

SWIFTS CREEK FUTURE

Local Development Strategy



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Swifts Creek Future acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land our project covers, the Gunaikurnai people, and their enduring connection to Country.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Forestry Transition Program supports businesses, workers, and communities affected by Victoria's transition away from native timber harvesting, which ceased on January 1, 2024.

The objective of the Local Development Strategy (LDS) Grants Program is to assist communities impacted by the Victorian Forestry Plan in developing a local development strategy that:

- » Supports their transition away from native timber harvesting
- » Leads to the creation of new jobs in sustainable industries
- » Results in long-term economic and social benefits for each community

A key objective of the LDS is to foster collaboration within communities and provide capability training to support long-term economic development opportunities. To achieve this, the LDS will draw on the *Smart Specialisation Strategy* (S3) methodology – an evidence-based, inclusive process for identifying and developing regional strengths and assets and opportunities for innovation.

Three pillars:

- » Economic growth
- » Social connection
- » Community stability

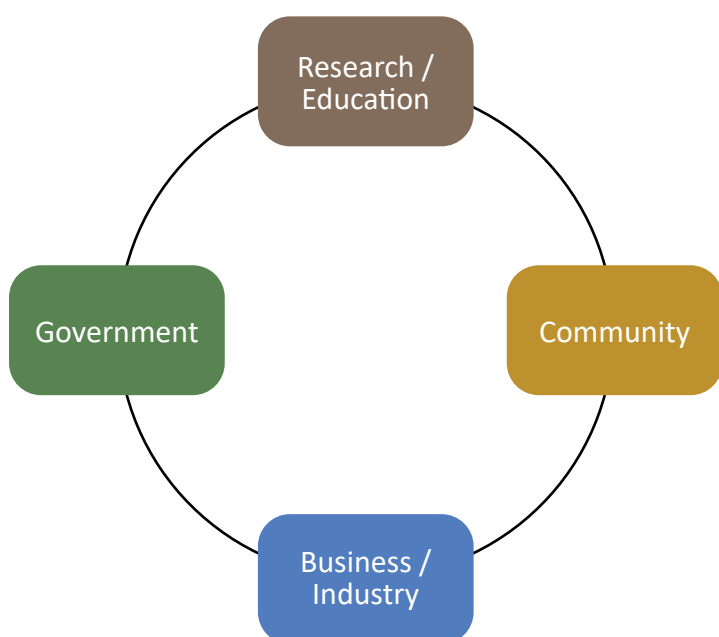


Figure 1: Smart Specialisation Strategy 'quadruple helix' model

A successful Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) relies on effective collaboration between key stakeholders – government, business/industry, community, and research/education sectors – often referred to as the 'quadruple helix'. This model enables the identification and pursuit of innovation and economic development opportunities (see Figure 1). The S3 process fosters efficient innovation systems as a collective effort based on public-private partnerships and ensures an inclusive approach that amplifies the voices of all affected, beyond the 'usual suspects.'

The S3 approach relies on a process of entrepreneurial discovery to identify areas where a region or district excels – or has the potential to excel – in the future. It empowers entrepreneurs who integrate scientific, technological, and engineering expertise with market knowledge to identify high-potential opportunities. This process involves establishing policy mechanisms to gather a region's entrepreneurial knowledge and effectively translate it into policy priorities.

The development of the Local Development Strategy (LDS) followed a structured process outlined in the Regional Context Analysis, beginning with an in-depth assessment of Swifts Creek's economic, social, and environmental landscape to identify key opportunities and challenges. Stakeholder engagement was central to this process, incorporating community workshops, surveys, and consultations to ensure the strategy aligns with local priorities. The Swifts Creek Community Reference Group (SCCRG) was formed to support the community's future beyond the Forestry Transition Program, serving as a vital link between the project team and the community. The SCCRG provided local insights, voiced concerns, and contributed to the planning, design, and implementation of LDS projects.

