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Coworking and an Outer-urban community: What can we learn from a grassroots community coworking hub?

Final Research Report

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'The importance of having an inclusive society is you get to bring all the richness and diversity that people have in their lives, you bring all those within the wider community and then people can contribute, they feel they are respected and that they are important. Every human being in an ethical sense deserves that.'

(Australian Social Inclusion Board interviews 2009)

Executive Summary

This report presents an introduction to grassroots coworking by members of a community working and living in an Outer Melbourne city. The aim of the study was to explore how cities might extend their focus on people and innovation and aim for the individual/collective cultivation of living and working spaces that foster coworking and mobility of communities of future workers. Melbourne has an international reputation as one of the world's most livable cities. However, rapid growth in outer Melbourne suburbs has meant that these suburbs often lag behind the rest of Melbourne in terms of the availability of physical infrastructure and other services. .

Drawing on an exemplar of grassroots coworking in Outer Melbourne, this report presents the findings from four focus group discussions conducted during Spring 2017 and serves as a first step in an ongoing investigation into the potential to innovate and nature of coworking issues facing people in outer Melbourne suburbs. Most of the twenty-five participants were members of a grassroots coworking hub, and either intended to be or were already involved, in small enterprises. The participants were mostly white-collar, skilled professionals living in pockets throughout the Wyndham, Melbourne area.

Key results indicate that residents of outer Melbourne:

- Have a great concern about support for their **business activities, and associated livability issues**;
- Have needs for outer Melbourne coworking spaces that **extend beyond those in the inner and central cities**. Coworking in Outer suburbs are about place (not so much space), community participation, multisectorial, mixed-use where members take part-ownership, feel included and part of a healthy neighbourhood. Coworking in the CBD focuses primarily on activity-based working (Mahlberg and Riemer, 2017).

- The abundance of coworking opportunities and other related resources in the Melbourne CBD and elsewhere (for example, Melton, Geelong), were not available to them and there was perceived **lack of funding and support**, both from the government, formal and informal sectors.
- Often had to travel between 2 - 4 hours per day to the city to work and lamented its significant **social impact**, and emphasised the limitations on the potential for business growth and jobs in Wyndham as a result.
- Believe in co-working's potential to innovate, however there is a strong need for a flexible model of a co-working / development hub in the local area where they live, **repurposing the CBD model for coworking** in Wyndham.
- The participants had specific **expectations of key players** in the development of such facilities in the municipality, *i.e.* the local council, State government, the corporate sector, land developers, and the local community.

Our research suggests three key considerations:

- Extend the exploration of grassroots, community generated coworking efforts that both mitigate and adapt to challenges of livability in our outer-suburbs;
- Improve collaboration and integration between the various key stakeholders activities in each area, in order to improve liveability in outer Melbourne;
- Identify and support the grassroots, community generated coworking that offers opportunity for local enterprise development. To be sustainable it requires financial/infrastructure support from key stakeholders.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Table of Content	3
List of Figures	4
List of Tables	4
1. Introduction	5
2. Coworking Hubs	7
2.1 What is coworking?	7
2.2 The eco-community: A grassroots coworking hub (GCH) in Wyndham	8
3. Working and Living in Wyndham	9
3.1 Expanding and changing demographic	9
3.2 Education and workforce	9
3.3 Tyranny of distance: Commuting to work	11
4. Research Design	12
4.1 Data collection	13
4.2 Data analysis	14
5. Findings	15
5.1 Participant overview	15
5.2 Perceptions of working and living conditions	16
5.3 Personal experiences	18
5.4 Needs of the Wyndham community	21
6. General Outcomes	28
6.1 Flexibility: Complex demographics, visions of a hub, structure, pricing for levels of participation	28
6.2 Accessibility: Marketing; participation leading to awareness; online and physical spaces	28
6.3 Collaboration/integration: Roles of key players	29
7. Conclusion	30
7.1 Conclusions and recommendations	30
7.2 Future research	31
8. References	32

List of Figures

Figure 1: Forecast population for City of Wyndham 2016-2036 10

Figure 2: Employment location for City of Wyndham workers 11

Figure 3: Greater Melbourne distribution of commuting distances 12

List of Tables

Table 1: Participant characteristics 16

1 Introduction

Whilst some areas in Melbourne's outer suburbs are thriving, the city's continual urban expansion is exacerbating the often marked differences in liveability between those residing close to Melbourne CBD and those living substantial distances from the city, and its services and employment. This gap is widening, suggesting the emergence of 'two Melbournes': a choice-rich central city, surrounded by choice-poor outer suburbs (Interface Councils, 2013a). The issue is underscored by the prospect of Melbourne accommodating almost eight million people by 2050, further highlighting the importance of providing a diversity of opportunities for living and working in greater Melbourne irrespective of location and suburb.

The challenge of a growing population and expansion of outer suburban areas in major cities in Australia has dominated conversations for more than a decade. Research studies and forums have attempted to identify ways of addressing related issues in a fair, equitable, and sustainable way, with a focus on *transport and housing* in particular, but often neglecting solutions that draw on grassroots, community-generated innovations. There is consensus, however, that if there is a failure to adequately address this wicked problem, future economic and employment prospects of those living in the outer suburbs will be severely compromised.

One of the key differences in opportunities between people living close to city centre and those living in outer suburban areas is the low concentration of local employment. While new jobs are being created for the growing population, most of these are located close to city centres rather than in outer suburban areas where most of the population growth is occurring. While more than half of the population growth in Australian major cities in recent decades has occurred in outer suburban areas that are located at least 20km away from city centres, more than half of the newly created jobs in Australia's five largest cities have been created in inner suburbs that are within 10km of the city centre (Donegan, 2015). The jobs-to-workers ratio also shows a significant difference between the two: in outer suburbs in the areas of the Interface Councils in Melbourne, the jobs-to-workers ratio is only 0.55 (*i.e.* 0.55 job for each person in the labour force), compared to 1.04 jobs per person for the majority of Melbourne, and a slightly lower rate of 0.85 in regional cities (Interface Councils, 2013b, p. 7).

