

Celebrating 25 Years of Valley Community Financial Services



Sharing the stories and impact of Community Bank
Hurstbridge, Diamond Creek, Eltham, Doreen-Mernda & Kinglake

Our Story

During the 1990s, rural communities across Australia watched as their towns faced decline—big banks withdrew their services, leaving towns empty and economies struggling. Before the age of digital banking, once residents traveled to larger towns or cities for banking, their shopping and local services often followed, further draining life from these communities.

In 1998, the traders and residents of Hurstbridge recognized this trend when the last bank in town shut its doors. The community knew that losing their bank meant losing more than just a financial institution—it was the heart of local commerce and connection.

When the Bendigo Bank community banking model was proposed the response was overwhelmingly positive and so local people stumped up \$600k in capital. "We didn't know if we'd see our money again. We didn't know if shareholders would see a dividend." Returning banking services to defend the town was all that mattered.

What followed was an inspiring success story. When the last bank left, Hurstbridge had seven empty shops and many local businesses were hesitant to invest. Within 12 months of the bank opening, all those shops were leased, trading was strong and community confidence was restored. Was the bank the catalyst for this revival?

The community's determination was remarkable. They invested over \$660,000 without knowing if they'd recover their money or see dividends—yet they believed in their town and in each other. Today, Hurstbridge Branch is more than just a financial institution; it's a beacon of community strength and success.

It now holds 24% of the local home mortgage market—compared to the Bendigo Bank's national average which is less than 5%.

This story exemplifies what a community can achieve when it comes together with a shared purpose.

How good is this community?



 Hurstbridge 20th Birthday

What is the Community Bank Model?

Banking built by community

Valley Community Financial Services (VCFS) operates under Bendigo Bank's Community Banking model - a structure designed to deliver full-service banking while ensuring profits are returned to the people and places that generate them.

From the customer's perspective, day-to-day banking is no different: personal and business banking services are provided just as they are at any bank.

The difference lies in what happens next.

As a locally owned social enterprise, VCFS reinvests the majority of our profits directly back into the community. These funds support projects across education, youth, mental health, wildlife and animal care, sport, arts and culture, emergency services, environmental initiatives and community infrastructure. The remaining profits are returned to shareholders - all of whom are local or have strong ties to the region, ensuring community ownership remains central.

The model is built on partnerships. Directors, staff and shareholders are all members of the communities they serve. Branch staff are not only banking professionals, but locals who understand the clubs, schools and organisations behind the accounts they manage. Conversations at the counter often extend beyond finances, creating opportunities to identify where community support can make a meaningful impact.

This approach has created a cycle of shared growth. As more people choose to bank locally, the business grows - and with it, the capacity to reinvest in community projects. Over time, this has resulted in thousands of visible outcomes across the region, each representing a story of local support made possible through everyday banking.

Banking locally contributes to stronger facilities, better services and more resilient communities. After 25 years, our local group of Community Banks stands as a living example of what can be achieved when profits are guided by purpose and communities are empowered to shape their own future.

To date, over \$10 Million in profits from customer banking has been reinvested into local initiatives. Thousands of projects, and countless lives impacted.

These are our stories.



Contents

Milestone Projects	2
Mental Health	6
Aging, Seniors and Connection	8
Youth	10
Education	12
Fire Resilience and Bushfire Response	14
Sport: Investing in an Active Community	16
Diversity and Inclusion	18
Community Bank Stadium	20
Environment and Animal Care	22
Festivals and Fairs	24
Arts & Culture	26
Defibrillator Program	28
Staff and Branches	30
Board & Volunteers	32





➤ Hurstbridge Staff in 2019

Milestone Projects

- 1998** | Local residents begin exploring ways to restore banking services in Hurstbridge after branch closures, laying the groundwork for a community-led solution.
- 1999** | A volunteer steering committee forms, with locals contributing time, expertise, and funding to establish 'Hurstbridge & District Financial Services Limited' and open the first branch in Hurstbridge under local governance. In 2005, the company was renamed to 'Valley Community Financial Services'.
- 2002** | After the Hurstbridge Primary School fire, VCFS contributes \$10,000 to rebuilding - an early demonstration of community impact through local banking.
- 2003** | Following bank closures in Diamond Creek, the Community Bank Diamond Creek branch opens to restore local access to banking services.
- 2004** | A partnership begins with Rotary through a \$70,000, 5 year agreement to save the Diamond Creek Rotary Town Fair, leading to ongoing collaborations on major community projects including the Diamond Creek Tram Cafe, Large animal rescue harness, and various events.
- 2005** | Partnership with local CFA brigades begins to grow - funding vehicles, facility generators, and infrastructure. \$20,000 is contributed to the Diamond Creek CFA for a stationary pump, which later proves invaluable in the 2009 bushfires as a regional asset.



▲ Diamond Creek Branch in 2018



▲ Diamond Creek Rotary Town Fair



▲ Diamond Creek Tram Project



▲ St Andrews Community Centre

2007 The first grants presentation is held at the AGM, distributing \$80,000 and establishing what becomes a regular community funding event.

