

Victorian philanthropics unite to back rural communities

By ALLISON HARDING

The Jack Brockhoff Foundation is one of Victorian philanthropics that have joined forces in a unique \$5 million partnership with the Foundation for Rural Regional Renewal (FRRR) which will strengthen the capacity and resilience of communities over the next five years.

Three Victorian communities will be named later this year after a detailed process involving needs analysis, mapping of key issues, disruptions and the funding landscape, and exploration of community readiness for the investment.

The partnership also includes the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, The Ross Trust, and William Buckland Foundation. FRRR will deliver the program, following the success of its similar NSW, Investing in Rural Communities Futures program (IRCF).

The funding will enable local not-for-profits (NFPs) to become more confident and collaborative in their approach to improving and sustaining the vibrancy, resilience, and liveability of their communities, ultimately enabling them to thrive, not just survive, especially during times of natural disasters.

“Investing in and strengthening the social and economic fabric of Victorian rural communities fosters long-term resilience,” says the CEO of FRRR, Natalie Egleton. “We know that our model can deliver these outcomes, and the multi-year model builds a whole-of-community approach.”

The \$5 million funding will be used to employ local facilitators, deliver capacity building activities for the local NFP such as governance training, volunteer development, marketing and fundraising support, and events. Funds will also be allocated to the three communities via grants for priorities and for organisational capacity building. Evaluation is central to the program.

The NSW program

The NSW program started in 2018 after FRRR recognised that many grassroots organisations were ‘locked out’ of philanthropy and often unable to access opportunities to invest in their own organisational capacity due to their size, distance, financial capacity, and lack of staffing.

“Most of the NFP work that happens in small towns is volunteer run and there just isn't any money or resources to help them be sustainable,” Natalie said. “Local leaders know what is going to make the biggest difference in their community and we knew that supporting local solutions would be key.”

The program commenced in Junee, Leeton, and Nambucca Valley with the support of Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation. The Snow Foundation and Bendigo Bank then joined to enable FRRR to take the program to Ulladulla, Batemans Bay, Nowra, and Bay & Basin. The Australian Government provided additional funding to expand the program in the Shoalhaven region and launch the program in Bega through their Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Program.

Evolution of the Victorian partnership

The plan to bring a similar program to Victoria began in late 2022 after The Ross Trust began discussions with FRRR and the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust. Conversations then began with the Jack Brockhoff Foundation and William Buckland Foundation. Importantly, the leaders in all these organisations had strong existing relationships and numerous granting collaborations with each other, as well as with FRRR.

“I could see that this program was about building the skills, resources and capacity of local not-for-profits – and that it was working,” said Sarah Hardy, the CEO of The Ross Trust. “It was also clear that any Victorian partnership would need a commitment of \$5 million to get off the ground. That is a lot of money for any one mid-sized philanthropic, when we all have ongoing projects.”

Sarah said the positive and trusting relationships between the five organisations meant they were able to openly discuss whether it was a project that their trustees and directors would support.

The CEO at the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, Debra Morgan, said the early conversations and resulting partnership benefited from like-minded organisations working together.

“We realised early that we couldn't do anything this significant alone, and that working together would help us to affect better and longer-term change,” Debra said. “This collaboration sets a new bar in how we work together, and it's certainly the longest-term project we have funded under our new strategy.”

Louise Kuramoto, the CEO of the Jack Brockhoff Foundation, said that it was the first time, other than a commemorative grant, the foundation had made a five-year commitment to a project.

“The philosophy behind this program is not unusual, but the amount and duration are,” Louise said. “The solid track record of FRRR gave all four funders the confidence to invest at such a scale. It's wonderful that we can come together to support communities and the people in them.”

For the Grants Lead of William Buckland Foundation, Ferdi Hepworth, the program perfectly aligns with her organisation's long commitment to country Victorians.

"We have had a long partnership with FRRR and more recently we've been funding a program where FRRR distributes small grants to communities, and we had already been talking about how we could better support them," Ferdi said. "It was very easy to say yes to being part of this partnership.

"We often see governments and big business leading change, but it's the people in the community who best know the ingredients required to help that community thrive. This project supports those people with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to work together to achieve change."

After many emails, online and in-person meetings, visits to NSW communities, and discussions with their trustees and directors, the four funders set themselves a deadline of June this year to see if they could raise the \$5 million to commence the program in July 2025. By April, they had done it.

"For four mid-sized philanthropic organisations to raise \$5 million when we already have current commitments shocked us all, but in a good way," Sarah said.

How the program will work in Victoria

FRRR will study past granting trends and community profiles and will map issues and disruptions occurring or on the horizon, as well as the funding landscape, to select the three communities. The process will also include community consultation, with a shortlisting process that will invite expressions of interest. Given the program is grounded in deep collaboration and co-design with each community, it is vital that there is a sense of readiness to embark on the five-year partnership.

Once communities are selected, a locally based community facilitator will work with the local NFP sector to scope priorities, gaps and opportunities that will be collated into a sector roadmap. The roadmap, which will be refreshed annually, will be the framework for activating capacity building activities and funding, and for monitoring progress, celebrating change, and adjusting priorities as needed.

Natalie from FRRR said she was confident many Victorian communities would be enthusiastic about the opportunity, adding that, like in NSW, it was likely the communities would be at very different starting points.

"Success is turning out to be different in each community, which is fine because the indicators we are interested in all focus on changes in mindset and sector collaboration to drive new and better opportunities for their communities - and that has been a major success," Natalie said.

FRRR will employ a program manager who lives in Victoria and is familiar with key concerns and issues in the state. Local facilitators will also be employed in each community. Over time, it is expected that more than 20 people will be employed in the program. Staff and volunteers will benefit from training and professional development and possibly partnerships with councils, TAFEs and universities.

Deb Samuels is the People Portfolio Lead at FRRR and will oversee the Victorian project.

“We now have five years of NSW evaluation data and interviews and the recurring theme is that people in the communities feel much more empowered to make decisions and collaborate,” Deb said. “If they know a large grant opportunity is coming up, they know who to call to say, ‘let’s pool our efforts to apply’.”

Deb cited examples of success that could be replicated in Victoria, such as one NFP leader rallying to halt the closure of local bank branch that was relied upon by vulnerable residents, and another leader now running for mayor.

“Local leaders involved in the IRCF program have shared they would not have had the confidence to do things like that in the past,” Deb said. Young people can also engage with the program and see themselves as an important part of the NFP sector.

“One of the best things somebody said to me is that ‘the funders believed in us and invested in us and now we believe in ourselves and what we can do’.”