The lack of locally based employment in outer suburban areas has created a range of negative impacts on the community. It reduces the prospect for building a strong sense of community, and creates significant impacts on several other aspects of liveability, including car dependence and long work commutes, reduced health and wellbeing outcomes, time poverty, traffic congestion, and air pollution. Many residents of Melbourne's outer suburbs face a greater challenge in maintaining a 'work life balance' and have significantly less time to spend with family and for recreation than do residents of Melbourne who live close to their work. Research reveals that one in four full-time employees in Australia's major cities spend more time in commuting to work than with their children (Donegan, 2015); with the population living in outer suburban areas thus contributing a large portion of this statistic, due to the lack of local employment opportunities and the distance to the city centre. On the other hand, people living in inner suburbs have greater access to jobs with a reasonable commute time. For example, a worker who lives within the inner Melbourne area would have access to 90% of all Melbourne jobs within a 45 minute drive (Kelly and Mares, 2013, p. 28).

We have thus reached a point in Melbourne where a combination of factors is increasingly putting pressure on community life and raising livability issues. A report published by PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PwC) (2017) identifies the following as the primary tenets of a livable environment: reduction in travel times and associated cost for workers; an increase of the pool of people who can access jobs and opportunities that can attract industry to an area; and an enabled employment density that supports productivity gains through collaboration and labour force deepening for improved access to jobs and travel time savings. Furthermore, the drivers of productivity and the growth of productivity improve connections to employment and services, promoting aggregated economies and contributing to a more efficient transport network, the latter having significant practical implications.

Published as a strategic vision in Plan Melbourne (2014, 2017), a 20-minute neighbourhood was explained as being a city in which most people would be able to undertake most activities needed for a good life within a 20-minute walk, cycle or public transport trip from where they lived. However, the concept was underdeveloped in the plan, as it focused only on the inner and middle Melbourne precincts. This neglected the outer suburbs where development is occurring on multiple greenfield sites simultaneously, many of which have not been achieving sufficient

density in the early stages to make conventional public transport viable. This means that, when people move into these areas, they are entirely car-dependent due to the lag in local infrastructure provision.

Meanwhile, most metropolitan strategies and plans demand timelines that last longer than a decade, even multiple decades, outlasting any particular political party in government. Thus, the development of and debate over alternative solutions, new ideas and innovative alternative solutions can help to create a long-term vision often unattainable due to changes in particular government agendas.

With these issues in mind, by eliciting resident perceptions of an exemplar grassroots community coworking hub, we take initial steps to respond to some of the liveability challenges facing outer-suburbs.

2 Coworking Hubs

There has been significant change in the landscape of work over the last decade, in terms of *how we work* and *where we work*. Changes in this landscape are predominantly driven by changing economic structures and technological affordances. Firstly, there has been an increased number of freelancers and self-employed, where networking and interaction between small and new businesses are crucial for the success of their businesses; secondly, information systems are increasingly facilitating networking and distributed teamwork. Coworking hubs have emerged as places where contemporary workers can come together to cowork and network, to share ideas, engage in joint activities, and collaborate.

2.1 What is coworking?

Coworking is a place where independent professionals, often freelancers, share a space and other facilities in their work. It is often developed around the idea of community building and sustainability, with an emphasis on innovation. It brings together different groups of workers, such as start-ups, entrepreneurs, business travellers and home workers. It helps foster social entrepreneurship, *i.e.* a social innovation culture where the community builds social capital through collaboration and sharing of ideas. It brings together a wealth of talent in the form of individuals, micro- and small businesses to foster creativity and new business opportunities.

Most coworking spaces are shared, open-plan workspaces that usually feature shared desks or tables where coworkers work alongside each other, in a predominantly activity-based work setting. Members of a coworking place sometimes participate in joint activities associated with learning (for example, talks by members of the space) and collaboration, organised within the coworking place. Governance models between coworking spaces vary dramatically, but are all either developed or supported by the formal or informal sector. There are little evidence of the existence of independent, socially engineered grassroots community coworking hubs.

The world's first coworking space was conceived in 2005 (Mahlberg and Riemer, 2017). Coworking has since grown at a rapid pace. Today, the number of coworking spaces worldwide exceeds 10000; and they exist in different forms and at different scales. In Australia likewise, the concept of coworking has gained the attention of private businesses, corporates, local governments, and state governments. Over 300 coworking spaces can be identified in Australia today. Nearly 70% of these are located in the CBD or inner suburban areas of the major cities, while only 7% are located in outer suburban areas. Sydney and Melbourne are the two major cities with the highest concentration of coworking spaces in Australia (ibid.).

With the continuous rapid population growth in outer suburban areas in Australia, problems of unemployment, liveability, and changes in work mode have become challenging issues facing local communities and policy makers. Social enterprise, such as coworking hubs, can thus potentially play a key role in improving social well-being and liveability for local residents. Well-facilitated coworking hubs can potentially connect local businesses, provide a working space for independent professionals, and create a sense of belonging to and for the local community.

Research question: How can an independent grassroots coworking initiative in outer suburban Melbourne offer an opportunity to explore how cities might extend their focus on liveability and people and aim for the individual and collective cultivation of living and working spaces that foster the productivity and wellbeing of communities of future workers?

2.2 The eco-community: A grassroots coworking hub (GCH) in Wyndham

To explore and better respond to the research question, the study drew on a grassroots coworking hub (hereafter GCH) in Wyndham as an exemplar of the coworking model.

GCH is a grassroots community-driven initiative launched in 2015 after a local social entrepreneur identified the need for coworking opportunities in the area. A stakeholder consultative process confirmed the need for such an initiative. GCH aims to draw together local business people, stakeholders and interested parties to find solutions to the problems facing the fast-growing neighbourhood in Wyndham, and to offer an option to 'live and work locally'.

In the absence of dedicated physical premises and government financial support, GCH started out by organising a series of 'pop-up' coworking space events targeting local small and large businesses. Local business owners and employees are also connected through monthly 'get-together' events ('hackathon'), around social activities such as presentations, lunches, workshops, learning events, and coffee catch-ups. All local services (for example, services, shopping, restaurants and dining, and meetup groups), local news and events organised by GCH are advertised through its virtual hub.