2009 Black Saturday bushfires tear through St Andrews, Strathewen, and Kinglake Ranges - VCFS provides significant funding for recovery support including \$150,000 to the Community Enterprise Foundation, and eventually resulting in the opening of the Kinglake branch.

2010 VCFS provides funding to rebuilding projects including Strathewen Hall, Kinglake Reserve, the Strathewen Bushfire Memorial and Blacksmiths Tree, and St Andrews Community Centre.

2009 | **2011** Three branches were opened within an 18-month period during a time when banking margins were tightening across the industry, creating significant financial pressure. The organisation navigated several challenging years that followed through careful restructuring and consolidation, remaining focused on long-term sustainability. This period demonstrated strong perseverance and a clear commitment to honouring promises made to the community while continuing to invest locally.



WATCH THE WHOLE STORY



▲ Eltham Branch Staff in 2011



▲ Strathewen Memorial Tree



▲ Doreen & Mernda Community Bank Opening



▲ \$1m for the Community Bank Stadium

2010 The Community Bank Eltham branch opens, quickly becoming embedded in local life and supporting community initiatives.

2010 The seed funding model launches, helping to kickstart large projects - including \$25,000 of Diamond Creek Tennis Club's \$125,000 tennis courts - and \$25,000 of Diamond Creek Women's Football Club's \$120,000 lighting project. The upgrade allowed the previously nomadic team to secure a home ground - and paved the way for government investment in women's sport.

2010 A grants evening in Mernda distributes \$50,000 - including \$11,000 in books for the library at the new Laurimar Primary School - sparking strong community pledges and momentum for a local branch.

2011 The Community Bank Doreen-Mernda branch opens, creating new funding streams for local clubs and community groups.

2012 Community Bank Stadium in Diamond Creek opens thanks to a \$1 million contribution and governance support from VCFS.



St Andrews Mens Shed



Diamond Creek Memorial Kindergarten



Eltham North Adventure Playground



Panton Hill CFA

2013 Partnership with Diamond Creek Men's Shed is formed in collaboration with Diamond Creek Rotary to fund facility extension and ultimately unlocking further funding from council and state government. Building on this concept, support extended to other community sheds including Hurstbridge, Eltham, St Andrews, and Kinglake.

2013 \$25,000 in seed funding launches the training nets replacement project at Panton Hill Cricket Club, unlocking further council support.

2018 Eltham North Adventure Playground is destroyed by fire. VCFS commits to matching community donations dollar-for-dollar, contributing a total of \$32,000 to rebuild the playground.

2018 After growing awareness and demand, a \$50,000 investment helps to launch Spectrum Journeys locally, to support families and people on the autism spectrum.

2025 The Dementia Café program launches through the Dementia Alliance group in response to growing community needs.



Diamond Creek CFA



Laurimar Primary School



 SALT team

Mental Health

Over time, community wellbeing has become increasingly recognized beyond bricks, mortar, and facilities, to include mental health, connection, and culture. Sporting clubs, which are central to community life, continue to emerge as a powerful place to engage people - particularly young people - in conversations that had once been difficult to start.

This understanding led to a significant collaboration with SALT (Sport and Life Training), an Australian not-for-profit organisation founded in 2015 to address mental health, culture, and leadership through sporting clubs. SALT was established in response to a series of Australian club-related incidents and was built on a simple idea: that clubs could be places of care and connection, not just competition.

In a milestone moment, Valley Community Financial Services has joined with six other metropolitan Melbourne Community Banks in a coordinated commitment to support SALT's work. Together, the group has entered a five-year, \$500,000 partnership designed to strengthen SALT as an organisation and enable its programs to be delivered at a grassroots level across local sporting clubs.



 SALT



WATCH THE WHOLE STORY

SALT's programs focus on practical, value-based education. The sessions for young people address peer pressure, decision-making, respectful relationships, and mental health awareness. Programs for senior players, coaches, and club leaders focus on inclusive leadership, preventing violence against women, and building strong wellbeing cultures. Parents and coaches are also supported through training that emphasises resilience, character, and long-term development over winning alone.

Importantly, the partnership is structured to reduce cost barriers for local clubs, allowing more organisations to access the training without placing pressure on volunteers or committees. VCFS identified a further need for additional funding, and coordinated

a separate process targeted to help local sporting clubs in their communities. So far, this program has been approved for: Greensborough Junior Football Club, Hazel Glen Netball Club, Diamond Creek Cricket Club, Hurstbridge Football Netball Club, Mernda Football Club, Laurimar Sporting Club, and Northern Runners.

The Community Bank contribution reflects VCFS' commitment to strengthening mental health support in both a local and state level - with focus on prevention, education, and long-term cultural change. By supporting SALT, the focus moved from responding to crises, to building healthier, safer, and more connected communities, ensuring sporting clubs remain places where people look out for one another, on and off the field.


