



# Reclaiming our Purpose:

It's time to talk about the public good

A PRACTICAL AND VALUES-LED FRAMEWORK

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This report was prepared for Australia reMADE by Dr Millie Rooney and Lilian Spencer, March 2022.

# the moment

There's nothing like a crisis to highlight what really matters and to show us how quickly things can move.

The crises of the past few years have given us moments where challenging norms are possible. Who would have thought Australia would test a form of universal basic income, or that the majority of our population would willingly participate in lockdowns and border closures?

These rips in the very fabric of business as usual offer an opportunity, but the neoliberal system is very good at quickly closing in, blaming bad actors for any perceived mistakes and protecting itself.

**“Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change.”**

- Milton Friedman

The challenge now is how do we best navigate the aftershocks and ongoing disruptions, learn the lessons and pragmatically apply them, given the difficulties that lie ahead?

This report offers a way forward – a scaffolding for advocates, community leaders, public servants and holders of public office, based on the deeply-shared values of people from very different backgrounds across the country.

Beyond punctuated moments of global crisis when we may stand up for 'freedom' or 'democracy', our current politics is sorely missing a clear articulation of purpose and values. We are going to need this in the complex and unpredictable decade ahead.

No one can map the future, but we *can* provide a compass to guide us through.

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# the project

From the middle of 2020 through to late 2021, we listened to Australians from different walks of life talk about what was sustaining them, and what they wanted more of: be it better roads, more community spaces, or different ways of doing democracy.

No politician to elect, no product to sell. Just dialogues grounded in genuine respect, curiosity and the road-tested belief in the power of good questions to bring people together.

We recruited several hundred participants, embedded in more than 45 different organisations and networks, from diverse backgrounds, interests and political inclinations. Dr Millie Rooney and a team of Australia reMADE-trained community facilitators led a series of qualitative interviews and focus groups focused around two key questions, "What do you want available to you and your communities?" and "forgetting who pays for it, who do you think should provide this?".

Further details about this project can be found on our website,

[www.australiaremade.org/public-good](http://www.australiaremade.org/public-good)

# the findings – it's time to reclaim our public good

The public good. It's a phrase we tested in this work, and found deeply useful for showing us what people value, regardless of their politics or background.

First up, there are a handful of basic goods and services people want to be available to everyone. These came up time and again, in every conversation and group, regardless of people's socio-economic resources, location, cultural background or political leanings. Namely, they are **housing, healthcare, education, jobs, access to nature and access to the internet.**

People also talked about culturally safe spaces, culturally-appropriate healthcare, good footpaths, a sense of community identity, reliable and kind welfare payments, governments with integrity, getting money out of politics, laws to protect nature and climate, a fair and transparent justice system, less polarisation; a responsible, truthful and unbiased media; places where 'the coffee is free', park benches, emergency housing, access to community mental health, parks... and more.