GCH offers a flexible month-to-month membership program which enable its members access to all its events and its collaborative online community platform. GCH has since gained momentum in actively promoting and mobilising local business and community support for their ideal of *live locally, work locally, and shop locally*, and in fostering a sense of community. Over the last two years, GCH paid membership has grown steadily to 110.

3 Working and Living in Wyndham

The City of Wyndham is located in the south-west of greater Melbourne. The city is centred around the residential areas of Werribee, and has been experiencing substantial residential growth since the 1970s, continuing to expand into new suburbs; and is now one of fastest growing outer suburban areas in Australia.

3.1 Expanding and changing demographics

- The City of Wyndham had a population of 217,122 in 2016, with an average increase of 11,000 new residents each year since 2011. This made Wyndham the second fastest growing municipality in Victoria during the period between 2011 and 2016 (Wyndham City Council, 2017a; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). The forecast population for 2017 is 238,773, and is expected to keep growing at a rapid rate and reach 435,832 in 2036 (see Figure 1), a 82.53% increase (Forecast.id, 2017).

- A high rate of overseas migration and demand for affordable housing are the two key factors contributing to the continuous rapid population growth in Wyndham, and the expansion of new suburbs such as Point Cook, Tarneit, and Truganina.

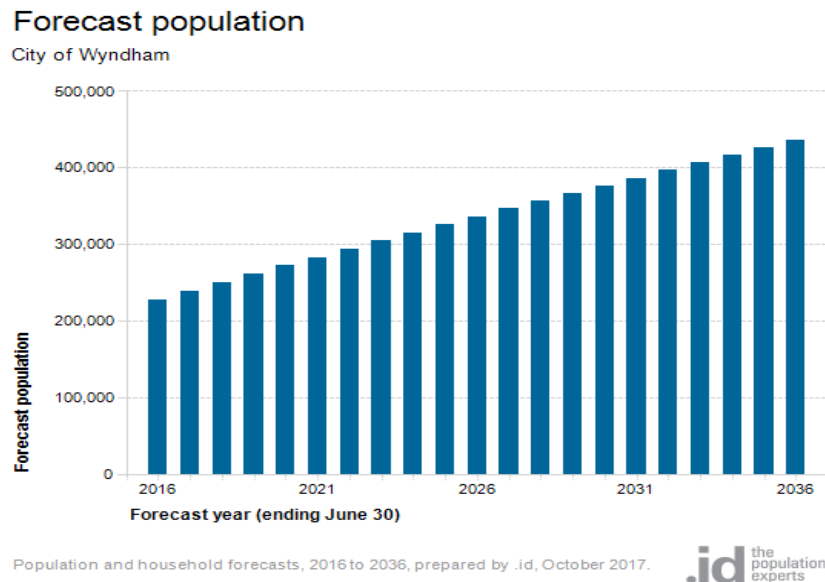


Figure 1: Forecast population for City of Wyndham 2016-2036 ‘

Attribution notice: This material was compiled and presented by .id, the population experts.

www.id.com.au‘

Source: <http://forecast.id.com.au/wyndham>

3.2 Education and workforce

- Nearly half (49%) of the population aged 15 and above hold a post-schooling qualification: 14.6% have a Certificate III or IV, 10% with an Advanced Diploma or a Diploma degree, and 24.4% hold a Bachelor Degree or above (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).
- There were 107,665 employed residents in Wyndham and 77,242 jobs in the area in 2016 (Economy.id, 2017a). About one-third of employees (30.4%) lived and worked in Wyndham (see Figure 2), while 66% had to commute to outside the Wyndham municipality to work, and 3.7% had no fixed place of work (Economy.id, 2017b). Nearly two-thirds (60.2%) of the workforce were full-time workers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016)

Employment location of resident workers, 2016

City of Wyndham - All industries

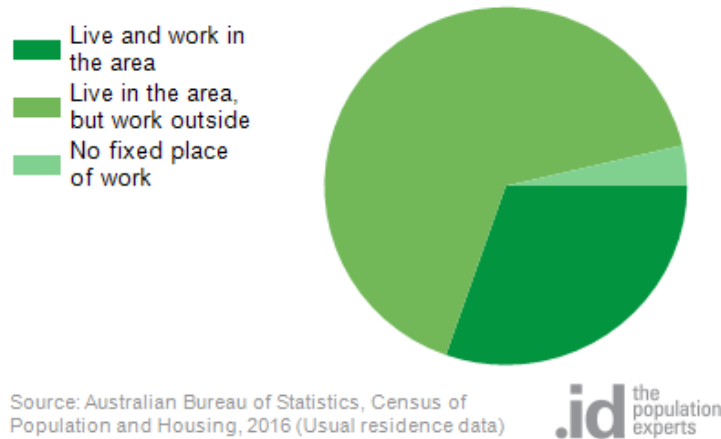


Figure 2: Employment location for City of Wyndham workers

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Source: <http://economy.id.com.au/wyndham/residents-place-of-work-industry>

- Wyndham had a 7.55% unemployment rate in the second quarter of 2017, compared to 6% for Victoria and 5.6% at the national level during the same period. Wyndham also had a jobs-to-workers ratio of 0.72 in 2015/16, meaning there were fewer jobs available compared to the number of workers living in the area (Economy.id, 2017c).
- Eighteen and a half percent of the working residents in Wyndham are professionals, 15.3% are clerical and administrative workers, 12.7% work as technicians and trades workers, 11.2% are in community and personal services, and 10.7% work as managers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

3.3 Tyranny of distance: Commuting to work

- A high percentage of population in Wyndham rely on a car to go to work (72%), while only 5% use train services (Wyndham City Council, 2017a).
- Overall, people living in fast growing outer suburban areas spend 20% more time commuting to work than residents living in inner suburbs (Daley, 2015). In a report published by Bitre (The Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics) in

2011 (Figure 3), among all the suburbs in Melbourne, Outer Western suburbs (such as suburbs in Wyndham) had the highest percentage of people travelling 30 km or more to work.

