afternoon tea after LVC Spring Gala concert, Traralgon, Gunaikurnai Country, Victoria, 2023. Image by Pearly Black**

# Implications

Insights from this case study reveal how community singing groups can be a powerful resource for promoting greater social equity in ***all*** Australian communities, but particularly those experiencing division and disadvantage. LVC has offered an ideal opportunity to investigate the ways in which community music can contribute to cultural richness and may serve as a catalyst for building stronger social bonds that can withstand the challenges unique to the region. Likewise, PCPW has provided a compelling example of how place-based representation and culturally responsive repertoire can contribute to powerful equity outcomes in community music initiatives. The nexus of these elements fosters inclusion and belonging, dynamic reciprocity, and social cohesion, along with the social safety that arises from that (e.g. in the face of dehumanising effects of racism-based division), while addressing structural inequities.

Insights from how these choirs operate speak to the value of when community music facilitators intentionally design programs for equity outcomes. As illustrated in these examples, this can include the use of participatory approaches, sustained engagement, cross-sector partnerships, co-creation of materials, and presentations in community contexts. This highlights the importance of intentional, context-sensitive, and sustained approaches that are ideally continued over a long period, as is the case with LVC and the continued use of 'Our World In Wyndham' across a wide range of contexts.

This case study reveals that these positive outcomes are significant but come at a cost. An enormous amount of energy, alongside huge and humble efforts that are self-generating and self-sustaining, is put into these community choirs. However, many are constantly struggling to survive because they simply need more support. They are surviving on the altruistic goodwill and dedication of volunteers or underpaid/overworked professionals and often struggle to afford access to venues, marketing, and the other necessities of public performance outputs. The lack of sustainable resourcing creates vulnerabilities in the structure of community music initiatives and threatens their long-term viability. Operating in a state of ongoing precarity may impact their capacity to consistently deliver high-quality outcomes and to respond to emerging community needs. It is crucial to acknowledge and value the extraordinary commitment of the facilitators, the visionary music professionals, and the volunteers working in the community music space and to nurture this strength through appropriate support in order to make the most of the long-term wellbeing and social equity outcomes that can be fostered by community music.

As this report highlights, connected communities make for more resilient and capable societies. Community music is an age-old mechanism by which connection is achieved and maintained. Community singing is particularly effective in achieving and maintaining this connectedness. Leveraging this powerful tool through more appropriate support and cross-sector collaborations presents great potential for promoting greater community wellbeing and cohesion and the positive civic and societal outcomes that are embedded in that.

**With its strong focus on reciprocity and cohesion, the insights from this case study show how community music can contribute to more equitable societies by supporting individuals, facilitating collective agency, and working in a caring and loving way to counter structural inequities such as racism and community division. Those caring and loving approaches to facilitation are seen in the considered use of repertoire choices and creation, the creation of safe spaces and practices that create welcome and a family feeling, the responsiveness to the needs of the place in which each community exists, the dedication to the longevity of the initiative, and the generosity of both effort and artefact (e.g. the place-based songs created). This report also highlights the distinct way that singing operates in a highly embodied manner. The singing instrument presents a unique way to bring change through community music. The insights from this case study reveal how singing is an intimate experience—a way to be in more equitable relations with other people and places and of being capable of fostering individual wellbeing and systemic change together.**


**Figure 26: Cover Me in Sunshine—PIF massed choir event, Naarm (Melbourne), Wurundjeri and Bunurong/Boonwurrung Country, Victoria, 2022. Image by Brydie-Leigh Bartleet**


**Figure 27: PIF performance at Hampton Park Uniting Church, Victoria, 2022. Image by Brydie-Leigh Bartleet**

# Recommendations

## Recommendations for Practice

### 1. *Inclusive and intentional facilitation*

- Foster inclusive practices by actively welcoming diverse community members and ensuring facilitators are culturally sensitive and responsive.
- Encourage facilitators to receive training in cultural competency and trauma-informed practices to create safe, respectful, and welcoming spaces.

### 2. *Tailored and bespoke repertoire*

- Encourage the creation of bespoke musical pieces that resonate with local cultural identities, histories, and experiences.
- Include diverse cultural influences, languages, and instruments in the repertoire to affirm community diversity and foster a sense of belonging.

### 3. *Sustained community engagement*

- Ensure ongoing, regular community singing sessions rather than one-off events to build deeper trust, relationships, and social cohesion.
- Facilitate long-term collaborations between local community choirs and social sector organisations to address broader social issues, such as mental health, racism, domestic violence, and disaster recovery.
- Consider the value of creating high-quality audiovisual recordings of community singing efforts that can serve as a lasting resource for community engagement. Documenting performances and projects in this way enables the broader community to continue benefiting from the initiative long after the live event has concluded.

### 4. *Cross-sector collaboration*

- Foster collaborative efforts between community music initiatives and local government, educational institutions, and health and welfare sectors to address community-specific challenges and amplify outcomes.
- Use community singing as an integral part of civic events, cultural celebrations, and public awareness campaigns to enhance wider community participation and impact.

## Recommendations for Policy

### 1. *Increased and sustained funding*

- Advocate for sustainable governmental and philanthropic funding specifically allocated for community arts programs that aim to enhance social equity and address social challenges.
- Include funding provisions for training facilitators in inclusive, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed approaches.
- Work proactively with community music groups and organisations to tailor support to context-specific needs.

### 2. *Recognition of community music in cross-sector policy frameworks*

- Develop and implement policies recognising community music as a strategic approach to community development, social equity, and public health.
- Integrate community music explicitly within local government community development and social inclusion strategies.

### 3. *Support community arts infrastructure and capacity building*

- Incorporate community-created music into civic ceremonies, local festivals, citizenship events, and community engagements as part of broader social inclusion strategies.
- Provide resources for physical spaces and venues conducive to regular, accessible community music practices.

## Recommendations for Further Research

1. There is the potential to conduct long-term studies tracking the individual and collective impacts of community singing, particularly focusing on sustained wellbeing, belonging, and social cohesion outcomes.
2. This study has established the need for further research investigating the ongoing impact of culturally responsive and place-based songs and their role in shaping community identity and social equity over time.
3. This research has signalled the potential in exploring differences and similarities in how community singing can address distinct forms of social inequity (e.g. racism, socio-economic disadvantage, social isolation).
4. This case study has revealed the potential for a deeper investigation into how different approaches to facilitation (e.g. trauma-informed, culturally responsive) influence community singing outcomes.
5. There is a pressing need for further research into the effectiveness and impact of partnerships between community music initiatives and broader social service sectors and how these collaborations can amplify social equity outcomes.

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