

Improving Transport Access, Workforce Participation and Community Wellbeing

Glenelg Shire

Appreciative Inquiry Outcomes – Portland, Victoria

Commissioned and funded by: This report was funded by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (the Department) through the Workforce Australia Local Jobs Program – Local Initiatives Fund. It was commissioned by the South Coast of Victoria’s Local Jobs Program. The Department accepts no responsibility for any errors or omissions in the information presented. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and participating community members and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the Department.

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 Portland, within the Glenelg Shire, focused on transport access as an enabler of workforce participation, education, health access and community wellbeing.

The inquiry surfaced a strong view that many of the foundational elements needed for effective transport already exist in the Portland region, including established bus networks, school buses, a port, rail infrastructure, an airport, a functioning L2P program, and proactive employer-led solutions. However, these assets are not consistently configured or connected in ways that support how people live, work and study today.

Rather than identifying transport as a singular problem, participants framed the opportunity as one of better utilisation, smarter design and alignment with real employment and training patterns. The ideas generated through the inquiry are practical, locally grounded and strongly aligned with State and Commonwealth priorities for regional connectivity and workforce participation.

What We Heard in Portland

Participants in the Portland Appreciative Inquiry consistently spoke about transport as a key determinant of choice, opportunity and confidence.

Several strong messages were repeated throughout the session:

- The foundations for good transport already exist in Portland, but they do not yet operate as a coherent system that supports hub-and-spoke movement across the Shire.
- Where transport solutions are flexible and locally driven (for example, employer-run minibuses or car pooling), barriers to work and training reduce rapidly.
- Participants noted that frequency, timing and coverage matter more than the presence of large-scale infrastructure.

- There was a strong desire to see existing public assets used more effectively, rather than always seeking new investment.
- Transport was repeatedly linked to retaining young people, supporting ageing residents, and enabling employers to attract and keep staff.

The overall tone of the discussion was pragmatic and optimistic: participants believed that measured changes, trials and better coordination could materially improve outcomes within a short timeframe.

What Is Working Well in Glenelg Shire / Portland

The inquiry identified multiple strengths already supporting mobility and access:

- V/Line services connecting Warrnambool and Melbourne
- A functioning public bus system within Portland, with affordable fares
- School bus networks operating across the region
- A well-utilised L2P program, with strong uptake and demonstrated outcomes
- A small but functional taxi network
- A bike, walk and scooter-friendly town layout, particularly within Portland
- Proactive local employers (e.g. farms, manufacturers) operating minibuses to support workers
- Non-profits absorbing transport costs for clients and supporting connectivity
- Existing railway infrastructure, airport and port facilities
- Ease of driving and relatively low congestion

These elements demonstrate that Portland is not starting from zero — there is clear capacity to build on what already exists.

Design Opportunities Identified Through the Inquiry

Participants identified several key opportunity areas where design improvements could unlock significant value.

1. Reconfiguring Bus Services as a Hub-and-Spoke Network

- Portland is well placed to operate as a transport hub, with surrounding towns acting as spokes.
- Participants suggested looping services linking Hamilton – Warrnambool – Portland, with coverage of smaller towns.
- Smaller buses operating more frequently were seen as more useful than infrequent large buses.

2. Better Use of School and Program Buses

- Large school buses often operate with significant spare capacity.
- There was strong interest in exploring shared use or time-based access, with appropriate safeguards.
- Red-tape was seen as a barrier rather than safety itself.

3. Expanding and Strengthening L2P

- L2P is working well, but demand exceeds mentor availability.

- Ideas included:
 - Increasing age limits, or an additional over 25 program.
 - Incentivising mentors
 - Corporate or employer-sponsored L2P vehicles
 - Reducing anxiety for new drivers by broadening access points

4. Employer-Led Transport Solutions

- Employers already running minibuses were seen as proof of concept.
- There was interest in incentives to support more employers to take this approach.
- Car pooling was already happening informally and could be supported more systematically.

5. Active Transport and Local Movement

- Portland's layout supports walking, cycling and scooters.
- Weather and distance are barriers for some, but improved infrastructure (bike paths, safer routes) was seen as valuable.

6. Longer-Term Vision Opportunities

- Activation of passenger rail
- Reinstatement of airport services
- Freight shifting from road to rail to reduce heavy vehicle impacts
- Greater regional tourism and cultural participation

Alignment with Government Priorities

The outcomes of the Portland inquiry align strongly with existing policy directions without exceeding their scope.

Victorian Government alignment includes:

- Department of Transport and Planning priorities for integrated, place-based transport systems
- Infrastructure Victoria's focus on maximising existing assets and improving access to jobs and services in regional areas
- Regional Development Victoria objectives around workforce participation, business attraction and liveability

Commonwealth alignment includes:

- Jobs and Skills Australia priorities to reduce structural barriers to regional workforce participation
- National focus on regional connectivity and service access to support economic participation

Importantly, the Portland ideas complement, rather than duplicate, existing strategies, making them well suited to pilots and trials.

Key Recommendations Emerging from the Inquiry

1. Trial a hub-and-spoke public transport model with Portland as a central node

2. Introduce smaller, more frequent bus services, aligned to work and training times
3. Explore shared use of school and program buses outside school hours
4. Expand L2P capacity through mentors, incentives and corporate involvement
5. Support and incentivise employer-led transport solutions
6. Invest in active transport infrastructure to support local movement
7. Undertake feasibility work on rail, airport and freight optimisation over the longer term

From Ideas to Action: Trials and Implementation Pathways

Destiny Phase Idea	What Could Be Trialied	Primary Stakeholders	Intended Outcome
Hub-and-spoke bus model	Pilot linked services connecting Portland, Hamilton, Warrnambool and surrounding towns	DTP, Council, operators	Improved regional connectivity
Smaller, frequent buses	Replace low-use large buses with smaller vehicles running more often	Transport operators	Better alignment with workforce needs
Shared school bus access	Time-based use of school buses with clear safeguards	Education, transport agencies	Improved asset utilisation
Expanded L2P	Incentives for mentors and corporate-backed vehicles for outlying towns	L2P providers, employers	More licensed drivers
Employer minibuss support	Grants or incentives for employer-run transport	Local businesses	Improved staff attraction and retention
Active transport upgrades	Extend bike paths and improve pedestrian safety	Council, State agencies	Increased local participation

Conclusion

The Portland Appreciative Inquiry demonstrates that Glenelg Shire has both the assets and the community readiness to improve transport outcomes quickly and meaningfully.

By focusing on better use, smarter design and locally led innovation, government investment can deliver strong returns for workforce participation, wellbeing and regional resilience — without requiring wholesale system redesign.

Workforce Australia Local Jobs is funded by the Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

