



November 2025

# Annual Report 2024-25



castlemaine  
institute

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# Chair's Foreword



This year marked a major milestone for the Castlemaine Institute: we were granted **Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR1) status** as an **Approved Research Institute**, enabling us to receive tax-deductible donations and opening our doors to greater funding opportunities. This achievement reflects our growing maturity and standing as a charitable research institute and strengthens our capacity to deliver work of enduring public value.

It was also a year of consolidation and integration. Building on the foundations of our early projects, we refined our model of action research and deepened our role as a research institute grounded in place, while extending our influence nationally.

Highlights included the delivery of the **Whole-of-Home Resilience Program**, training local assessors and piloting one of Australia's first integrated household resilience assessment methodologies. In a first for us, we licensed our **Retrofitting for Resilience Workbook** to the City of Port Phillip, demonstrating how our place-based research can be adapted and applied in other communities.

Our **Wilderhoods program** took a new step, trialled as a suburb-wide resilience initiative with the City of Greater Bendigo. And through the **Deeper Roots Wellbeing Economy program** over 250 community voices were amplified into a strategy for inclusive economic transformation, paving the way for ongoing leadership in wellbeing economy work. In line with this, we were successful in furthering this work with funding for a **Wellbeing Economy Learning Circle**—a new initiative that expands knowledge sharing and strengthens collaboration across sectors to deliver on the wellbeing economy goals and vision set by our earlier activities.

We also continued to receive recognition for our partnership with Mount Alexander Shire Council to co-design an economic development strategy on wellbeing economy principles, **receiving the Economic Development Australia Award for Diversity, Equity & Inclusion**.

*We see our work not only as delivering projects with impact but as **cultivating the conditions** for resilience, equity and regeneration across scales— from households to neighbourhoods, from local to regional economies and landscapes.*

Another significant development was welcoming Dr Melissa Kennedy as **Research Fellow in Residence**, as she works in a funded capacity through Deakin University with VicHealth alongside our wellbeing economy program. This partnership marks a key step toward our vision of building deeper ties with universities and centres of learning, embedding research more fully within our community-based practice and enabling us to extend our reach.

We also moved into a new co-working space within **Castlemaine Community House**. The move aligns closely with our values – situating the Institute within a trusted learning space that serves the community and has a long history of education, inclusion and practical service. Our new home, with its thriving community garden and proximity to the Mount Alexander Shire Council offices, the library and community theatre, places us in the very heart of the Shire’s civic, educational and cultural precinct. We are now co-located with Nalderun: Aboriginal Education Corporation and the Mount Alexander Shire Sustainability Group, deepening our everyday connections across sectors that share our commitment to community, learning and Country.

This year also reinforced the importance of **First Nations partnerships and guidance**. From walking Country with Uncle Rick Nelson to worldview training with Nalderun, we continued to learn and to re-orient our work towards deep listening, reciprocity and shared custodianship.

Looking forward, we remain committed to strengthening our internal capacity as a growing research institute, supporting our members’ livelihoods with dignity while building the sustainability of the organisation to match the urgency and potential of our work.

*Alison V. Whitten*

**ALISON WHITTEN**

CHAIR

# Our Organisation



*Our work blends rigour and imagination, connecting data, lived experience and place-based wisdom to tackle the complex challenges of our time.*

## Purpose

The Castlemaine Institute is a **charitable, member-based research and learning hub** located in central Victoria on **Dja Dja Wurrung Country**.

We bring together researchers, practitioners, and community leaders to design and test **regenerative approaches to economy, community and landscape**—creating local models for systems change that can inspire others across Australia.

Castlemaine Institute is a registered charity and an Approved Research Institute with Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR1) status.

## Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that we live and work on the unceded lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung, and we honour the Djaara people as the ongoing custodians of this Country. We pay our deep respects to Elders past and present, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who contribute to our community and learning.

**Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.**

Castlemaine Institute commits 1% of total revenue to Pay The Rent in recognition that sovereignty was never ceded.

# Our People



*Our strength lies in our people—a multidisciplinary group of researchers, practitioners and community builders who bring depth, creativity and care to every project.*

## Members & Associates

Dr Cassia Read (Co-Founder)

Warwick Smith (Co-Founder, Director)

Lexi Randall-L'Estrange (Co-Founder, Director)

Melina Chan (Director)

Jodi Newcombe (Co-Founder)

Alison Whitten (Director, Chair)

Ada Nano

Mahesh Kandasamy

Lisa Merkesteyn

Sharon Fraser

Dr Melissa Kennedy (Research Fellow in Residence)

Neil Bowker – Business Manager

## Research Committee

As an Approved Research Institute and educational charity, Castlemaine Institute is constitutionally required to maintain a Research Committee to guide the quality, ethics and focus of our work. We are deeply grateful to the members of this committee for their generosity, rigour and wisdom, and proud to draw on their expertise as we continue to grow our research practice.