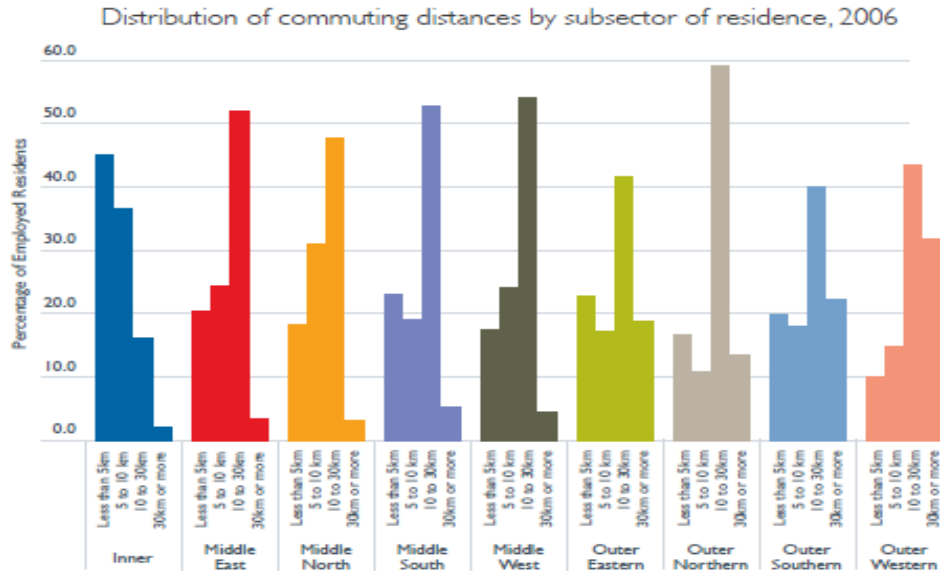


Figure 3: Greater Melbourne distribution of commuting distances

Source: https://bitre.gov.au/publications/2011/files/report_125.pdf, p. 236.

- Over a year, residents in outer suburban areas could spend up to 800 hours commuting to work:

‘Five million Australians live in fast-growing outer suburbs like Tarneit, Point Cook and Truganina. On average, those residents will spend up to 800 hours every year commuting on the crowded Werribee train line’, said Cr Henry Barlow, Former Mayor, Wyndham City Council (Wyndham City Council, 2017b).

4 Research Design

Building on the demographic statistical data, we wanted to see how and in what different ways Wyndham residents made sense of working and living in Wyndham, drawing on a real-world exemplar, a local grassroots community hub (GCH), to expose lived experiences for exploration and clarification of how it was understood and utilised by Wyndham residents.

We opted for a qualitative research design focusing on collecting rich contextual data from our participants, including:

4.1 Data collection

In order to perform a rapid and robust research design, we adopted a two-stage process: firstly, co-sponsoring and participation in a one-day hackathon, co-offered as part of the Victorian Government Digital Innovation Festival; then a series of focus groups organised by the research team.

4.1.1 A one-day hackathon (workshop) event on coworking

Members of the research team participated in an one-day workshop to discuss the model of the Plan Melbourne 20-minute neighbourhood and how this concept could potentially benefit the people living and working in Wyndham. The insights from the hackathon event informed the second stage of our research.

4.1.2 Focus groups:

Four one-and-a-half hour focus groups were conducted at The Park, Werribee, between late September and early October 2017:

- a) Focus group 1 and focus group 2 on 28th September 2017
- b) Focus group 3 and focus group 4 on 6th October 2017

The focus groups aimed to be both participatory and to engage with and value participants everyday experiences with coworking. The participants were recruited through the GCH website, its Facebook site, an email list compiled from the business cards of hackathon event attendees mentioned above, and some Wyndham community Facebook pages. Participants were offered a gift voucher to compensate for their costs of their-travel, parking and time. Each focus group involved five to eight participants with a total of twenty-five participants across all groups. Each focus group was facilitated by one or two of the researchers, focussing on the following key issues for the participants working and living in Wyndham:

- a) Familiarity with the GCH model/concept
- b) Perceptions and feelings about the local environment
- c) The concept of a local co-working space/hub
- d) Issues of liveability

e) Views about key players

In compliance with the Ethics requirements of RMIT University the project was granted approval in September 2017 (number: CHEAN B 21074-09/17). The focus groups discussions were audio-recorded and participants were given a consent form to sign and a scanned copy to be kept. All the focus groups were then fully transcribed with participants' information (for example, their names and their affiliations) being de-identified during the transcription process. Next, the data was analysed.

4.2 Data analysis

The data analysis followed six phases (Braun and Clarke, 2006): Firstly, members of the research team read and re-read the data, noting down initial ideas, and initial codes generated. Thirdly, potential themes were identified and collated and the themes reviewed. The fifth phase involved naming and defining the emerging themes, which led to the sixth and final phase, selection of compelling extracts relating to the themes, some of which are discussed in the findings below.

4.2.1 Identifying profiles of participants, perceptions, experiences and needs

Detailed notes were made on the transcripts for all the focus groups. The profile of each participant was first identified, in terms of their profession, nature of their work, involvement with GCH, and other involvement in local activities. Their views were then categorised into the following three dimensions:

- a) Needs/expectations – this includes participants' needs and/or expectations of a local co-working space/hub/place, the local environment, the local community, local government, and other key stakeholders;
- b) Experiences/knowledge – this includes participants' experiences and knowledge of the concept of a co-working space/hub/place, and other personal experiences of working and living in Wyndham in general;
- c) Barriers, opportunities and other key points – this includes participants' views about barriers to growth in the local area, and the opportunities or potential that they could identify.

5 Findings

In the following section, key findings from the four workshop discussions are presented. Issues of liveability; the need for a coworking space/place; requirements for funding and support from local and state governments; the importance of collaboration between key stakeholders; and integration of resources and services, were key topics that dominated the workshop discussions.

5.1 Participant overview

All the participants contributed to a focus group held in Wyndham. The participants could be categorised into two groups: i) employees of large corporate organisations working full-time in the city while trying to run a small business locally at the same time; and ii) small or micro business owners (actual or prospective) who wish to or run their businesses in the local area, in areas such as business consultancy, life coaching, education, arts and crafts, and social media. The latter group was in the majority.

