

# THE POWER OF MENTORING

MOBILISING LOCAL SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE FOR SUPPORTED COMMUNITY GRANTING



Prepared by Fire to Flourish  
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# Acknowledgement

We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and acknowledge the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. We are committed to collaboration that furthers self-determination and creates a better future for all.

This report was created by people living on Boonwurrung/Bunurong, Brinja-Yuin, Djiringanj, Walbunja, Wurundjeri Country.

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians and Owners of the lands on which we work and live across Australia.



# Fire to Flourish

Fire to Flourish was a five-year (2021-2025) community-led program that worked in partnership with communities impacted by the 2019-2020 Australian bushfires to trial innovations in long-term community-led disaster resilience.

Led by Monash University, and philanthropically funded, Fire to Flourish worked at the intersection of community development and disaster resilience in ongoing partnership with communities to co-create and support new approaches to community disaster resilience initiatives. The program has developed and tested new tools and processes to support community action and disaster resilience across four partner communities: Eurobodalla, Tenterfield and Clarence Valley in New South Wales (NSW) and East Gippsland in Victoria (VIC).

Fire to Flourish has enabled communities to have decision-making power over flexible, easy-to-access grant funding, and to have access to resources that equip communities to design and implement projects to enhance disaster resilience.

In Eurobodalla, Fire to Flourish worked in deep partnership with community members, organisations, Elders, and local leaders to strengthen resilience through cultural connection, social capital, community belonging and wellbeing, and skills development.



## PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

Throughout its five year program, Fire to Flourish trialed new approaches to community granting, sometimes called participatory granting.

The Fire to Flourish team in Eurobodalla experimented with community and participatory granting and created a new approach and process for granting that supported community members and applicants all along the way. This practice guide will introduce readers to the Community Project Mentor process and what the Eurobodalla team termed 'supported granting'.

The Supported Granting approach placed a strong focus on mentoring and provided ongoing support throughout a community grantmaking process. This guide will show how mentoring and community support was centred throughout their process and the important and ongoing influence this had on funded projects and the community.

A companion report titled *Supported Community Granting: A Guidebook for Practice* provides more detailed information on Eurobodalla's participatory granting process, including step-by-step guidance for practitioners looking to implement a similar scheme.



# What is Participatory Granting?

Participatory granting is an approach to community granting that recognises the expertise community have about their priorities and needs. It shifts decision making power to communities themselves and increases community agency and self-determination.

Rather than external organisations determining where resources should flow, communities themselves can identify priorities, assess proposals and make funding decisions. Increasing the participation of local people ensures that grants are locally relevant, and aligned with community aspirations.

Importantly, participatory grantmaking is more than a funding mechanism, it is a capability-building platform. It strengthens local governance, deepens collaboration, and fosters inclusion by ensuring diverse groups have a say in how resources are allocated. It is flexible and designed to empower communities and be responsive to evolving needs.

## Our Country in Healing Hands

### Supported Community Granting

In 2024 the Fire to Flourish Eurobodalla community team facilitated a process of supported community granting called 'Our Country in Healing Hands'. This participatory granting process was active between July to November, and distributed AU\$1.2 million to local communities to support local initiatives and strengthen their community disaster resilience.

The defining characteristic of this grant process was the introduction of Community Project Mentors (CPMs). These CPMs were local community leaders that brought particular experience and skills to project ideas.

The introduction of the CPM approach responded to the need to better support grant applicants and prevent burnout among grant recipients. Community leaders that step up and do things for the benefit of the community are essential and valued, but often end up overwhelmed and burnt out. All too often, there is not enough support for those people that are volunteering their time and effort to support their community.

Through community conversations, we repeatedly heard that people wanted someone to call when they got stuck, someone that could help troubleshoot when problems arose. This was a constant challenge for community leaders, who were often left feeling alone and unsupported. The introduction of the Community Project Mentors was our response.