[Hurstbridge Football Netball Club](#)
[Laurimar Sporting Club](#)



📍 Diamond Creek Mens Shed

Aging, Seniors and Connection

From its earliest years, VCFS recognised that a strong community must care for its older generations - not only through services, but through connection, purpose, and belonging.

As the region grew and demographics shifted, supporting seniors became an increasingly important part of the organisation's community investment.

One of the most enduring examples of this commitment has been long-term support for local Men's Sheds. Beginning with early grants to help establish the Diamond Creek Men's Shed, Community Bank funding played a role in enabling grassroots groups to secure spaces, tools, and facilities. In partnership with Rotary, council, and state government, this support helped turn modest ideas into permanent hubs where retired men could connect, learn new skills, and continue contributing to the

community. Beyond the practical outcomes (including furniture for schools, community projects, and public libraries) - the deeper impact lay in improved mental health, reduced isolation, and renewed purpose.

This model expanded across the region, including Eltham, St Andrews, Kinglake, and most recently Hurstbridge, where a \$100,000 commitment has contributed to a new "community shed" designed to welcome both men and women. These spaces reflect an evolution in thinking: places not just to work with hands, but to share stories, ideas, and experience.

Local groups such as Doreen Seniors Club, and OM:NI are among the many that have received Community Bank support. Further support has also extended to remembrance and service. For more than two decades, Community Bank branches have backed local RSLs, contributing to ANZAC Day


 Doreen Seniors

commemorations and memorials that honour service while keeping history alive within the community.

More recently, the organisation has played a core role in supporting dementia-inclusive initiatives. Through funding, governance support, and strategic guidance, Community Bank has helped strengthen the Dementia Friendly Alliance - supporting dementia cafés, carers, and volunteers, and enabling a locally developed model to move toward long-term sustainability and potential replication.

Together, these initiatives reflect a consistent philosophy: investing in seniors is not about charity, but about dignity, participation, and ensuring people remain valued members of their community at every stage of life.



WATCH THE WHOLE STORY


 OM:NI



 L2P Program

Youth

Supporting young people has been a long-standing priority for VCFS, driven by a belief that strong communities are built by investing early in confidence, opportunity and connection. Our Community Bank branches have always supported a range of youth initiatives focused on education, employment pathways, leadership and resilience programs.

One of the most notable initiatives is the Confident JobSeeker Program, developed in partnership with Diamond Valley College. The program connects local students with employers through forums, small group discussions and mock interviews, helping young people better understand local career pathways and build confidence entering the workforce. While time and capacity limited how far the program could expand, it helped shape Community Bank's ongoing commitment to youth employment and skills development.

That commitment has now evolved through partnerships with the Banyule Nillumbik Local Learning and Employment Network (BNLLEN). Drawing on earlier experience, Community Bank funding provided a \$40,000 grant to establish a local jobs portal, connecting students, schools and employers to real employment opportunities within the community. The portal created a practical, scalable tool that continues to support young people transitioning from school to work. With years of structure and refinement - this program can now be easily replicated in new locations and schools.

In the Kinglake Ranges, youth support became especially important following the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires. A key role was played in managing and contributing to the Murrindindi Youth Foundation in collaboration with Moonee Valley Council and Community Bank Strathmore, which funds programs supporting young

people affected by trauma, isolation and limited access to services. Partnerships with organisations such as Blue Light Victoria deliver leadership and confidence-building programs for both primary and secondary students, strengthening relationships between young people and local frontline services.

Across these initiatives, we continue to bring partners together, provide seed funding, and help leverage further support from government and philanthropic organisations. The lasting impact lies not just in individual programs, but in building pathways, resilience and hope for young people who will shape the future of their communities.




WATCH THE WHOLE STORY






▲ Sacred Heart Primary School

Education

INVESTING IN EDUCATION AT EVERY STAGE OF LIFE

Education has been a cornerstone of VCFS' community investment since its earliest years. From primary schools and preschools to secondary education, training pathways, and lifelong learning, the organisation's approach has consistently focused on practical support that responds to real local needs.

One of the most defining moments in this commitment occurred in 2003, when Hurstbridge Primary School was destroyed by fire on New Year's Day. At the time, the Community Bank Hurstbridge was still in its infancy and operating on limited profits. Nevertheless, within days, the bank committed \$10,000 to the school to help replace the many essential items that fall outside government funding - sporting equipment, office resources, and everyday tools needed to reopen.

That early decision marked the beginning of a long-term partnership. As the school was rebuilt on its original site, further funding supported courtyard paving, water tanks required under new regulations, and a \$50,000 playground, designed to be accessible to the wider community outside school hours. Over time, additional initiatives followed, including support for a walking school bus program and, in 2026, a \$60,000 commitment to renovate the original playground - ensuring the facility continues to meet modern safety standards. Across the rebuild and subsequent projects, investment in Hurstbridge Primary of more than \$130,000 reflects a sustained relationship rather than a one-off response.

Further support for education has taken many forms. Preschools such as Hurstbridge Preschool and Ferguson Park Preschool received funding for playground equipment and learning resources.