In terms of gender breakdown: there were thirteen male and twelve female participants. The participants come from various ethnic backgrounds reflecting the cultural diversity in the area, and are aged between 28 and 72. Some of the participants are relatively new to the area, having only lived in Wyndham for the last two or three years, while the rest have been living in the area for at least six or seven years. The participants can also be divided into three categories that reflect their affiliation with/involvement in GCH, and their attitude to the concept of a coworking hub/space in general:

- a) 'Two-year members'/advocates – participants who have been members of GCH from the early stage; and who in general have a strong vision of a community-based model for a coworking space.
- b) Users – participants who have been attending GCH activities and/or other coworking spaces, but whose interests and needs are generally limited to the use of facilities in order to network or to perform their job (for example, an office space to meet their clients); and who thus tend to see the coworking concept in utilitarian, transactional terms.

- c) Newcomers/outside – participants who are new to GCH or the concept of a coworking hub, but who in general demonstrate interest in the concept and are in a phase of further exploration; and who may have either a community-based or transactional view of coworking.

Participant characteristics	Description
Age:	28 – 72 years
Gender:	12 females and 13 males
Industry:	9 Business advisor/consultancy, 6 Training/career advisory 4 IT/marketing business, 4 Creative/design, 2 currently developing business concepts/in full-time corporate employment
GCH membership:	10 joined within the first year (2-year members) 8 joined during the last year (users) 7 newcomers

Table 1: Participant characteristics

5.2 Perceptions of working and living conditions

5.2.1 Liveability and lack of support to help achieve it

- The participants expressed their views about the importance of liveability and having time to spend with their family. However, a lack of white-collar jobs and facilities available to help local businesses (for example, a coworking space and office to rent based on an ad hoc basis and a flexible model) means many have to spend time travelling to the city, which impacts their quality of life, particularly their family life.
- Wyndham, as is the case with other outer suburban cities, is expanding rapidly, and the participants believe that it has reached a critical juncture in terms of population growth relative to infrastructure (especially transport) and jobs, particularly white-collar jobs; with vulnerable members of the community, for example unemployed youth and mature-aged job-seekers, the hardest hit.

5.2.2 Support and funding/investment in the area

- The participants argued that there is a need for more funding and investment from the government and corporations in the Wyndham area. They believe that investing in

businesses and the community is crucial for the growth of the area, and for change to occur.

- Investment by key players in coworking facilities represents the provision of small amounts of money and resources to a large number of (potential) small businesses, leading to the success and identification of 'winners' who could then go on to become bigger businesses employing people locally, improving the local economy. In this case, a hub would eventually provide wider benefits to the community:

You don't fund a coworking space in order to make money of it as a coworking hub, you fund a coworking hub because it's a way of getting businesses to locate in your area... an opportunity to basically make a very small investment in a very large number of businesses, and there's a reasonable chance that one of those will pick up, hire twenty people, and because their offices are in Wyndham... they'll be hiring twenty people to work in Wyndham. [Patrick, a consultant]

5.2.3 Ignorance about (western) suburban areas

- Participants felt the West was perceived negatively as remote and far away from the city. Also perceptions that Wyndham is a high crime area was also identified as one of the barriers to attracting investors and businesses to the area, negatively impacting the growth in Wyndham.
- The participants expressed their pride in Wyndham having a diverse albeit complex demographic Assumptions about the area, however, were seen to have a detrimental effect on business investment and activity (for example clients not wanting to travel out to the area; lack of awareness of white-collar/businessperson demographic).

5.2.4 Facilities and infrastructure

- The participants argued that there is a lack of facilities and infrastructure in Wyndham for their businesses, including a key challenge with quality Internet that affected their community and businesses alike.
- Lack of flexible physical facilities, in particular suitable, affordable meeting spaces for hire, was also a key issue identified by the participants. Several shared that they have to travel to the CBD in Melbourne in order to meet their clients or train their staff – often, clients and staff who also live in Wyndham.

- Information about available facilities and spaces, such as (for example, through a registry) was limited.

5.3 Personal experiences

5.3.1 Working from home: Benefits and drawbacks

- Many of the participants involved in the research are small business owners who work from home. Thus, one of the key issues arising during the workshop was the benefits and drawbacks of working from home.
- The main attractions of working from home include:
 - Low cost: rent free; being able to use home facilities:

...the money side is something for me that I need to think about, 'cause I don't have to pay when I'm working from home...[Gemma, a natural health practitioner, who is relatively new to Wyndham]

- Flexibility: allows child supervision and other home duties while running the business:

...for me, being in a corporate environment for twenty years, I took on my own business as a work-life balance, so, to me now, I look after the kids and help with the family and stuff like that, so, I've gotta home office. [Phil, an insurance broker]

- The key disadvantages of working from home identified by the participants are:
 - Isolation: many of the participants who work from home shared their experience of feeling isolated, and the need to go out to meet other people:

...working from home, working alone, you are down for whatever reason...and you don't produce...working from home, the biggest problem is isolation. [Alan, who runs a life coaching business to help new, small businesses]

...an ability to occasionally go out and remind myself, you know, or be reminded that I'm not alone and that there are other people out there who have ideas and – and things that can be engaged with is great. [Patrick, a consultant]

- Distractions: the advantages of flexibility by working from home could also be a distraction (for example, children, pets, housework). This could then become a barrier for productive work. Joanne, an artist who has just started her own business, explained why she doesn't have a home office. Joshua, who runs his own business, and is currently using a coworking space in the CBD, also shared the difficulties of working from home, and the reason he chose to travel to the CBD to work rather than working from home. For example:

If I'm at home, and my husband's at home working, then you've got these distractions of pets and husband and all that stuff. [Joanne, an artist and a new business owner]

I'll spend an hour travelling to the CBD and an hour coming home, and that's two hours out of my day...that I'd spend, because at the end of that I'm more productive doing that than I am spending all that time at home. [Joshua, who has been running his own business for more than a decade]

- Inferior facilities: slow internet was raised several times during the workshops as a key issue in working from home for small businesses:

...it actually gets sometimes like a dialup. [John, a business coach mentor]

