

# Improving Transport Access, Workforce Participation and Community Wellbeing

## Colac Otway Shire

### Appreciative Inquiry Outcomes – Colac, Victoria

Commissioned and funded by:

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#### Executive Summary

This report presents the outcomes of a Workforce Australia Local Jobs – South Coast of Victoria Local Initiatives Fund (LIF) project, delivered through an Appreciative Inquiry workshop conducted in Colac, within the Colac Otway Shire, focused on transport access as a key enabler of workforce participation, education and training, health access and community wellbeing.

Participants identified that Colac already has strong transport foundations, including V/Line services, town bus coverage, taxis, school buses, volunteer drivers, employer-led initiatives and seasonal visitor transport. However, these assets are not yet coordinated or configured to fully support how people live, work, study and access services across the Shire.

Rather than calling for wholesale system change, the inquiry clearly articulated opportunities around better coordination, increased frequency, improved awareness, smarter use of existing assets, and stronger community voice in design. The ideas generated are practical, locally grounded and well suited to staged trials and place-based pilots.

#### What We Heard in Colac

Participants in the Colac Appreciative Inquiry consistently described transport as directly linked to choice, independence and confidence.

Key messages heard during the session included:

- Colac already plays a regional connector role, linking people to Geelong, Lorne, Apollo Bay, Ballarat and surrounding communities.
- Where transport options are visible, affordable and reliable, people are far more likely to take up work, complete study and remain engaged locally.

- Participants noted that awareness of what already exists is uneven, with many services under-used simply because people do not know they are available.
- Young people, apprentices, students, people working variable hours and those living in outer areas of Colac were identified as groups who would benefit immediately from small, targeted improvements.
- There was strong enthusiasm for community-led and digitally enabled solutions, provided safety, registration and trust were clearly addressed.
- Participants expressed optimism that local collaboration between council, businesses, schools, health services and community organisations could unlock rapid progress.

Overall, the discussion reflected practical confidence that Colac can build on what it already has to achieve better outcomes for people and employers alike.

### What Is Working Well in Colac Otway Shire

The inquiry identified a number of existing strengths:

- V/Line train services connecting Colac with Geelong and Melbourne
- Town bus services, covering much of Colac
- V/Line coach services across the wider Colac Otway region
- Strong local taxi services, with standing bookings and organisational use
- Seasonal bus services to Lorne, with strong uptake
- School bus networks, including two schools funding VDSS buses to Geelong
- Employer-led staff buses and pick-up points
- Volunteer driver programs, particularly for medical access
- L2P participation, supporting young people into licensing
- Funding support for bikes and e-bikes
- A walkable town centre and growing active-transport participation

These elements demonstrate that Colac already has a diverse and functioning transport ecosystem that can be strengthened through better alignment and design.

### Design Opportunities Identified Through the Inquiry

Participants identified several opportunity areas for improvement, framed as build-on opportunities rather than deficits.

#### *1. Better Coordination of Train and Bus Services*

- Improve alignment between train timetables and bus connections
- Increase bus coverage and timing for outer areas of Colac
- Investigate earlier and later services to better support work and study

#### *2. Expanding and Optimising Bus Coverage*

- Expand bus times and routes rather than increasing fleet size
- Explore seasonal and demand-responsive models beyond Lorne
- Use data to identify gaps in outer suburbs and surrounding townships

### *3. Taxis, Volunteer Transport and the Gig Economy*

- Strengthen the existing taxi system through incentives and support
- Explore whether regulated gig-style models could complement services
- Increase awareness of taxi cards, disability access passes and subsidies

### *4. Licensing and L2P Expansion*

- Extend L2P eligibility and mentor availability
- Explore free or subsidised registration for apprentices
- Consider defensive driving and localised training programs

### *5. Community-Led and Digital Solutions*

- Interest in a Colac Transport App / digital connector
- Digitising transport information to make options easy to find
- Exploring car-share or community vehicle models with appropriate safeguards

### *6. Education, Training and Youth Engagement*

- Align transport to school, TAFE and apprenticeship schedules
- Actively engage young people (15–30) in transport design
- Partner with schools, Headspace, SWTAFE, employers and job agencies

## **Alignment with Government Priorities**

The Colac inquiry outcomes align strongly with existing policy directions.

Victorian Government alignment includes:

- Department of Transport and Planning priorities for integrated, place-based transport
- Infrastructure Victoria's focus on maximising existing assets and access to jobs and services
- Regional Development Victoria objectives to support regional connectivity, workforce participation and liveability

Commonwealth alignment includes:

- Jobs and Skills Australia priorities to reduce structural barriers to employment
- National focus on improving regional access to education, training, health and employment opportunities

The ideas generated in Colac are particularly well suited to local pilots, cross-sector collaboration and incremental reform.

## **Key Recommendations Emerging from the Inquiry**

1. Improve coordination between train and bus timetables
2. Expand bus coverage and operating times, particularly for outer Colac
3. Strengthen and promote taxi, volunteer and subsidy schemes
4. Expand L2P and licensing pathways, including apprentice support
5. Support community-led and digitally enabled transport solutions
6. Improve awareness of available services and eligibility
7. Actively involve young people and employers in ongoing transport design

## From Ideas to Action: Trials and Implementation Pathways

| Destiny Phase Idea      | What Could Be Trialled in Colac Otway Shire                          | Primary Stakeholders              | Intended Outcome                       |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Train–bus coordination  | Adjust local bus timetables to align with V/Line arrivals/departures | DTP, Council, operators           | Smoother regional connections          |
| Expanded bus coverage   | Pilot extended routes/times to outer Colac suburbs                   | Transport operators               | Improved access for workers & students |
| Taxi & volunteer uplift | Incentives and awareness campaigns for taxi and volunteer drivers    | Council, providers                | Greater reliability and uptake         |
| Digital transport hub   | Develop a Colac Transport App or online connector                    | Council, community, tech partners | Easier navigation of options           |
| Expanded L2P            | Increase mentors, eligibility and apprentice support                 | L2P providers, employers          | Faster access to licences              |
| Youth-led design        | Establish a transport working group with young people                | Schools, youth services           | Solutions that fit real lives          |

## Conclusion

The Colac Appreciative Inquiry demonstrates that transport improvement is achievable by building on what already exists, strengthening coordination and embedding community voice.

By focusing on smarter use of assets, improved visibility of services and locally informed design, Colac Otway Shire is well positioned to enhance workforce participation, retain young people and improve access to services, reinforcing its role as a connected, thriving regional centre.

