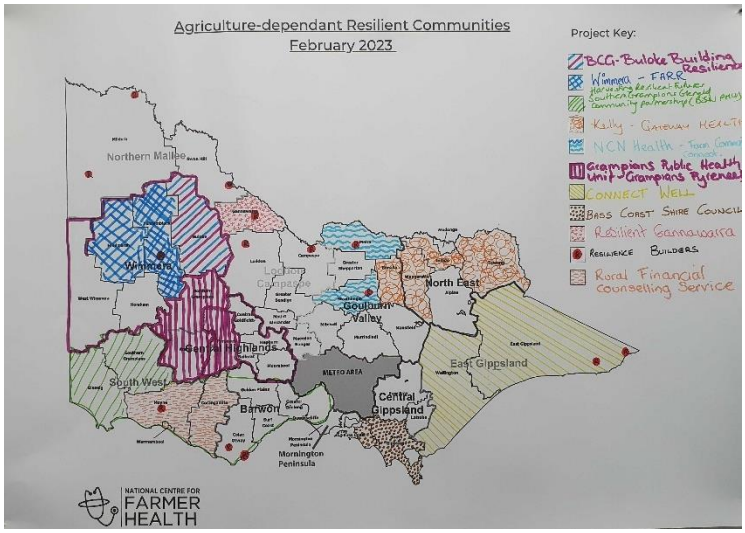
NATIONAL CENTRE FOR FARMER HEALTH

Agriculture-dependent Communities Resilience Initiative: Project Evaluation and Community of Practice

A report from the National Centre for Farmer Health (NCFH), Hamilton summarising the evaluation of the Agriculture-dependent Community Resilience Building Initiative and the coordination and evaluation of a supporting Community of Practice.



Compiled by Dr Jessie Adams, Ms Kelly Barnes, Professor Susan Brumby and A/Prof Alison Kennedy, National Centre for Farmer Health

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Contact Details:

Assoc. Prof Alison Kennedy
Director
National Centre for Farmer Health
Western District Health Service
PO Box 283
HAMILTON VIC 3300
Phone: 03 5551 8533
Email: alison.kennedy@wdhs.net

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1. BACKGROUND

The Smarter Safer Farmers initiative was a four-year $20 million program funded by the Victorian Government and delivered through Agriculture Victoria and the Victorian Department of Health. Funding was provided to projects that aimed to (i) keep farmers, workers and farm families safe and well, (ii) help farmers make sound business and farm management decisions, (iii) ensure farmers are prepared and have strategies to manage their business through drought and the impacts of climate change, (iv) support farmers to capture the benefits of innovation and new technologies, and (v) position agriculture as a career of choice (Agriculture Victoria, 2022).

As part of the Safer Smarter Farms initiative, $2.9 million was assigned to the Resilient Farming Communities project (see Figure 1). This project aimed to support farmers, farming communities and farming families to have increased capacity to manage stress and look after their wellbeing (Agriculture Victoria, 2022). Project funding and development was informed by a rapid review of evidence about resilience building in agriculture-dependent communities (to be referred to ongoing as the 'rapid review'), conducted by the National Centre for Farmer Health (Kennedy et al., 2021). The review included peer-reviewed literature, grey literature and stakeholder interviews. Twelve recommendations were proposed as the best possible design elements and approaches for resilience building in agriculture-dependent communities. The recommendations included:

1. Prevention focused
2. A coordinated approach
3. A sustainable framework
4. Place-based response
5. Targeted to the needs of specific populations
6. Initiating and strengthening engagement
7. Enablers for support
8. Prioritising structured monitoring and evaluation
9. Peer to peer support model for intervention
10. Adaptive models of intervention delivery
11. Good governance
12. Resilience supporting resources.

A more detailed discussion of these recommendations can be found here.

Following the provision of the rapid review to the Department of Health and Agriculture Victoria, 11 Victorian organisations received funding to work closely with local agriculture-dependent communities to co-develop and deliver programs to enhance social connectedness through community events and training, as well as increase awareness of mental health treatment options and other care and support services (Agriculture Victoria, 2022).

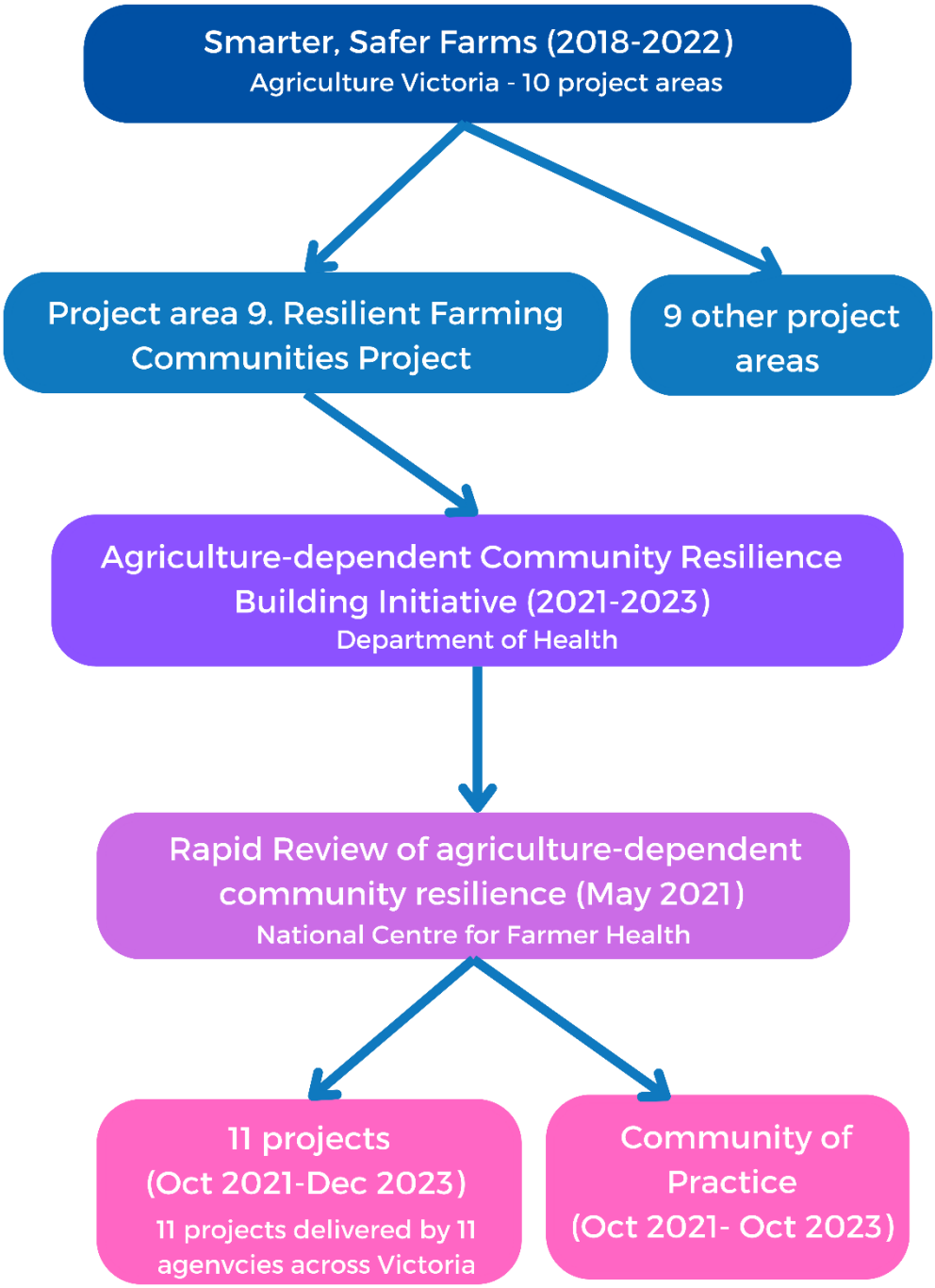


Figure 1: Smarter, Safer Farms Resilient Farming Communities Project outline

Previous investment in building community and individual resilience and good mental health has limited evidence to demonstrate its effectiveness. The NCFH was contracted to conduct an evaluation of the Agriculture-dependent Community Resilience Building Initiative, informed by the recommendations from the rapid review. Further, the NCFH was also contracted to coordinate and evaluate a Community of Practice (CoP) to support and facilitate interaction between project teams, the evaluation team, the Department of Health and other relevant stakeholders. The CoP aimed to provide shared context, facilitate meaningful

dialogue, create new learning opportunities, practice through forums, increase collaborative processes and generate new knowledge around resilience-building in farming communities. Table 1 shows the timeline of the rapid review and undertaking of the 11 projects, the evaluation and Community of Practice.

Table 1: Agriculture-dependent Community Resilience building Initiative Timeline

Activity	Timeframe
Rapid Review	March 2021 - June 2021
Project rollout and evaluation	August 2021 - December 2023
Community of Practice	October 2021 - October 2023

The Agriculture-dependent Community Resilience Building Initiative evaluation and the implementation and evaluation of the Community of Practice was approved by Deakin University Human Ethics Advisory Group Health (ref: HEAG-H 79-2022).

This following sections of this report include:

- A summary of each of the 11 resilience projects
- An outline of the methods and findings of the evaluation of these 11 resilience projects
- An outline of the Community of Practice approach and evaluation findings
- Recommendations based on findings from the report overall.

2. AGRICULTURE-DEPENDENT COMMUNITY RESILIENCE PROJECTS

Eleven independent projects were funded by the Resilient Farming Communities project between August 2021 and December 2023. The spread of the projects can be seen in the map developed by Community of Practice members in Figure 2. The following sections summarise the aims and key activities of each of the eleven projects.

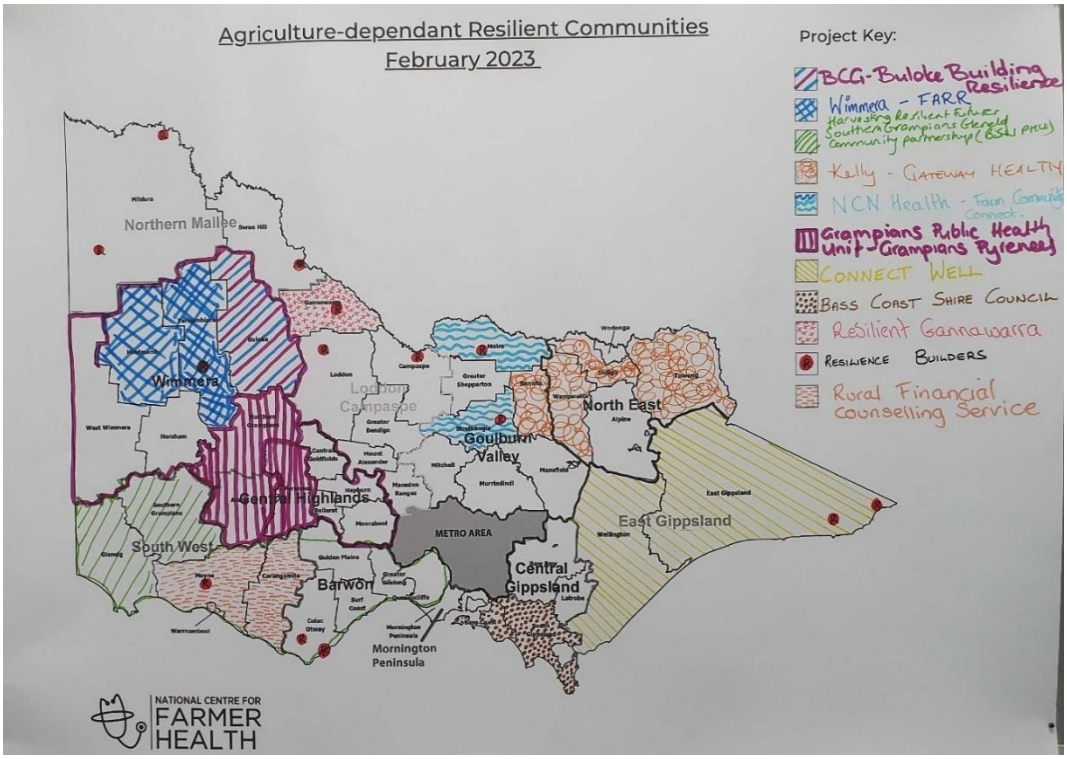


Figure 2: Map developed during the CoP to demonstrate LGA's targeted by each project

RESILIENT FARMING COMMUNITIES

The Resilient Farming Communities project was delivered by the Bass Coast Shire Council and aimed to improve resilience and mental health outcomes in their farming community. This project was based on three core elements:

- Small agribusiness and farming diversity and resilience group program. The seven-month program aimed to provide training to enhance business skills and personal development. Through a combination of group workshops and individual consulting and mentoring, individuals were educated on business development, practical tools and management of personal and business systems. Business Strategy Plans and Resilience plans were developed for each participant.
- Delivery of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training (n=2 workshops)

- Delivery of a program (in partnership with Food and Fibre Gippsland) to better support existing health and agribusiness networks through dissemination of drought cycle support documents. This included three workshops targeted to financial services, health services and community organisations.

Watch a brief video about the Resilient Farming Communities Project here.

BULOKE RESILIENCE PROJECT (BUILDING A BETTER BULOKE)

The Buloke Resilience Project was delivered by the Birchip Cropping Group (BCG) (project initially under Buloke Shire Council), and took a proactive approach targeting the young farming community of the Buloke Shire. The project sought to enhance resilience and mental health of the agricultural sector in consultation with the Buloke Shire Council by building capacity in the next generation of farmers, prioritising the mental health and wellbeing of the farming community and fostering long-term resilience. The key project activities included:

- Development of the 'Over the Fence' coffee table book to share real-life experiences (interviews conducted with 23 farming families)
- The Farm Expansion Day aimed at the young farming community to cover topics on stress management and decision making when expanding the farm business
- Young Farmer Network meetings
- Funding the catering at the George the Farmer event in Birchip.

Watch a brief video about the Building a Better Buloke Project here.

CONNECT WELL EAST GIPPSLAND & WELLINGTON FARMER RESILIENCE PROJECT

Connect Well East Gippsland and Wellington Farmer Resilience Project was run by Gippsland Lakes Complete Health. The project utilised asset-based community development and health promotion to increase community resilience in 20 rural communities over the two LGAs. The project sought to increase mental health literacy, community connection and health seeking, and build community capacity to seek funding and lead their own initiatives. Project activities included:

- Approximately 30 community-led and co-designed activities over the two LGAs (e.g. Farm Succession Planning sessions, Working Dog School Ensay, Farmer's Night Out Glendale, Christmas in July, funding of participants to attend Young Farmers Netball and Football Carnival, Women in Agriculture Fencing Workshop, MHFA training, Cassilis Community Market and the Port Albert Get Event Ready)

- Development of resource materials including Farming Conversation Calendars for 2023 and 2024 (n=2,500 distributed), health service contact detail postcards and community maps.

Watch a brief video about the Connect Well East Gippsland & Wellington Farmer Resilience Project here.

CONNECTING GANNAWARRA – LOCAL COMMUNITY PLANNING INITIATIVE

The Gannawarra Shire Council undertook the Connecting Gannawarra-Local Community Planning Initiative. This project aimed to develop individualised local community plans for six rural districts (Murrabit, Lake Charm, Leitchville, Lalbert, Quambatook and Macorna/Tragowel) to support localised community strategic planning and empower communities to plan for the future whilst building resilience. A consultant was employed to develop the plans and 502 community members over the six rural districts provided feedback through attending a listening post, participating in community workshops, community social meals, drop-in sessions, interviews, discussion groups, local comment boxes, children's drawing activity and completing a survey.

Watch a brief video about the Connecting Gannawarra Project here.

BUILDING OVENS-MURRAY AG-SECTOR (BOMAR) PROJECT - GATEWAY HEALTH

The Building Ovens-Murray AgSector (BOMAR) Project by Gateway Health targeted agricultural-dependent communities across the Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Towong, Wangaratta, Benalla and Indigo in North East Victoria. The project sought to connect farming families and members of the agricultural-dependent community with the services they may need to enable them to embrace choice, 'live well' and understand what good mental health is. Project initiatives included:

- Community engagement activities (e.g. working dog schools, sausage making classes and stalls and activities at community events (Rutherglen Farmers Market Health and Wellbeing Day, AgField Day, Rutherglen and surrounds Farmers Market, Tallangatta Team Yarding Event and Redi Expo Myrtleford))
- Supported the delivery of Mental Health First Aid and accidental counselling course (n=4 workshops) and delivery of tailored mental health training (n=2 businesses)
- Training in Mental Health First Aid, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma
- A symposium focused on farm and family wellbeing.

Watch a brief video about the BOMAR Project here.

FARMWELL

The FARMwell project by Grampians Health aimed to connect, inform and activate farming communities to build community resilience and wellbeing in the Ararat Rural City Council, Northern Grampians Council, Pyrenees Council and the Grampians Health LGA of the Central Goldfields Shire Council. FARMwell sought to increase capacity to manage stress, strengthen networks and improve access to information and support. Project activities included:

- Development of the FARMwell Reference Group to assist with the project and ensure representation from the local agricultural dependent communities (e.g. individuals from the three Shire Councils, agricultural organisations, agencies, community groups, farmers and agribusiness).
- Small grants for empowering farming community groups. Grants were awarded to support 11 events, including the St Arnaud Young Farmers Harvest Festival, St Arnaud Pony Club, Beaufort Football Netball Club Fireworks, Upper Hopkins Land Management Group Garden Day and the Willaura and District Community Development Group Harvest Cut Out).
- Scholarships for individuals to undertake their Certificate 3 and 4 in Personal Training to become Active Farmer Trainers.
- A succession planning workshop.

- Working Dog Schools (n=3) in partnership with the National Centre for Farmer Health to deliver Health and Lifestyle Assessments to participants.
- Development of the Mental Health and Wellbeing 2024 Calendar.
- Provision of partial scholarships to undertake post graduate study in Agricultural Health and Medicine (to be undertaken in 2024).

Watch a brief video about the FARMwell Project here.

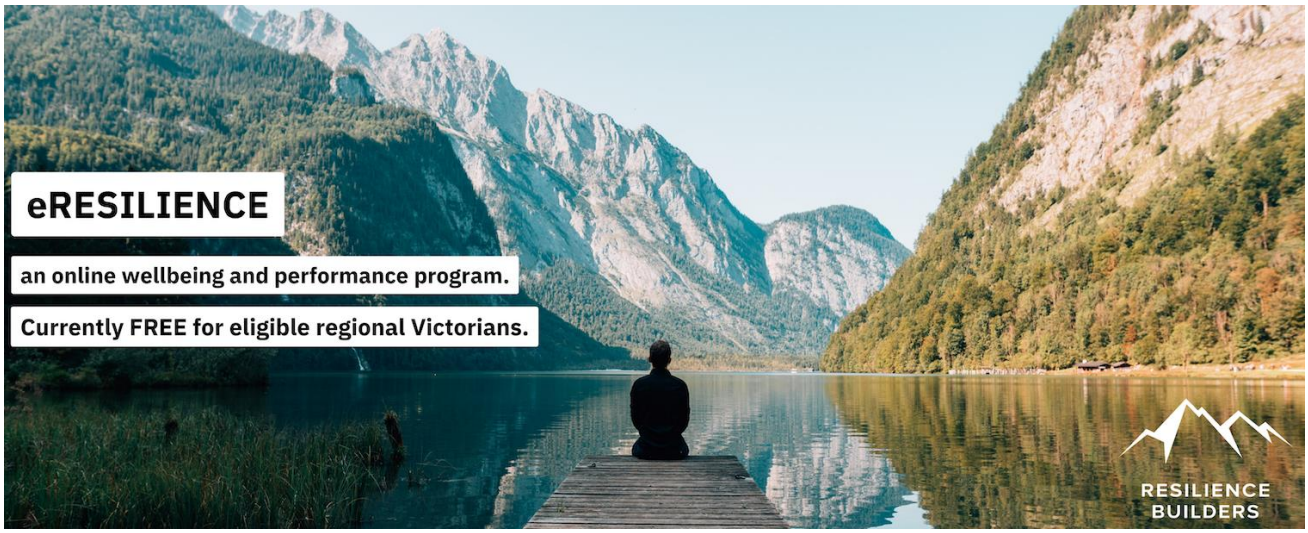
FARM COMMUNITY CONNECT – MOIRA AND STRATHBOGIE SHIRE

The Farm Community Connect project was run by Nathalia, Cobram and Numurkah Health (NCN) and aimed to support farmers and their families across the Moira and Strathbogie Shires to improve their capacity to manage stress and better support their own health and wellbeing. The project specifically aimed to target farmers and farm families who are socially isolated (have lost connection with historical support networks, dairy farmers aged 45 to 55 years, rural women and children of farm families who had been impacted by isolation). The Farm Community Connect project sought to support a range of opportunities for social engagement/connection that included elements of resilience building activities, stress management strategies and dissemination of information on access and referral to support services and health care. Examples of activities undertaken include:

- Community engagement activities (stall at Numurkah Lions Market, Euroa Saleyards and International Dairy Week).
- Farming Morning Teas (n=7).
- Drumming Workshops (n=2).
- Family Fun Days (n=3).
- Activities with local schools.