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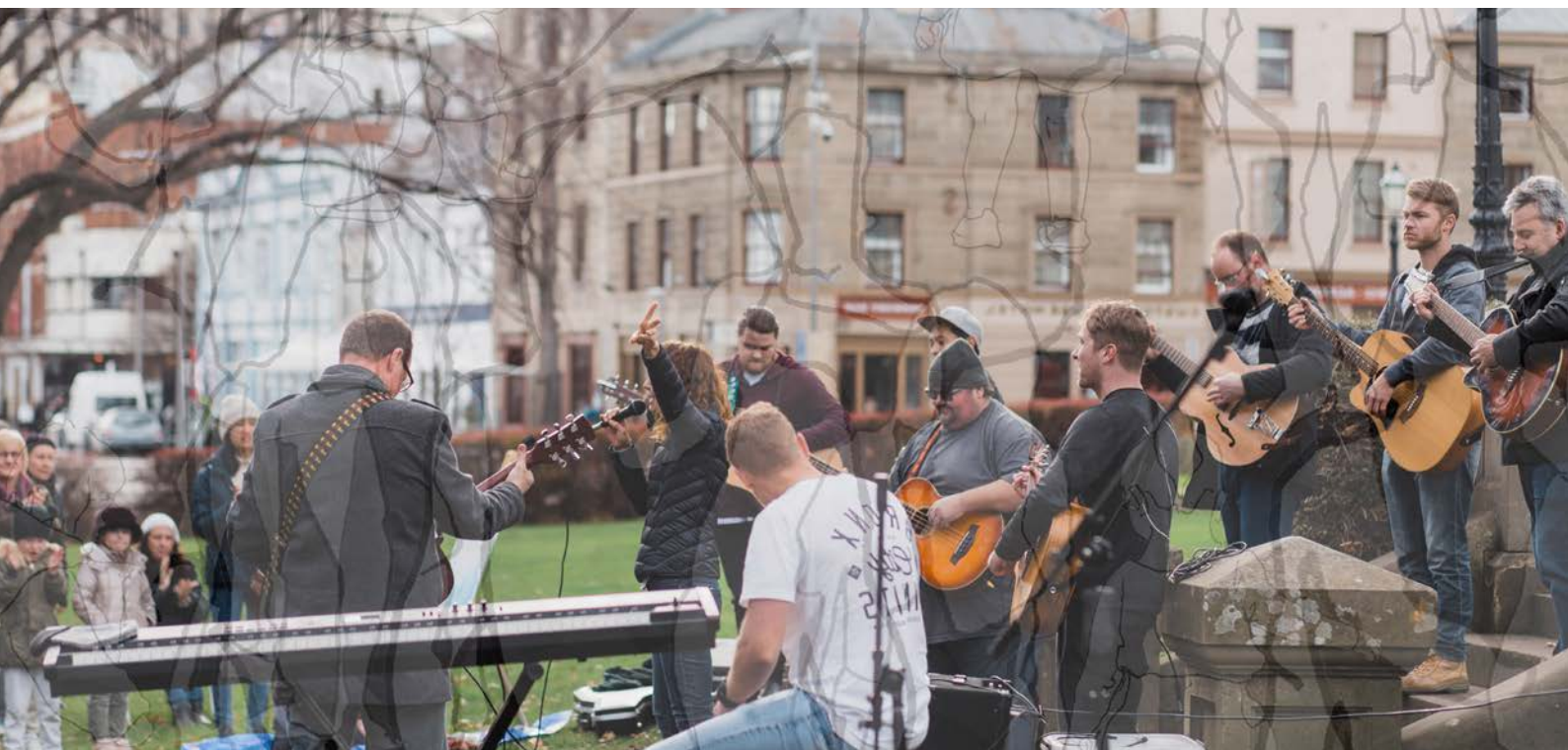
These are all important. But in every conversation, after people had rattled off the top-of-mind essentials, they would pause, reflect and begin to go deeper. And that's where the real heart of this research takes us.

**We heard the call, beautiful in its sincerity and simplicity, for three core things:**

- 1. The opportunity to **CONNECT** with each other and with place;**
- 2. The ability to **CARE** and be cared for; and**
- 3. Pathways to **CONTRIBUTE** locally and nationally to who we are as communities and as a nation.**

Connection. Care. Contribution. These are what we've come to understand as the real building blocks of public good – or in the words of one of our participants, the “things that provide, and are public domain and are offered to everyone” - Miriam (poet).

Let's take a closer look at each, starting with connection.



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# connection

Participants want, and most Australians would agree, that we absolutely need the **physical infrastructure of connection**: things like telephone lines, roads, public transport and good internet.

They **ALSO** identified the desire for **more and better infrastructure that supports us to connect** – the spaces and places that facilitate human interaction, such as:

- public parks, playgrounds, community and seniors' centres, outdoor 'furniture' like park benches and exercise equipment, and other physical public spaces that are thoughtfully designed, accessible and maintained;
- publicly-available community activities where people are actively welcomed and engaged (both online and face to face); and
- workplaces of all kinds where time and space is made for human interactions that are not directly related to output or productivity (something many of us lost during COVID when we began working from home).

Regardless of where people lived, their age, their cultural identity, people want to connect and belong to community and to place; and they want this for others. Specifically, they want places for people to come together that don't require money and where there is a sense of being specifically welcomed.



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*"[My mum works] at the local pub which has a gaming room and there's an old guy who would show up every week or so and give my mum a big tip and basically come to the gaming room just to socialise with people. I want people like him to have a space where they don't have to spend money to be able to socialise and be connected."*

- Jess (young person), regional Victoria

People want to be welcomed and want to "belong without having to fit in".

