

Improving Transport Access, Workforce Participation and Community Wellbeing

Southern Grampians Region

Appreciative Inquiry Outcomes – Hamilton, 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 Hamilton, within the Southern Grampians region. The inquiry focused on identifying existing strengths, locally generated ideas, and practical opportunities to further improve transport access in ways that support workforce participation, education and training pathways, health access, and overall community wellbeing.

Participants consistently demonstrated that the Southern Grampians already possesses strong community capability, informal transport solutions, and a willingness to innovate. Rather than starting from a deficit position, the inquiry highlighted how existing assets could be better coordinated, scaled, and aligned to meet contemporary needs.

The findings align closely with both Victorian and Commonwealth government priorities relating to regional accessibility, workforce participation, service integration, and efficient use of public infrastructure.

What We Heard in Hamilton

Participants in the Hamilton Appreciative Inquiry consistently described transport as more than a service, it was seen as an enabler of independence, participation and choice.

The discussion was grounded in lived experience, with strong alignment around the following messages:

- When transport works well, people can take up employment, attend training, access healthcare and remain connected to community life without fear of being stranded or relying on others.
- Many effective transport solutions already operate informally in Hamilton, including car pooling, employer-assisted travel, community buses and flexible local arrangements.
- Participants believed that small, well-targeted changes, particularly to timing, coordination and access, would generate disproportionately large benefits for workforce participation and service access.
- There was strong recognition that existing vehicles, services and funding are not always fully utilised, presenting an opportunity to achieve more from investment already in place.
- Transport was repeatedly linked to retaining young people, supporting ageing residents, and enabling employers to attract and keep staff.
- A recurring theme was that transport solutions must reflect how people actually live and work in the Southern Grampians, rather than assumptions based on metropolitan travel patterns.

Overall, the conversation reflected optimism and practical confidence that locally informed, place-based improvements could meaningfully strengthen workforce participation and community wellbeing.

What Is Working Well in the Southern Grampians

Participants identified a range of existing strengths within the Southern Grampians transport and mobility ecosystem. These strengths form a strong foundation for future design and investment.

Key strengths identified through the inquiry include:

- Walkability and active transport options in and around Hamilton
- Use of bicycles, e-scooters and motorcycles for local travel
- School bus networks supporting education participation
- Community bus services where locally coordinated
- Informal car pooling between individuals and local businesses
- Strong culture of volunteering and shared problem solving
- Existing government-funded transport and fleet assets

The inquiry reinforced that many effective solutions are already operating informally within the community and could be strengthened through better coordination and policy support.

Design Opportunities Identified Through the Inquiry

Rather than focusing on shortcomings, participants framed transport issues as design opportunities. The following opportunities were identified as realistic, achievable and locally appropriate.

- Introducing demand-responsive transport models building on existing community buses
- Amending bus timetables to better align with work, training and health schedules
- Using smaller vehicles more frequently rather than infrequent large services

- Sharing under-utilised government and organisational fleet assets
- Expanding access to driver licensing and learner support to unlock employment
- Supporting locally led car-pooling and employer-supported transport solutions
- Leveraging virtual or hybrid access where physical travel is unnecessary

Participants emphasised that these opportunities reflect lived experience in Hamilton and surrounding townships and represent solutions the community believes would work in practice.

Alignment with Government Priorities

The outcomes of the Hamilton Appreciative Inquiry align strongly with existing State and Commonwealth policy directions, reinforcing that the ideas generated locally are consistent with broader strategic objectives.

Victorian Government alignment includes:

- Department of Transport and Planning priorities for integrated, place-based transport services across regional Victoria
- Infrastructure Victoria's 30-Year Infrastructure Strategy, which prioritises access to jobs, services and opportunities in regional communities
- Regional Development Victoria objectives to strengthen workforce participation, liveability and economic resilience in regional areas

Commonwealth Government alignment includes:

- Jobs and Skills Australia priorities to address structural barriers to workforce participation in regional labour markets
- Australian Government policy focus on improving access to employment, training and essential services in regional Australia

The inquiry demonstrates that targeted, place-based transport investment in the Southern Grampians would reinforce rather than duplicate existing government strategies.

Key Recommendations Emerging from the Inquiry

Based on the strengths and opportunities identified, the Appreciative Inquiry generated the following recommendations:

1. Pilot demand-responsive transport solutions in Hamilton that complement existing services
2. Adjust bus timetables to better match workforce, training and health needs
3. Introduce smaller, more frequent vehicle services where appropriate
4. Enable shared use of under-utilised fleet vehicles across agencies and community providers
5. Expand learner driver and licensing support to improve employment access
6. Support employer-led and community-based transport initiatives

From Ideas to Action: Trials and Implementation Pathways

Destiny Phase Idea	What Could Be Trialled	Primary Stakeholders	Intended Outcome
Demand-responsive transport	Pilot a small, bookable transport service in and around Hamilton using existing community vehicles and services	Local government, transport agencies, community providers	Improved access to employment, training and essential services
Amended bus timetabling	Adjust service times to better align with shift work, training schedules and health appointments	Transport providers, employers, training organisations	Increased workforce participation and retention
Smaller vehicles, higher frequency	Replace low-use large services with smaller vehicles operating more frequently	Transport agencies, local operators	More reliable, practical transport that reflects local demand
Shared use of fleet assets	Enable shared access to under-utilised government or organisational vehicles	State agencies, health, education and community services	Improved return on existing public investment
Expanded learner driver support	Increase access to mentors, lessons and flexible eligibility for licence acquisition	Employment services, training providers, community organisations	Greater access to employment and training pathways
Employer-supported transport	Support local employers to coordinate car pooling or transport assistance	Local businesses, councils, industry groups	Reduced recruitment and retention barriers

Conclusion

The Hamilton Appreciative Inquiry highlights that transport improvement in the Southern Grampians is not primarily a matter of creating entirely new systems, but of building on what already exists.

By amplifying community-generated ideas, coordinating existing assets and aligning investment with lived experience, governments have an opportunity to deliver high-value outcomes that support workforce participation, service access and regional wellbeing.