TOOLS FOR TOUGH TIMES - RESILIENCE BUILDERS

The Resilience Builders developed the Tools for Tough Times program targeted to secondary school students in outer-regional and remote Victoria. The program aimed to equip students with tools and strategies to become more resilient. The program was delivered to 12 schools over two face-to-face and two online sessions. To support greater reach of the resources, the eResilience program was developed. The eResilience program included online modules that participants can complete in their own time. eResilience was launched and promoted to a range of regional Victorian organisations and community groups from August 2023, and was out of the scope of this evaluation.



Watch a brief video about the Tools for Tough Times Project here.

REACHING OUT TO FARMING FAMILIES SOUTH WEST VICTORIA

The Rural Financial Council Service (RFCS) Victoria West developed the project Reaching Out to Farming Families (ROFF) South West Victoria. This project targeted the Warrnambool, Moyne and Corangamite LGAs and aimed to develop a farmer health and wellbeing education and engagement program to build social connection and peer support and increase farming families awareness of healthcare and community services. Project activities included:

- Development of the Reaching Out to Farming Families (ROFF) Network to provide guidance, support and promotion of project activities.
- Creation and delivery of 'Talk the Talk' Mental Health and Wellbeing workshops to equip services providers with the skills and resources to talk to farmers about their mental health (n=3 courses to industry support personal, n=4 workshops upon request of farmers and industry personnel).

- Mini health checks conducted on-farm with support from local Ambulance Victoria Paramedics.

Watch a brief video about the Reaching Out to Farming Families Project here.

HARVESTING RESILIENT FUTURES-SOUTHERN GRAMPIANS GLENELG COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

Harvesting Resilient Futures, targeted the Southern Grampians and Glenelg Shire council areas. It aimed to build community resilience leadership and capability by developing a shared understanding, establishing networks, building capability and aligning efforts of local support services to increase resilience to shocks and stressors within the agricultural-dependent community.

Activities undertaken as part of this project included:

- A literature review to understand existing resilience frameworks.
- Interviews and focus groups to understand factors that influence community resilience in the local area.
- Group Model Building workshops to foster a shared understanding of resilience in the local community and create a map of the local system. Representatives in the workshops included Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, Women's Health Barwon South West, Hamilton Community House, Western District Health Service, Victorian State Emergency Service and Agricultural Victoria.

Watch a brief video about the Harvesting Resilient Futures Project here.

HINDMARSH AND YARRIAMBIACK RESILIENCE PROJECT

The Hindmarsh and Yarriambiack Resilience Project was developed by the Wimmera Primary Care Partnership. It aimed to increase farmer knowledge and empower them to support people in need. The project sought to increase the digital literacy of farmers in the Hindmarsh and Yarriambiack LGAs to assist in accessing services and remaining connected to family and friends. Examples of activities conducted include:

- Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training (n=2 workshops per shire per annum), including the training of local MHFA instructors (n=2).
- Use of an existing community fifth wheeler bus to deliver:
    - Digital literacy training (e.g. at field days in partnership with other health services).
    - Service access (e.g. Wimmera Hearing tests, vaccinations).
- Social events funded by small grant (e.g. Community Barbeques and Morning teas).
- Eight-week photography/digital phone course.

Watch a brief video about the Hindmarsh and Yarriambiack Resilience Project here.

3. EVALUATION OF THE AGRICULTURE-DEPENDENT COMMUNITIES RESILIENCE INITIATIVE

3.1 EVALUATION APPROACH - CONTRIBUTION ANALYSIS

Given the existing evidence and recommendations arising from the rapid review, the approach used to evaluate the Agriculture-dependent Community Resilience Building Initiative drew on the methodological approach of contribution analysis as outlined below.

Contribution analysis is used to identify the contribution an intervention has made to a change or set of changes (intrac, 2017). It assists in understanding why the observed results occurred and the functions performed by the intervention (Better Evaluation, 2022). This evaluation utilised minimalist contribution analysis (Kane et al., 2017). This involves finding evidence for outputs to demonstrate the expected activities were carried out. Minimalist contribution analysis is used where there is an acknowledged link between outputs and resulting changes. Importantly, this evaluation used contribution analysis to understand if the projects adopted the 12 recommendations made in the rapid review in the design, development and implementation of the initiatives aiming to build resilience in agriculture-dependent communities across Victoria.

The six-step of contribution analysis include:

1. Set out the question to be addressed -
   Did the funded 11 projects apply evidence-based recommendations in the design, development and implementation of local initiatives aiming to influence resilience in agriculture-dependent communities across Victoria?
2. Develop a theory of change.
3. Gather existing evidence.
4. Assemble and assess the contribution narrative.
5. Seek out additional evidence.
6. Revise and strengthen the contribution narrative.

The Department of Health also requested the evaluation incorporate measurement of the impact of projects/activities where possible.

3.1.1 Developing a Theory of Change

Given the variation and complexity across all of the 11 projects, the approach to developing an overarching theory of change was distilled to its simplest form. As outlined in Figure 3 (with further detail in Figure 4), the theory of change focused on identifying how the 11 independent projects, supported by the resources available, applied the approaches to resilience building recommended in the rapid review in the design, development and implementation of local activities, with the ultimate goal of improving levels of resilience in agricultural-dependent communities.

The National Centre for Farmer Health team also worked with each project at multiple time points to develop and plan their own theory of change—in the form of a program logic (Holt, 2009). This process was designed to assist the projects to focus on the broader goals of the Agriculture-dependent Community Resilience Building Initiative and how they might consider the rapid review recommendations in planning

and implementing their project, while also assisting them to focus on their project-specific goals and evaluation requirements.

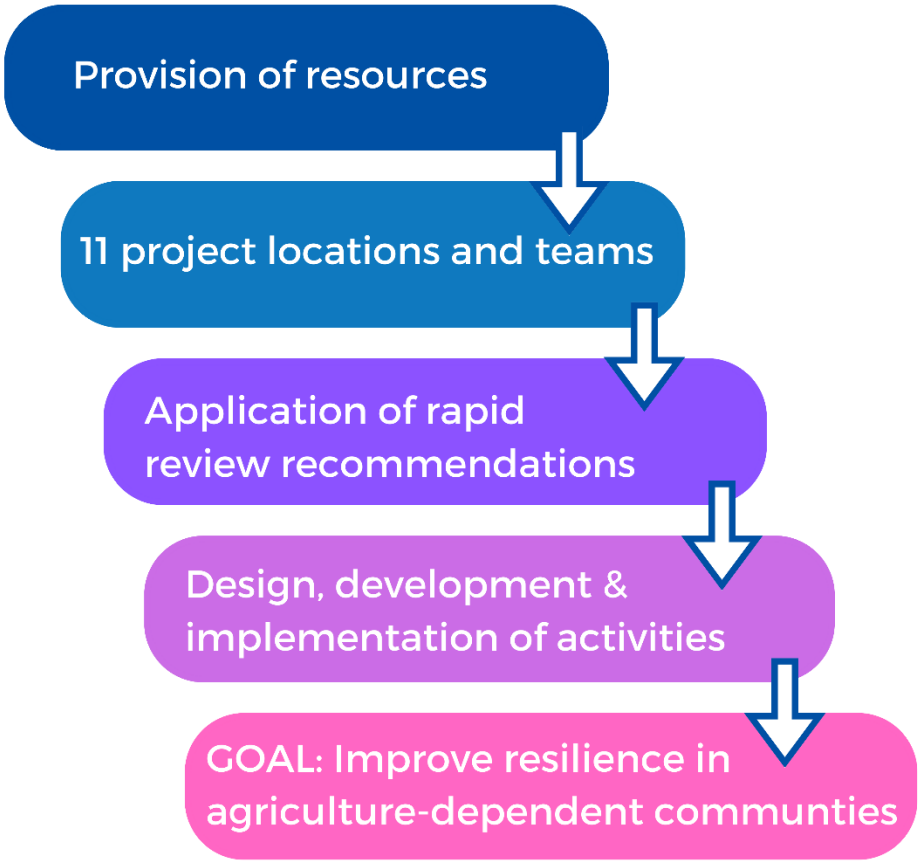


Figure 3: Theory of change

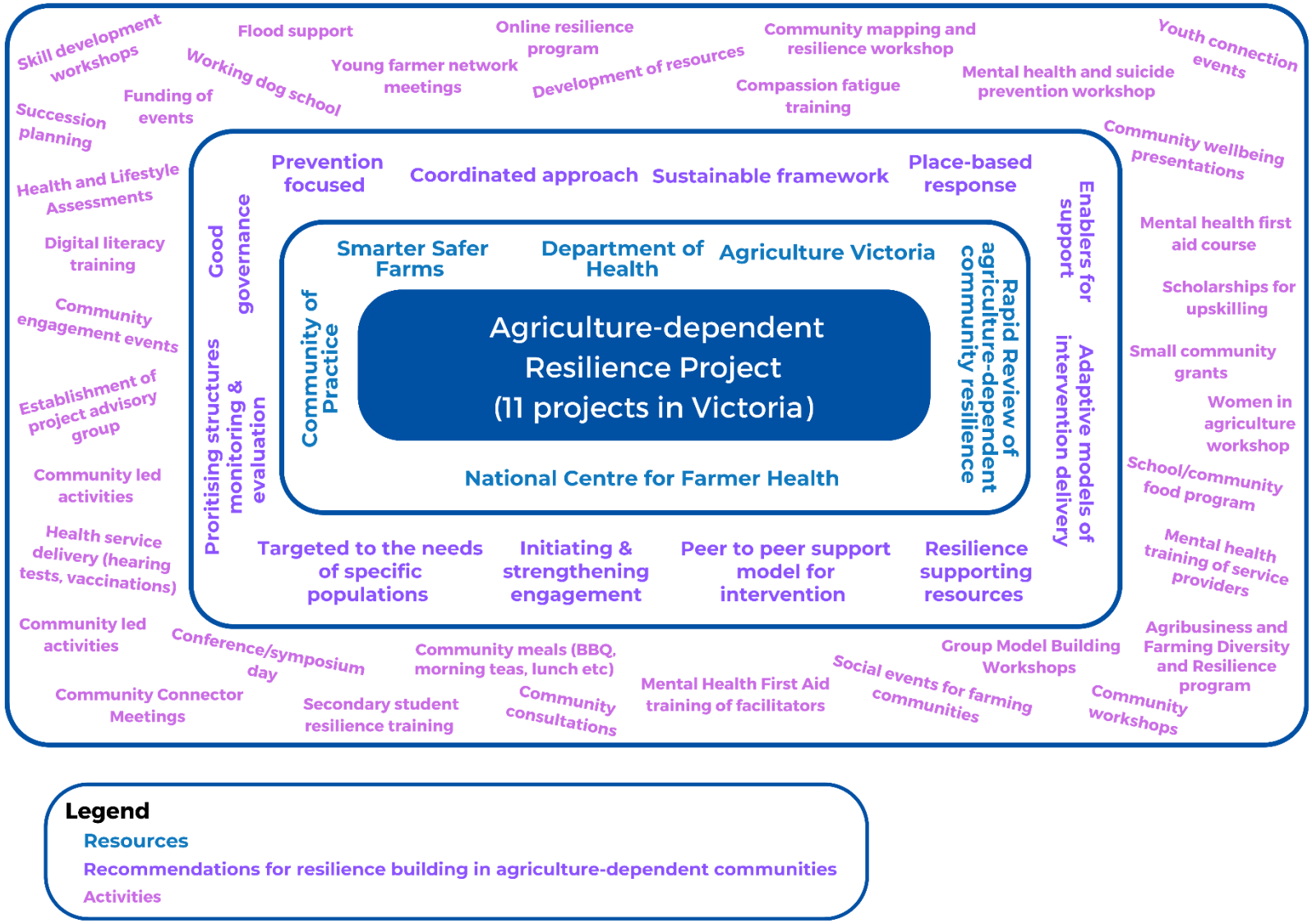


Figure 4: Ripple effect of the agriculture-dependent community resilience projects

3.2 EVALUATION REQUIREMENTS AND METHODS

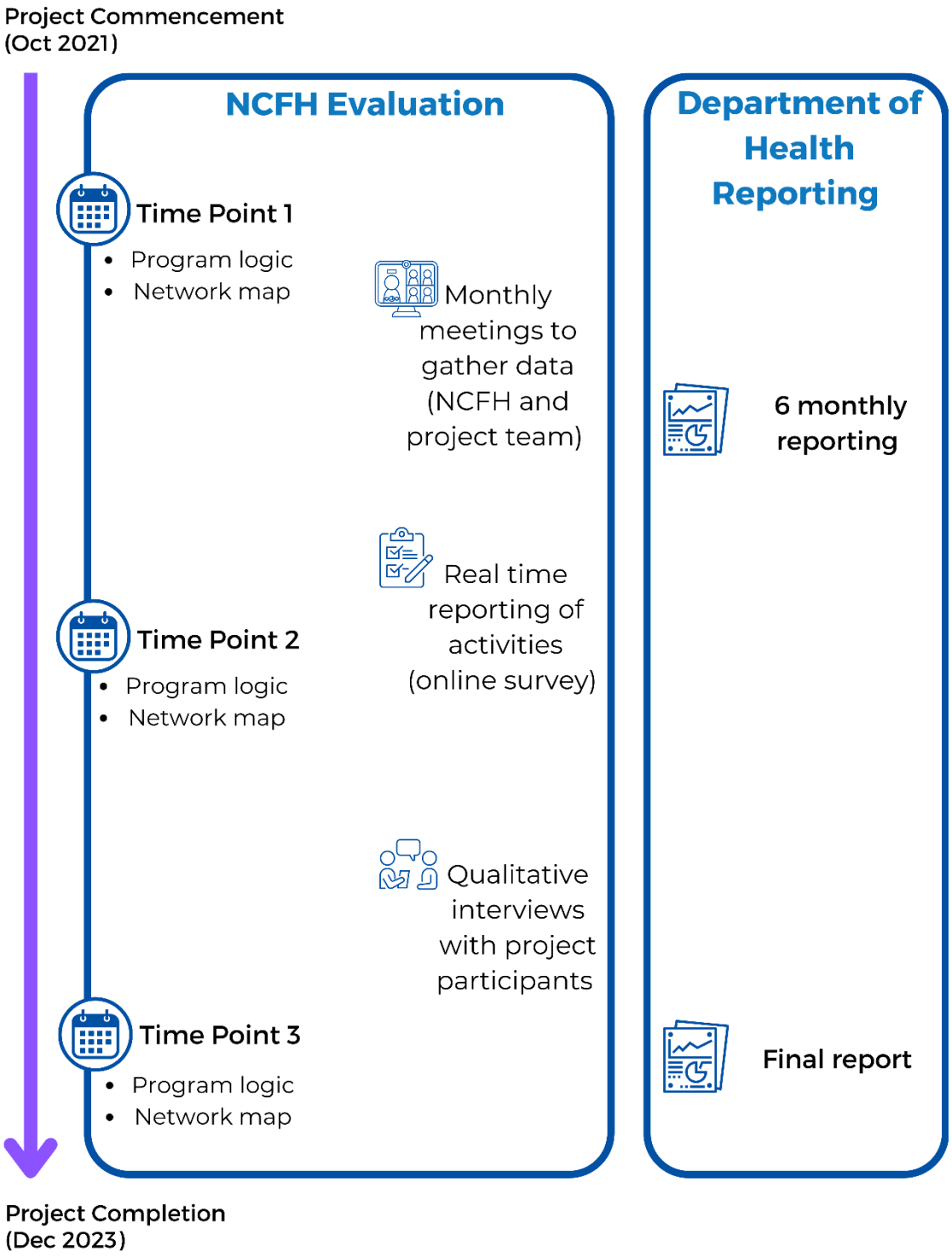


Figure 5: Flow chart of common evaluation requirements from each of the eleven project teams

3.2.1 Aiming for consistency

Each of the 11 projects were requested to complete the same evaluation requirements. As Figure 5 demonstrates, an initial meeting between the NCFH evaluation team and individual project teams were undertaken. These meetings aimed to gain an understanding of the individual project design, aims and expected outcomes. Following these discussions and working together the NCFH evaluation team then developed program logics for each project. Another meeting was also held to develop project network maps to identify stakeholders and community involvement. Program logics and network maps were reviewed at two additional time points to demonstrate changes in projects throughout their life. Due to a range of factors (e.g. DoH funding access, staff recruitment and retention), the 11 projects started and finished at different times. This meant that the commencement of the development of program logics and network maps varied across projects. Examples of varying time points for program logic development and reviews include:

Example 1. Hindmarsh and Yarriambiack Resilience Project

1. Program logic development: December 2021
2. Program logic review: December 2022
3. Program logic review: August 2023

Example 2. Reaching Out to Farming Families South West Victoria

1. Program logic development: January 2023
2. Program logic review: August 2023
3. Program logic review: November 2023

Although conducted at different time points across projects, all projects developed (and reviewed at two further time points) a program logic and network map.

Additional evaluation requirements included monthly check-in meetings scheduled between project teams and NCFH evaluation staff, completion of the online activity survey and providing interview contacts of participants from their project activities.

3.2.2 Collaborative development of program logics

Program logics establish a visual and easily understandable relationship between program activities and the desired outcome of the program (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2016). To gain a clear understanding of each project and how they aimed to increase community resilience, scoping interviews were conducted with each project team to clearly define the project design, goals and expected outcomes. Using the information captured during these interviews, program logics were constructed for each project. The program logics were then returned to the project teams for review before finalising. Program logics were reviewed and amendments made at an additional two time points to demonstrate changes throughout the life of the project. A quality cycle of planning, involving, doing, checking and adjusting was undertaken when developing the program logic between the project team and the NCFH evaluators. The process of checking and adjusting was repeated at each review.

Program logics were seen as a support to project teams to (i) assist in developing program capacity, (ii) consider the rapid review recommendations in project design and implementation, and (iii) encourage consideration of their individual evaluation approach (outside the scope of the broader evaluation but contributed to individual project reporting requirements of the Department of Health).

3.2.3 Collaborative development of network maps

From the rapid review, it was established that community resilience building is most successful when initiatives take a coordinated approach that is place-based, builds community engagement and is tailored to, and meaningful for, the target population. An essential requirement for achieving this is the development of networks, partnerships and collaborations within their target communities. This provides a range of potential benefits including providing valuable information about community needs, as a conduit for community engagement and recruitment, an opportunity for extending reach, and an avenue for developing ongoing community linkages and sustained capacity building in the longer term. The visualization of the networks through the mapping process also assists to identify gaps and weaknesses, and where focus is required to meet diversity and inclusion expectations.

The VicHealth Victorian Partnership Analysis Tool was used to inform the network map development process (VicHealth, 2016). The tool aims to help organisations reflect on the partnerships they have established and monitor and maximise their effectiveness (VicHealth, 2016). To undertake the development of network maps, online scoping interviews were conducted with project teams to identify and describe project networks. The strength of each network relationship was assessed, incorporating assessment of frequency and purpose of engagement, and detailed in a network map for each project. Network maps were reviewed at an additional two time points and updated to demonstrate changes in network size, strength and value over time.

Network mapping was seen as a support for project teams to understand the nature of partnerships (including the strength, value and benefits of the partnership to both parties), identify current partners, identify opportunities for strengthening existing partnerships, identify where there were gaps in partnership

needs, and identify opportunities for the development of new partnerships. Conducting this over multiple time points also allowed project teams to see where partnerships had grown or diminished over time and where attention was required with regards to partnership nurturing or development.

3.2.4 Qualitative interviews

Given the variability across project teams, establishment of a quantitative assessment of impact that could be implemented in a reliable, consistent and meaningful way across all 11 projects was particularly challenging. As such, each project team was requested to identify potential contacts from participants in their activities to participate in semi-structured interviews. These interviews were designed to gain greater understanding of how project teams had applied the rapid review recommendations and the impact of participation or involvement in project activities. Interviews were conducted by the NCFH evaluation team through various methods including via Zoom and telephone. Where possible, NCFH evaluation team members also attended events and conducted interviews in person. Varying interview questions were developed and tailored for volunteers/stakeholders, project team members and community member participants (see Appendix 1).