 Hazel Glen College



 Hurstbridge Primary School



 Walking School Bus

A broader program provided grants to local schools to fund priorities identified by educators themselves, recognising that needs differ across communities.

Support has also extended to new and growing communities. Contributions helped stock the library at Laurimar Primary School before it opened, while schools such as Diamond Creek East Primary School benefited from funding for playgrounds, outdoor learning areas, and shared use facilities linked to Community Bank Stadium. In 2016, Doreen Primary School received \$2500 towards construction of their outdoor basketball court shelter.

Education investment has never been limited to formal schooling. Partnerships with organisations such as Hurstbridge Learning Co-operative and neighbourhood houses have supported adult education, short courses, and skill development across all ages.

Together, these initiatives reflect a consistent philosophy: strengthening communities by supporting learning - not just in classrooms, but across the entire life journey.



 Catholic Ladies College Eltham



WATCH THE WHOLE STORY



Black Saturday

Fire Resilience and Bushfire Response

The Black Saturday bushfires of February 7th 2009 marked one of the most defining moments in the history of VCFS and the communities it serves. Fires tore through Kinglake, St Andrews and Strathewen, devastating townships and claiming 27 lives locally. In the immediate aftermath, the local Community Bank group stepped forward not only as a financial institution, but as a deeply embedded community organisation.

Within days, VCFS committed \$150,000 to the Community Enterprise Foundation, Bendigo Bank's philanthropic arm, enabling urgent relief where it was most needed. Directors worked personally with affected residents, funding practical necessities - from tools and hardware, to gates, fencing and basic supplies - allowing people to begin reclaiming their properties and sense of ownership.

As recovery shifted from emergency response to rebuilding, the bank played a critical role in long-term renewal. It supported the reconstruction of community infrastructure, including the Strathewen Hall and local facilities, ensuring spaces for people to gather, heal and reconnect. In St Andrews and Kinglake, the bank helped bridge funding gaps for community centres, memorials and essential upgrades - often making the difference between projects stalling or moving forward.

Beyond bricks and mortar, the bank recognised the importance of resilience and preparedness. Ongoing support for CFA brigades included generators, pumps, communications upgrades and specialist training equipment - investments that directly improved emergency response capability. The bank also financially supported the establishment of Bushfire



🔥 Bushfire Resilience Inc

Resilience Inc, supporting education programs and science-based webinars to help communities better prepare for future fire events.

Through funding, advocacy and quiet behind-the-scenes work, VCFS helped communities not only rebuild, but stay together. The legacy of this period is one of trust, resilience and a shared belief that recovery is strongest when driven by local people, and supported by local institutions.

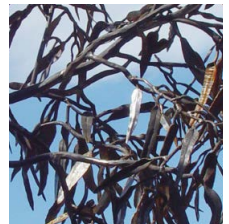
Footsteps In The Ash chronicles the devastating 2009 Black Saturday bushfires through powerful firsthand accounts from residents of St Andrews and Strathewen. Written by local authors Jim Usher and Mac Gudgeon and funded by a \$25,000 contribution from VCFS, the book provided a platform for survivors to share their experiences while preserving these stories for future generations. The publication gained national attention - its launch attended by then Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Premier John Brumby - and went on to raise over \$100,000 in sales, with proceeds returned to local CFA brigades supporting those who respond in times of crisis.



🔥 Footsteps In The Ash Launch



🔥 Arthurs Creek CFA



🔥 The Tree Project



🔥 Kinglake West CFA



🔥 Stathewen Memorial



WATCH THE WHOLE STORY



Eltham Football Club

Sport: Investing in an Active Community

From its earliest days, VCFS understood that sport is more than recreation - it is where communities gather, identities and friendships form, and generations connect.

Over the past 25 years, our local Community Bank branches have become a powerful enabler of local sport, helping budding clubs develop lasting facilities.

In the early years, support took the form of modest sponsorships - sometimes in contributions as small as \$500 - but even then, it signalled belief. One of the first beneficiaries was the Hurstbridge Football Club, a relationship that has grown into long-term sponsorship, major facility upgrades, and the installation of an electronic scoreboard. Similar partnerships developed across cricket, tennis, soccer, basketball, baseball, netball, bowls, and junior football.

As the company matured, so too did its approach. Rather than simply funding uniforms or signage, the Community Bank began providing seed capital - strategic early funding that unlocked much larger projects. This model proved transformative. At Diamond Creek Tennis Club, a \$25,000 contribution helped leverage council, resulting in four new synthetic courts built in just months - something the club had believed was decades away. At Pantom Hill Cricket Club, a \$25,000 commitment enabled funding from both council and Sport and Recreation Victoria, finally delivering the \$130,000 training nets project after 13 years of stalled attempts.

Perhaps the most visible example is the Community Bank Stadium in Diamond Creek. When the project risked collapse due to rising costs and bureaucratic complexity, the Community Bank group stepped forward - ultimately committing \$1 million



Mernda Cricket Club



Hurstbridge Adult Riding Club



Whittlesea Pacers

and providing leadership to keep the project alive. Today, the stadium serves thousands each week, supporting schools, sports clubs, performances, and community events.