As of August 2024, the SCCRG has transitioned into the Swifts Creek Community Leadership Group (SCCLG), continuing to provide local knowledge, skills, and advocacy. The SCCLG advises Innovation Working Groups (IWGs) on project development, monitors progress, prioritises work programs, endorses funding applications, and addresses barriers or emerging opportunities. The Leadership Group also includes representatives from the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) and East Gippsland Shire Council (EGSC), ensuring

a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach. Collectively, these efforts form a strategic framework aligned with broader regional and state objectives, guiding sustainable development tailored to the unique needs of Swifts Creek.

The Community Development Fund (CDF) has supported several key projects designed to foster economic resilience and growth in Swifts Creek. These initiatives include the Business Voucher Program, hosted by EGSC, which provides targeted support to local businesses and start-ups, and the development of a Structure Plan to guide future land use and development. Additional projects include feasibility studies for nature-based tourism, education and skills development programs, and value-added primary industries, all aimed at fostering sustainable economic and community development in the region.

Community engagement and collaboration

Engagement with the community and key stakeholders has been a central focus, ensuring open and effective communication channels. The Communication and Engagement Plan has driven outreach efforts, including regular newsletters, website updates, social media activity, and well-attended community events and workshops. This strategic approach has facilitated consistent information-sharing and meaningful dialogue with the broader community.

The Communication Plan, approved by the Leadership Group, prioritises transparency and inclusivity. Members of the Leadership Group actively participate in community events, reinforcing their commitment to the project and fostering strong relationships with local residents, businesses, and other stakeholders.