3.2.5 Data collection template and monthly data collection

Online activity surveys were developed to capture information on each activity project teams undertook. Each project team had a unique link to allow for individual tracking of projects. It was expected project teams would complete the survey following the completion of each project activity.

For each activity, project teams were asked to provide:

- Description of activity
- Aim of activity
- Category of activity (training/education session, community social event, guest speaker, service delivery, governance/stakeholder meeting, planning workshop, co-design/workshop session, community grant, focus group, other)
- If this was not the first time that activity had been run, had they made changes based on what they had learnt previously?
- Target audience
- Who was involved
- How the activity focused on risks to mental health
- Number of attendees
- Percentage of attendees living and/or working on a farm
- Opportunity for social connection – describe opportunity
- Resource materials provided to participants
- Extent to which participants were encouraged to connect with stakeholders and/or service providers
- Perceived most positive outcome of this activity
- Identified challenges running this activity.

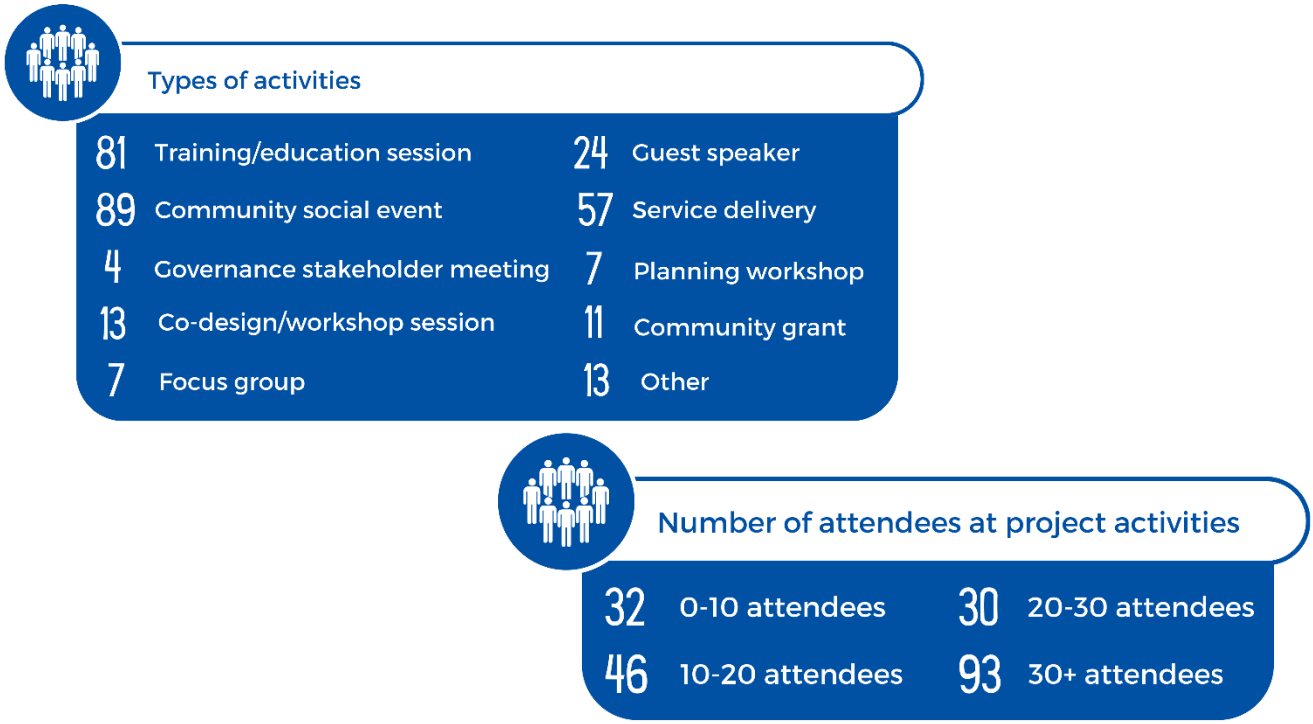
Project teams were also provided with three survey questions to be used to capture participant feedback after each activity (see Appendix 2).

3.2.6 Monthly evaluation meetings

To extend on the data collected in the activity surveys, 30-minute monthly evaluation meetings were scheduled in advance with each project team. During this time, project progress was discussed including activities upcoming or completed over the previous month and challenges/issues being faced. Meetings were also used as an opportunity to prompt and assist with the completion of the other evaluation requirements (i.e. surveys, qualitative interview contacts).

3.3 EVALUATION FINDINGS

Overall, approximately 220 activities were delivered by the 11 project teams, reaching an estimated 16,591 participants (estimated attendance based on final reporting to the DoH). Of these, 15,163 were attendees at community events and 1,428 at school based events. There were a variety of activities offered across the projects. Of the activities entered into the activity survey by project team members, community social events, training/education sessions and service delivery were most commonly undertaken (activities could fit in to multiple categories).



Activities also catered for different sized gatherings—depending on their purpose—from focused workshops engaging with small groups in an intensive format, to large scale community social events.

3.3.1 Program logics

Appendix 3-13 contains the program logics for each project over the three time points. The main changes in the program logics between the three times points for each project is in the activities planned or undertaken. In time point 1 the activities were largely those planned or intended to be undertaken, while time point 3 shows what was actually undertaken. Both the Connecting Gannawarra (Appendix 6) and the Hindmarsh and Yarriambiack Resilience Projects (Appendix 13.1-13.2) experienced the least change. The Connecting Gannawarra program logic was consistent throughout the three time points. The only change in

the Hindmarsh and Yarriambiack Resilience Program was between time point 1 and two where “support from business/corporate services” was added in regard to their digital literacy training.

FARMwell experienced some changes in their activities throughout the life of the project (Appendix 8.1-8.3). Community grants, working dog schools and training of active farmer instructors were all planned and undertaken from the beginning. However, there were changes in the program logics between the three time points. Firstly, the delivery of MHFA courses and a centrally based social event were not completed (attributed to challenges in accessing project funding). The Farmers Resilient Toolkit workshop was altered to a Succession Planning Workshop and keynote speaker. Additionally, the Bush Nursing Extension Training was changed to scholarships offered for the Agricultural Health and Medicine Unit in 2024. Finally, it was initially anticipated 200 calendars would be distributed, however, at the final time point 1000 calendars were distributed.

The program logic of the ROFF (Appendix 11.1-11.3) project shows the development of the project throughout its life. Initially the project team planned to deliver occasional counselling sessions to non-farmers. This led to the development of the ‘Talk the Talk’ program to provide skills and resources to service providers to equip them to talk to farmers about mental health.

3.3.2 Network maps

Appendix 14 to 24 contains the network maps for the three time points for each project. The maps changed between each time point and largely show the increase in networks over the life of the projects. These maps show the vast array of networks established by these projects and how relationships changed overtime. Some network maps have consistent stakeholders over the three time points but the engagement or frequency changes (e.g. Connecting Gannawarra (Appendix 17.1-17.3) and the Bass Coast’s Resilient Farming Communities (Appendix 14.1-14.3)).

Other project network maps show increases in networks/stakeholders between the time periods. For example, the increase in networks in the Connect Well (Appendix 16.1-16.3) project between time points reflects the number of groups they co-designed and ran activities with. The Tools for Tough Times (Appendix 21.1-21.3) network map shows the engagement with the 12 schools and at the final time point shows they are not currently engaged. The project team intended to re-engage with these schools to promote the eResilience program.

3.4 ADDRESSING THE 12 RESILIENCE BUILDING RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AGRICULTURE-DEPENDENT COMMUNITIES

In order to establish the contribution of project activities to the enhancement of community resilience, an alignment of project activities to the rapid review recommendations was required. This section will focus on each recommendation in turn, along with examples of how project approaches and activities adhered to or effectively demonstrated these recommendations. Conversely, discussion of the findings will also highlight areas where projects may have been less successful in implementing the recommendations and, as such, likely to have been less effective in enhancing resilience in the community.

3.4.1 Recommendation 1: Prevention focused

The rapid review suggests resilience projects with a prevention-focused approach allow for shocks to be anticipated, prepared for and resources allocated. Avoiding a reactive stance and focusing on prevention also allows for the provision of tailored support to target local needs and minimise duplication and overwhelming responses in reaction to disaster.

All projects had a broad focus on prevention of risks to health and wellbeing. This included initiatives with a direct focus on health and wellbeing (e.g. developing local skills in Mental Health First Aid, conducting screening and early intervention health, wellbeing and safety through Health and Lifestyle Assessments, developing local community resilience plans to support the development of organisational strategies and local policy). In addition, there was a range of strategies which indirectly aimed to prevent risks to health and wellbeing (e.g. succession planning workshops to improve change management on farms, digital literacy skill building to support social connection and address geographic isolation).

A key component of a preventative approach is identification of at-risk populations. While the Smarter Safer Farms program had a particular focus on the farm workforce and farming families, it was also acknowledged that there was a broader agriculture-dependent community indirectly impacted by events and stressors known adversely affecting farmers. While several projects had a specific focus on farmers (e.g. NCN targeted isolated farming communities, Birchip Cropping Group focused on young farmers, Rural Financial Counselling Services sought to assist at-risk farming populations by building capacity and skills in service providers directly engaging with farmers), others had a targeted focus on the broader rural population in their areas (e.g. Wimmera Primary Care Partnership concentrated on the entire population of the Hindmarsh and Yarriambiack LGAs, recognising their vulnerability due to factors like distance, lack of services and low digital connectivity).

While project teams generally had been able to identify a specific target audience, effectively engagement with this audience was not always easy. Across the life of this project, farming communities experienced a number of challenging situations (e.g. floods in 2022), which led to an influx of reactive responses and a range of conflicting priorities. A participant from the Bass Coast Shire's Small Agribusiness and Farming Diversity Resilience program described:

> *"There's just so many little programs out there… I think you have to look at getting rid of a lot of the little peripheral ones and really adding a lot more meat and potatoes…"*

Community champions and trusted members of the community were important in recruitment and promotion of the value of participating in programs. A participant from the Bass Coast Shire's Small Agribusiness and Farming Diversity Resilience program explained why they participated:

> *"I was a little bit sceptical but probably because it was [organiser], she's, you know, I really value her."*

Similarly, participants from the Talk the Talk program delivered by the RFCS highlighted the importance of community members promoting programs.

> *"I think the best thing is word of mouth, I mean I try to talk about it to people."*

The use of community champions for promotion and a coordinated approach to eliminate duplication is important for the success of programs.

3.4.2 Recommendation 2: A coordinated approach

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Coordination is required in all stages of resilience building approaches in agriculture-dependent communities. Both coordination and collaborative partnerships are needed for preparedness. The rapid review highlighted six factors for successful coordination; leadership, sustained effort, development, funding, roll-out and evaluation. The infographic above shows the activities delivered by the 11 projects involved representatives from many different groups/organisations/backgrounds.

The rapid review recommended strong local service leadership and commitment to collaboration. The Harvesting Resilient Futures project delivered by Southern Grampians Glenelg Primary Care Partnership is an example of successful leadership by bringing stakeholders together from the local community. Initially, the project team undertook 25 interview consultations with participants from across the Southern Grampians and Glenelg Shires representatives from emergency management, local government, non-government organisations, recovery, health and the community sector. Following, Group Model Building workshops brought together local community participants/professionals to assist in understanding the potential roles everyone can play in resilience of the local community (e.g. health service, indigenous and housing representatives. The development of local systems maps allowed for a strategic approach to assist in understanding the role every organisation plays and fosters opportunities for collaboration. A workshop participant reiterated the projects focus of aligning individual organisations work:

> *"So if you can get people to align and work together, it assists greatly."*

Another participant, from the Community House Organisation, further described the benefits of attending the Group Model Building workshops:

"I have made some new contacts, which may have the potential to be very useful for projects and resources and building some resilience in the community. So it's basically finding out what other people are doing and where they are, and where we think there is maybe some gaps. And maybe what can be done about that".

The development of networks and meeting of people working towards similar goals in the community was also beneficial:

"Probably some of the service mapping where things connect and where there are gaps and the things that are interlinked, but also the contacts and possibly of working together and collaborating down the track".

Another factor highlighted in the rapid review was the use of a coordinated, co-design approach when developing resilience building programs. Many of the projects utilised coordination in the development of their activities. Both the ROFF and FARMwell projects established advisory groups to assist and advise project development. Members of these advisory groups included farmers, service providers, government, health services, agricultural organisations and community groups. The Buloke Resilience and BOMAR Projects successfully utilised co-design and community consultation to assist in identifying specific focus areas to inform the development of the activities and interventions delivered. The community grants offered by the Connect Well and FARMwell projects facilitated the development and delivery of community-led, using community knowledge. Finally, the Connecting Gannawarra project undertook a community consultation process to develop community plans for six communities in their area.

Following a coordinated development of a program, the rollout must also be planned allowing for flexibility and multi-tasking by community leaders. Many of the activities undertaken by the eleven project teams were delivered in partnership/collaboration with other organisations. These were in varying capacities including partnering to offer services. Examples include the RFCS and Ambulance Victoria collaboration to conduct health checks on farmers identified as at risk by a RFCS wellbeing counsellor, WPCP attending Wimmera Field days in partnership with Wimmera Hearing Society to provide hearing tests, rural contact list, covid information and covid tests, and digital literacy support. Both Gateway Health and Connect Well collaborated on the delivery of workshops with the Red Cross.

Although many of the projects clearly demonstrated goals to achieving a coordinated approach, challenges to achieving this were also identified. This included challenges attracting and engaging local stakeholders to collaboratively work together. Despite the aim to get stakeholders together at a Group Model Building Workshop, the Harvesting Resilient Futures Project found bringing the right people together challenging. As one attendee described:

"The challenge they face in project with getting enough outsiders involved, enough stakeholders involved."

A further challenge was to ensure that—when projects were able to bring stakeholders together—the focus of the activities was relevant, timely and met the goals of the stakeholders. One Harvesting Resilient Futures workshop participant highlighted this:

"So one of the key learnings for all, for this project, but all projects is look around and find out what's already going on and try and align yourself, because people are being asked the same questions

repeatedly. And so they tune out, you know, and they miss out on a golden opportunity to contribute."

The same Harvesting Resilient Futures workshop participant acknowledged the importance of developing networks with the right people. However, they also highlighted the challenge that project funding is typically short and often relationships are built and then funding ends. People moving on then results in the loss of these relationships:

> *"It'll be their ability to continue to build strong relationships in the future. The challenge is, the funding runs out, falls over and the next person comes along and starts another survey and starts another group. The answer is you need a clear line of sight between fed, state and local and money will continue to be wasted on separate projects instead of developing cohesive ways of mentoring and supporting communities."*

Despite best intentions, local coordination between community groups was not always successful. Collaborative workshops bringing together the efforts of Bass Coast Shire and Food and Fibre Gippsland did not receive significant community support. The Bass Coast Shire team believed this was due to a mismatch between the workshop focus and the community needs—potentially due to varying views and focus across the two organisations. Unsuccessful collaborations were noted as likely to reduce the desire for, and potential of, further coordinated efforts in the future.

3.4.3 Recommendation 3: A sustainable framework

3. Sustainable framework
- Scholarships for upskilling
- Mental Health First Aid training of facilitators

Sustainability of projects is frequently associated with funding availability—notably that developing sustainable outcomes with short term funding streams can be challenging. The rapid review added further evidence to support the development of sustainable frameworks—beyond longer funding terms—including enduring capacity building through community member training and support, avoiding relying on volunteers and over-burdening the paid workforce, and needs-based funding models. The CoP assisted in building capacity of the project teams and increasing networks between the projects to enhance sustainability. There were also opportunities to increase reach with external stakeholders such as VicPol, BoM, Ag Vic, Deakin University, Rural Aid etc.

The Hindmarsh and Yarriambiack Resilience Project delivered by the Wimmera Primary Care Partnership provided the opportunity for local individuals to become Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) trainers. This allowed for the continuation of the delivery of MHFA training in the region beyond the project funding period. The project saw four individuals successfully skilled in delivering MHFA training and two current MHFA trainers upskilled to older person delivery.

The FARMwell project by Grampians Public Health Unit utilised a coordinated approach by partnering with Active Farmers to provide scholarships for residents to complete a full FitCollege Cert 3 and 4 Personal Training course and ongoing business establishment support for two years. To date, one individual has

completed the training and has established an Active Farmers group in the Northern Grampians Shire Council. Another individual is utilising the scholarship to undertake the training to launch an Active Farmers group in Pyrenees Shire Council. There are two further expressions of interest for 2024 scholarships. The opportunity to undertake this training and establish Active Farmer groups in isolated rural communities allows for members of the agricultural-dependent community to engage in physical activity and provides opportunities for social connection resulting in improved health and wellbeing. A scholarship recipient who has since established an Active Farmers group in their local community described the opportunity:

> *"This opportunity has very much had a positive impact on my life and will further assist me in building a better life for myself and my daughter and to also have a positive impact on rural communities by running fitness classes to bring communities together for socialisation and communication."*

The Connect Well East Gippsland and Wellington Farmer Resilience Project had a focus on capacity building within the local community. An example of this was "Port Albert Get Event Ready". This saw 24 community members from the Port Albert district attend first aid training and event management courses to allow them to run their own events in the future. This training culminated to a community event held on the 31st December 2023.

Ensuring sustainable project outcomes was challenging for several project teams. Factors that impacted this included significant delays in funding (e.g. as a result of the transition from Primary Care Partnerships to the Public Health Unit), high rates of project staff turnover and limited staff engagement in support offerings (e.g. participation in the Community of Practice)—often as a result of conflicting priorities in a very busy work environment and also during the COVID pandemic. Where project staff were unable to dedicate time to participating in the Community of Practice, they missed opportunities to share learnings and develop support networks with other project teams.

Gateway Health noted a number of challenges they felt threatened their ability to support longer-term sustainability of project outcomes. One of the greatest threats to sustainability was time. Community members exposed to ongoing stressful events (droughts, bushfires, pandemic, flooding, poor prices and cost of living increases) were tired and time poor. With limited professionals to coordinate and drive initiatives, capacity to maintain momentum was limited. Developing resources and guidelines on how to continue activities and ensure awareness of services remained high, was one way Gateway Health worked to maintain some sustainability of outcomes, despite these challenges.

3.4.4 Recommendation 4: Place-based response

4. Place-based response

- Community led activities
- Community mapping and resilience workshops
- Community consultations
- Small community grants
- Funding of events

While there were a number of recommendations identified in the rapid review that underpinned effective resilience building initiatives, it is also true that there is no 'one size fits all' approach. Effective programs are developed with local knowledge, tailored to the local needs and do not rely on 'outsiders' that may not understand the community. This approach encourages ownership and engagement within the community. The Connecting Gannawarra – Local Community Planning Initiative aimed to develop community plans in six small communities within the Gannawarra shire (Murrabit, Lake Charm, Leitchville, Quambatook and Macorna/Tragowel). The aim of the plans was described by a community leader/project team member as:

> *"An updated community plan that identifies community assets, what our community most like about where they live, as well the key issues/challenges. Importantly, the plans identify key priorities and provide Council with a good understanding of what these community priorities are and how we can work together to support small communities to not only survive, but hopefully thrive into the future".*

Another project team member described the place-based focus:

> *"And you know in rural communities, a lot around how people can physically come together and engage which helps build inclusiveness and improves that mental health impact. So really, we wanted to understand what the needs were in that community, how we could sort of plan those communities out that would enable and support a more healthy, both mental health and physical health, environment in those townships".*

Local community members were able to participate by sharing their views through attending a listening post and discussion groups, contributing to local comment boxes, participating in children's drawing activities, completing a survey or participating in a community workshop. The rationale behind the community consultation process was described by a community leader/project team member:

> *"Opportunities to engage were broad but went to where people in communities already gathered – such as the monthly social meal or at a school event. The online survey was also a popular way for people to input without going to a 'meeting'".*

Consultants collated the findings and drafted individual community plans for these six communities.