We call this approach 'supported community granting'. In sharing this approach, we hope to encourage you to consider the additional value and benefits that can be gained through running a supported approach to community granting.

I believe this process and [approach to] granting is so unique . . . irrespective of who gets funded, all applicants will gain something from this process.

Community Project Mentor

It was great to be at a community forum – we're all leaders in our own way; First Peoples and non-Indigenous people together having fun.

Grant Applicant

I've never really applied for grant funding before, so [it was] really cool to see a forum like this that's a way of moving ideas forward with funding that's available. It's really empowering, and this process was empowering. The mentors were really good in teasing out what we've got individually.

Grant Applicant

# The Role of Community Project Mentors

The 'Our Country in Healing Hands' process was about more than providing access to funding.

A critical feature and focus of the process was on supporting grant applicants, both through the granting process itself and then later in implementing their projects. It was about providing community members with opportunities to try new ways of working. The process was designed to enhance and strengthen community capabilities in grant writing, and to equip community members with additional skills and knowledge.

Alongside gaining funds for projects, people developed new connections and strengthened community networks. The integration of Community Project Mentors through the whole granting process was key to unlocking these

broader benefits. Mentors played a critical role in helping applicants shape and stress-test their proposals, developing budgets, and connecting with new people or ideas. Establishing a network of mentors was a way of drawing on the strengths and skills that existed in the local community, expanding the reach and impact of the granting process.

Integrating the project mentors into the granting process helped to build a stronger network across our community that has persisted beyond the granting process itself. In our experience, this additional layer of support maximises the benefit of a participatory granting process, both for those applicants navigating the granting process through to grantees working on project implementation.

The image below illustrates the relationship between the grant process itself, and the role of Community Project Mentors at each stage.



# Community Granting

## Journey in more detail

### Understanding community priorities

The design of the community granting round began with facilitated community consultation processes to define community priorities. This process created space for meaningful engagement and open discussion to allow shared priorities and concerns to emerge. From these conversations, two priority themes emerged - Caring for Country and Health & Wellbeing. A First Nations Leadership Gathering was also held, bringing together local Indigenous Elders and community leaders to articulate their vision and priorities for the local community, with a particular focus on how community leaders can best be supported. The insights from this Gathering were critical to informing the design of the 'Our Country in Healing Hands' grant round.

### Expressions of Interest Sought

An Eol process invited early stage project ideas and provided an avenue to support idea development. This reduced barriers to participation by allowing people to explore the opportunity without needing a full project proposal from the outset.

The Eol process also allowed the team to begin matching applicants with CPMs that had relevant experience and skills, with pairs introduced and connected to each other ahead of the Community Forums.

To support the preparation of the Eols, the Fire to Flourish Eurobodalla team developed a Grant Writing Toolkit. This responded to an identified need in the community for a straightforward document to help community members navigate a granting process and prepare an application. The toolkit was distributed widely and shared with all interested community members to support development of their applications.



### Community Workshops & Forums



The forums served as a shared learning space where applicants connected with each other, and tested project ideas in a facilitated and supported environment. With the support of CPMs, the Forums included project labs - connecting people with similar ideas, and supporting applicants to strengthen their idea and final application. Through this process, people may elect to withdraw their project.

All applicants were required to attend at least one of the Forums. Participation ensured that the resulting projects reflected genuine community needs and avoided duplication. It was also a way to facilitate sharing and connection without jeopardising privacy or confidentiality, and ensuring a transparent process, including eligibility and suitability of projects for funding.

### Shortlisting Eols



The shortlist process enabled Community Assessors to identify the strongest applicants and invite them to submit a full funding application. This way, the energy invested in writing an application was only expended by those most likely to be successful (rather than seeking full applications for ideas that were potentially not aligned in the first place).

CPMs also had a role voting on the Eols that should be invited to submit a full application, though they were excluded from voting for the project they supported.

CPMs then supported the applicants to develop the full application.