Across women's sport, junior clubs, and emerging codes, the impact has been the same: improved access, safer facilities, and opportunities that might otherwise never have existed. These investments have ensured sport remains inclusive, affordable, and deeply rooted in local life - a lasting legacy of community banking in action.



Montmorency Bowling Club



HBFCNC



Yarrambat Park Ladies Golf





📍 Diamond Valley Wheelchair Basketball

Diversity and Inclusion

VCFS has increasingly recognised that a strong community must be inclusive - designed to support people of all abilities, backgrounds, and circumstances. This understanding has shaped a wide range of investments focused on accessibility, dignity, and participation.

One of the most significant initiatives in this space was the early support of Spectrum Journeys, an organisation established to support families with children on the autism spectrum.

While many government services focused on education, Spectrum Journeys identified a major gap in family support - particularly respite, access to local services, and community connection.

After encountering the program at a Bendigo Bank conference, VCFS helped bring the concept to the local area, funding a public meeting in Eltham that drew more

than 200 families. The response revealed the scale of unmet need across the region.

Programs were piloted in Hurstbridge, bringing services closer to families who had previously travelled long distances for support. Although the initiative ultimately closed, due to the pressure placed on volunteer parents running the organisation, it left a lasting legacy. It highlighted both the depth of local need and the importance of strong governance structures to ensure long-term sustainability - lessons that would later inform future partnerships.

Practical inclusion has also taken physical form. Funding supported the construction of a specialised mounting ramp at Hurstbridge Pony Club, enabling riders with disabilities to safely participate in equestrian activities. Designed in partnership with Riding for the Disabled, the ramp became a prototype for similar facilities across the state.

VCFS also supports the Diamond Valley Basketball Association's 'Wheelchair Basketball Program' - the first initiative of its kind in Melbourne's north. Delivered from a fully accessible venue, the program provides pathways to learn, coach and officiate, and has grown into a thriving social competition where people of all abilities can participate.

The Araluen Centre in Diamond Creek provides vital programs and support for roughly 260 adults with intellectual disabilities across the Nillumbik region. Community Bank support helped fund the completion of the Tiger Studio - a multimedia space built with significant contributions from the Barden family and supporters. The studio required final interior finishing and soundproofing to become fully operational. Built with significant contributions from the Barden family and supporters, the studio required final interior finishing and soundproofing to become fully operational. A \$6,579 contribution from VCFS helped bring the project to completion, creating a creative space for music, media, and expression within the centre.

Long-term partnerships with organisations supporting adults with disabilities have further extended this impact - through funding specialist facilities, training opportunities, and inclusive employment initiatives delivered in collaboration with Rotary and other community groups.

Together, these investments reflect an evolving understanding of inclusion: not as a single project, but as a commitment to removing barriers, strengthening support systems, and ensuring everyone has a place within the community.



WATCH THE WHOLE STORY



Hurstbridge Pony Club



Spectrum Journeys



Araluen



 Current day

Community Bank Stadium

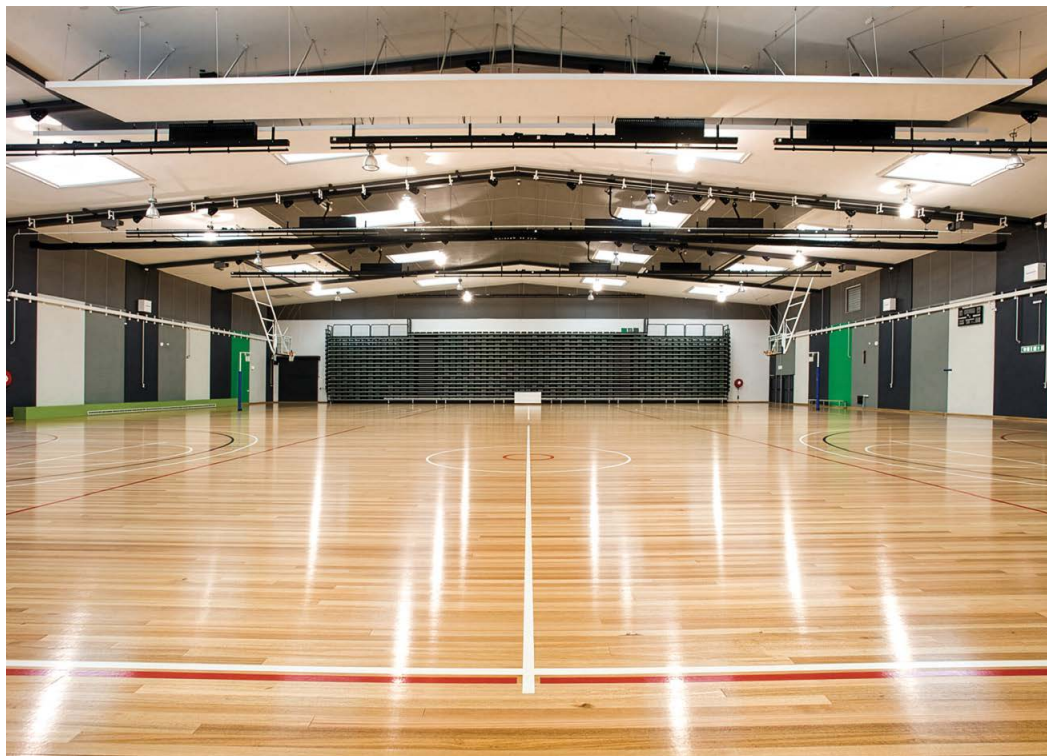
The Community Bank Stadium stands as one of the clearest examples of what can happen when local determination meets community banking in action.