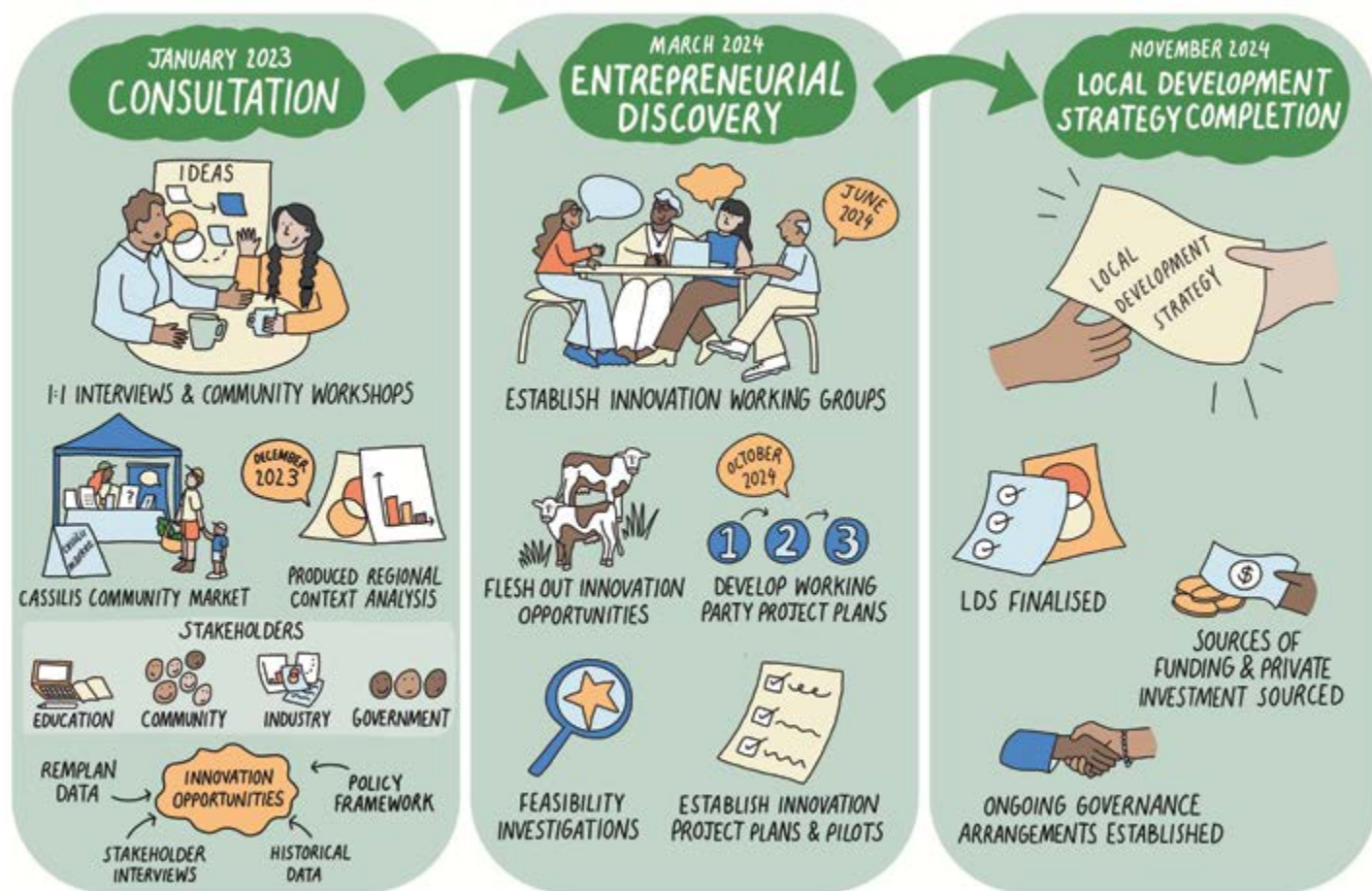


Figure 2: Process of the Local Development Strategy development

Governance and knowledge management

Governance structures have been reinforced through ongoing collaboration between community leaders, government representatives, education and research institutions, and local businesses. Since the project's inception, engagement across these sectors has evolved significantly. Meaningful collaboration with the Council and education sector has strengthened communication, enhanced participation in regional projects, and paved the way for increased investment in community-led initiatives.

To ensure sustainability and continuity, a structured approach to knowledge management and succession planning has been introduced. The development of an information repository will serve as a centralised resource, capturing essential project insights, documentation, and learnings. This initiative is designed to support leadership transitions and maintain project momentum.

Community participation and ongoing support

The transition project has created new opportunities and increased interest across diverse sectors. Active participation from local organisations, businesses, and community members highlights the importance

of sustained collaboration in driving economic development. Key supporters of ongoing community-led initiatives include local businesses, regional development agencies, education providers, and government bodies, all playing a critical role in ensuring long-term success.

Community feedback remains integral to this process, informing decision-making and shaping future actions. Continued engagement and structured governance will ensure that community voices are heard and that Swifts Creek's economic development remains firmly community-driven.

Strategic investment and future directions

The Swifts Creek Future Project has secured \$500,000 in funding from DEECA through the Forestry Transition CDF Stream 1, supporting initiatives through December 2026. This investment enables progress on key community-driven priorities, including nature-based tourism, education and skills development, and value-added primary industries. At the heart of this vision is the Local Development Strategy, which will guide future actions to ensure efforts align with community needs and aspirations over the next two years.