- Warwick Smith (Chair) - Director, Castlemaine Institute and Research Director, Centre for Policy Development
- Jason Gibson - Lecturer in Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies, Deakin University
- Nicola Fortune - Assistant Director, NDIS Participant Outcomes and Research Strategy Section, Department of Social Services
- Nina Roberts - PhD candidate, Latrobe University (2020-ongoing part time)
- James Whitten - Lecturer, Urban Planning and Design, Monash University

# Our Impact



**140 homes assessed**

Through Australia's first integrated energy and hazard-resilience assessments

**250+ community voices**

to shape a wellbeing economy for Mount Alexander Shire



**1 new First Nations partnership**

Co-developing Weenyah Keen Fire Strategy with Gunditjmara Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation



**3 partner councils**

Mount Alexander • City of Greater Bendigo • City of Port Phillip



**8 forums & presentations**

across Victoria including with VicHealth, Economic Development Australia, and Biolinks Australia



**75% of project funds**

re-invested in local people, organisations and suppliers

**\$640k+ total project value**

across 8 major projects



**25+ partnerships**

reflecting CI's role as a connector and backbone organisation for place-based innovation



**1st licensed tool**

Retrofitting for Resilience Workbook adapted by City of Port Phillip for local use



**5 local assessors trained**

and accredited in climate resilience assessment tools

**1 national award**

Economic Development Australia (EDA) Award for Equity, Diversity & Inclusion in Economic Development

# Our work

*In 2024–25, Castlemaine Institute's work was organised around three interconnected streams: Home & Neighbourhood Resilience, Wellbeing Economy, and Cross-cultural Ecology. We also began scoping a new stream – Ageing, care & prevention.*

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## Neighbourhood & Household Resilience

Our neighbourhood resilience work focuses on the places where people live, connect and act together. These projects strengthen community capacity to adapt to climate change, enhance local biodiversity, and build the skills, relationships and confidence needed for households and neighbourhoods to thrive through uncertainty and to prepare for disasters.

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## Wellbeing Economy

Through our wellbeing economy stream, the Castlemaine Institute continues to explore how local economies can serve people, place and planet. These projects integrate research, policy and community practice to create frameworks, strategies and learning networks that support equitable, regenerative economic transformation rooted in local strengths and shared values.

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## Cross-cultural Ecology

Our First Nations collaborations are grounded in respect, reciprocity and deep listening. Working alongside Traditional Owner organisations and First Nations partners, we support Country-led projects that honour Indigenous knowledge systems and strengthen pathways for healing and self-determination.

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## Ageing, care and culture

This work explores the different dimensions of ageing, the care economy, and the intersections with cultures, mindsets, and community connection. It grapples with what it means to live a good life, how we can reclaim and celebrate ageing and care, and interrogates the dimensions of our society and economy that can be reoriented toward ensuring everyone can have dignity and participation throughout life.

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# Wilderhoods



*Re-wilding Our  
Neighbourhoods:  
Empowering residents  
to create thriving,  
biodiverse  
neighbourhoods in a  
changing climate*

Wilderhoods entered a new phase this year through a collaboration with the City of Greater Bendigo's emergency preparedness team. The project adapted the neighbourhood-scale Wilderhoods model for the suburb of Maiden Gully, focusing on flood resilience and community connection through habitat creation. A series of three community workshops were prepared and commenced in the financial year, with a fourth workshop planned by Council to focus on emergency planning.

The pilot revealed the challenges of engaging a large and dispersed population while confirming the value of visible local action and place-based collaboration. It has seeded a new community hub partnership and provided valuable insights for scaling Wilderhoods as a tool for climate adaptation and neighbourhood resilience.

## **Funders**

City of Greater Bendigo

## **Partners**

City of Greater Bendigo  
Biodiversity and Emergency  
Preparedness Teams, Maiden  
Gully Progress Association

## **Castlemaine Institute Team**

Dr Cassia Read, Ada Nano

# Whole of Home Resilience



*Mount Alexander Shire  
Household Multi-Hazard  
Resilience Professional  
Assessment Pilot*

This pilot program delivered the region's first integrated resilience and energy-efficiency home assessments. Five local assessors were trained and 140 households participated, receiving tailored advice for their property, to reduce risks from bushfire, heat, storm and flood while improving comfort and efficiency. Early analysis revealed strong household engagement, practical follow-through on recommendations, and evidence that even low-cost actions significantly improve resilience. The project also generated national policy interest as a replicable model for multi-hazard retrofits.