When the project began - rising costs, funding uncertainty, and stalled agreements led the community to believe Diamond Creek may never see their much needed indoor sporting and performing arts facility. Built on education department land between a primary and secondary school, the proposed stadium promised shared use for students on weekdays, and the wider community by night and on weekends. But competing demands and the absence of a joint-use agreement placed the entire project at risk.

VCFS stepped forward.

Initially contributing \$250,000 to restart fundraising momentum, VCFS later committed a further \$750,000 - bringing its total contribution to \$1 million - to ensure the stadium could be completed. The support was not simply financial. Directors chaired fundraising efforts, negotiated with council, and advocated at State Government level to secure the approvals required to proceed. A naming rights agreement was secured, reinforcing the partnership between the facility and the community banking model that helped deliver it.

When the doors opened, the impact was immediate and lasting. Today, the stadium serves approximately 6,000 people each week. Two schools use the courts, while basketball, netball and gymnastics clubs train and compete there.

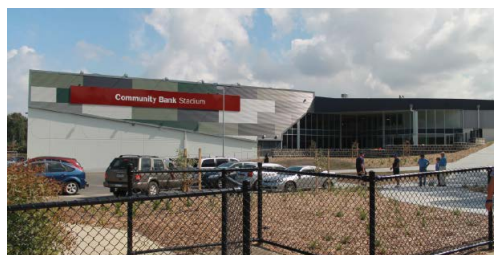

 Inside

Retractable seating allows for audiences of up to 1000, transforming the space into a venue for concerts, productions and community events. What was once a stalled proposal is now a vibrant regional hub.

The stadium is more than a building. It represents leadership, collaboration and belief in local priorities. It reflects VCFS's commitment to backing projects that communities themselves identify as essential - proving that when local people bank locally, extraordinary things can be achieved.



WATCH THE WHOLE STORY


 At Opening

 Opening Day

Environment and Animal Care



WATCH THE WHOLE STORY

INGLAKE WILDLIFE
SUPPORT
27 334 34
Making a difference
in our community
Bendigo Bank

 Kinglake CWA

In the communities served by VCFS, the natural environment is not a backdrop - it is part of daily life. From bushland corridors and waterways to semi-rural properties and townships, connection to landscape and wildlife shapes how people live, build and care for one another. VCFS supports this connection by investing in initiatives that protect, restore and sustain the places and animals that define the region.

Care for animals is equally woven into community life. VCFS supported wildlife shelters in St Andrews and Kinglake as they rebuilt and expanded following fire damage, assisting volunteers caring for wombats, kangaroos and native birds. Funding for a specialist X-ray machine at Murrindindi Ranges Wildlife Shelter improved emergency treatment capacity and animal outcomes across the region.

VCFS also teamed up with Kinglake CWA to fund polar fleece materials to create purpose-made pouches for injured and orphaned baby animals - a small but powerful example of practical compassion meeting local need.

Support has also extended to large animal rescue, equipping Arthurs Creek & Strathewen CFA with specialist lifting and recovery equipment to safely rescue horses and livestock. These investments protect animals, volunteers and responders alike.

Environmental stewardship has long been embedded in the area's identity. One of the earliest and most enduring partnerships was with the Nillumbik Mudbrick Association. What began as a modest sponsorship grew into meaningful collaboration, including support for the development of a formal mud brick building code.

This work helped preserve an environmentally responsive building tradition while enabling it to operate confidently within modern regulatory frameworks.

Grassroots sustainability initiatives have also been supported. Local clean energy groups received assistance as they explored renewable energy solutions, including community-scale solar and battery proposals. While not every concept proceeded, these projects strengthened local knowledge and encouraged forward-thinking conversations about energy resilience. Landcare groups were supported in maintaining waterways and biodiversity, and initiatives such as Boomerang Bags in Hurstbridge combined waste reduction with social connection, well before single-use plastic bans became commonplace.

Together, these initiatives reflect a practical, place-based philosophy. VCFS is committed to strengthening the knowledge, compassion and preparedness that allow communities to care for both their environment and the animals within it.


 Wildhaven

 Mudbrick production

 Arthurs Creek Large Animal Rescue

 Echidna X-Ray

Festivals and Fairs

For 25 years, VCFS has supported festivals and fairs as a vital part of community life - recognising that strong communities are built not only through infrastructure and services, but through shared experiences that bring people together.