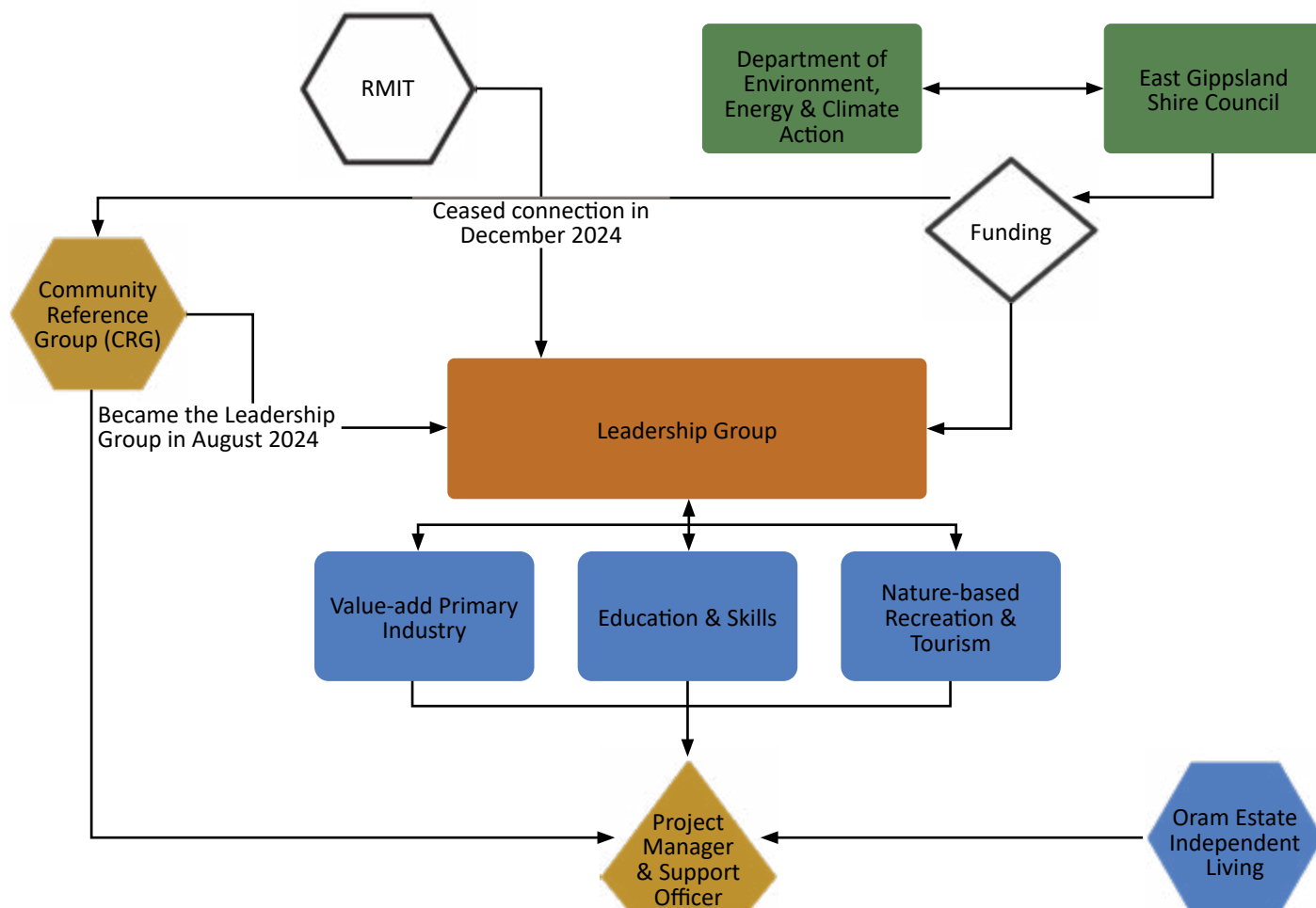


Figure 3: Swifts Creek Future governance and funding structure