5.3.2 Commuting: Impacts

- The participants who have to commute to work shared their experience of their daily 2 - 4 hour commutes to the city, hence missing out in family life, and the impact of this on their children:

No school holiday concept for him [son] for the first five or six years of his – of his life! Even during school holidays, he would pack up his bag and get up early in

the morning and be dropped off at holiday program, so that kind of routine just takes everything out of your family life. [Samantha, who owns two businesses in Wyndham]

5.3.3 Perceptions of the GCH-model

- Participants who have been members of GCH shared their experiences, in particular expressing their appreciation for the sense of community and the collaborative culture in GCH, and the importance of maintaining this sense of community:

..It's really driven from the community... it's more than just a business. I've been to a few other networking classes where, if I give you a referral, it's expected that you give me a referral, whereas, with GCH, there's no expectation or anything like that. [Phil, an insurance broker]

People usually have a notion of coworking, how is that going to work for me, what's in it for me... then they step out – outside of their old little confined space of me, me, me ... It's all about putting themselves forward, coworking helps to put the community before themselves, and that's when their businesses start getting results. [Samantha, who owns two businesses in Wyndham]

- Members of GCH also shared their views about the importance of articulating and communicating the vision and the benefits of GCH to outsiders and also to existing members:

Being a GCH member it's easy for us to advocate the concept, but it's important to understand that what a new entrant or an outsider can perceive of GCH...I think the bigger plan is to create awareness for other people what the concept is so people feel connected to it, can enjoy the community, and can become part of the greater – a greater cause as well. [Abhi, who works in a digital media marketing company]

- GCH has created a 'place' that connects people and creates opportunities for innovative business, sharing ideas that lead to the development of entrepreneurial activities and

local jobs. GCH offers their members the opportunity to move from full-time employment, working in the CBD and unsure about how to proceed with their business concepts, to starting their own enterprises:

At that point in time when I started my business I needed to build a community around my business and I needed to ah, put my name out there, basically. GCH provided me a good network. [Samantha, who owns two businesses in the Wyndham area]

GCH, the way I see it, is an environment for small business and people wanting to start a business, especially people that are working alone, to network, to meet other people, and collaborate. [Alan, a founding member of GCH]

- Diversity of members and the services offered was considered a plus and most members either already did or indicated they would like to engage with or mentor youth and mature-aged unemployed people in the area:

...you know, it's a thing that I always thought is valuable, but you know, I've got no way of actually making that happen, but if there's a structure behind it, yeah... [Josua, a financial advisor]

5.4 Needs of the Wyndham community

5.4.1 A flexible model of coworking space/development hub

- Most of the participants are well informed about other coworking spaces in Melbourne. The participants agreed that there is a need for a development hub / coworking space that is based on a flexible model with a tiered fee structure, in order to fulfill the various needs of the community based on the nature of their work and the conditions the various members and potential members work within. This includes people with restricted budgets, new arrivals to the area, home-based office business owners, business owners who need to regularly meet clients, business owners with young families, and those who are already fully initiated into the hub concept and its possibilities and are willing to pay more for services.

- For people with restricted budgets and minimal needs, what they needed was a basic service, *i.e.* for a modest (for example, monthly) fee, notices of events and/or space available where they can just pop in or book for once-a-month or as required:

... I'm looking at from a very small business, from the sound of having to face such a fee for a place would be probably too much for me, except if I would be able to do something like a one-off pay monthly fee [a very] minimum to be a part of it in the sense that I'll get all the notices of what's going on, how many spaces there are available, when it's available. But I would only probably use, I don't know how many, half a dozen during the year. [Olivia, arts and crafts small business owner]

- For some people who are new to the area, or who have just started a new business, they needed a coworking space where they could network and socialise. Sophia, for example, is new to Melbourne and owns a small business and works closely with the local community (such as in registered training organisations, child/aged/disability care): she needs a coworking hub or community-based network organisation such as GCH that helps her get to know other people in the local area or neighbourhood. Joanne, who has just started her own business and doesn't have a home office, also shared the same view about her needs:

...networking, collaboration works for me, especially meeting other businesses, as I said, because I'm just starting, networking's been really good, because, you know, being an artist you're kind of in your own little artist circle. [Joanne, an artist who has just started her own business]

- A feeling of isolation is one of the key challenges facing people who work from home. They need a place where they can meet others and break that isolation:

My business is pretty well based with networking with other people in my field, and meeting other businesses, and so having – having a space to go would be

great... just remind yourself that you – you aren't alone and there are other – are other people working. [Gemma, a natural health practitioner]

- For many others (including those that 'moonlight' or 'side hustle' and have another job outside their main job), a professional environment with professional facilities where they can have business meetings is what they need. Alex, for example, who works for a large corporation in the city and has a small business outside normal working hours, needs a closed-off area with professional projection facilities. Alex's view was also shared by another participant Rosemary, who owns her own business management consultancy and said that her needs are very specific (for example audiovisual, phone conferencing, and interpretation facilities, and working in a culturally and linguistically diverse, or CALD, community):

I need a space, right, and I – it's like I'm getting some like-minded people or some people that I wanna collaborate with, on a pretty innovative idea, and we wanna make a commitment to meet once a week, twice a week, whatever it is, and have a space, versus having to go to someone's house, right? And what I'm doing at the moment is I've gotta go and – I'm using a friend's office in the city. [Alex, a large corporation employee, who runs a small business outside working hours]

I don't want to have to carry my portable screen and my laptop and my projector. I want to be able to go there with my resources, everything set up...[Rosemary, owner of a business management consultancy]

- For some of them who are happy working from home, they need a place where they can socialise and exchange ideas with others to improve their business. Debbie, who owns a home-based office, for example, discussed the need for a place where business owners can meet and interact:

I have a home-based office, I have the desk, and I have the printer and have everything else, what I wanted was if I'm gonna go and cowork in another space, I want a space where I can work, and then a space where I can socialise and

bounce ideas around with other business owners...[Debbie, who runs a business coaching company, and has a home-based office]

- Linda, who works in marketing and has a young family, explained the need for a working space in the local area for people with young families and also for meeting with staff (meeting with clients was another need identified, see below):

I'd really like to connect locally, with the space, and the need for coworking locally. Cause I have some staff at the moment and I'm like – we gotta go and work in the city because I can't find a suitable place ... and I don't want to have a permanent base in the city, but that's a family decision for me, because I've got young children and I don't wanna be an hour away, because I need to be somewhere where I'm within five to ten minutes. [Linda, a marketer working mostly with small-medium sized businesses]

- The need of a business address for both deliveries and meeting clients, is also mentioned by some of the participants,:

You need an address as a mailbox, where, you know, it goes – it's not your home address but it looks like an office address...[Ravi, who works for a telco company three days a week and runs his own creative design company]

5.4.2 A greater role for the local council

- Many of the participants expressed the view that the Wyndham City Council could play a key role in providing and facilitating a more integrated development hub in Wyndham, with close ties with local businesses and corporations (and with hubs such as GCH).