Some of the biggest partnerships have been formed with local service groups, particularly Rotary. One of the earliest and most significant examples is the Diamond Creek Rotary Town Fair. When the long-running event faced closure after its original organisers stepped away and funding ceased, Diamond Creek Rotary approached the Community Bank for support - as the fair was at risk of becoming a lost tradition.

In response, VCFS committed to a five-year sponsorship of \$70,000, helping stabilise the event and securing its future on a sustainable footing. The partnership has proven transformative. Over time, the fair not only survived but grew - eventually returning to profitability and becoming one of the most successful in its history. As the festival continues to strengthen, the relationship evolved from financial rescue to collaborative partnership, with a focus on shared projects and co-branding rather than ongoing subsidy.



▲ Pantom Hill Festival

Similar support is now provided to other major local events, including the Eltham Rotary Festival, the Eltham Jazz, Food & Wine Festival, Pantom Hill's Night on the Hill, and the new and improved Hurstbridge Wattle Festival.

Originally in partnership with the Hurstbridge Traders Association, The Wattle Festival, which had been dormant for 90 years, has been reintroduced with Community Bank backing, including underwriting the upfront cost of a steam train attraction - an iconic drawcard that continues to operate successfully year after year.



▲ Pantom Hill On the Hill Festival



▲ Diamond Creek Rotary Town Fair



📍 Diamond Creek Rotary Town Fair

Beyond large-scale festivals, VCFS supports school fairs, multicultural celebrations such as Diwali, and community events across Hurstbridge, Diamond Creek, Eltham, Mernda, Doreen, and Kinglake.

Together, these investments reflect a long-standing belief that festivals and fairs play a crucial role in strengthening identity, connection, and pride.

By helping communities gather, celebrate, and share stories, VCFS has ensured these moments remain part of the region's living history.



📍 Hurstbridge Wattle Festival



📍 Eltham Rotary Festival



📍 Laurimar Town Fair



📍 Dindi Open Studios Kinglake

Arts & Culture

Arts and culture have long played an important role in shaping the identity of the communities served by VCFS. Creative expression, local history, and shared cultural spaces continue to connect communities - particularly through periods of change and recovery.

Community Bank supports a wide range of local arts initiatives, from exhibitions and open studios to heritage preservation. One of the most valuable partnerships has been with Nillumbik Artists Open Studios, an annual program that opens artists' studios across the region to the public. Supported for many years, the initiative showcases the depth of creative talent in the area and produces a publication that documents participating artists and their work, creating a lasting cultural record.

Community Bank support has also extended to local art exhibitions and fine art shows, including early partnerships linked to tertiary

and community education. Following the 2009 bushfires, an art exhibition held in Kinglake was fully sponsored to provide artists with a platform to respond to the fires through their work. The exhibition captured the devastation, recovery, and resilience of the landscape and community, and has continued in various forms since.

Support has also extended to supporting the Open Cellars of Nillumbik on numerous occasions - showcasing boutique family-owned wineries in the Yarra Valley region.

Preserving local history has been another key focus. Support for the Eltham District Historical Society has helped sustain its newsletter and archival work, ensuring stories of the former Shire of Eltham are recorded and shared. This commitment reflects an understanding that culture is not only about creative output, but also about remembering where communities come from.



Eltham Art Show

Arts and culture support has also taken practical, place-based forms. Partnerships with groups such as the Arthurs Creek Community Centre helped protect community ownership of a historic church building, enabling it to be repurposed as a shared cultural and gathering space.

Together, these initiatives highlight a long-standing belief that strong communities are built through creativity, memory, and shared spaces. By investing in arts and culture, VCFS has helped ensure local stories continue to be told, experienced, and passed on.



Mernda & Doreen Multicultural Association Inc



WATCH THE WHOLE STORY



Eltham Historical Society



Community Bank Hurstbridge

Defibrillator Program

Over a decade ago, VCFS began what would become one of its most quietly powerful community programs: funding defibrillators across the region. At the time, portable automated external defibrillators (AEDs) were still relatively new. They were becoming more reliable, easier to use, and more accessible - and, tragically, several highly publicised incidents had shown that lives could have been saved if one had been close at hand.

Responding to this growing awareness, VCFS introduced a dedicated defibrillator funding program. What began as funding individual applications quickly evolved into a structured commitment, with an annual budget allocated to place AEDs in sporting clubs, community facilities, and public locations. In the early years, demand regularly exceeded expectations - a sign of both the program's relevance and the trust placed in the Community Bank.