As an action-research initiative, it strengthened CI's capacity to connect lived experience, community benefit and systemic learning—building the case for investment in resilience retrofits as a wellbeing economy strategy.

## **Funders**

Australian Government and Victorian Government under the National Partnership Agreement for Disaster Risk Reduction

## **Partners**

Resilient Building Council, Mount Alexander Shire Council, DEECA (Scorecard)

## **Castlemaine Institute Team**

Lisa Merkesteyn, Alison Whitten

# Home Upgrades for Climate Resilience



*Supporting households to prepare for and adapt to extreme weather*

Following the success of the Castlemaine Institute's Retrofitting for Resilience project and Home Upgrades for Climate Resilience workbook, the City of Port Phillip identified the resource as a valuable tool to engage their community in household climate resilience. The workbook was licensed by Castlemaine Institute and adapted by the City of Port Phillip for use in their local context, with CI providing review and guidance.

This project represents a new approach for Castlemaine Institute—demonstrating how our place-based research and tools can be adapted to work in different environments and communities. It also allowed us to explore licensing as a sustainable model for amplifying the impact of our work beyond our region.

## **Funder & Partner**

City of Port Phillip

## **Castlemaine Institute Team**

Lisa Merkesteyn, Alison Whitten



# Wellbeing Economy Learning Circle



*Growing a community of practice for place-based economic transformation*

Launched in mid-2025, the Wellbeing Economy Learning Circle is the next evolution of CI's work on regenerative, inclusive economies. Building on the foundations of the Deeper Roots program and the Mount Alexander Shire Economic Development Strategy, the Circle brings together local community leaders, and research collaborators to share practice-based learning about what it means to build a wellbeing economy in place. Each gathering explores a key theme—from data and measurement to governance and storytelling—anchored in local projects and community experience.

The Circle also connects CI's local work to a national network of innovators and funders interested in new economic systems that prioritise people, planet and culture. This growing community of practice demonstrates CI's role as both a local knowledge-holder and a national contributor to wellbeing economy transformation.

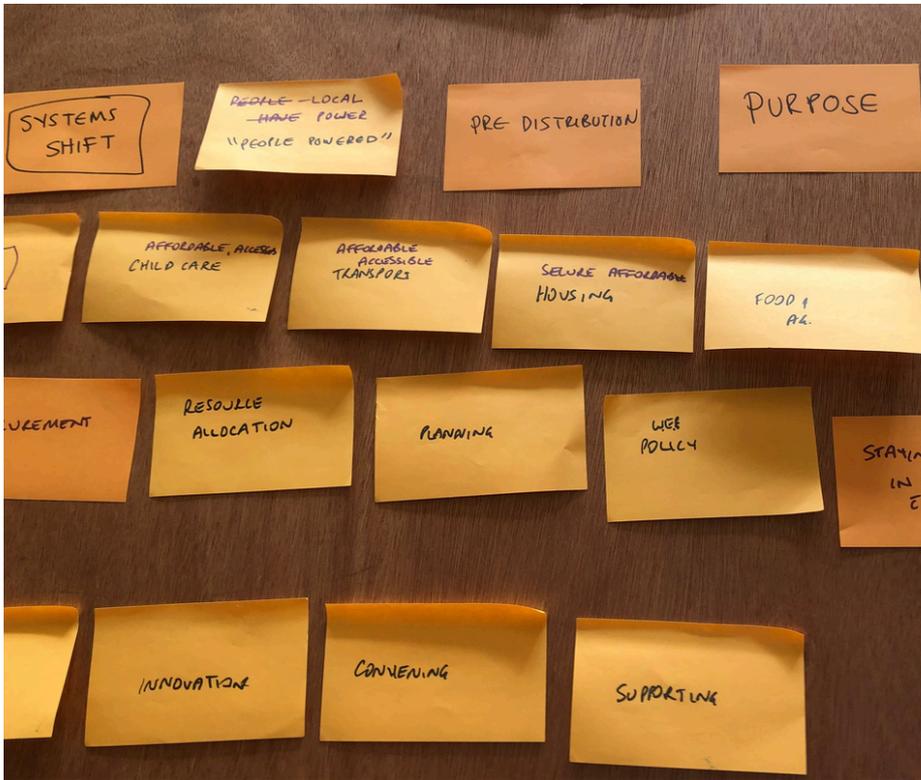
## **Funders**

Greater Melbourne Foundation  
(formally Lord Mayor's  
Charitable Foundation)