I would love it – for GCH to tie in better with Wyndham City Council... I would love them to have a hub. I would love Wyndham City to have – 'here's our development hub', and to work with GCH. [Ann, who runs a social media business for local businesses]

...and I think, that's why I said the council should be in control of that, because [the GCH founder] is working very hard to, you know to identify people who are business owners in the community, but we're all busy, and so if you're not on Facebook or you don't go to an event and meet her there, then how do you get to know that, whereas the council, they have details of people who run businesses in the area, and they are quite accommodating. [Debbie, who runs a business coaching company, and has a home-based office]

- An integrated and cooperative approach would help businesses grow better, offering affordable access to specialist facilities, coworking spaces and other support, and enable lower startup costs for small- to medium-sized businesses. For example, the council could help facilitate access to underutilised space in the Wyndham area (finding a suitable space was identified as a key issue by several of the participants), and invest in facilities for local businesses and the community.
- The importance of a well-facilitated development / coworking hub was reiterated by several participants who argued that the demographics of Wyndham are changing rapidly, and hence a well-organised development / coworking hub is important to help people who are 'in transition' in their career, for example providing opportunities for 'side-hustling' (moonlighting) of white-collar professionals starting up small businesses in the local area, and providing a bridge facilitating the transition from city-based job to local small business / self-employment:

So we need to create a community where existing professionals can come together... and move from your CBD activity, eventually to your local community activity. But there is no step present at the moment, like, it's a huge jump. [Abhi, who works in a digital media marketing company]

- Increases in land values in Wyndham was also identified as a key factor why investors are not interested in investing in buildings to rent to coworking hubs: they do not provide a sufficient rate of return compared to other uses (for example for overseas investors). This presents a key challenge to the people working and looking for a coworking hub in Wyndham; and it was suggested that the local council could play a role by investing in

and facilitating a development hub, and in strategising their investment policy (for example, along the lines of Western BACE in Melton).

5.4.3 Other stakeholder involvement: State government, corporates, white-collar locals, developers

- Besides the local council, state government, corporates and land developers are other key stakeholders identified by the participants. Some participants, for example, pointed to the potential role for corporate investment along the lines of-NAB Bank in setting up the Village hub in the City CBD and in Geelong.
- Tony, who owns a consultancy business, and who has used other coworking spaces in other areas, argued that there is a need for the State Government to play a greater role in supporting local businesses and a development hub:

The state government should be involved...If there's enthusiasm from members, in order to build on that, we do need some government support... some sort of money coming in, some – funding of some sort, otherwise the enthusiastic members will go... [Tony, a chartered accountant who owns a consultancy business]

Jason, who owns a business in education and has been using the facilities in the East, is passionate about helping Wyndham set up an entrepreneurial hub, and also talks about the importance of state government support:

Last year, or year before, they [LaunchVic] actually funded a lot of money, put it into this area for startups, in Victoria, into the ecosystem they want to build. So, now they're up to the fourth round of giving fundings, and the third round ...I was trying to apply because... my friends ... actually got a funding, they run a coworking space, in Carlton – they got funding, from them, from Victorian Government. And then the third round... looking at that, the criteria, there's a very sharp terms this round, the Victorian Government is not looking at funding any more coworking space... they don't realise most of their funding went to inner-city coworking or regional spaces! if your idea is a coworking space, don't apply, they don't accept, because the reason is, they think they have a very

good track record of [funding coworking] in Victoria, so they believe they need to support something else. [Jason, owner of a business in education]

- Jobs creation in the local area would help increase the living quality of people living in the area and also the economic opportunities. The statistics on levels of education and population density in the Wyndham area show that there are lots of people to draw on in the local area across a range of professional skills-growth in the Wyndham city area; and these in turn are an untapped asset for corporations and other businesses who could relocate to the area:

...if we can have more jobs, white collar jobs, for the right educational level of people that we've got in our area, it will really make a difference. [Alex, large corporation employee who runs a small business outside working hours]

- Land developers and corporations are another set of key stakeholders that participants perceived as having an important role to play in the growth and development of Wyndham:

...government support yes, but I would also be looking at property developers in the area. They have a responsibility...I don't see too much of them contributing to roads, just the roads in their estates, and they are building gym facilities, pools, and childcare centres. What about something like this? So I'd be certainly looking there. [Rosemary, owner of a business management consultancy]

...they [corporates] might be the ones with unused, underutilised space. [Matt, IT consultant]

5.4.4 Other observations:

- Participants from the workshops thought that GCH is an excellent coworking space, but in terms of the salient factors for the physical coworking space in Wyndham, suggestions drew on good examples of current models (for example, The Village, Melton) that are available (*i.e.* do not reinvent the wheel). Salient factors included low threshold for entry/access, appropriate facilities (including positive ambience, after hours access,

professional facilities, etc.), and flexible fee structure according to needs, are the key features of a good model of a coworking hub.

- There is also a need for awareness and information (in particular a registry) on other businesses in the area, available spaces etc.: for example an online registration system for booking spaces in existing buildings such as community centres, council offices, and empty restaurants.
- Online merchant facilities for local business people (for example sales of books, seminar places, etc).

6 General Outcomes

While there was a wide range of views presented about working and living in Wyndham, certain key themes emerged across the workshops, reflecting the participants' key concerns and needs for coworking. These can be grouped into the need for: 1) flexibility; 2) accessibility; 3) collaboration / integration.