*"Belonging is when we can take our whole self, the magnitude of who we are to spaces, knowing we are accepted and we matter when it's safe to be ourselves without compromising."*

- Kuweni (artist), regional Queensland

We also heard about the importance of community festivals and events that contribute to the local understanding of who the community is. Connection isn't always provided through obviously utilitarian infrastructure. In this context, funding and making space for art is an example of connective infrastructure.

*"People are looking for story, to have their lives reflected back at them and we do that through art."*

- Miriam (poet), Sydney

*"We need common spaces and places... We need common spaces to be in community, neighbourhoods, etc. Libraries do some of this."*

- Michael (accountant), regional Victoria



# care

We all want and need to care and be cared for at different times in our lives. Participants clearly identified the need for **physical infrastructure of care** – things like hospital beds and childcare centres.

They **ALSO** talked about the **necessity of infrastructure that supports us to care, be cared for and feel cared for**, such as:

- staffing ratios that enable services to operate effectively and compassionately;
- services that recognise different cultural or social needs of particular communities, such as the need for access to Country to be considered an essential element of healthcare for First Nations people; and
- adequate time to care – both for formal carers and for those supporting and contributing to the wellbeing of family, friends and their community.

We heard about the need for formal care services such as social security payments, healthcare and so on to be delivered in ways that in themselves show care. Participants talked about the growing gap between the language of what government services are there to do, and the perceived reality on the ground for people experiencing those services.





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*"When I first got family assistance they sat you down and went, 'what do you need?' [They would] go through it all. The current process is, apply for it and they'll tell you you can't have it. Apply for something different and they'll tell you you can't have it. Rather than telling you what is available."*

- Barbara (supply logistics), outskirts of Melbourne

Many participants from across very different backgrounds spoke clearly about their desire to not just be cared for, but to offer care themselves. For example we heard from renters who not only wanted to receive the care of a safe home, but actively wanted to care for the places in which they lived.

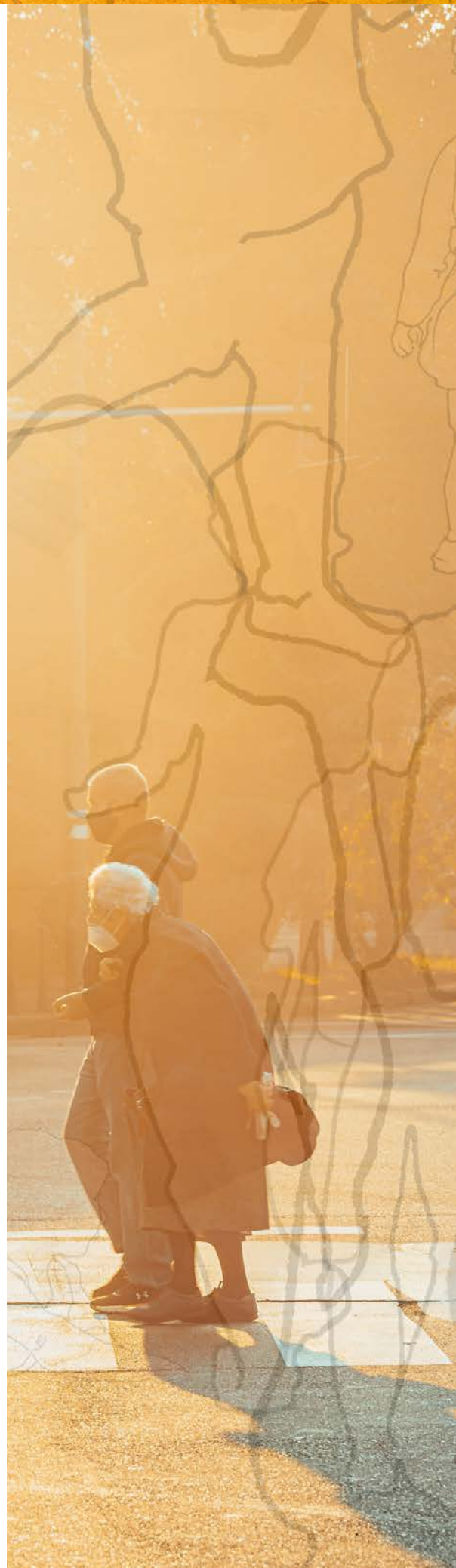
*"[If we had different rental laws] we'd be able to invest our emotions, time and resources into our homes. We could put art on the walls and grow wonderful gardens. We could restore the antique door, repaint the living room, and love and care for where we live."*