While geographically place-based, concerns were raised that the development of community plans may not have effectively engaged with all target groups in the six communities. One local community leader highlighted the lack of farmers present at the community consultations:

> *"The were mainly townspeople. We didn't get a lot of input from the farming community I would say. They are too busy trying to earn a living for themselves. They are busy people and to be honest they're more concerned with making their businesses viable and keeping that going, especially with the threat of no water and that sort of thing".*

> *"I am not sure this will help farmers resilience. It will help the local towns. The biggest thing around farmers resilience is the viability of their farms and that is what is under threat and that is what is causing them stress and concern".*

The development of relevant and targeted community plans aimed to support the development of a sustainable resilience framework, through the identification of priority areas for communities to proactively work towards over time. However, the implementation of the community plans appeared uncertain. One project team member described the implementation as the communities' role:

> *"They have a plan for their future, whether they chose to follow that, we've enabled that for them".*

However, a local community leader appeared unclear on future directions:

> *"There are about 54 points on the plan. And how we're going to prioritise those will be interesting. I am not sure what the next steps will be. But when we get to see the final draft plan, we will go from there".*

Another project team member/community leader described the desire for further funding to ensure the implementation of these plans:

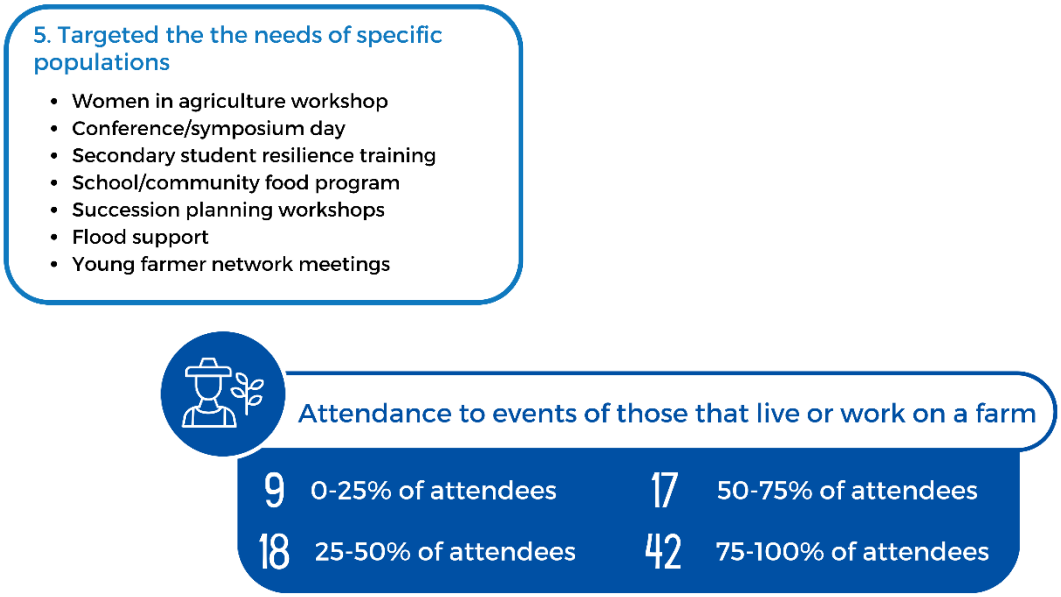
> *"Some funding for the communities involved to continue to lead the conversation as they implement their plans would be great".*

The Harvesting Resilient Futures project had a strong focus on identifying local approaches to resilience building within the Southern Grampians and Glenelg LGAs. Group Model Building workshops sought to identify local characteristics, assets and challenges, in order to facilitate the development of action ideas with a local focus, encouraging a place-based response.

Connect Well East Gippsland, Wellington Farmer Resilience, Building Ovens-Murray AgSector (BOMAR) and FARMwell designed project activities in collaboration with community, through consultation with members to target the needs identified as local priorities. Both the BOMAR and Connect Well projects initiated activities that focused on developing local emergency preparedness and resilience—working with local groups already active in the community such as the Red Cross, North East Housing Recovery Workshops, Climate Change and Rural Community Presentation and the Goulbourn-Murray Catchment Planning Meeting. Confirming the effectiveness of this place-based strategy, was evidence from BOMAR reporting that 82% of all local initiative participants lived within a 50km radius. Understanding community needs was also seen to be successful in the Wellington Shire Farmer Resilience project, where a working dog school (including a focus on wellbeing) attracted 160 attendees.

The Resilience Builders program, 'Tools for Tough Times', was delivered to schools in regional/rural Victoria. As the organisation is based in Melbourne, they did not have local knowledge or connections to draw on for promotion and recruitment. They determined regular follow-ups were required to keep schools engaged, committed and accountable. Additionally, they had to change the delivery method to be mostly face-to-face to generate more traction with schools. Following tailoring to the needs to the schools, they were successfully able to deliver their program to 12 schools.

3.4.5 Recommendation 5: Targeted to the needs of specific populations



Community resilience building is most successful when it is tailored to, and meaningful for, the target population. The focus of the Smarter, Safer Farms program was on agriculture-dependent communities, specifically, farmers, farm workers and their families (Agriculture Victoria, 2022). Targeting projects to specific populations allows activities to be tailored to their specific needs resulting in positive outcomes. The rapid review suggested programs that focus broadly on the general population of agriculture-dependent communities can miss the opportunity to directly targeting resilience building in those most at risk. Within agriculture-dependent communities there are varying groups with different needs (e.g. older farmers, young farmers, women, children or culturally diverse farmers).

Key examples of projects that focused on addressing the needs of specific populations are the Buloke Resilience Project, Farm Community Connect, Connect Well. The Buloke Resilience Project delivered by Birchip Cropping Group (BCG) utilised a preventative approach to provide support to the young farmers in the BCG footprint to improve mental wellbeing. Their activities were developed through consultations with their target population to ensure they focused on their needs. Firstly, Young Farmer Network meetings were held to facilitate connection and sharing of experiences—developing a sense of community and support networks. A key activity of this project was the Farm Expansion Day. This event was attended by 144 individuals and targeted the youngest generation working on the farm. The day consisted of presentations from industry experts about tools to assist in farm expansion decision making, options to help guide expansion decisions and stress management information.

A presenter from the day (also a farmer) described their perceived benefits from the day:

> *"Information on managing family relationships, information on big picture thinking of your business and what you might do about it, stuff about yourself and how you work with other people. And just opportunities for businesses and how you might tackle them."*

An attendee from the day described their reason for attendance:

> *"I think we are at that age group where we are definitely in the throws of succession. So with our own children we are definitely looking towards our future as a family, potentially our kids future on farm, our future off-farm, and I think just my husband and his brother have that real desire to grow and to be the best farmers they can. So we find these days really inspiring and really beneficial to absorb information and gain insight from experts that otherwise you may not know about. So it was just an opportunity we saw that our eyes lit up and we thought, yeah lets make a day of it."*

The topic of succession planning in farming is often difficult and complicated, this was highlighted by an attendee of the day:

> *"…I think you could hear a penny drop when Carmon was talking because succession is such a huge topic because there is emotion involved and there is a lot of fear and excitement and a lot of different levels of expectations from so many different people involved in the farm."*

The presenter highlighted the successful attendance, but did question what had been learnt, what action might come from the day and how it could be replicated and built on:

> *"My question is, what are they going to do now? What is the follow up? Is there a follow up? What are the outcomes, I would like to know what the outcomes are in terms of what's going to happen, are they going to do the same thing next year, will it be different, a different topic? How can they replicate that? Because I think it was a good capturing of the people and the mood and how can we do that again because I think it is important in our rural communities."*

Farming family focused events were also run by the Buloke Resilience Project—supporting the catering for the Birchip Kindergarten's 'George the Farmer' performance. The success of this family friendly event is evident by the attendance of 350 parents and children. An attendee described the success of the event:

> *"It was a family day, it wasn't linked to alcohol. It was just a really wholesome time, you could see families connecting."*

The unique opportunity an event like this provided locals was also highlighted:

> *"And I really believe in providing young families with opportunities to see new things and have new experiences that their urban counterparts take for granted. So provided a bit of dignity is the word I would like to use."*

While targeting farming families, economic benefits to the broader agriculture-dependent were also noted as a result of the event:

> *"There was a lovely little spin off too. We have two beautiful shops in our main street. One is for children's clothing and toys, and another is a boutique and they opened especially for it. And there was food deals that the local café was doing. So it helped support the local economy and helped us showcase Birchip a little bit too."*

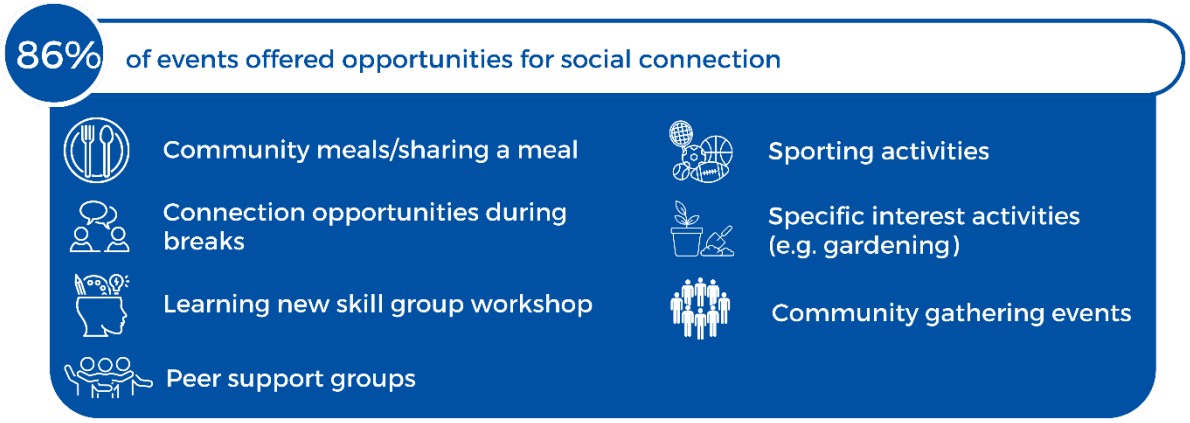
Additionally, BCG's launch of the 'Over the Fence' coffee table book shared collated interviews from farming families relaying relatable stories and real-life experiences in a resilience-supporting resource aimed to foster connections and share valuable information. As one farmer involved in the project shared (in a BCG press release [BCG Launches Over the Fence – an insight into family farming | Birchip Cropping Group]):

> *"It's important to remember that no amount of money will suffice for time spent with your family. When you need a holiday take it; the farm isn't going anywhere. You won't remember the extra kilometre of fence you got up, but you will remember the time spent camping with your kids."*

The Farm Community Connect project by NCN Health in the Moira and Strathbogie Shire targeted farmers and farm families who were socially isolated. This initiative particularly focused on those who had lost connection with historical support networks, including dairy farmers aged 45 to 55 years, rural women and children of farm families impacted by isolation. Examples of activities included community engagement stalls/activities (e.g. at saleyards), an informal dinner and guest speaker, a farming women's morning tea, Live4Life with youth, drumming workshops, an art therapy workshop, flood recovery events, family fun days and a school student project.

The Hindmarsh and Yarriambiack Resilience Project targeted members of their community with limited digital literacy. The outreach initiative aimed to build digital literacy among geographically isolated members of their community for the purpose of improving access of services (e.g. accessing covid vaccination certificates) and support social connection with friends and family.

3.4.6 Recommendation 6: Initiating & strengthening engagement



Engagement in resilience building activities can be conducted alongside activities that are already occurring or known to be of interest to the targeted agricultural-dependent community. The rapid review recommended the upskilling of stakeholders and service providers that are already engaged with farmers for business-related purposes. Often these people have existing trusted relationships with farmers—allowing for prevention and preparedness messaging during usual interactions with farmers and their families. The partnership between the RFCS and Ambulance Victoria paramedic utilised this approach. This program allowed RFCS Counsellors to visit referred farmer clients along with a paramedic to conduct mini health checks (blood pressure, blood glucose and conversation around stress and physical concerns). This allowed services to be taken to the farmer and utilised a preventative lens to identify health risks before treatment is required. A case study provided on this collaboration described the identification of a male farm worker with dangerously high blood pressure who was immediately put in an ambulance and flown to Melbourne to have a stent put in.

Encouraging social connection as part of a broader mental health response was recommended as part of resilience building activities in agriculture-dependent communities. Of the 142 activities entered into the online activity survey by project teams, 86% provided an opportunity for social connection. Primarily this was through the provision of meal alongside an activity (e.g. morning tea/lunch during workshops, community barbecues). Other examples included peer support groups, sporting activities, learning a new

skill in a group and activities focusing on specific interests to connect like-minded people (e.g. gardening day).

The use of outreach models was identified in the rapid review as a way of achieving and strengthening engagement. The Hindmarsh and Yarriambiack Resilience Project resurrected a community fifth wheeler bus to deliver social events and distribution of resources. The bus was used at field days to create a social hub and provide information on digital literacy. The project team also partnered with other health services to provide hearing tests and COVID-19, Influenza and Japanese Encephalitis vaccinations. An outreach immunizer described the social connection the bus created:

> *"We did a lot of talking outside […] It's about being able to deliver a service out of a shoebox. You know that was just another example of what you can do in a very tight small space".*

The use of personal stories for engagement, communication and education is another key technique to engagement with farmers in resilience building activities, as identified by the rapid review. The use of narrative-based stories can be effective as farmers are often willing to listen to individuals they can relate to. The Building a Better Buloke project interviewed 23 farming families to develop their 'Over the Fence' publication. The coffee table book provides narratives, wisdom from real-life experiences, the sharing of valuable information and innovative strategies for risk mitigation contributed by members of the local agriculture-dependent community. Similarly, the Farming Conversation Calendar developed by the Connect Well project. The 2023 and 2024 calendars included the mental health stories of 12 farmers. During the annual calendar launch, local farmers shared their personal mental health challenges, along with their experiences of help seeking and how to support each other. Over the two years of funding, 2,500 calendars

were distributed, with 65 people attending the launch of the 2023 calendar and 52 attendees at the launch of the 2024 calendar.

3.4.7 Recommendation 7: Enablers for support

7. Enablers for support

- Working dog school
- Health and Lifestyle Assessments
- Health service delivery
- Mental health first aid course
- Mental health and suicide prevention workshop
- Digital literacy training
- Agribusiness and Farming Diversity and Resilience program

The rapid review on resilience in agriculture-dependent communities suggested enabling clear, well-communicated follow-up actions and pathways to support as a strategy for strengthening resilience. When working together with Ambulance Victoria, the Rural Financial Counselling Service were able to reduce traditional barriers to accessing health support experienced by farming communities—facilitating connection through an existing trusted source and delivering a service available at the farm gate.

Another enabler for support was initially engaging with farmers for the delivery of practical support, with an extension of support to connect participants with mental health support. The Resilient Farming Communities project by the Bass Coast Shire utilised this approach through their Small Agribusiness and Farming Diversity and Resilience program. The program was developed in collaboration with council, local stakeholders, farmers, agribusiness owners and community organisations. This six-month program was offered to small farms and agribusiness operators to provide practical support, tools and training to build knowledge to improve businesses, promote diversification, develop business plans and also enhance resilience and mental wellbeing—with the goal of fostering long-term sustainability of the local economy and community. Two facilitators delivered the program—one an experienced business strategist and the other an experienced health psychologist. The 21 participants engaged in three online webinars, three face-to-face workshops, three on-site consulting sessions, two mentoring sessions (participants choice of this focusing on business or

personal), core values, personal dynamics and conditions of operation. All participants concluded the program by receiving a Business Strategy Plan and Personal Management and Resilience Plan. This adaptive model successfully combined business strategy with mental health and wellbeing.

The successful inclusion of resilience into the business program was highlighted by a participant:

> *"When I signed up for the course, I thought it was about farming, but it turned out to be better than what I had expected because for me personally, it was particularly targeted at succession planning. And talking about general resilience within the farming community, which I thought was fantastic and it concentrated on topics that I had not dealt with before."*

The value of the combination of business and personal wellbeing was also highlighted by this participant:

> *"Looking at the business as a total, looking at, you know, the thought patterns that I could use on a day to day that probably I haven't been thinking about or considering, that's both perhaps a business and a health point of view that you really need to consider those things because you can [get] run down really easily […] and also I'll say the psychological part of the program, which I hadn't envisaged when I first started, has given me more confidence because this is a little bit off the side. But anyone talks about perhaps the financial element of retirement. Not so much the psychological process that you need to go through. So I found that particularly beneficial."*

Additionally, the networking and social connection this program offered with the face-to-face workshops with similar businesses provided value. Participants described the benefits of being able to access this peer-based support:

> *"And I think that I think that's valuable from the point of view of meeting other people, hearing everyone's got their own problems and in some cases, the problems all come back to the same frustrations or the same issues, whether it's trying to get council approval for things or whether it's trying to find the money to do things."*

> *"I found it also particularly good just sitting around, you know, and round table discussions that, you know, face to face discussions, I think are really good."*

> *"I would say the networking, and also re-establishing old relationships with people who I haven't seen in a while and exchanges like email and networks, so old networks and re-establish new networks."*

While new knowledge and information was valued, the shared experience and networks of peers added significant benefit when establishing continuing support pathways:

> *"I think it's increased a bit [knowledge of available support services], but it's also given us a new network of people that did the course that we can all bounce ideas off each other and see how everybody's going."*

The rapid review also recommended that referral pathways should be clearly understood and resilience initiatives should develop networks/relationships between community members and service providers. The Farm Community Connect program by NCN Health sought to connect a face with a service. The project lead

attended and presented at various community events to establish a presence, raise awareness about available services, hand out resource packs and build rapport with the local community to encourage them to make use of services. Examples include community engagement activity at the Euroa and stall at Lions Market Numurkah and, attendance at International Dairy Week, Life4Life Moira induction, men's peer support groups and Ag Recovery and Resilience Program.

Similarly, the BOMAR project by Gateway Health aimed to expand people's understanding of good mental health by connecting farming families and members of agriculture-dependent communities with services to assist them to embrace choice and live well. Examples of events the project team attended with the view to linking services with farming families included a stall promoting the BOMAR program and activities for young people at the Tallangatta Team Yarding Event, an information stall and health/mental health checks at Rutherglen Farmers Market, information stalls at a range of other agriculture events, hosting the Farm and Family Wellbeing Day, Working Dog Schools and Sausage Making Workshops.

The FARMwell Working Dog Schools utilised an enabling support approach. Three Working Dog Schools were held in three locations within the project catchment. Attendees were provided with skills for training their dog and also participated in a Health and Lifestyle Assessment (conducted by agrihealth professionals from the National Centre for Farmer Health). Working Dog Schools are popular amongst farmers and were used as a drawcard for farmer participants to provide them with useful skills, social networks and link them in with physical and mental health services. Participants acknowledged this attraction:

> *"I think the idea of the working dogs is actually a fantastic idea. The majority of farmers have working dogs and there are always going to be new ones coming through. It's something you know they will take the day off to attend."*

Farmers also acknowledged the benefits of attending the health assessment alongside the working dog school:

"Look to be honest, besides the tools that Vin's taught with the [working dog] training, it was actually good. [The agrihealth clinician] did your blood pressure and all that sort of thing, and explained a few bits and pieces that I need to investigate really. It's good"

"Based on my health check I will be a bit more wary and make changes in my lifestyle, that will hopefully positively influence my overall health. And also, the skills I take away from today will help my day-to-day working operations. Hopefully a lower stress environment."

Attracting farmers to resilience initiatives by way of including a working dog training event or sausage making workshop was initiated across a number of projects (largely inspired by shared learnings through the Community of Practice). The Connect Well project delivered the Ensay Working Dog School with the aim to reduce social disconnection and encourage community connectedness. Attracting 160 participants, one event volunteer described the success in terms of attendance:

"This type of event is absolutely fantastic to get people who are working a lot. Farmers are very busy. They don't always have time to come to social events often […] The working dog group was a legitimate business activity if you like, which would enhance the farm, the ability of the farm to work effectively. Everyone's got dogs here. So it was a great initiative to reach out to other people in the community who wouldn't usually attend […] You just have to make them feel comfortable that it's not going to be a challenge to attend."

3.4.8 Recommendation 8: Prioritising structures monitoring & evaluation

8. Prioritising structured monitoring & evaluation

- Workshop participants receive incentive for completing evaluation
- Pre and post workshop surveys

The rapid review highlights the importance of evaluation as part of the planning process of a project to ensure its effectiveness is captured and understood. It is suggested evaluation methods are proactive and collecting impact of a program from participants in a timely and convenient manner (not relying on them to complete evaluation of their own accord post participation).

The Resilience Builders program 'Tools for Tough Times' conducted evaluation of program effectiveness through pre- and post-participation surveys. The surveys aimed to measure participants pre-program wellbeing and then again after the four sessions to measure the impact. The online eResilience project developed post the delivery of the Tools for Tough Times program also utilises the pre- and post-survey method. The Resilience360 Self-Assessment is used to track participants wellbeing across 30 indicators. The same questions are asked prior to commencing the eResilience program and during the five to six weeks following completion. Participants are then asked to complete the Self-Assessment for a third time approximately six to eight weeks later. A tailored report is provided to the participant following completion of each assessment outlining their resilience scores and providing a comparison with their previous scores to track wellbeing over time.