REGIONAL A

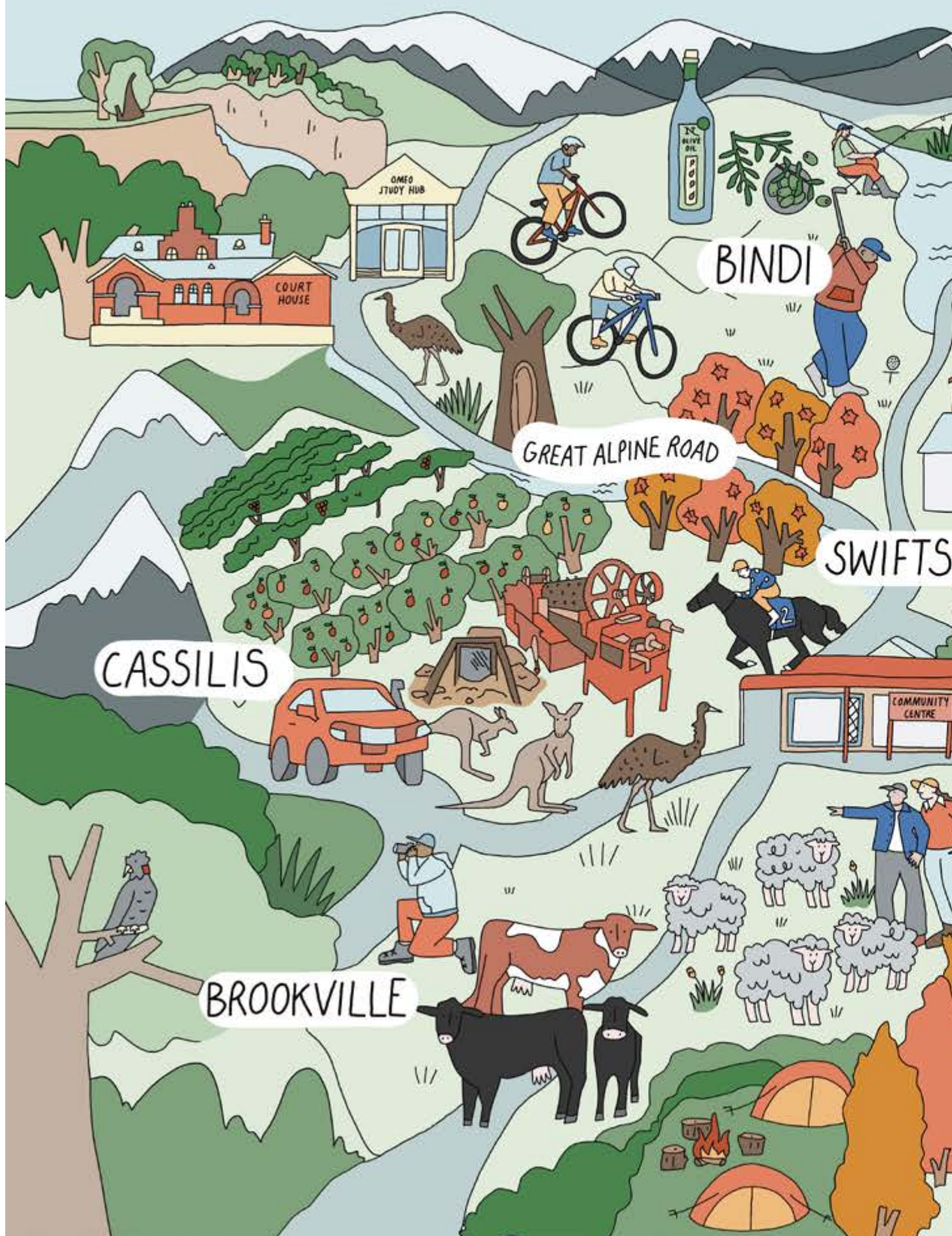
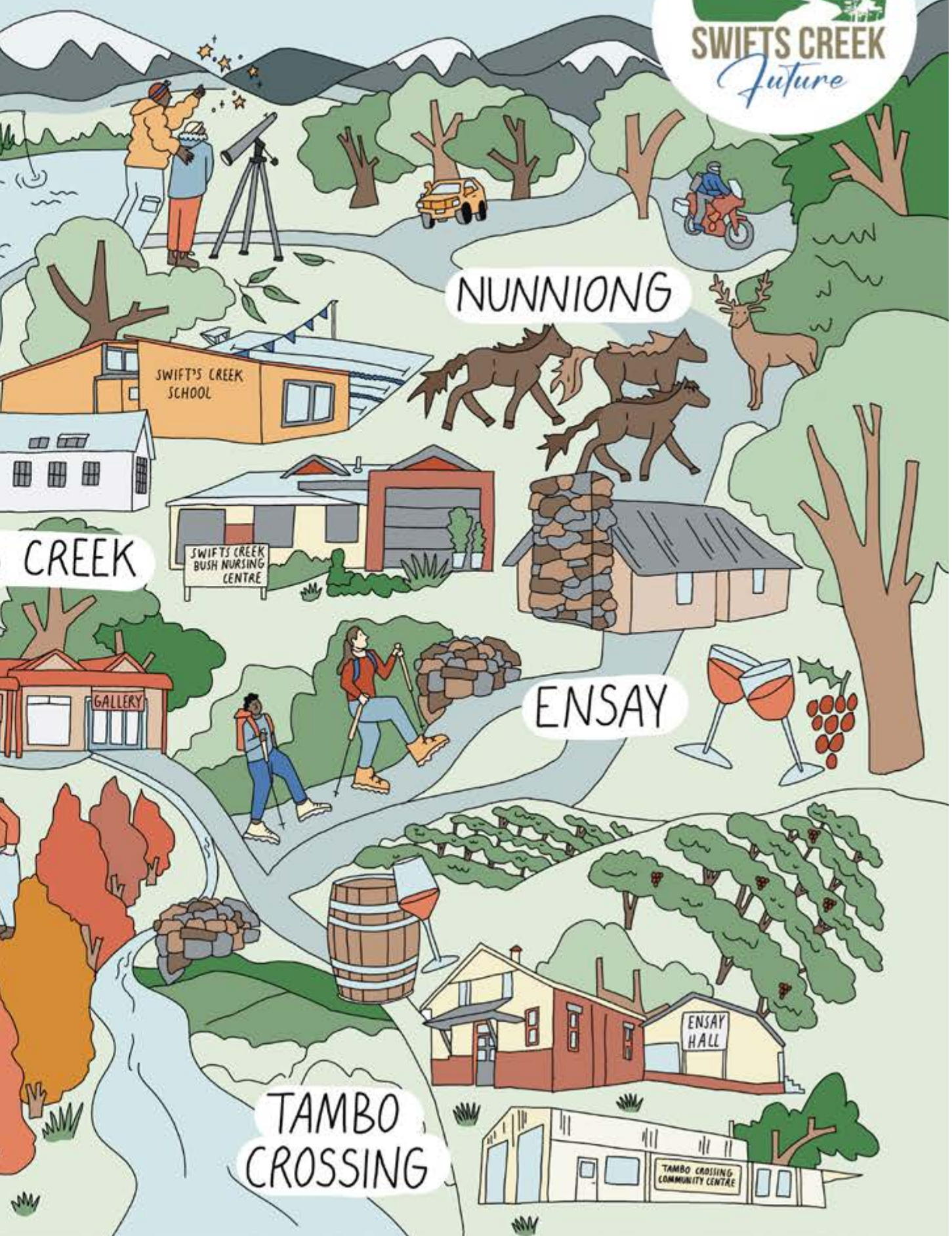