## **Castlemaine Institute Team**

Melina Chan, Lexi Randall-  
L'Estrange, Jodi Newcombe, Dr  
Melissa Kennedy

# Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning Pilot



Local evaluation framework pilot for the Mount Alexander Shire Council Wellbeing Economy Strategy

This pilot tested how VicHealth’s emerging evaluation framework could be applied to Mount Alexander Shire’s wellbeing economy approach. It assessed the framework’s relevance for small regional councils and place-based systems-change work, confirming its potential while identifying practical challenges such as resourcing, data collection and authorising environments. CI worked with council staff to explore new ways of understanding impact beyond traditional economic indicators, developing reflective questions and guiding principles for future evaluation. The work strengthened relationships between CI, Council and VicHealth, highlighting the importance of shared learning across government, community and philanthropy.

The pilot also seeded a VicHealth Research Fellowship with Dr Melissa Kennedy, now based at CI, to advance locally grounded monitoring and evaluation methods that reflect wellbeing values. Together, these efforts position Mount Alexander Shire as a testbed for innovative governance and measurement within the wellbeing economy.

## Funders

Vic Health

## Partners

Mount Alexander Shire Council

## Castlemaine Institute Team

Lexi Randall-L’Estrange, Sharon Fraser, Mahesh Kandasamy

# Weeyn Yarkeen: Fire Dreaming Strategy



*Co-developing a five-year fire management strategy for Gunditjmara Country*

Building on our earlier collaboration with Gunditj Mirring on the Significant Species project, this year CI continued the project to co-develop the Weeyn Yarkeen (Fire Dreaming) Strategy—a five-year plan to strengthen cultural fire practice on Gunditjmara Country. The project combines historical research on traditional fire knowledge with community consultation, including on-Country gatherings and online workshops with staff, rangers and broader community members.

A draft strategy is nearing completion and will be refined with Gunditjmara community members and the Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation. This process highlights the time, trust and cultural sensitivity required to develop strategies that honour First Nations knowledge systems, and it has deepened CI's learning about collaborative, community-led research grounded in Country and relationship.

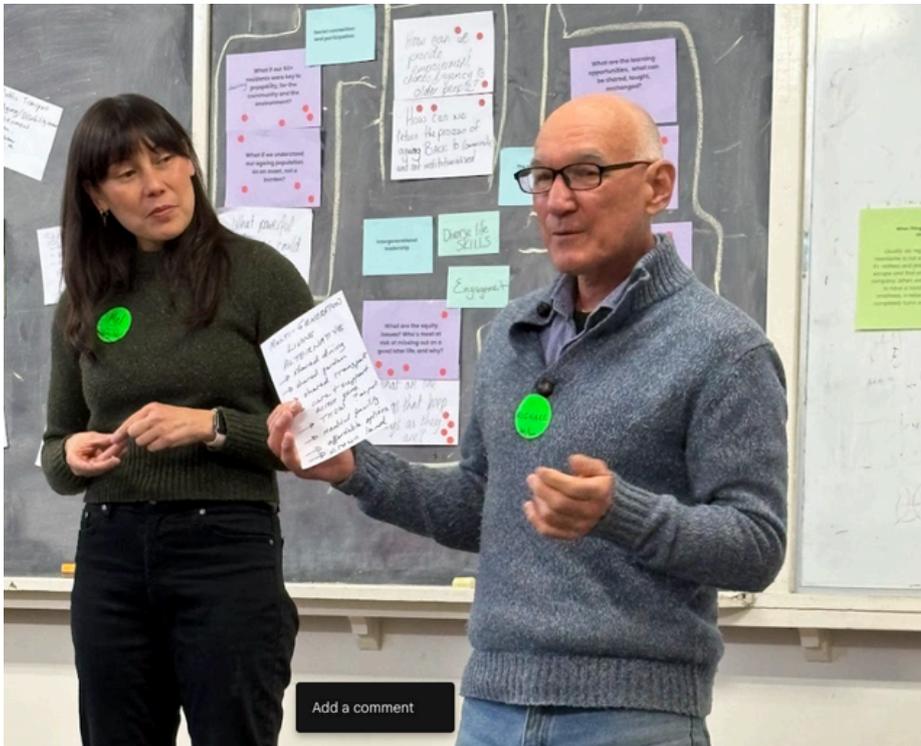
## **Funder and Partner**

Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation

## **Castlemaine Institute Team**

Ada Nano, Dr Cassia Read

# Rethinking ageing to unlock resilience



*Exploring how narratives of ageing intersect with wellbeing and resilience in regional communities*

This exploratory project examined how cultural narratives of ageing shape resilience and wellbeing within regional communities. Conducted in collaboration with Good Flock, a not-for-profit organisation focused on growing a culture that values every stage of life, and by CI member and Director, Melina Chan, the project brought together local practitioners and community members to explore later life as a period of creativity, contribution and renewal rather than decline. Through a structured co-design process, the project identified shared priorities across transport, knowledge exchange, economic participation, and community connection.