- Miranda (single parent), Sydney

Similarly in the case of a neighbourhood centre, part of the enabling infrastructure for care was building a culture that de-stigmatised the need for care and highlighted that everyone gives and receives in different times and different ways.

*"It became known, people in need who need financial help come to the Community Centre to receive either food vouchers or hampers of healthy food. So some people didn't want to come 'cos 'people in need go there and I'm not in need'. So we worked very consistently on [the idea that] all of us have needs and all of us are helpers [and] there's no one exempt from that equation... The stigma has lifted and people are using it... and that's been beautiful to witness."*

- Mariana (community centre manager), regional NSW



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## Contribution

The need to contribute also came through strongly, but it's a blind spot for many in our politics, policy and advocacy. Participants saw the value in **formal processes** like voting in elections, doing paid or voluntary work and paying taxes.

They **ALSO** talked at length about the need for **infrastructure that enables us to contribute**, such as:

- a culture of public expectation of being heard and respected (we heard a lot about the feeling that citizen input or feedback was mostly disregarded and lost in a void of bureaucracy);
- genuine processes and friendly structures for citizen engagement with government decision-making, planning and service delivery (we heard about the need for easier ways to contribute, and the importance of having positions for 'everyday people' people on governing bodies for hospitals, schools and other institutions serving the public good); and
- the time and freedom to participate in unions, committees, civic endeavours and voluntary work (we heard a lot about the lack of time people have to participate in volunteer groups, write submissions or attend council meetings, and the need for spare capacity to enable them to do so).

*"Back to the issue of time. Some people have no time. Others have too much. How do we share that more? How do we free up time for each other to be citizens?"*

- Rob (retired), Tasmania



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People spoke of the desire to contribute more directly both locally and nationally and the need for an infrastructure to enable this. For many this was about genuine processes of listening and consultation.

*"We want the government to come and be responsible for initiating conversations, [and not just as] a media performance or a publicity stunt. They need to come and just listen to understand."*

- Jess (manager, First Nations woman),  
regional New South Wales

*"You asked about mechanisms to engage. They need to be meaningful. Committees are boring and you can feel you are just token. The citizens' jury model is interesting because you know you have power as a group. It's not necessarily going to go your way, but you understand the process and know your role. Meaningful process and trust in that process is essential."*

- Tracey (farmer), Western Australia

## Take-away

Connection, care and contribution provide the principles and frame through which to develop, advocate and evaluate policies, programs and solutions. They cross the left/right divide and offer us a pathway forward based on shared values. We should be asking:

- Does this work, policy or solution help meet people's need for connection (including the time and space to connect)?
- Does it help meet people's need to care and be cared for (including the time and space to care)?
- Does it help meet people's need to contribute, whether locally or nationally (including the time and space to contribute)?





# Messaging advice for practitioners and change-makers

ONE: The “public good” is a helpful phrase – USE IT.

TWO: Insert the language of connection, care and contribution into your work.

THREE: Widen how you talk about and define ‘infrastructure’.

FOUR: Set high expectations publicly of ‘good government’.

FIVE: Be clear that ‘everyone means everyone’.

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## ONE: The “public good” is a helpful phrase – USE IT.

The “public good” is a wonderfully useful term.

- It expresses the value of collective endeavour and wellbeing;
- It provides a broad entry point for people from all sorts of backgrounds and political persuasions, as well as a simple frame for bringing together seemingly different issues; and
- It provides a simple but powerful counter to ‘the economy first’ narrative.

It's a phrase that unites us while letting different approaches and causes be the focus of our individual work. It's a term that doesn't come with a lot of baggage, so there's an opportunity for us to define it in the public's mind. **If we do nothing else, let's start using this phrase as often as possible in our work and public-facing communications.**

For example, secure housing is a public good, strong laws for climate action are a public good, a robust federal Independent Commission Against Corruption is a public good, a Constitutionally-enshrined voice for First Nations is a public good, and so on. It's also a good litmus test to draw attention to in the public's mind: is something or someone really serving the public good, or private profit/political self-interest?