The 'Talk the Talk' program delivered by the RFCS conducted pre- and post-workshop surveys to determine levels of mental health and wellbeing awareness, and individuals' confidence to support someone if required. The pre- and post-survey was completed by 40 program participants, achieving an 80% response rate.

Following the Succession Planning workshop, the FARMwell program partnered with AgVic to offer an additional one-on-one succession planning business development session for each participant that completed their post-participation survey.

Across many of the projects, evaluation was not considered as an integral part of the project design—despite efforts by the NCFH to incorporate discussions about evaluation into the program logic development and as a recurring discussion in the Community of Practice workshops. This meant that consideration was often limited to process evaluation relating to implementation and reach (e.g. number of attendees)—rather than impact and outcome measures endeavouring to understand changes in attitudes, knowledge and/or behaviour.

Where evaluation methods were considered, these were not often applied systematically across all project initiatives.

3.4.9 Recommendation 9: Peer to peer support model for intervention

9. Peer to peer support model for intervention

- Mental health training of service providers

The rapid review described the increasing evidence supporting the effectiveness of peer support models in resilience building. Service providers already engaging with farmers have been identified as key peers as they already have established relationships and are trusted by farmers.

Mental Health First Aid Training was offered by multiple projects. This equips participants with skills to recognise and respond to individuals experiencing mental health problems or crisis. Educating local community members assists in the mental wellbeing of the community as they are able to identify and assist those that are struggling. Connect Well offered MHFA training through the RFCS for 15 rural service providers and farmers. The Bass Coast Resilient Farming Communities project saw 33 participants accredited in MHFA training. Similarly, the Farm Community Connect project by NCN Health offered eight MHFA courses, engaging 89 participants. The Hindmarsh and Yarriambiack Resilience Project provided MHFA training to 207 to local community members, Active Farmer staff, youth leaders and members of the Yarriambiack-Murtoa football/netball club. Additionally, they supported the training of MHFA trainers and the upskilling of trainers to include training for older persons. This will allow for the continuation of MHFA training—and the ongoing sustainability of capacity building in the community—beyond the life of the project.

Through the Reaching Out to Farming Families South West Victoria Project, the Rural Financial Counselling Service Victoria West created, organised and facilitated the Talk the Talk workshops. These workshops were targeted to local agricultural industry service providers who work directly with farmers and their families (e.g. accountants, insurance providers, Agri Bank personnel, stock agents, real estate agents, agronomists, veterinarians, ag contractors, milk tank drivers and industry field officers) to equip them to be "Occasional Counsellors". Service providers regularly interact with farmers and are typically well-known and trusted. A service provider program participant described the importance of peer-to-peer support:

> "*…I think it's really important, and it's all part of that resilience building, whether it is us as employees delivering services to farmers or the farming community themselves".*
>
> *"So I think it works better if we are mixing together and hearing each other's stories, and moving together. Yeah, I would hate to be siloed and think that you know, service providers and farmers are separate, I think we need to be engaging together".*

It is often assumed that farmers are unwilling to seek health/mental health support. Peer-to-peer support models may assist with bridging the gap between identifying a need for support and enabling access, via a trusted link. The need for this linkage was identified by one of the RFCS team:

> *"Knowing farmers, as we all do, they do not talk about their own feelings until it is too late a lot of the time. And, they don't want to be, well, its got a lot better, because people have started to realise they need to talk if they need help, need to get help earlier. Particularly financial counselling*"

Talk the Talk workshops educated participants to recognise signs of ill mental health and wellbeing, help start conversations by reaching out and opening communication whilst confidently supporting the next steps of help seeking. A program participant highlighted the value of the program being delivered by peers:

> "*I think it was pitched at a really good level and its very down to earth and we are hearing real life stories which I think people relate to and a really relaxed environment to be in. And you know they're people that are surrounded by their peers. And I think that's the beauty of it. It's a project that's, well with Jo and Annemarie, they were delivered by people in our community, so I think people relate to that*."

Three Talk the Talk workshops were delivered to 50 industry support personnel. Additionally, four workshops were facilitated upon the request of farmers and industry personnel, supporting the sustainability of capacity building across community. The benefits of the program were highlighted by participants:

> "*Well, I think we have a duty as members, as leaders of our community to get on board and just learn a little bit more about it. It was quite humbling actually to hear some stories from people in the room. And I think, yeah, break down that stigma of mental health and just knowing the little things to look for and the ways to communicate with our farmers and our community".*
>
> *"…biggest thing was the talking aspect, the conversations to have. I always struggle with that, what would I say if I was presented with this issue. And I think that just gave me a little bit more confidence to actually have the right words at the right time."*
>
> *"I like the way she spoke, you know, she speaks to people where they are, and not too technical, pretty down to earth, and that's what farmers want".*

The training of Active Farmer instructors through the FARMwell project also encouraged the development of a peer-to-peer support model. As previously described, members of the local community gained a qualification to be able to run Active Farmer groups for members of their community. A scholarship recipient described how the program allows participants to engage in physical activity while also being surrounded by peers:

> "*… I decided to get involved as I believe that the goals of the organisation of Active Farmers is a very important role that we can provide fitness classes but also bring the community together for not just fitness but also for socialisation and community… Being connected to each of my fitness class clients and get to have a positive impact in their lives".*

3.4.10 Recommendation 10: Adaptive models of intervention delivery

10. Adaptive model of intervention delivery

- Digital literacy training
- Online resilience program

Face-to-face methods of delivery have the potential to be transited to online platforms to be complementary to the traditional engagement style. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic programs had to transition to alternative delivery methods as face-to-face was not possible.

The Resilience Builders developed the Tools for Tough times program which to develop resilience in four pillars; physically, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Throughout 2021 to 2022 this program was delivered to approximately 900 students at 12 schools in Victoria through a mixture of two face-to-face workshops and two online sessions. In 2023, the program was redeveloped and offered through online modules and offered to rural Victorians for free. To date, 32 people have completed the eResilience program. Initial evaluation is suggesting am almost 20% improvement in participants wellbeing between pre- and post-program participation.

The Agribusiness and Farming Diversity and Resilience Program delivered as part of the Resilient Farming Communities project by the Bass Coast Shire utilised an adaptive model. The 21 participants engaged in the six-month program that consisted of three online webinars, three face-to-face workshops, three on-site consulting sessions, two mentoring sessions (participants choice of this focusing on business or personal), core values, personal dynamics and conditions of operation. All participants concluded the program by receiving a Business Strategy Plan and Personal Management and Resilience Plan. This adaptive model successfully combined business strategy with mental health and wellbeing. Further, it was able to utilise a mixture of in-person and online meetings as well as one-on-one meetings and workshops with all participants to allow for sharing of stories/experiences and social connection.

An activity delivered through the Hindmarsh and Yarriambiack Resilience Project was the Mindful Mobile Photo Making Project. This saw eight participants complete an eight-week photography and digital phone course. The program facilitator described the program:

> *"So we met every Sunday and I would go through a mindfulness exercise because I wanted them to be thinking about mindfulness as well, so, you know, like mindfully doing the dishes or some breathing, or you know, I'd just have a five or ten minutes mindfulness. They all got a gratitude journal so they could be writing things down. It was to get them thinking about ways that they could have a bit of self-care, but at the same time teaching them a new skill so they felt confidence. And so we'd have 90 minutes where we caught up… But even so it was designed so they could still participate, even if they didn't turn up because I would send them the notes and they could keep taking their photos."*

Participants were required to post a photo every day to their closed community online group. It was designed to teach the participants new digital technology skills and create new positive wellbeing habits in a creative way:

> *"…[Participants entering the program] were not brilliant on technology. So they had to actually, they got better on their phones, you know we had a WhatsApp, you know, closed forum where they could post. I loved watching all their chats and they would chat about other stuff. They really connected online, which they probably wouldn't have done, some of them, because they were too scared to or didn't feel confident. They were taking photos and they would have to leave the house. You know a lot of this stuff you do outside, so they had a bit more exercise. But they also were making these friendships without even realizing it through the process, and isolation is a massive thing in rural. They are skill talking to each other now. And sharing recipes and all that stuff."*

The facilitator highlighted groups within agriculture-dependent communities have varying needs and do not fit into one stereotype:

> "*We really tried to get blokes and farmers, but there was probably three or four that were either on farms or they were older women living alone, who are probably invisible in these communities too. We always think of farmers being out on the land but there is a whole bunch of people in small towns who are very isolated as well. So I think we still targeted, it may not have been agricultural, but they are in agricultural communities."*

The program was celebrated with a photo exhibition event. A pre and post wellbeing survey completed by participants saw improvements in all questions including feeling optimistic about the future, feeling useful, relaxed, closer to others and thinking more clearly. Feedback from participants included:

> *"It was nice 'me' time"*

> *"Took me out of my comfort zone and saw new possibilities"*

> *"Tips for photography, challenge of thinking of topics, fun and fellowship"*

3.4.11 Recommendation 11: Good governance

11. Good governance

- **Establishment of project advisory group**

It is recommended for resilience building programs to be sustainable, strong governance requires a clear governance structure, shared decision-making, responsibility and leadership, time and funding for collaborative models, and ensure projects have measures outcomes, recommendations and evaluations.

Importantly, governance of the overall agriculture-dependent communities resilience program was effectively supported by weekly meetings of the NCFH evaluation team and bi-monthly meetings of the NCFH evaluation team and the Department of Health.

Multiple projects also developed project advisory/reference groups to provide guidance/input to the planning and delivery of activities. The Reaching Out to Farming Families (ROFF) advisory group was established as part of the Rural Financial Counselling (RFCS) Victoria West project, Reaching Out to Farming Families South West Victoria. This network met quarterly and aimed to re-establish a southwest farmer health network. The network was established to meet and share insights, inform what relatable activities or projects are occurring or planned locally to encourage collaboration, reduce duplication and provide feedback to the RFCS on their plans for the rollout of the project. A member of the network described their involvement:

> *"I just go to the meetings that are held and just contribute wherever I can to help improve the process or give the perspective of our healthcare service, what we have found the requirements of our community are, and how we have flexed our service to that community".*

The network had representation from farmers, agriculture industry service providers, health services, veterinarians, farm consultants, local government, Department of Families Fairness and Housing, Agriculture Victoria officers and neighbourhood house representatives. The advisory group was involved and provided support to aspects of the development and mapping of local support networks. The group also assisted with building community awareness of the program with activity participation increasing when network members helped advertise events and opportunities via their various organisations to attract attendees.

A member of the ROFF network described their experience:

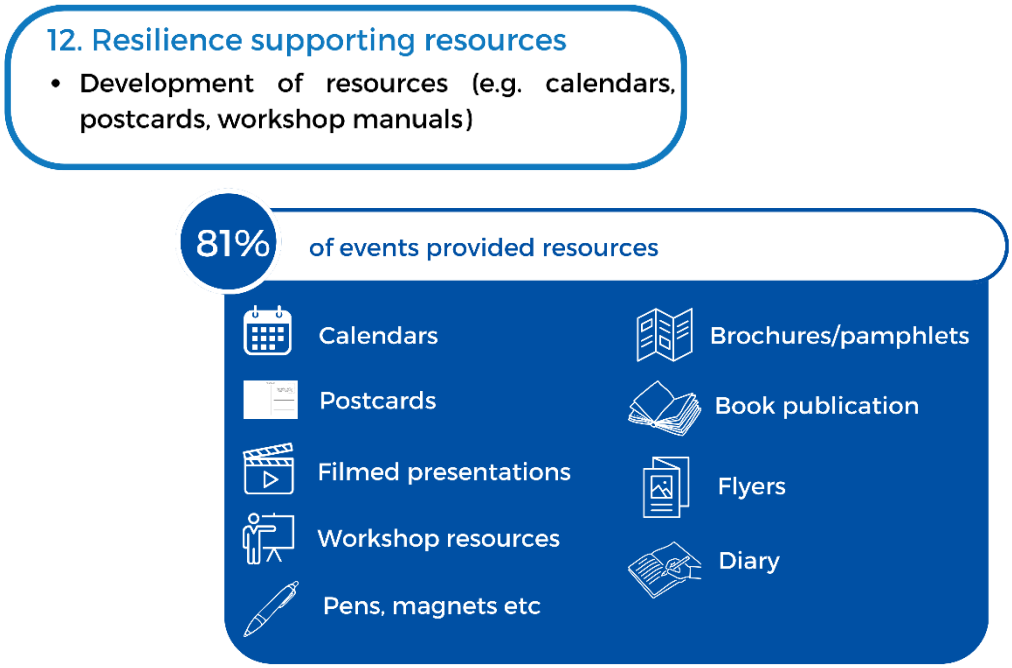
> *"I find it, I have absolutely loved it, I found the conversations to be very very productive, I think there are a lot of common goals shared about where we are heading as an area and working together, we realise working together we are going to get there a lot quicker and a lot, you know, and put systems in place that last for generations as opposed to working in silos".*

Similarly, the FARMwell Network was established as part of the FARMwell project to ensure representation and input from members of the agricultural dependent community. Members included representatives from three shire councils, agricultural organisations, agencies, community groups, farmers and agribusiness.

The agriculture-dependent communities resilience program overall was also faced by challenges to effective governance. This included frequent staff turnover within many project teams. In many cases,

succession/handover between project staff was not completed as thoroughly as needed. The restructuring of the Primary Care Partnerships into the Public Health Unit structure—resulting in project delays, uncertain leadership structures and shifts in strategic priorities—also contributed to gaps in effective governance. Lack of consistent and effective governance and leadership in these situations had further flow-on effects on the achievement of project deliverables (including project evaluation requirements established during the development of program logics).

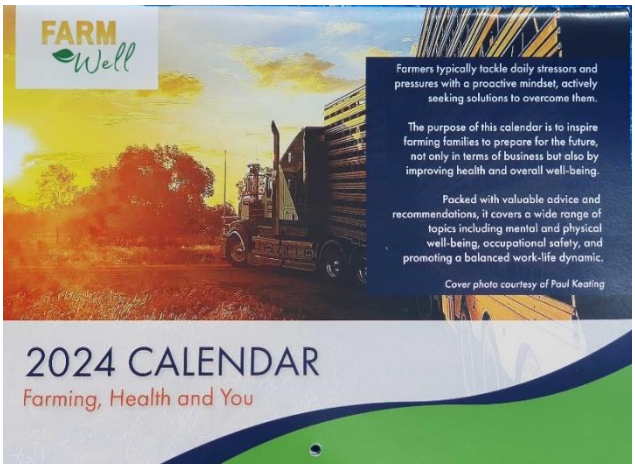
3.4.12 Recommendation 12: Resilience supporting resources



It is recommended resilience supporting resources are practically-focused and tailored to the farming context, available in varied formats, supplementary to the initial intervention to reinforce messaging into action. The eleven projects developed/utilised a wide array of resilience supporting resources to aid and bolster their activities. Of the 142 activities entered into the online activity survey by project teams, 81% included resources provided to participants. Examples of resources included community mapping resources, calendars, postcards, pamphlets/brochures (e.g. resources on improving mental and physical health and wellbeing contact details of local health and wellbeing services), workshop manuals (e.g. MHFA manuals, succession planning manuals) and filmed presentations (Dr Rob Gorden presentation, Gateway Health Farm and Family Wellbeing Day presentations).

Multiple projects utilised varying methods to distribute information on local health and wellbeing service contact details including postcards, brochures, flyers and pamphlets. Some resources were made accessible on different platforms and available to participants that could not attend activities. For example, The Gateway Health Farm and Family Wellbeing Day recorded all presentations from the day and have made them accessible on their website. Participants of the Small Agribusiness and Farming Diversity and Resilience program could also view online meetings at a time convenient to them if they could not make the scheduled group meeting.

Some resources were developed as a key activity to a project. Both Connect Well and FARMwell projects developed calendars to share information. The 2023 and 2024 Farming Conversations Calendar by Connect Well contained mental health stories from 12 farmers. To date 2,500 have been distributed. The 2024 calendar developed by FARMwell contained pictures and quotes from approximately 50 local farming women. The calendar provided advice on mental and physical wellbeing, occupational safety and a balanced work-life dynamic. There have been 1,000 copies distributed in the agriculture-dependent communities in/around Ararat, Stawell, Horsham, Marnoo, Donald, St Arnaud, Avoca, Willaura, Lake Bolac, Skipton, Ballarat, Creswick and beyond.



The Connect Well project also developed postcards were co-designed with community members to provide local health service and mental health service contact information.

Participants of the Small Agribusiness and Farming Diversity and Resilience program Personal by the Bass Coast received individually developed Personal Strategy Plans and Personal Management and Resilience Plans:

> *"So Lee designed a business plan for us moving forward for the next three years. And so that's, that's really good that we'll sort of follow that and aim to achieve those goals."*

As part of the RFCS Talk the Talk workshops developed of resources was key. Workshop participants were provided with a showbag consisting of a fridge magnet, wallet size contact card, note pad, microfibre screen cloth, wellbeing checklist card with online service options, pen, Mental Health '50 ways to take a break'. A participant described they had already made use of some of the resources:

> *"…we have got some flyers here and there is a wellbeing checklist, which I gave to one of our workers because I thought he was struggling…"*

Finally, the Buloke Resilience Building project by BCG developed the 'Over the Fence' publication featuring interviews from 23 farming families and local imagery to share wisdom from real-life experiences and share valuable information. The publication was completed in December 2023 and 500 copies were printed.

The National Centre for Farmer Health also provided access to existing evidence-based, popular resources (such as Managing Stress on the Farm, Managing Health on the Farm, Steering Straight guide) to all project

teams (as appropriate for different initiatives)—avoiding the need to duplicate effort, ensuring efficient use of funding and allowing for the reinforcement of messaging conveyed through project initiatives.

4. STRENGTHS, CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY-LED PROGRAMS IN AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITIES

Findings from the evaluation interviews confirmed and extended on many of the recommendations made in the rapid review. Interview participants highlighted the volume of programs being run in their communities—irrespective of whether these initiatives meet community need—particularly following COVID-19 and floods. Along with this, volunteer fatigue is rife in rural communities. Farmers are busy people, activities/programs must be targeted the needs of the populations for engagement. This means programs must be designed in collaboration with members of the farming community or empowering/providing the means for them to coordinate activities to fulfill their own needs.

Recommendations

- Relevant - Activities must be relevant to the needs and wants of the targeted community
- Worthwhile - Farming populations have limited time so activities must be perceived as worthwhile. This may be teaching participants something they see value in.
- Coordinated approach - As there are so many programs around, it is important to ensure duplication does not occur and utilise existing services and resources to allow for the most effective initiatives to be delivered.
- Promotion – The use of word of mouth through trusted organisation, community members and community champions for promotion of programs is crucial to the engagement and therefore success.

Feedback during the evaluation also highlighted the dilemmas of providing free events. While cost should not pose a burden to participation, it was also noted that—when events were free—people may register to attend but then fail to attend.

Recommendations

- Consider minimal registration fees to attend events to ensure people have some 'skin in the game' and commit to attend. Scope for wavering this fee could still be considered where applicable).

4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS AND EVALUATORS DURING TIMES OF CHANGE

While project funding for active delivery of initiatives may now have ceased, many of the eleven projects under the Agriculture-dependent Communities Resilience Project built community capacity through skill building. This will support sustained and long-term impacts on their targeted communities. Examples of

activities that focused on upskilling community members included the delivery of MHFA courses, courses developed to train service providers in mental health and suicide prevention, providing scholarships for Active Farmer instructor training, offering MHFA instructor training and courses in community event organisation. These skills will be in the community post the life of the projects adding to the sustainability of project outcomes and increased capability.

Continuing capacity building was a recurring theme throughout this evaluation—demonstrated through the project initiatives but also emphasised to support the development and success of future resilience building initiatives.

Recommendations

- Ensuring that support is provided to agriculture-dependent communities to facilitate the development of skills in funding applications, project management, community and stakeholder engagement skills and simple evaluation techniques would foster more sustainable, effective and measurable resilience initiatives in the future. This could be centrally supported or developed locally through skill building workshops.

Throughout the life of the projects, relationships were established within and between organisations and individuals. A coordinated approach was a recommendation of the rapid review, and as previously discussed, a key component of projects was the utilisation of collaboration. This network building and collaboration was demonstrated in multiple ways—through the network mapping process (identifying both increased numbers and quality of partnerships across many projects) and through the Community of Practice (where project teams worked collaboratively within workshops and in-between workshops to strengthen their respective projects).