DEFIBRILLATORS FUNDED FOR THESE LOCATIONS		
Doreen CFA	Riverside Cricket Club	Eltham Bowling Club
Eltham Junior Football Club	Diamond Creek Bowling Club	Hurstbridge Bowling Club
Laurimar Football Club	Hurstbridge Hurricanes	St Andrews Bushfire Recovery Assoc
Mernda Football Club	Basketball Club	Yarrambat Rural Fire Brigade
Research Junior Football Club	Research Fire Brigade	All Saints Anglican Church
North Eltham Wanderers Cricket Club	Panton Hill Football Club	Bundoora Junior Football Club
St Mary's Senior Football Club	Diamond Valley Athletic Club	Diamond Valley College
Plenty Cricket Club		Kangaroo Ground Primary School



▲ Greensborough Hockey Club



▲ Diamond Creek CFA



▲ Plenty Fire Brigade



▲ Kinglake Primary School



▲ Tram Café

Over time, defibrillators were installed at each Community Bank branch, many sporting reserves, CFA locations, and other high-use community spaces. Some were placed internally at first, but experience soon highlighted the importance of 24/7 accessibility - which led to extra funding for 24-hour access cabinets.

The impact has been tangible. It is understood that the defibrillators funded through our program have saved at least 2 local lives so far. Stories like these reinforced the value of the initiative, even though the hope is always that the devices are never needed.

As AEDs became more common and government support increased, Community Bank's role evolved from sole funder to collaborative partner. Today, the program often operates alongside councils, Rotary, Lions Clubs and sporting associations. Importantly, funding is tied not just to equipment, but also to training, maintenance and ongoing support - ensuring devices remain effective over time.

The defibrillator program stands as a practical expression of our philosophy: targeted local investment, responsive to real community needs, with outcomes measured in lives protected - not just dollars returned.



WATCH THE WHOLE STORY



▲ Nillumbik SES



VCFS Staff with "Razor" Ray Chamberlain



Kinglake Opening



Lending Hub



Hurstbridge Branch at Opening

Staff and Branches

For 25 years, VCFS has delivered more than traditional banking across Hurstbridge, Diamond Creek, Eltham, Doreen-Mernda, and Kinglake. Operating under a franchise agreement with Bendigo Bank, the organisation provides full banking services while reinvesting profits back into the local community - a model shaped by local ownership, a dedicated board, and deep community knowledge.

The expansion of branches reflects both community need and strategic adaptation. Hurstbridge and Diamond Creek emerged during a period of widespread bank closures, when major institutions withdrew from towns despite strong local demand. In response, residents backed a community-owned alternative, choosing to support a bank that would remain present and accountable. Eltham and Doreen followed later, with the company partnering with local steering committees to raise capital

and establish new branches, even through periods of financial pressure and industry change.

The Kinglake branch stands apart in origin and purpose. Established after the Black Saturday bushfires, it initially provided financial guidance to residents navigating bushfire recovery. Though small, its presence delivered employment, stability, and became an essential local service during a long recovery period.

Over time, the VCFS strengthened its foundations through careful governance and long-term strategy. It invested in property ownership to build financial resilience, diversified revenue beyond banking alone, and restructured operations to function as one connected business rather than isolated branches. Mobile lending teams, shared staffing, and lending hubs were introduced well before they became common practice across the banking sector.



Kinglake 10th Birthday Celebrations

Central to this success has been staff culture. Branch staff are not only bankers, but community members - familiar faces who understand local clubs, schools, businesses and families. This connection reinforces the core principle that underpins the model: when the community banks locally, the community grows locally - which has a lasting impact for future generations.



Staff and Directors in 2025



Community Bank Diamond Creek Opening Plaque



📍 The Directors in 2016

Board & Volunteers

VCFS was founded on volunteer leadership and community action. Before a branch opened or a dollar was earned, a community steering committee - made up entirely of unpaid locals - worked together to return banking services to the district. That early commitment to service, shared by many across the community, established a culture that continues to define the organisation today.

The company's first directors contributed their time, professional expertise, and personal networks to establish the business. Several community members even covered the initial costs required to prepare a prospectus, later converting those contributions into shares. From the outset, the organisation relied on trust, shared purpose, and a strong belief in local ownership - values mirrored by the many volunteers who gave their time to keep local clubs, services, and community groups thriving.

As the company grew, governance requirements became increasingly complex. Directors assumed the same responsibilities as those in any public company - including compliance, financial oversight, risk management, and regulatory accountability - while remaining deeply engaged in community life. Board members were visible at local events, fundraisers, meetings and project launches, standing alongside the volunteers and organisations they supported.

In time, a modest director fee was introduced with shareholder approval. Rather than acting as remuneration, it was intended to offset the significant out-of-pocket costs incurred through travel, community engagement, and governance responsibilities. Volunteerism remained a core value, with service to the community continuing to be the primary motivation.



➤ Barry and Dale



➤ Directors at the 2025 AGM

Importantly, the Community Bank's impact has never been limited to those around the board table. Across the region, countless volunteers contribute to schools, sporting clubs, emergency services, arts groups, welfare organisations and local initiatives. VCFS exists to support and strengthen these efforts - providing funding, resources and long-term partnerships that enable volunteers to continue their work and help communities flourish.

Across more than two decades, this shared volunteer ethos has shaped the organisation. Directors, staff and community members remain deeply invested in the wellbeing of their towns - ensuring community banking remains both commercially strong and proudly community-focused.



WATCH THE WHOLE STORY



➤ Directors



➤ Malcolm in 2021



➤ The Directors in 2024





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