Figure 4: Assets and strengths identified through the initial LDS consultation process

ASSETS MAP



DISTRICT PROFILE

Demographic and economic trends

This section may recapitulate, or update, information provided in the initial Context Analysis.

Swifts Creek and its surrounding district have experienced a gradual population decline, with an ageing demographic being a key concern. The region's population is relatively small, with a significant proportion of residents over the age of 55, raising concerns about the sustainability of essential services and the local labour force. A major challenge facing the community is the outmigration of younger residents, who relocate to larger urban centres for educational and employment opportunities. This trend further accelerates the ageing population and limits the available workforce for local economic activity.

Over the past 50 years, employment in both agriculture and forestry within postcode 3896 has declined significantly. In 1971, agriculture accounted for approximately 45% of the workforce, but this steadily dropped to 19% by the 2021 census. Similarly, forestry, which once employed around 30% of workers in the 1970s, had shrunk to just 10% by 2021 due to changing environmental policies and reduced logging activities. While these shifts reflect broader economic trends, they also highlight an opportunity to build on the enduring strength of the agricultural sector. By investing in innovation, value-added agricultural products, and sustainable practices, the region can revitalise its economic base and create more stable employment opportunities.

However, employment in the region remains highly seasonal, contributing to economic instability. A key strategy to address this challenge is the development of nature-based tourism, an industry with significant untapped potential. The region's natural beauty provides a strong foundation for tourism, yet it remains underdeveloped. Expanding this sector could help diversify the economy, create year-round employment, and attract investment, strengthening the community's long-term economic resilience.

Geographic challenges and opportunities

Swifts Creek's geographic isolation and limited services continue to pose challenges for economic growth and access to essential services such as healthcare and education. Many residents must travel to nearby towns to meet basic needs, and the lack of higher education facilities contributes to the outmigration of younger people.