Sample messages:

- *“As Australians ricochet between devastating fires and floods, there's no doubt that ending the climate crisis as fast as possible is a public good, and we need government to prioritise it immediately.”*
- *“As we saw during COVID, ending poverty in Australia is not only possible, it's a public good for all Australians. We're better off as a country when we all feel secure and know that in good times and in hard times, we have the essentials we need.”*
- *“Is XYZ really there for the public good, or merely to feather someone's nest?”*

**“I don't want my policy decisions made and implemented by profit-focused corporations. There should be no profit in policy. No profit in care. No profit in education.”**

Sonya (facilitator, Canberra)

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## TWO: Insert the language of connection, care and contribution into your work

Just as the public good is a useful phrase, so too are the words “connection”, “care” and “contribution” – embrace them. They are even more powerful when combined with the word “infrastructure” (see next point with messaging examples).

## THREE: Widen how you talk about and define ‘infrastructure’

Our research highlights the underrated value of ‘enabling infrastructure’ – the invisible structures and supports that ensure our physical infrastructure and services actually serve their intended purpose.

Time seems to be the most important type of enabling infrastructure, and the hardest to pin down. We all need the time to do our jobs well; to connect, care and be cared for, and to be able to contribute to the public good beyond paid employment. We also need the space that “unproductive” and “unaccountable” time provides for our creativity and focus to flourish, and for human relationships to develop and thrive. We need these things to be valued and supported.

So for example, we can start referring to essential infrastructure as not just roads, hospitals and factories, but also as good staffing levels and four day work weeks; regulations that curb the power and change the business models of Big Tech, and so on.

Likewise, community festivals are essential connection infrastructure, good staffing ratios are essential care infrastructure, and underlying economic support to help free up people’s time are essential contribution infrastructure.

**We should expand our definition of infrastructure and what needs to be built to include these less tangible but no less essential pieces of social scaffolding.**

### Sample messages:

- *“We want infrastructure that enables connection and community cohesion to flourish – so the business model of Big Tech has to change. We want it to serve the public good, not profit from disinformation, polarisation and addicting children and adults.”*
- *“Whether we’re talking about a child, parent, neighbour or friend, we all need time to care and be cared for throughout our lives. Paid parental leave, universal carers’ leave and flexible work hours are essential care infrastructure for the public good.”*
- *“Making sure the community can participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect them is essential contribution infrastructure for our democracy.”*

## FOUR: Set high expectations publicly of 'good government'

For the public good to flourish, we need good government. People believe in the importance of government (as one participant said, "when the chips are down, we need government") but we found people are also concerned that governments are not up to the task of dealing with contemporary challenges. As people withdraw from civic engagement they turn instead to individual and local community action, and or/the private sector.

While there is a role for each of these different approaches, there is also a real danger: by dismissing the value of good government and good use of the state, we diminish and undermine the capacity of government to provide much of the public good infrastructure we have identified as vital to collective wellbeing.

So we need to be loud about our expectations and the potential for good government. The Australian Conservation Foundation has a fantastic resource with practical tips on how to talk about democracy in a way that acknowledges the problems without contributing to cynicism about government in general (<https://www.acf.org.au/democracy-narrative-guide>).

Also, when celebrating the grassroots community or business leadership, remember not to let government off the hook. Likewise, we can encourage people to build community initiatives in a way that connects up to democracy. Kitchen Table conversations and the Voices4 movement are great examples of this, as is community organising, participatory budgeting, 'flatpack democracy' and sending community interns to Parliament. For more on all this, see our "Community, Democracy, Power" blog on our website ([www.australiaremade.org/blog/community-democracy-power](http://www.australiaremade.org/blog/community-democracy-power)).