Supporting relationship development at a community-level was also an important component of the local resilience projects. Following COVID-19—when many communities experienced significant declines in social connection which persisted post-lockdown—the importance of re-establishing relationships and social connection was crucial. The large majority of activities delivered by the projects provided opportunities for social connection. This allowed/encouraged community members to engage or reconnect with those in their community.

A key aim of the CoP was to establish networks and allow for collaboration and sharing of ideas between those working on the 11 projects. The CoP also allowed for the networking of project teams members with the Department of Health, NCFH and the other invited presenters throughout the two years of monthly meetings.

Although project funding had ended and many project team members have moved on, their enduring skills and established relationships will support them in a range of community-based roles.

The evaluation of the overall impact of the 11 projects was challenging. All 11 projects took very different approaches to building resilience in their agriculture-dependent communities, restricting the ability to set meaningful and comparable outcome measures across all projects. Three common evaluation survey questions were developed with the aim of project teams utilising these at each of their activities to ensure there were some consistent evaluation methods (see Appendix 2). The survey questions were designed to

gather feedback from participants involved in all 11 projects, with a view to understanding their reasons for attendance and the benefits gained from participating. The importance of integrating the questions was communicated directly to each of the project teams via regular communications from the evaluation team, during the Community of Practice workshops and via the Department of Health. Despite repeated communications, these survey questions were not utilised across all of the project teams, and were not consistently applied across any of the projects. Instead, the project teams conducted their own, individual evaluations—many of which did not consider impact or outcomes data. This challenge was compounded by frequent project staffing changes and reallocation of funding from PCPs to other community-based organisations.

Recommendations

- Common evaluation metrics should be established early and incorporated into project funding agreements.
- Evaluation requirements should be provided in writing with clear direction on reporting time frames and format.
- A small percentage of project funding could be withheld until all project deliverables are submitted and approved.

To support ease and timely reporting of information required for evaluation, the activity survey (described in 2.2.4) required project teams to complete details about project activity/initiative. This activity survey was completed well be some projects. However, missing data from some projects has limited the ability evaluate the full impact/effectiveness of these projects (e.g. number of participants, number of activities, percentage of participants from farming communities etc). The evaluation team adopted a range of approaches to address these challenges including scheduling monthly meetings with all project teams to identify missing data and crosschecking activity survey data with reporting to the Department of Health. Despite best efforts, not all data could be fully accounted for and reported.

Recommendations

- Work with project teams to explore methods to support accurate and timely completion of evaluation data that fit within their workflow and workforce capacity. This may require some training on commencement of funded projects and more creative uses of

Recommendations

- Ensure adequate resourcing for evaluation team members to attend resilience building events/initiatives to gather data. This will support more effective, efficient data collection and reduce the burden on project teams.

Reliance on project team members to send through contacts for qualitative interviews to inform project evaluation was not consistently effective. There were frequent delays in project teams sending through contact details of participants to complete follow-up interviews. This meant some participants were

contacted many months after their engagement in project activities—affecting recall and comprehensiveness of data.

Project teams frequently voiced challenges when trying to collect evaluation data by project participants. Frequently, they faced challenges in securing participants completion of surveys or encouraging their participation in subsequent evaluations.

Community resilience can be challenging to measure—particularly given the strong prevention-focused approach to resilience building in the agriculture-dependent communities resilience project—and is often built overtime. Therefore, impact of the resilience building initiatives is both difficult to identify and may not be measurable within the time and scope of the funded project. Many of the activities delivered by the 11 projects focused on upskilling community members (e.g. MHFA instructor course, Active Farmer instructor course) which will have more long-term impacts on communities.

Recommendations

- A compulsory training session for project teams in the importance of evaluation along with practical strategies for effectively gathering evaluation data could be allocated as part of all future project funding. While this topic was covered to a degree via the Community of Practice, not all project teams members may have been in attendance.
- Alternate or practical evaluation techniques may need to be explored and should be a crucial part of the planning of a project. If it is known a population is unlikely to participate in surveys, alternative methods of evaluation should be considered or identification of potential motivations/incentives for completion should be explored.
- Establishment of induction meetings with new/changing project staff could be conducted to ensure evaluation and reporting requirements are consistently communicated and understood.

Throughout the life of the Agriculture-dependent Community Resilience Building Project there were frequent organisational and staffing changes. A key transformation during the initial stages of the initiative was the change from Primary Care Partnerships to Public Health Units. This saw the transfer of projects between organisations, as well as changes to members of project teams. Transfers of projects also occurred between organisations (e.g. Buloke Shire Council to Birchip Cropping Group). Additionally, there were rapid and unanticipated changes in staffing and sometimes the opportunity for handover was not available. Given the multiple hats that staff in rural organisations are often required to wear, transferring projects between organisations and team members did mean that staff were often allocated projects they had little understanding of (or background/experience in). This posed a risk of project staff having less investment in project success, particularly when their role was temporary or outside of their usual scope of practice.

The frequent turnover of project staff contributed to a disjointed evaluation process. Project team members appeared to be confused by the differing roles and requirements of the Department of Health and National Centre for Farmer Health in this initiative. There was an ongoing need to inform new project team members of the evaluation expectations.

All these changes delayed project commencement and therefore reduced the time available to undertake activities. This resulted in projects being disjointed at times and some projects only had a few months to conduct their activities and consequently did not get to deliver everything they had intended/desired. Organisational changes also meant there were challenges with funds not flowing quickly (from the Department of Health to the lead organisation, as well as from within the lead organisation to the project team).

Recommendations

- Future planning of community-based projects should ensure clear, easily accessible communication to induct new staff over time.
- Clearer communications about the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in the funding, delivery and evaluation of projects should be developed (particularly large-scale, long-term projects where there are likely to be staffing changes across DoH, community organisations and evaluation team).
- Compulsory representation and attendance from all project teams on the Community of Practice may have helped alleviate some of the communication challenges noted here. The CoP presented a valuable opportunity to share learnings as well as provide support and information to project teams.
- Strategies should be explored to support the delivery of funding and set-up of projects in a timely manner. This may have a flow-on benefit of maintaining staff across an established contracted project period.

These recommendations extend and further detail the recommendations made in the previous rapid review (Kennedy et al., 2021), emphasising the need for an evidence-based, and well resourced, planned and coordinated approach to building resilience in agriculture-dependent communities. Further, that this approach prioritises the needs and engagement of the target community.

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APPENDIX 1: QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Agriculture-dependent Community Resilience Project Evaluation

Qualitative interview questions- Volunteers/Stakeholders

- Collection of basic demographic information:
  - What gender do you identify as?
  - What is your age?
  - What is your address?
  - Do you live on a farm?
- How did you learn about the project?
- Please describe your role in the project?
- What made you decide to get involved?
- Tell us about your experience as part of this project?

For the next few statements can you please respond with strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree (*request that participants write down this scale to assist when responding to each statement*). Please also feel free to clarify your response with a brief explanation.

1. I was provided with sufficient background information about the project
2. I was involved in the project design
3. My role in the project was clear
4. I have benefited from my involvement with the project
5. I felt the time and effort required to contribute was manageable for me
6. I have developed/learnt new skills that I will be able to use to support resilience in my agriculture-dependent community
7. I have developed new networks (or extended my networks) as a result of being involved in the project
8. The project targeted at-risk members of my agriculture-dependent community
9. I felt comfortable contributing my ideas to the project team
10. The project leaders were responsive to change
11. Social connection was encouraged as a broader mental health response

- Do you think that the project met the needs of the targeted agricultural dependent community?
- Was your participation in the project the first time you had connected with members of the project team?
- If you had an existing relationship with project team, do you think your involvement has strengthened this relationship?
- Do you have any further comments about the project?

Qualitative interview questions- Project team members

Reflecting on the progression of your agriculture-dependent community resilience project to date:

- Which community demographic have you targeted in your resilience project to date? (Prompts: farmers, service providers, young people, males/females, young/older people
- How has your target audience been engaged in your resilience project to date? (Prompts: co-design, governance, as volunteers, as participants in activities)
- How did you ensure engagement was not onerous?
- How has social connection as a broader response for mental health been incorporate into the project design?
- What do you think was the most valuable aspect of this project?
    - For the project team?
    - For individual participants?
    - For your community overall?
- How frequently was the project design (or aspects of the project design) reviewed? Did you introduce any changes following review?
- In a perfect world, what changes would you put in place to improve the project?

Qualitative interview questions- Community member participants

Interview will commence with a brief description of the resilience project in community member participants area.

- Collection of basic demographic information:
  - What gender do you identify as?
  - What is your age?
  - What is your address?
  - Do you live on a farm?
- Please describe your role in your agriculture-dependent community (Prompt examples: farmer, service provider, community leader, etc.)
- How did you learn about the project?
- How have you participated in the project?
- What made you decide to get involved in the project (Prompts: how did you hear about it? Did you respond to a flyer? Were you directly invited to intend an event?)?
- Do you think what was offered as part of this project met your needs? Met the needs of others in your community?
- How has your knowledge and understanding of available support services in your area changed as a result of your participation?
- Have you connected with any support services as a result of your participation in this project?
- What benefits have you gained by participating in this project (Prompt examples: new skills, new knowledge, new networks, social connection, links to services, etc.)
- How has participating in this project better prepared you to face future challenges?
- Were you involved in the project design?
- What did you find most valuable about this project?
- What suggestions would have to improve this project?
- What suggestions would you have to increase the number of farmers/farming families/agriculture industry groups (as relevant) participating in the project?

For the next few statements can you please respond with strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree. (*Request that participants write down this scale to assist when responding to each statement*). Please also feel free to clarify your response with a brief explanation.

1. The right people from the community were involved in the project
2. I felt socially connected during my involvement with the project
3. Engagement in the project was simple
4. The resources provided in this project were practical and helpful for me

- Do you have any further comments about the project?

APPENDIX 2: SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

The reason I attended the event was:

- To meet new people in my community
- To learn new ways of supporting my mental health and wellbeing
- To learn new ways of supporting the mental health and wellbeing of a loved one
- To feel connected to my community
- For something to do
- As part of my job
- Other

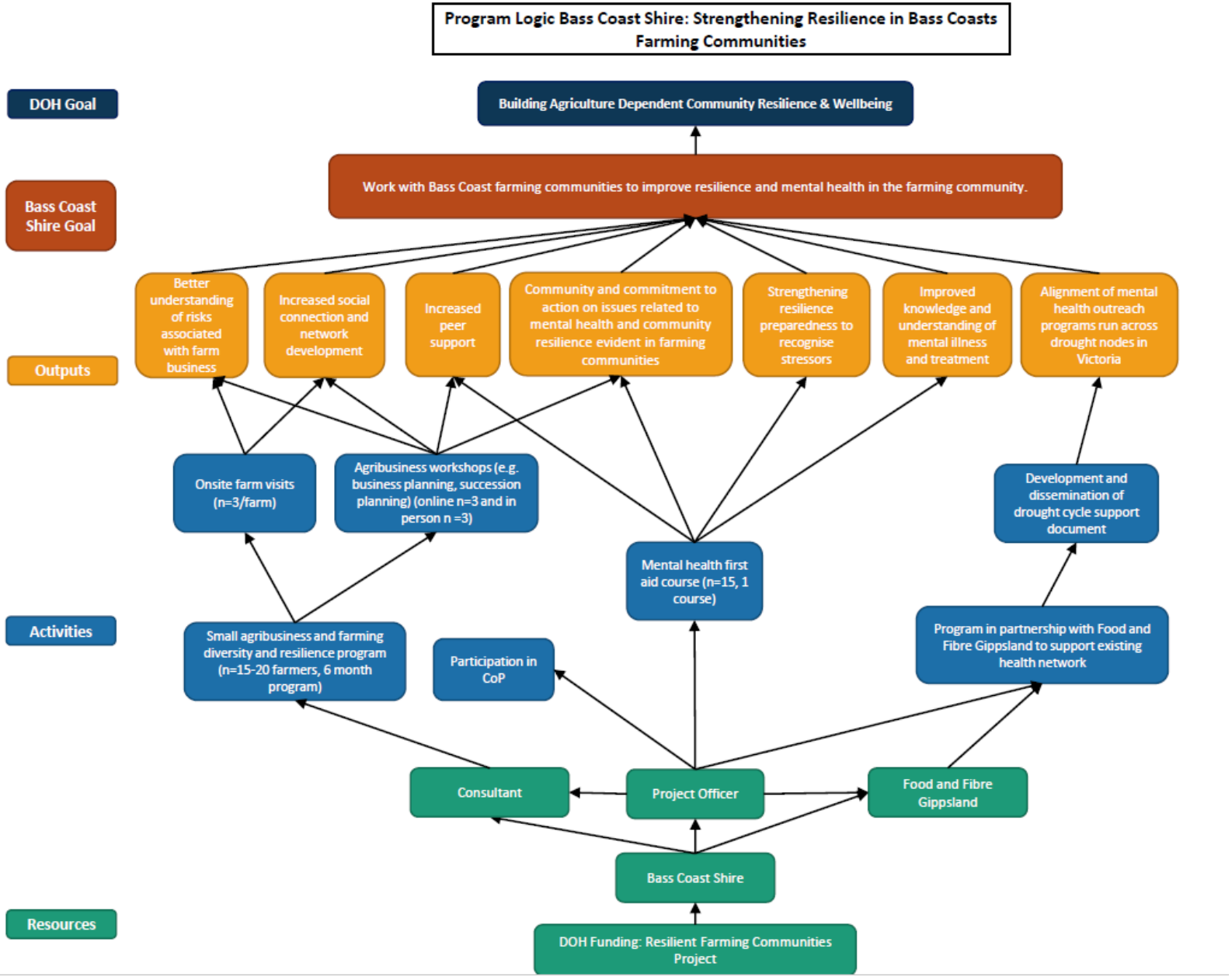
At today's event I:

- Made new social connections within my community
- Learnt about preventing risks to my mental health and wellbeing
- Learnt skills to employ when face with challenging situations
- Learnt ways to support my mental health and wellbeing
- Made new professional connections within my community
- Realise my organisation could play an important role in promoting good mental health and wellbeing in our community

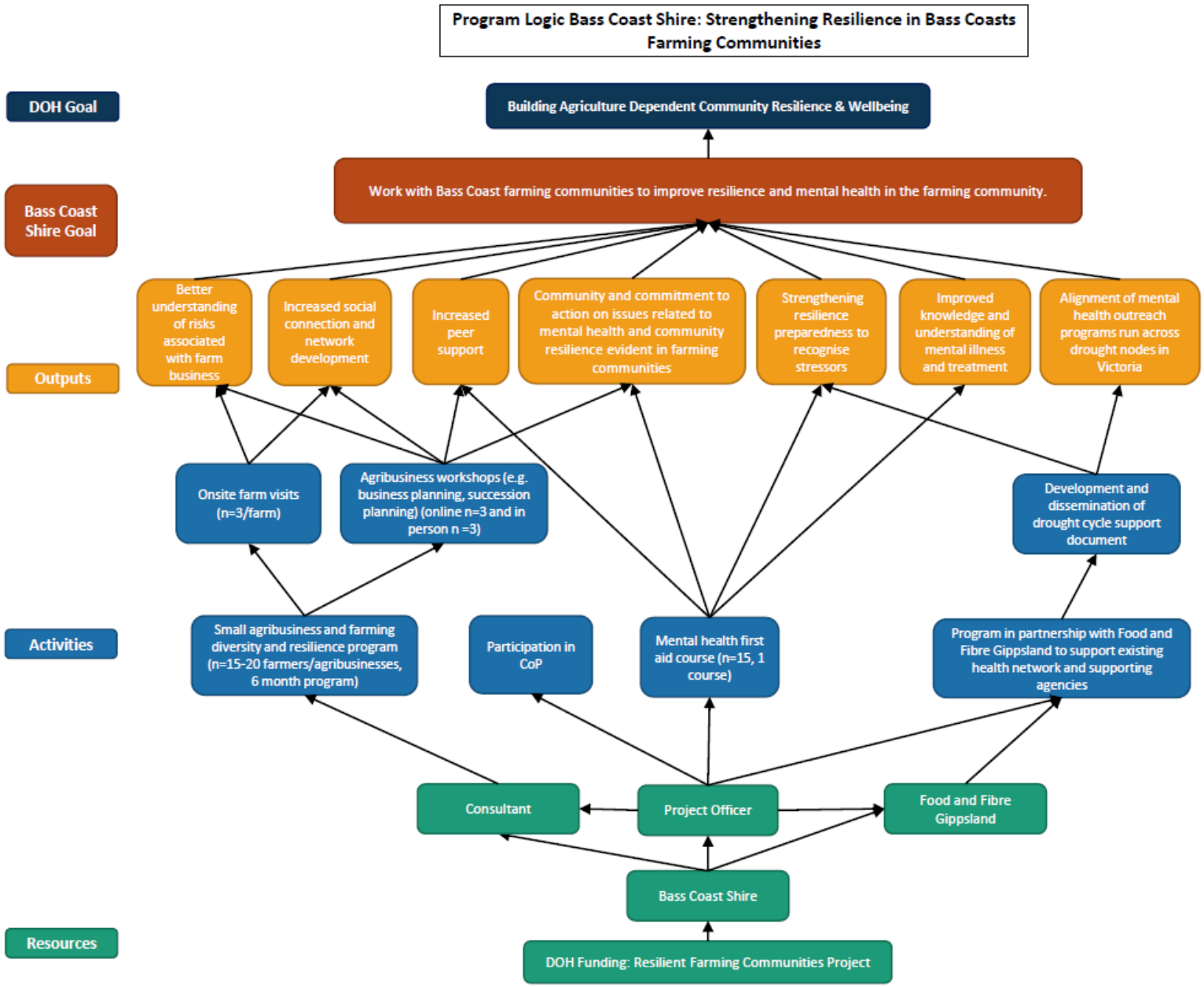
Following today's event:

- I feel socially connected
- I feel more comfortable discussing my own mental health and wellbeing
- I feel more comfortable discussing a loved one's mental health and wellbeing with them
- I am aware of resources in my community to support my mental health and wellbeing.
- I am going to be proactive in promoting the importance of good mental health and wellbeing in my community

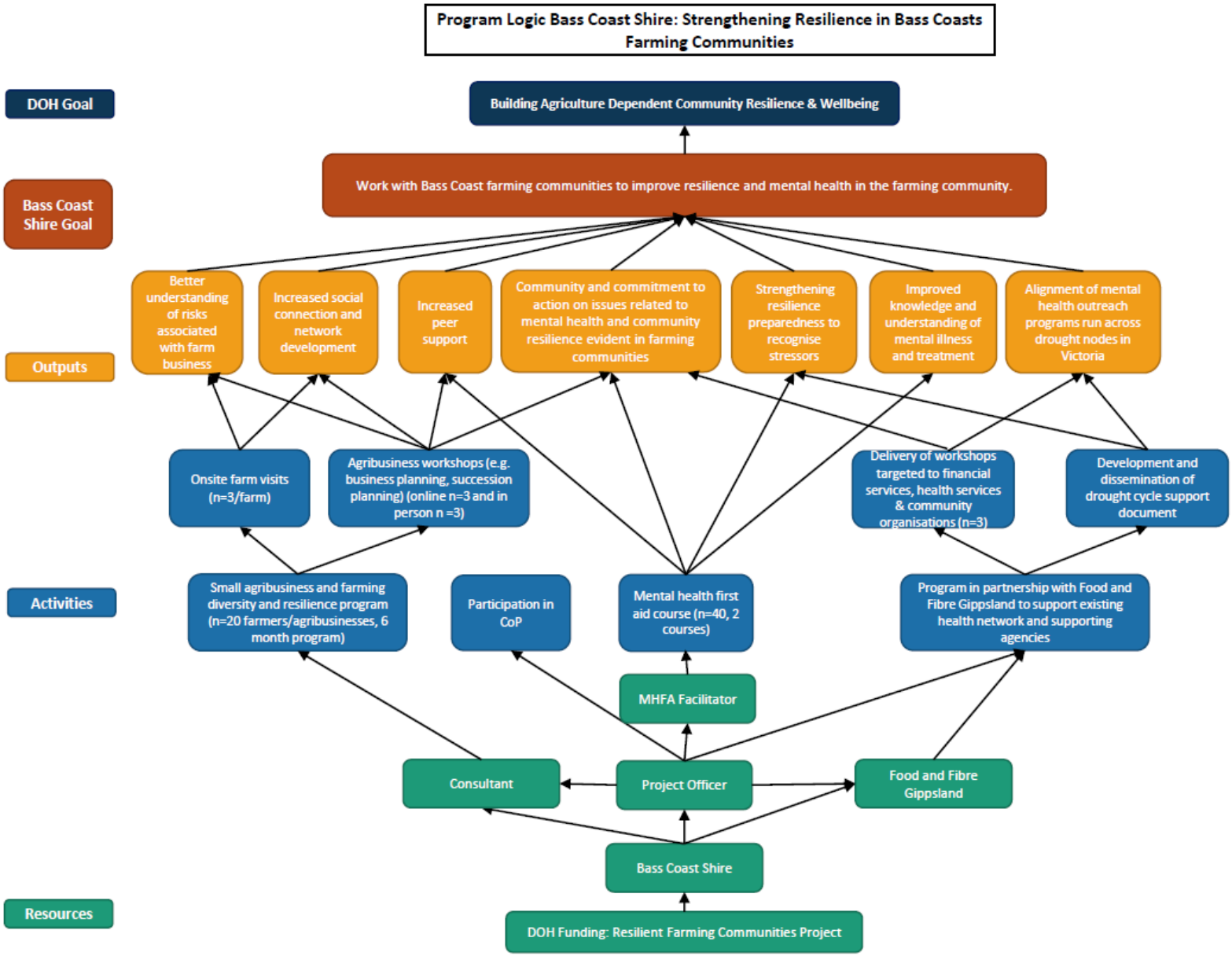
APPENDIX 3.1: PROGRAM LOGIC – RESILIENT FARMING COMMUNITIES TIME POINT 1 (MARCH 2023)