### Funding Decision

An independent panel of community members were appointed as Grant Assessors - to review grant applications and make final funding decisions.

GRANT PROCESS ENDS

# Community Project Mentor

## Journey in more detail



### Recruit Community Project Mentors

CPMs were recruited via an Expression of Interest process. An overview of the role, responsibilities and requirements was distributed widely throughout the community, and people self-selected to offer their skills and support.

This was followed by a one-on-one conversation to understand the person's expertise and experience in supporting the community. Deliberate attention was given to ensure the CPM cohort reflected the diversity and profile of the broader community.

### Community Project Mentor Training

CPMs received tailored training, including an introduction to Fire to Flourish, the community granting process, the grant criteria and community priorities.



### Community Forum

CPMs attended the Forums having been matched with an EoI applicant. The Forums provided an opportunity to explore project ideas, with CPMs providing support one-on-one and in small groups to applicants.

### Supporting Grant Preparation

CPMs worked with individual applicants to provide tailored guidance as they prepared a full grant application. CPMs would ask questions to help refine the application, such as is the project scope realistic and achievable, who is the target cohort, what are the identified needs and expected outcomes? etc.

OFFICIAL CPM  
ROLE ENDS

# Benefits & Value of the Community Mentor Model

The integration of Community Project Mentors throughout the granting process magnified the benefit delivered to our community.

It strengthened equity and supported people that may otherwise have been excluded or opted out of the granting process. It built confidence, increased project quality, and embedded each project deeply in the place, relationships and culture of the local community. The mentor model has built a strong and supportive network across our community, which continues to provide benefit to those involved, and beyond.

Although the CPMs were formally engaged only for the granting process itself, they continue to support grantees navigate the challenges of project implementation. Strong bonds have formed between CPMs and project leads (grantees), who continue to draw on the guidance and input of their mentors. This support has also become networked, with project leads tapping into expertise and support from other of the Community Mentors as needed.

#### This provides three key benefits:

- Project leads are better supported as they undertake work and deliver projects for the benefit of the broader community, leading to greater satisfaction and less burnout
- New relationships are formed, and existing relationships are deepened across the community, strengthening social cohesion
- The overall quality of projects delivered in our community is improved, as there is wraparound support in the design and implementation phase.

With the introduction of project mentors, the granting process was designed to optimise success for applicants. It provided a critical mechanism to address the biggest challenge for our community, being a lack of structured support for grant applicants.

This model works because it centres relationships, removes barriers, and fosters shared ownership.

By having someone to walk alongside project development and to call on when help was needed, the CPM process not only helped deliver stronger projects for our community, but it deepened and broadened networks of support that will sustain long after this granting process.

Feedback from both the Community Mentors and grantees reinforced the value of this more supported approach to community granting. Grantees have reflected on the support offered throughout the application process, which enabled them to shape and refine their project idea with guidance from a trusted local, and gave them additional support as they built new skills. Mentors have appreciated having an avenue to offer their expertise, and provide support that will benefit the broader community.

This approach to grantmaking is not just focused on the funding alone, but about providing the right support and maximising learning along the way. It shows that community granting processes can be a personal and relational process where applicants are supported to grow their skills and capabilities, while also strengthening social capital and strong communities.

We encourage other groups and organisations to replicate this approach, and experiment with incorporating community mentors into community grantmaking or other initiatives. A community mentor model can embed community leadership, enhance accessibility, support capability-building and cultural safety, while strengthening community networks and social cohesion. The benefits are significant, and of great value to communities, in grantmaking and beyond.



**The Fire to Flourish Eurobodalla team would like to thank our Community Project Mentors and the broader community for your participation and support throughout this journey.**

**Together, we have shared stories and experiences, built new connections and deepened others.**

We are hopeful that the legacy of Fire to Flourish is a demonstration of how community resilience can be achieved. Supporting community leaders, and supporting communities to stand shoulder to shoulder, together.