Despite these difficulties, the community remains resilient, with strong involvement in local volunteer organisations such as, but not limited to:

- » Sporting and events clubs
- » Landcare
- » Country Women's Association (CWA)
- » Great Alpine Gallery
- » Country Fire Authority (CFA)

Housing affordability presents a potential opportunity to attract new residents, retirees, or remote workers, though this potential has yet to be fully realised. Overall, Swifts Creek's demographic and economic profile presents both significant challenges and strategic pathways for growth through targeted investment in tourism and community services. Expanding this sector could diversify the economy, create more year-round jobs, and attract new investment, strengthening the community's long-term economic resilience.



Figure 5: Project area map

COMMUNITY VALUES AND ASPIRATIONS

Community consultation process

Community consultation was conducted at multiple levels, including:

- » One-on-one interviews with residents
- » Small group interviews
- » Workshops (participation ranging from 6 to 20 attendees per session)
- » Engagement at local community markets, providing information and fostering discussions on key topics

One dominant theme throughout these discussions was local pride and passion for the area. This was particularly evident in times of hardship, such as bushfires and floods, when the strength of community bonds was most apparent. One participant shared that when they first moved to the area, they experienced a bushfire, and local residents offered them resources, checked in on their well-being, and provided support before, during, and after the event.

Key issues identified by the community

- » Sewerage infrastructure: historical challenges and investigations
- » Accommodation shortages
- » Zoning regulations and potential adjustments
- » Childcare availability and services
- » Retention of staff and jobs to maintain population stability

Navigating transition and strengthening regional leadership

The Swifts Creek Future Initiative is managing a period of significant transition as the local timber industry adjusts to the cessation of native forest harvesting, affecting both workers and businesses. A range of support measures has been introduced to assist affected individuals, including financial assistance, retraining programs, and business transition grants aimed at helping businesses diversify and employees reskill.



The closure of the Omeo Region Community Recovery Association (ORCRA) has highlighted the need for strong regional leadership, prompting the establishment of a new regional body to support the Omeo Region through this transition. The *Our Community Disaster Resilience Plan on a Page* highlights both the strengths and vulnerabilities of Swifts Creek and its surrounding communities.

Key regional strengths:

- » Strong local knowledge and practical skills
- » Well-connected community networks
- » Reliable emergency response and infrastructure
- » Dedicated volunteer and emergency workers

Identified vulnerabilities:

- » Ageing population and workforce decline
- » Limited resources and stretched local services
- » Unreliable communication and power infrastructure
- » Geographic isolation and emergency response capacity gaps

Primary hazards impacting the region:

- » Bushfires
- » Floods
- » Drought
- » Pandemics
- » Severe storms
- » Biosecurity threats

The Disaster Resilience Plan underscores the importance of:

- » Reliable road access and infrastructure maintenance
- » Improved communication and power networks
- » Collaborative fuel management strategies
- » Strengthening social connection to enhance resilience and wellbeing

On a positive note, the opening of Stage 2 of the Mountain Bike Park in Omeo marks a significant milestone, offering new opportunities for recreation, tourism, and economic development in the region. growth in the region.

Existing and emerging drivers of prosperity

Agriculture

The region's longstanding and evolving agricultural industry remains a pillar of economic stability. Investment in sustainable farming practices and value-added processing could further expand this sector's contribution to the economy.

Nature-based tourism

With attractions such as the Mountain Bike Park and potential for eco-tourism expansion, nature-based tourism is an emerging economic driver. Leveraging natural assets for tracks, trails, and eco-tourism experiences offers opportunities to showcase the region's natural beauty and cultural heritage.

Local infrastructure and services

Community facilities and essential services, including healthcare, education, and retail, play a crucial role in supporting both residents and visitors. Continued investment in infrastructure will underpin regional stability and long-term growth.