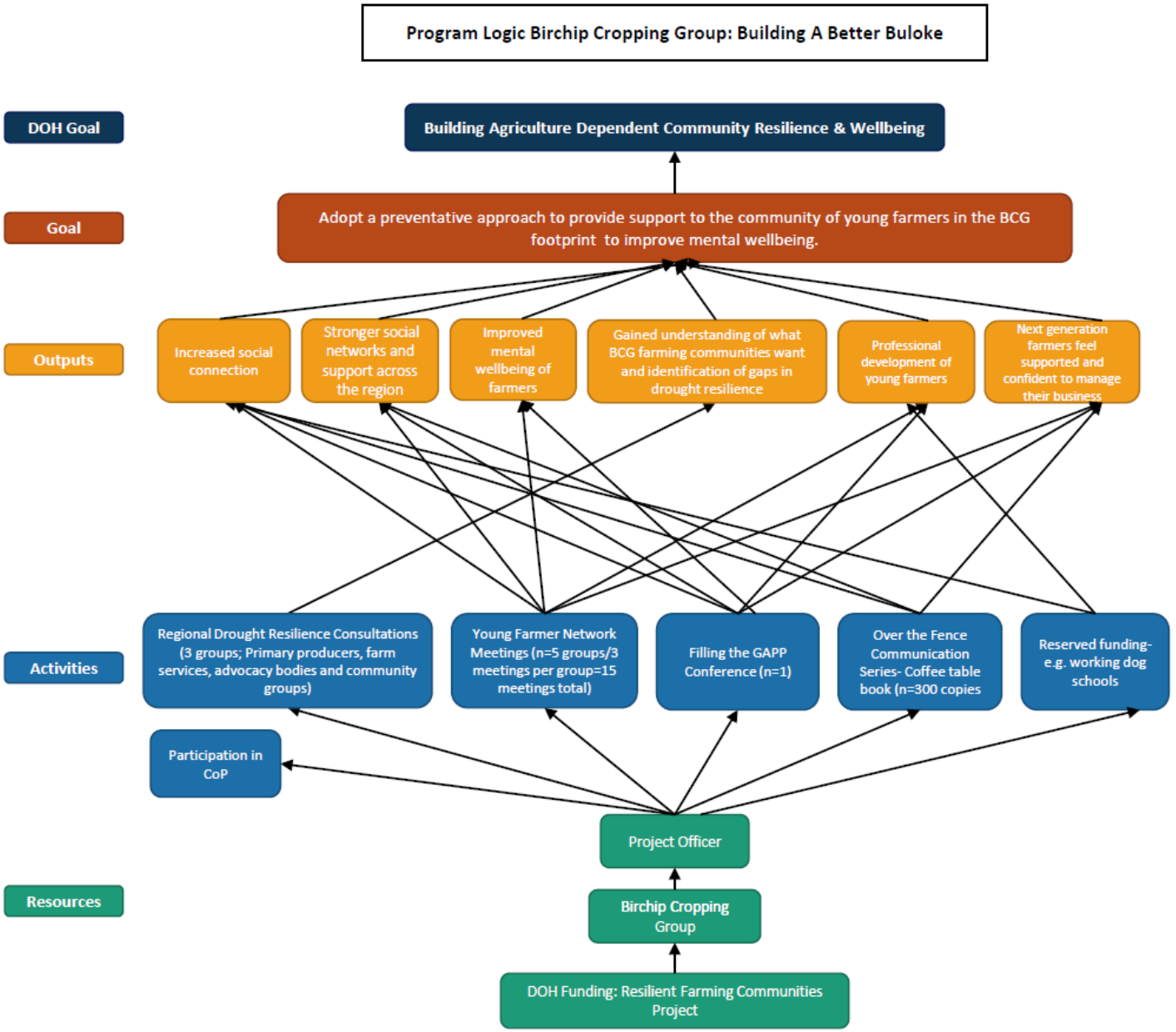
APPENDIX 3.2: PROGRAM LOGIC – RESILIENT FARMING COMMUNITIES TIME POINT 2 (AUGUST 2023)



APPENDIX 3.3: PROGRAM LOGIC – RESILIENT FARMING COMMUNITIES TIME POINT 3 (NOVEMBER 2023)

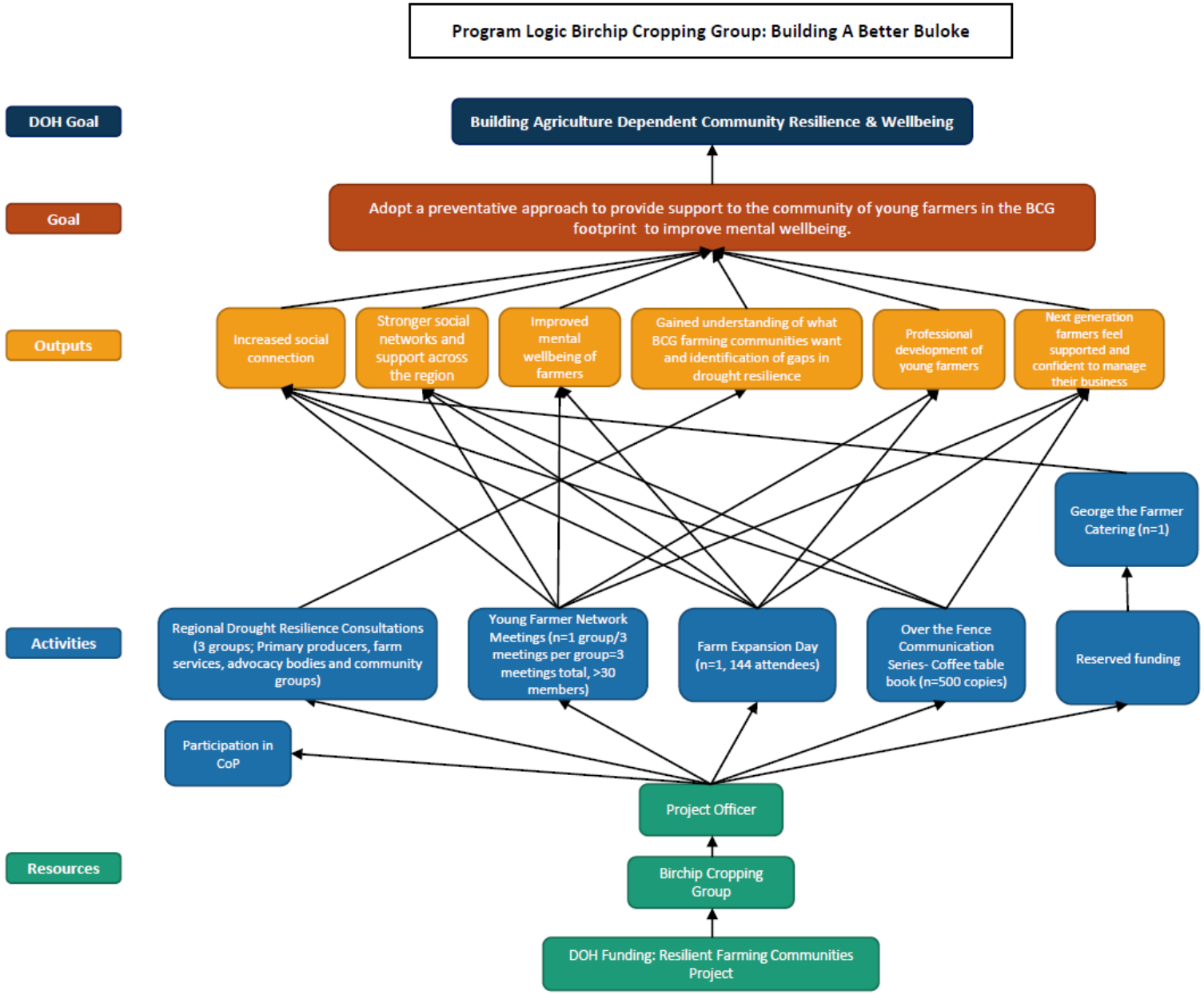


APPENDIX 4.1: PROGRAM LOGIC – BULOKE RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 1 (MARCH 2023)

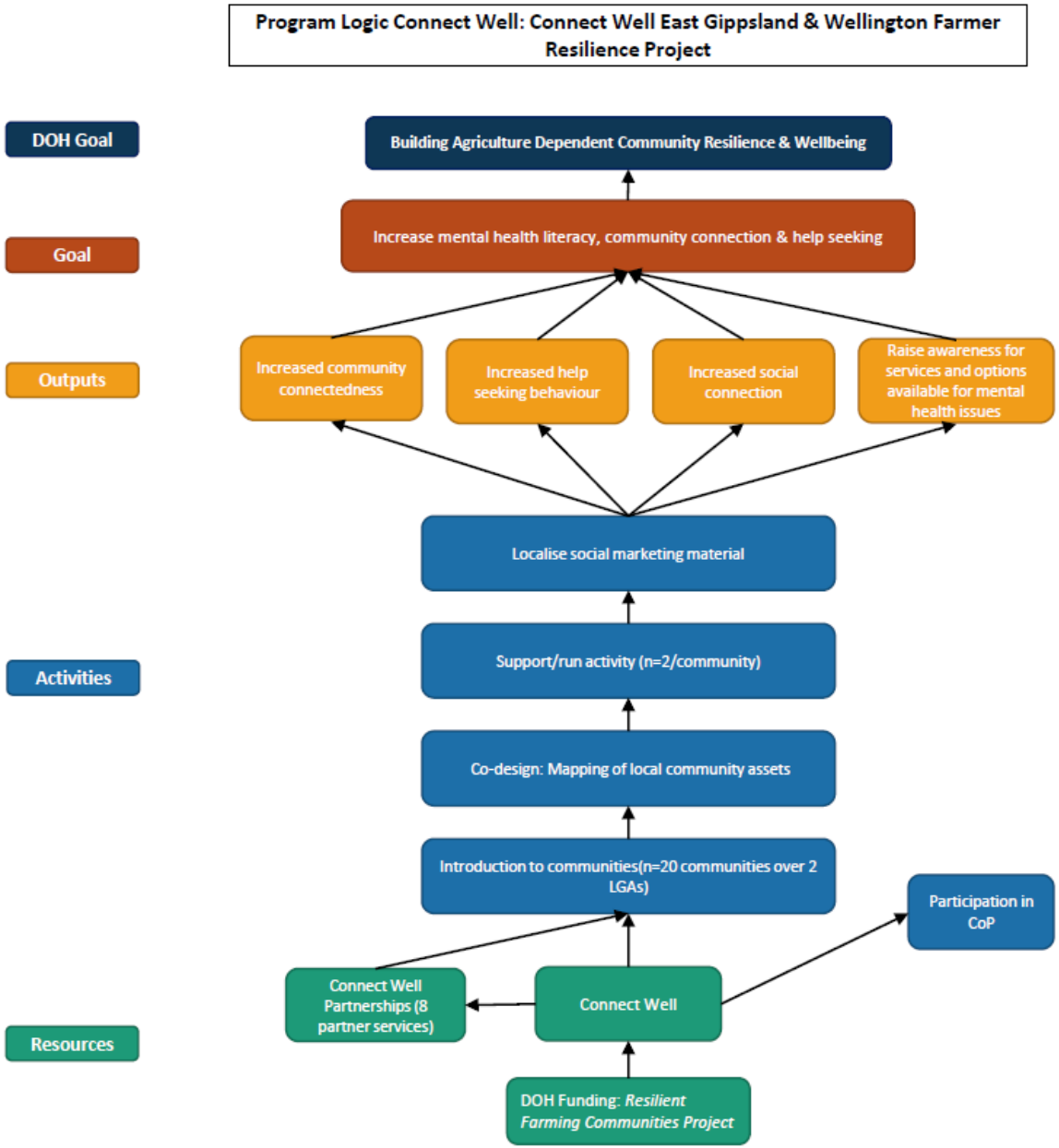


APPENDIX 4.2: PROGRAM LOGIC – BULOKE RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 2 (AUGUST 2023)

APPENDIX 4.3: PROGRAM LOGIC – BULOKE RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 3 (NOVEMBER 2023)

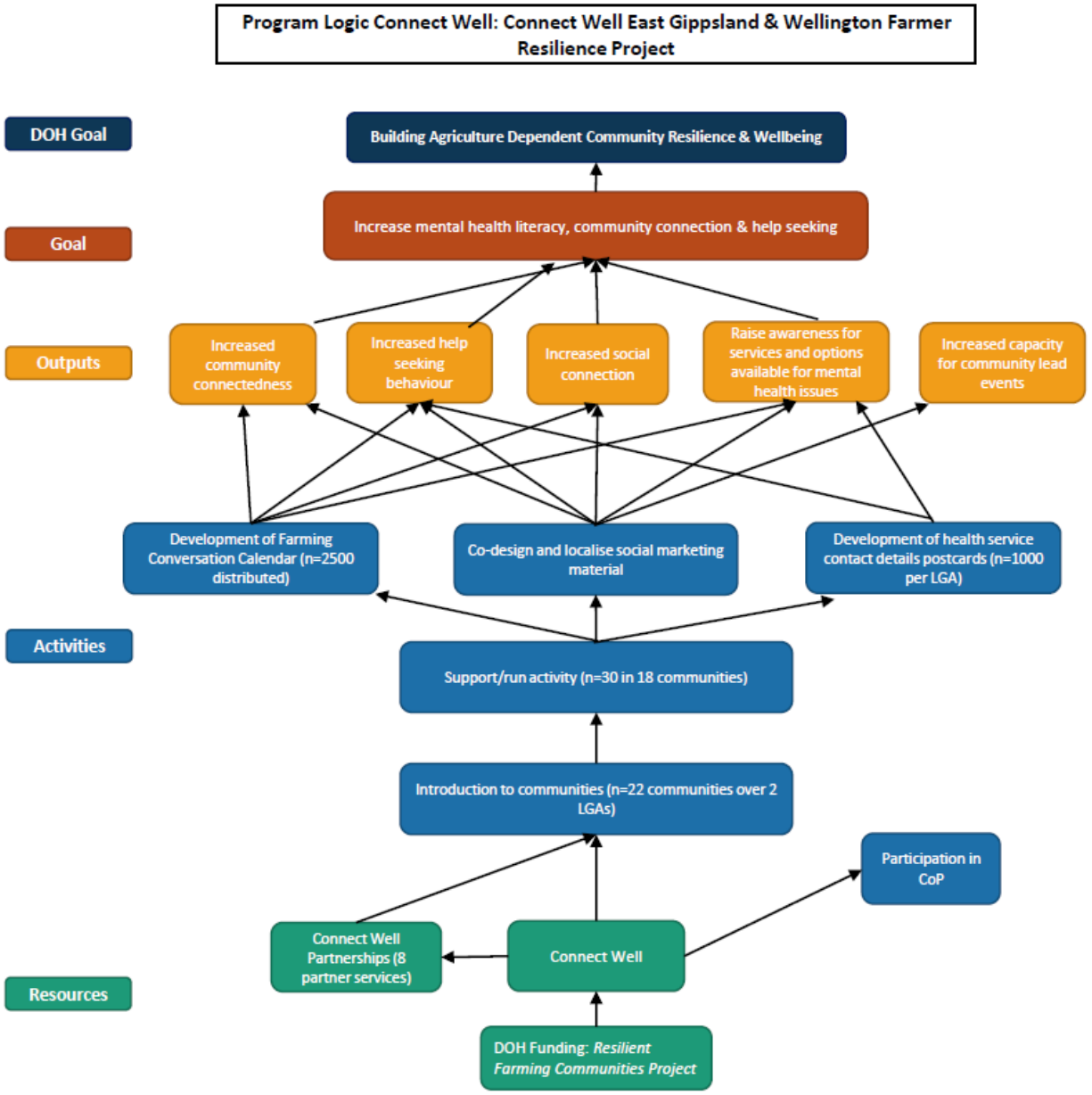


APPENDIX 5.1: PROGRAM LOGIC - CONNECT WELL EAST GIPPSLAND & WELLINGTON FARMER RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 1 (MARCH 2022)

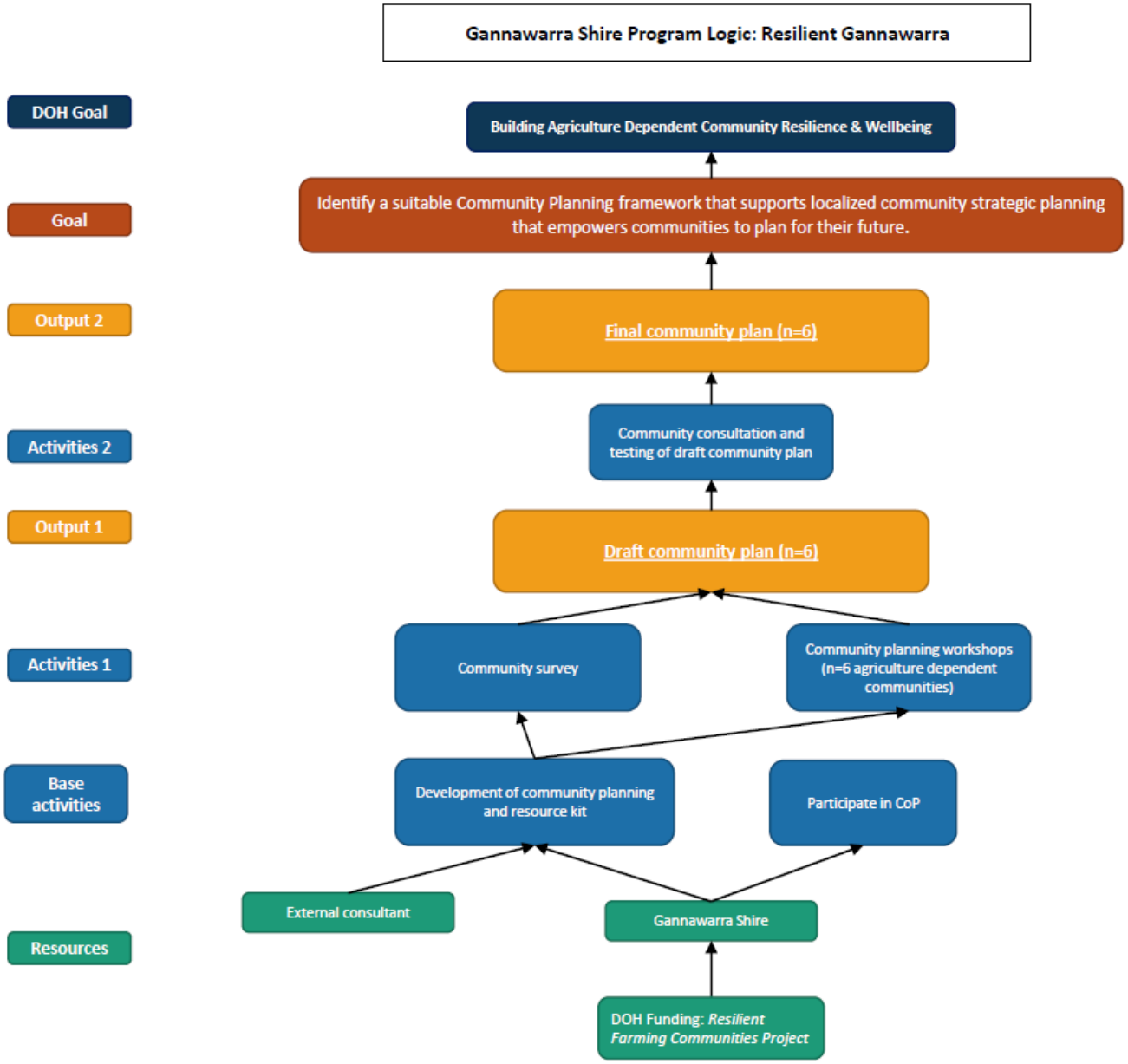


APPENDIX 5.2: PROGRAM LOGIC - CONNECT WELL EAST GIPPSLAND & WELLINGTON FARMER RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 2 (DECEMBER 2022)