6.1 Flexibility: Complex demographics; visions of a hub; structure; pricing for levels of participation

- A hub requires the flexibility to accommodate complex demographics, needs, and visions of what is needed.
- Support for two key visions of coworking space were provided: business (transactional, business oriented) or community (collaborative, social oriented). These are traditionally two disparate concepts of coworking spaces, the former a key characteristic of inner and central city coworking spaces.
- The structure of the coworking place has to accommodate the different community needs: those who wish to use the Hub (for various needs, for example, space to meet clients, information, networking); and those who wish to belong to the Hub (sense of connectedness overcoming isolation, learning how to set up a business from experienced business people, social aspect, facilitating community work - *i.e.* 'not just about business', 'community of businesses').
- Price sensitivity to membership necessitates a flexible / tiered fee structure to accommodate different levels of participation and different needs (for example, low entry

price, then premium service pricing for those already 'initiated' / exploring the range of services).

6.2 Accessibility: Marketing; participation leading to awareness; online and physical space and resources

- A simple clear message, supported by key stakeholders, for example civic and local government, targeting communities to engage with GCH, has to be developed by key players. Marketing should be based on a simple concept of basic needs to reach wider (entry-level) audience.
- Once involved, participation can lead to increased awareness of services and how best to draw on those services to enhance members' enterprise. Internal information becomes key for encouraging new members to further explore the possibilities of being a member.
- Physical space is required for meetings, networking etc.; an online platform also for networking and for information (for example, registry of businesses, contacts, spaces), possible booking system for spaces, and merchant facilities.
- Coworking spaces in Wyndham should have a coordinated 'main' community centre/hub, for example a central space for GCH, with 'satellite' central spaces close to concentrations of communities. As a guide, these satellites can follow school or library distribution patterns. This concept will absorb and save on costs of duplicating a variety of administrative functions in a variety of niche hubs.

6.3 Collaboration / integration: Roles of key players (council, state government, corporate, local business people / community and land developers)

- There is a need for collaboration between key stakeholders and integration of resources, services, information etc., for example, council information on local businesses and spaces, coordination of community organisations, small business operators, councils, state government, developers and corporates.
- Issue of risk of investing in coworking places has to be mitigated by the key players (*i.e.* government and corporate sectors).
- The benefits of coworking places for socio-economic, equity, inclusion, and health and wellbeing to local and state governments as well as the corporate sector, and of investing in outer Melbourne, and in particular, Wyndham, have to be promoted.

- Participants voiced the need for solutions for the short and medium term, as part of the broader strategic vision of local and state governments.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Conclusions and recommendations

7.1.1 Requirements of a coworking place

Our research, through a series of focus groups with local residents, suggests that there is a difference in emphasis between what is required from a coworking space in Wyndham when compared to that which is currently offered in (mostly inner) Melbourne hubs. Most coworking spaces in inner-city hubs are shared, open-plan workspaces that usually feature shared desks or tables where coworkers work alongside each other, a predominantly *activity-based work setting*. Members of the coworking place sometimes participate in joint activities associated with learning (for example talks by members of the space) and collaboration, organised *within* the coworking place. Communities in outer Melbourne associate a coworking space as a neighbourhood community *place* and GCH is an exemplar of a grassroots, community driven, coworking *place*. A *place*, which is more than a space, where the community can develop and expand the diversity of the area's entrepreneurial potential and spirit, which will in turn lead to an enhanced quality of life and sustainably ensure the livability of cities in outer Melbourne.

7.1.2 A hybrid approach to coworking places

Participants in our study suggest that a hybrid approach to coworking that combines social entrepreneurship and social enterprise would be valuable for outer Melbourne areas. The focus is on collaborative action associated with social innovation and an intention to create social and/or economic change, engagement and broad community benefits. This approach is associated with mainstream social, business and philanthropic activities, and acts as a bridge between the majority population and particular groups with specific as well as complex needs. This approach draws on an increasing desire by people and communities to take more initiative over matters that affect their wellbeing.

There is a potential for entrepreneurship and social enterprise to become a central, connecting node with influences that engage various groups, communities and domains of activity, with buy-in from local communities. An impact-driven investing strategy that aims to generate a social or environmental return (such as affordable housing or a reduction in greenhouse emissions), as well as a financial one, is recommended. Inclusive and affordable entrepreneurial initiatives and activities will empower communities in the outer Melbourne cities.

7.1.3 The importance of government support

Generating eighty percent of Australia's national income, and home to 84 percent of Australians, our cities are the heart of Australia's economy. The future prosperity of Australians depends almost entirely on whether or not our cities thrive. That can happen only when all its communities feel included, connected and fulfilled, which is achievable through collaboration between key players, with strong support from the government:

That means stopping Melbourne's urban sprawl, ensuring our regional cities remain affordable and livable, making smart investments in infrastructure that encourage job growth outside the CBD, and giving local communities across the state support to put together their own plans for development (Forward by Richard Wynne, The Minister for Planning, Victoria) (Plan Melbourne, 2017-2050).

Evidence suggests that a grassroots community coworking hub in an outer-suburban area is not sustainable without formal financial support from the formal and informal sectors.

7.2 Future research

This report presents the perceptions, experiences and needs of community members working and living in Outer Melbourne with a focus on Wyndham, as a first step in an ongoing investigation into issues facing people living in outer suburban Melbourne. Our study suggests that future research should address the following questions:

- It is suggested community needs for outer Melbourne coworking spaces extend beyond those in the inner and central cities, how do the key role players and stakeholders see their roles in advancing grassroots community coworking in outer Melbourne? How

might the formal and informal sector be empowered to better support the social entrepreneurial initiative made by members of the community?

- How might a scalable model for a council supported, grassroots coworking space in outer-suburban be developed to inform future development of coworking in outer-suburban neighbourhoods? How might such a scalable model extend the conversation around the 'future of work'?
- How might coworking spaces facilitate the economic integration and inclusion of specific at-risk demographics, for example youth, new migrants, and an expanding population of older unemployed workers?

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