Goal	Action	Measures	Delivery partners	When	Who	Status
Liveability	Roads - access / opportunity					
	Regional Discovery tour		DG, EGSC, tour operators, influencers? MPs, philanthropic trusts		NBRT IWG	
Boost visitor retention	Participate in the EGSC streetscape planning		EGSC	3 months April 2025		
	Investigate potential opportunity and support installation of public EV Charging Station	Charging station installed	Gippsland Climate Change Network, EGSC	Within 12 months January 2026	Project Manager	Investigation report complete. Preferred location for installation identified. Subject to successful funding from GCCN
	Collaborate with local businesses and EGSC to create initiatives that encourage visitors to stop and engage with the community		Omeo Region BTA, Regional Group, EGSC	November 2025		
Supporting skills and capability building	Complete skills and learning gap audit for the region	Audit report completed	Local businesses, committees, neighbourhood houses, recreational facilities	4 months May 2025	Project Manager	
	Develop a 2-year learning plan for the area in partnership with local neighbourhood houses	Learning plan developed with approximate timetable leveraging local events	Neighbourhood Houses, GippsTAFE, Gellen, LLEN, Learn Local, East Gipps NHH network, EGSC	July 2025	Project Manager	
Support development	Advocate/investigate enablers for development » Sewerage » Potential rezoning	Structure plan	EGSC	Ongoing	EGSC, Leadership Group	*Application to CDF submitted
	Identify and promote development sites	Structure plan	EGSC			

Education & Skills

Goal	Action	Measures	Delivery partners	When	Who	Status
Create learning network	Investigate researchers that visit the area	Developed network report with contacts	Universities, research organisations, tertiary organisations	January 2026		
	Community mentor program to pair skilled locals with those wanting to learn					
This is Swifts Creek Pilot	Work with Swinburne and Monash to establish “This is Swifts Creek” pilot,	Pilot established	Swinburne, Deakin, Swifts Creek P-12	June 2025	E&S IWG	
Investigate potential for Live & Learn facility	Engage consultant to compete investigation into feasibility of Live & Learn facility	Final study report completed	Skills 4 the Future, EGSC	April 2025	E&S IWG	

Nature-based Recreation & Tourism

Goal	Action	Measures	Delivery partners	When	Who	Status
Investigate potential outdoor activity investment	Engage consultant to complete feasibility into tracks and trails	Final study report completed	TRC Tourism	April 2025	NBRT IWG	
Promote visitation	Increase signage and mapping of the area	Number of maps/signs/information installed/available	Parks, DEECA, Omeo Historical Society	June 2026	NBRT IWG	
	Create a tourism network of operators and service providers to encourage provision of tourism packages	Network developed	Tour operators, hotels, pubs/ cafe/bakery, East Gippsland Winter Festival, Great Alpine Gallery	June 2026	Project Manager	
	Support potential establishment of mural trail project	Creating stakeholder networks, supporting project proposals and outlines, supporting funding applications	EGSC, Private landowners			
	Collaborate with Omeo MTB for advertising		EGSC	October 2026		
	Support potential of Crossley engine static display in Ensay	Establish sub-working party, Develop project plan, create network of stakeholders	DEECA, EGSC	October 2026	NBRT IWG	
	Support Jirnkee Water Race trail proposal	Establish sub-working party, Develop project plan, create network of stakeholder	DEECA, Parks Victoria	October 2026	NBRT IWG	

Value-add Primary Industry						
Goal	Action	Measures	Delivery partners	When	Who	Status
Create available resources		Resource hub established		October 2026	VAPI IWG	
Provide local supports	Develop targeted support programs	Number of programs delivered	Ag Vic, EGSC, RFCS	September 2026	VAPI IWG	
Investigate collaborative farming practices	Community engagement to increase interest and support	Engagement session held		? Completed or post proposal?		
	Engage consultant to research and provide evidence on best model with benefits	Report		August 2025		
Promote diversity and opportunity	Host a carbon offset information session?		Greening Australia	August 2025		

Oram Estate Independent Living						
Goal	Action	Measures	Delivery partners	When	Who	Status
Feasibility	Support an application to the CDF for a feasibility study	Application approved	Swifts Creek Bush Nursing Centre		Leadership Group	November 2024 Leadership Group approved application of up to \$120,000 to CDF for feasibility study
Create connections within Council	Provide Connections within Council for planning and regulatory requirements		Swifts creek Bush Nursing Centre, CMA, DEECA	September 2026	Project Manager	Meeting held September 2024 created discussions within Council regarding land use and permits



Thank you to the communities of the Swifts Creek Future project and all the participants for their contribution and support.

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