### Sample messages:

- *"While it's great to see XYZ business/the community stepping up to support flood victims, let us never forget that in Australia, no one should have to rely on charity alone. Go Fund Me is not a social safety net, that's what good government is for."*
- *"Good government should provide strong leadership to decarbonise our economy and solve the climate crisis as quickly as possible, to prevent and minimise these kinds of extreme weather events."*
- *"Putting the public good before vested interests is essential to our democracy. It's time for good government to get serious about a federal ICAC and getting money out of politics."*

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## FIVE: Be clear that 'everyone means everyone'.

For the public good to be meaningful it must be universally available. So we need to be clear, bold and repetitive that everyone means everyone – regardless of who they are, where they live, how much money they make, or where they come from. Simply using the language of “everyone” often and with conviction drives this point home.

While in practice this might mean that billionaires have the same right to free healthcare as those with only \$3 in the bank, that's part of the public good, too. (Anyone worried about this should ensure billionaires also contribute more in taxes to pay for the public goods that benefit everyone.)

So we can talk about how it is a public good for everyone to be cared for when and where they need it, to have the opportunity to be connected to people and place, and to contribute at both micro and macro scales to their community.

This means things like social security payments, disaster support, access to healthcare, paid leave, good roads, public transport, internet and inclusive spaces aren't just private luxuries or 'nice to haves'. Talk about them as public goods that benefit everyone.

### Sample messaging:

- *“In Australia, everyone has the right to healthcare. That's a public good we're proud of, and whether you have \$3 in the bank or \$3 million, you can count on this essential infrastructure to be there when you need it.”*
- *“Whether you live in a big city or small country town, we all need to feel connected to the place we call home. Public libraries, parks and other free community spaces are vital infrastructure for everyone in our communities to be able to access.”*
- *“Our communities are stronger and our people flourish when we're all encouraged and supported to contribute. Whoever you are, there's a place and way for you to contribute, and it's in the public good to help you find it.”*





# SUMMARY

Right now we have an incredible opportunity.

**The public good connects us to each other, brings us closer to democracy and provides a common language and framework for bringing together the things we care about.**

It's a concept that isn't geared only at left or right, and which allows us to lightly stitch together the work that many of us do in different sectors, on different issues and in different ways. Public good helps us to begin to prioritise infrastructure that enables:

- The opportunity to **CONNECT** with each other and with place;
- The ability to **CARE** and be cared for; and
- Pathways to **CONTRIBUTE** locally and nationally to who we are as communities and as a nation.

Others are already racing to meet these needs (think profit-driven corporations, Big Tech's surveillance capitalism and the appeal of online conspiracy theory groups). It's time for us to match their ambition.

**We must recognise the value of the often-invisible enabling infrastructure required for connection, care and contribution.** And in doing so use and embed the language of the public good in our work, set high expectations of government, and be clear that the public good means ensuring that everyone is included.

Change is inevitable, happening and here.

Yet we run the risk of the neoliberal system doing what it does best: self-healing its wounds and more deeply entrenching inequality and the supremacy of economic growth at any cost.

We saw this happen after the Global Financial Crisis and it is entirely possible it will happen again.

The findings from this research suggest a way forward that holds open the door of possibility. Embracing the public good can shape our strategies in ways that create space for what people really want; for what makes life meaningful and worthwhile. It lays the foundation for a world that can blossom, even through crisis, disruption and uncertainty.

# About Australia reMADE

Australia reMADE exists to support ambitious, collaborative, and transformative change-makers to reMAKE more of the world we want. We are independent, not-for-profit and here for anyone who aligns with our vision and values.

More information about this project and the work of Australia reMADE are available online: [www.AustraliareMADE.org](http://www.AustraliareMADE.org).

## We cannot do this work alone.

A huge thank you to everyone who contributed to this research as facilitators or participants. You have helped to create, connect and shape these ideas, and this work is infinitely richer for your voices and perspectives. Thank you for your generous minds and hearts.

This work has also been supported by the Australia reMADE Secretariat, the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania and the Australian Communities Foundation.

We rely on a wonderful community of individuals, organisations and donors to do this work. If you are interested in supporting or partnering with us for future work, or would like a tailored briefing on this work please get in touch with our National Coordinator, Dr Millie Rooney ([Millie@AustraliareMADE.org](mailto:Millie@AustraliareMADE.org)).

*Living, loving and working across this country, we respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay respect to elders both past and present.*

[www.australiaremade.org](http://www.australiaremade.org)