The findings highlight opportunities to design more inclusive, age-positive approaches to resilience that recognise older residents as key contributors to community wellbeing. This initial work lays the foundation for a proposed Ageing and Resilience Lab—a cross-sector initiative that would link wellbeing economy principles with ageing, care, and regional regeneration.

## **Funders**

Internal (CI seed funding) and in-kind contributions from project collaborators

## **Partners**

Good Flock, local government and community groups

## **Castlemaine Institute Team**

Melina Chan, Lexi Randall-L'Estrange

# Knowledge Sharing & Recognition

**Sharing knowledge is integral to the Castlemaine Institute's role as a place-based research and learning hub. This year, our work reached new audiences and received national acknowledgment for its innovation and impact.**

A highlight was receiving the **Economic Development Australia (EDA) Award for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion** alongside Mount Alexander Shire Council for the Wellbeing Economy – Economic Development Strategy. The award recognised our collaborative approach to building a stronger local economy that prioritises wellbeing, inclusion and care for Country.

The strategy was officially launched at a community screening of **Purpose (2024)**, a documentary featuring wellbeing-economy pioneer **Dr Katherine Trebeck**, who joined a post-film panel with Castlemaine Institute's Warwick Smith and Council's Merryn Tinkler. The event drew a full house and sparked vital dialogue about reshaping economies to serve people and planet.

At the **Commerce, Economy, Trade & Public Health Conference 2024**, the Institute co-led an interactive workshop exploring how wellbeing-economy principles can be practically applied within local government and community settings. Participants reflected on ways to embed these approaches in their own contexts.

Across the year, CI also shared insights at the **Biolinks Alliance Rewilding Symposium, Jump Leads Echuca**, and the **VCOSS Climate Network**, extending our reach and influence in resilience, regeneration and wellbeing-focused practice.



# Finance Review



*The independent audit found no material weaknesses and confirmed sound financial governance as the Institute continues to strengthen its systems, care and coordination capacity.*

## Highlights

- The 2024-25 financial year was one of consolidation and careful growth for the Castlemaine Institute. Total revenue increased by around 35 per cent to \$485,000, reflecting new and continuing partnerships across government, philanthropy, and community sectors. The majority of income was tied to project delivery. We closed the year with a modest surplus of approximately \$15,000, a reflection of prudent management through a year of expansion.
- A major milestone this year was the Institute's successful application for Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status, granted at the end of the financial year. This achievement positions us to receive tax-deductible donations and expand our funding base in the years ahead. We continue to direct 1% of total revenue to Pay The Rent, upholding our commitment to First Nations justice.

35%

Increase in revenue

\$485,000

Total revenue

# Gratitude



## Walking Together

We are grateful for the guidance and generosity of our First Nations partners, mentors and collaborators. Through Nalderun, DJAARA, and the Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation, we continue to learn and strengthen our commitment to walking together in the spirit of truth, reciprocity and shared custodianship of Country. We particularly acknowledge Uncle Rick Nelson and all those who contributed to the Weeyn Yarkeen (Fire Dreaming) process for their generosity in sharing knowledge, time and Country.

## Partners and Funders

We extend our heartfelt thanks to the funders and partners who made our work in 2024–25 possible. Support from WWF Australia, VicHealth, City of Greater Bendigo, Mount Alexander Shire Council, Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation, Resilient Building Council, DEECA, Emergency Recovery Victoria, Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation (now Greater Melbourne Foundation) and Ethical Fields enabled us to continue pioneering place-based research and action for community resilience and wellbeing. We also thank Nalderun, DJAARA, Good Flock, and Regional Development Victoria for their collaboration and wisdom. Our new home at Castlemaine Community House has further deepened our local ties and expanded opportunities for shared learning and impact.

## Volunteers & Supporters

Castlemaine Institute's achievements this year have been made possible through the dedication and goodwill of our members, directors and volunteers. We thank Warwick Smith, Dr Cassia Read, Lexi Randall-L'Estrange, Alison Whitten, Ada Nano, Jodi Newcombe, Lisa Merkesteyn, Mahesh Kandasamy, Sharon Fraser, Melina Chan, and Neil Bowker, and acknowledge their families and collaborators who supported this work. Our gratitude extends to everyone in our local networks who contributed expertise, encouragement and energy throughout the year.

# Contact Us



**castlemaine  
institute**

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