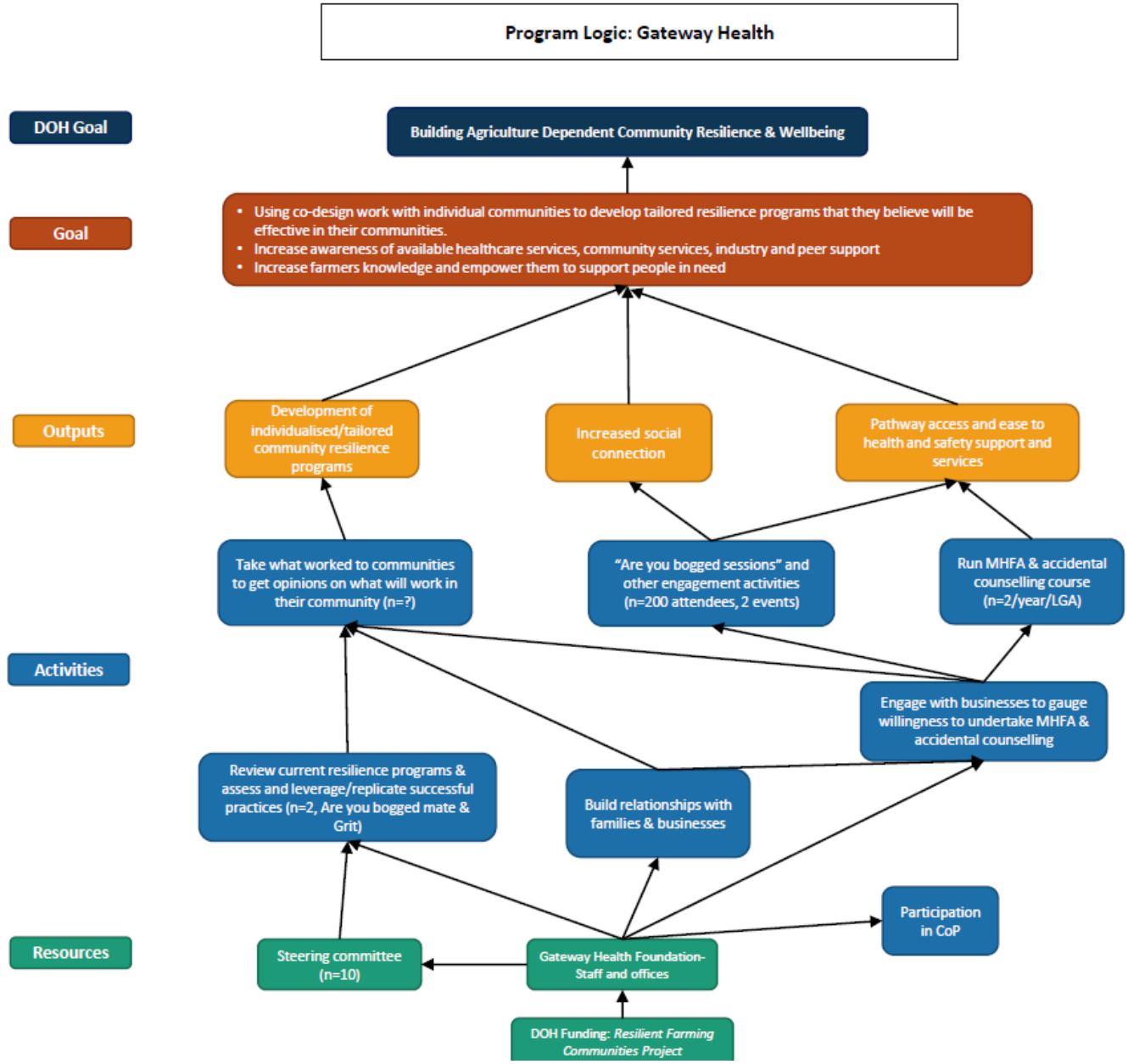
APPENDIX 5.3: PROGRAM LOGIC - CONNECT WELL EAST GIPPSLAND & WELLINGTON FARMER RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 3 (20TH NOVEMBER 2023)



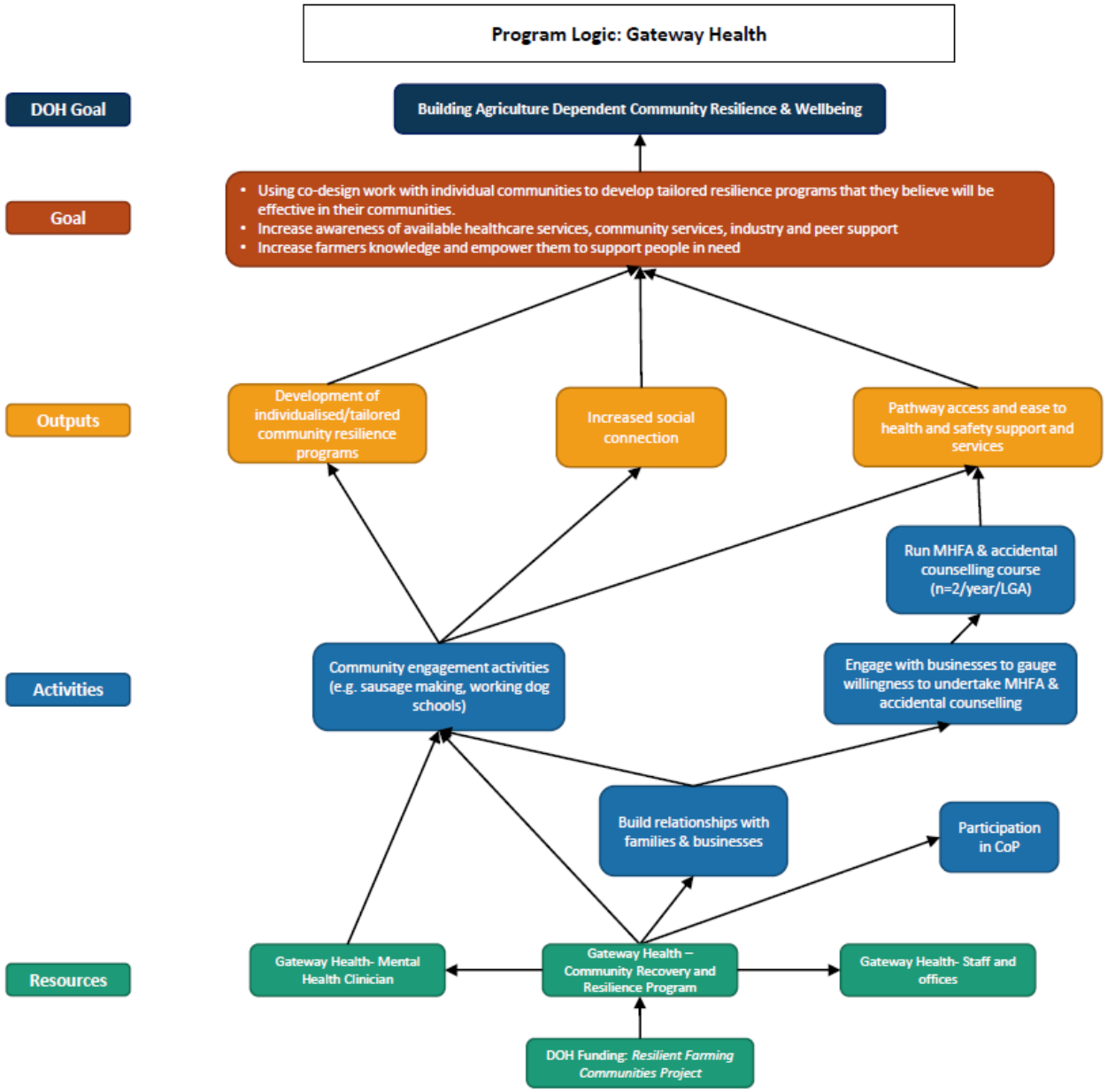
APPENDIX 6: PROGRAM LOGIC - CONNECTING GANNAWARRA TIME POINT 1,2 & 3 (FEBRUARY 2022, DECEMBER 2022, NOVEMBER 2023)



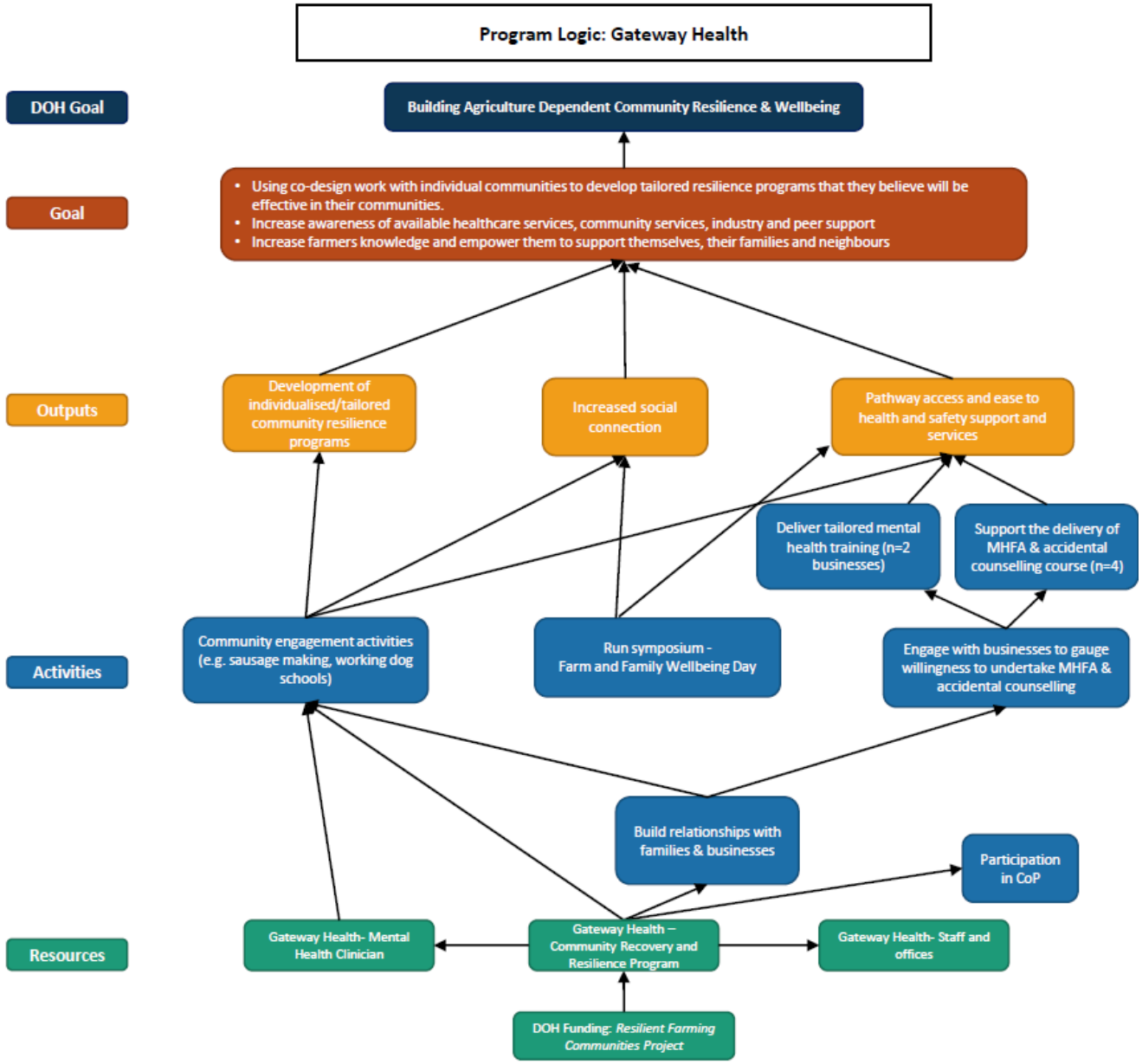
APPENDIX 7.1: PROGRAM LOGIC – BUILDING OVENS-MURRAY AGSECTOR PROJECT TIME POINT 1 (JANUARY 2022)



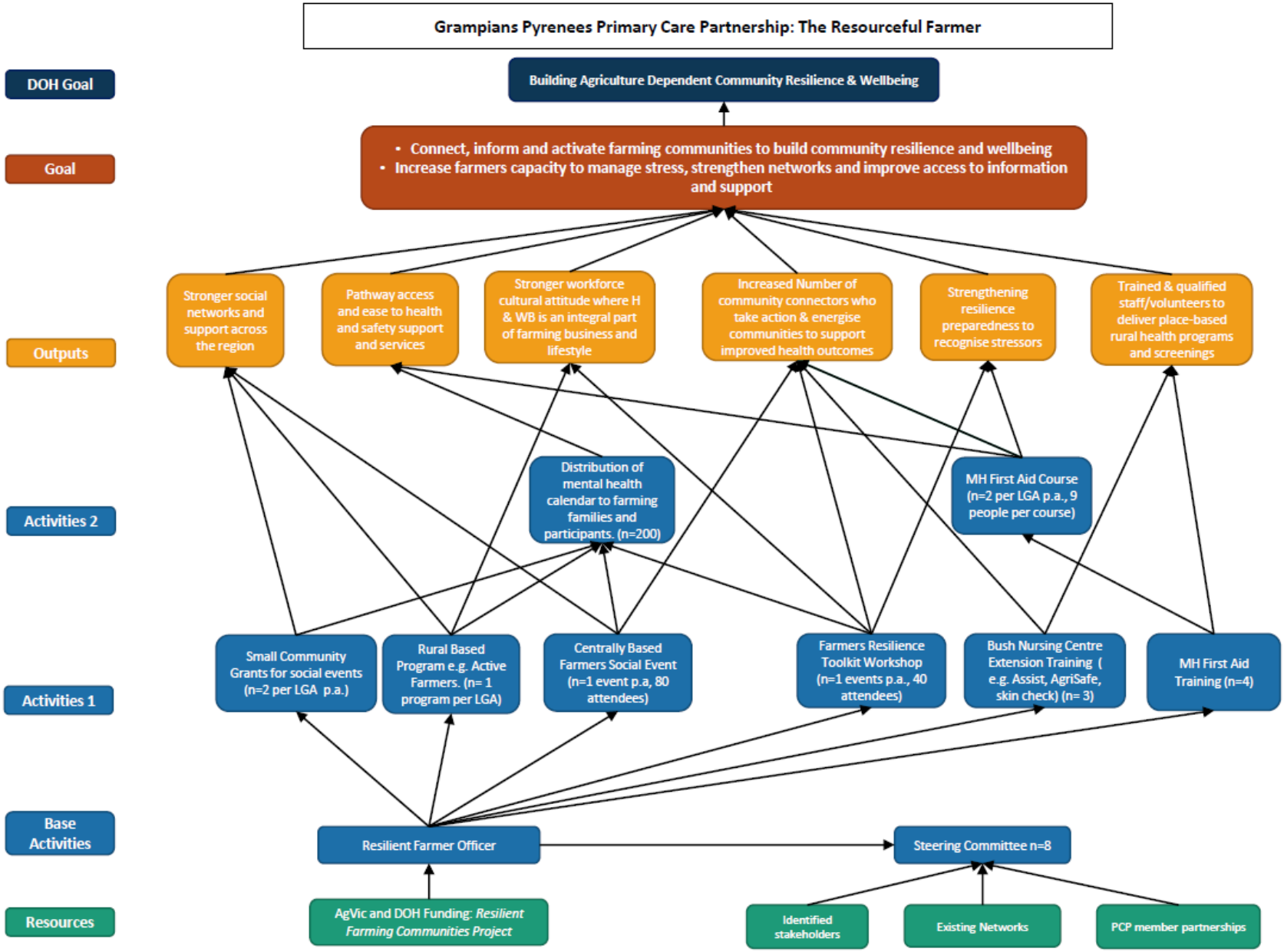
APPENDIX 7.2: PROGAM LOGIC – BUILDING OVENS-MURRAY AGSECTOR PROJECT TIME POINT 2 (JANUARY 2023)



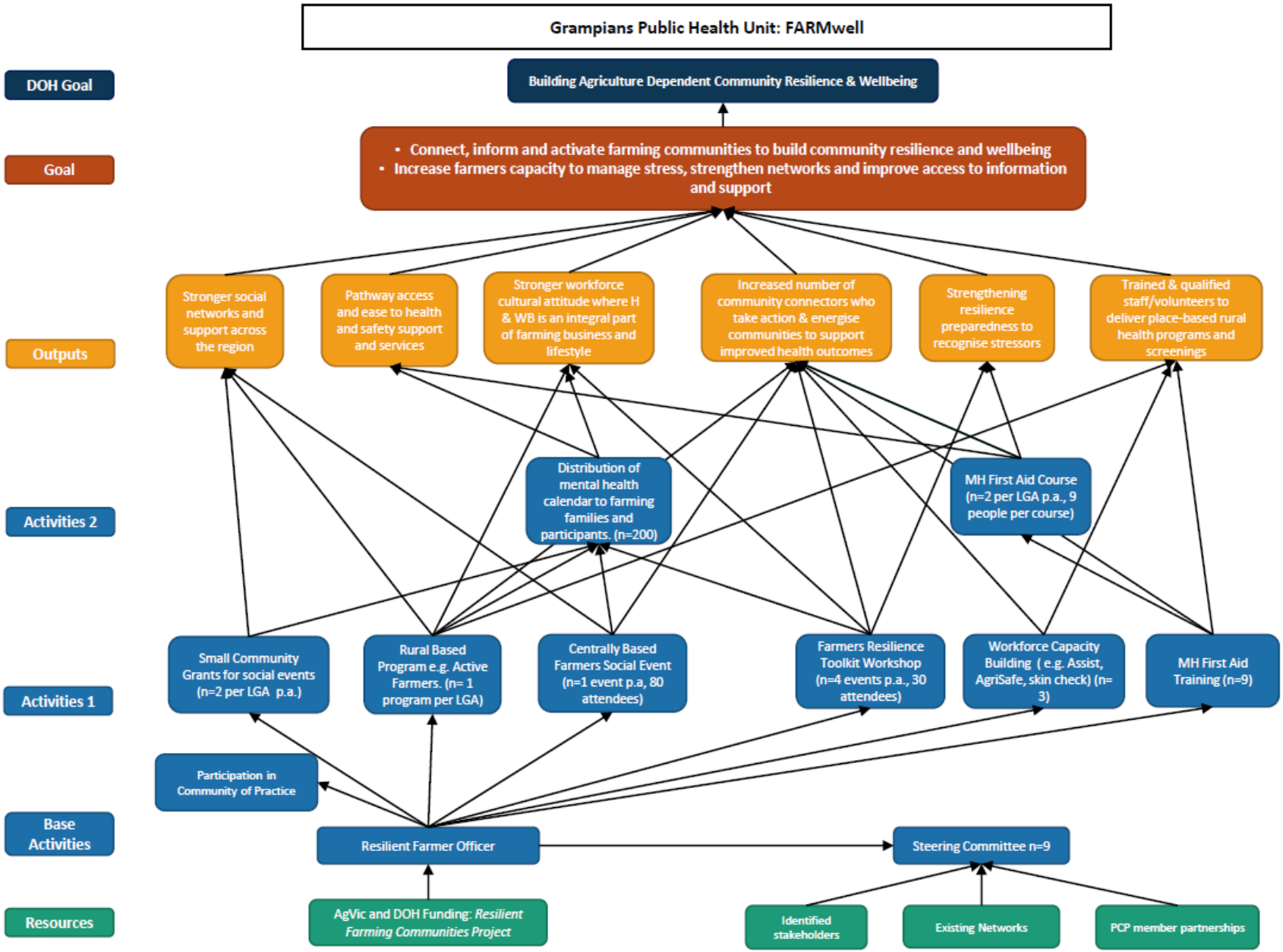
APPENDIX 7.3: PROGRAM LOGIC – BUILDING OVENS-MURRAY AGSECTOR PROJECT TIME POINT 3 (NOVEMBER 2023)



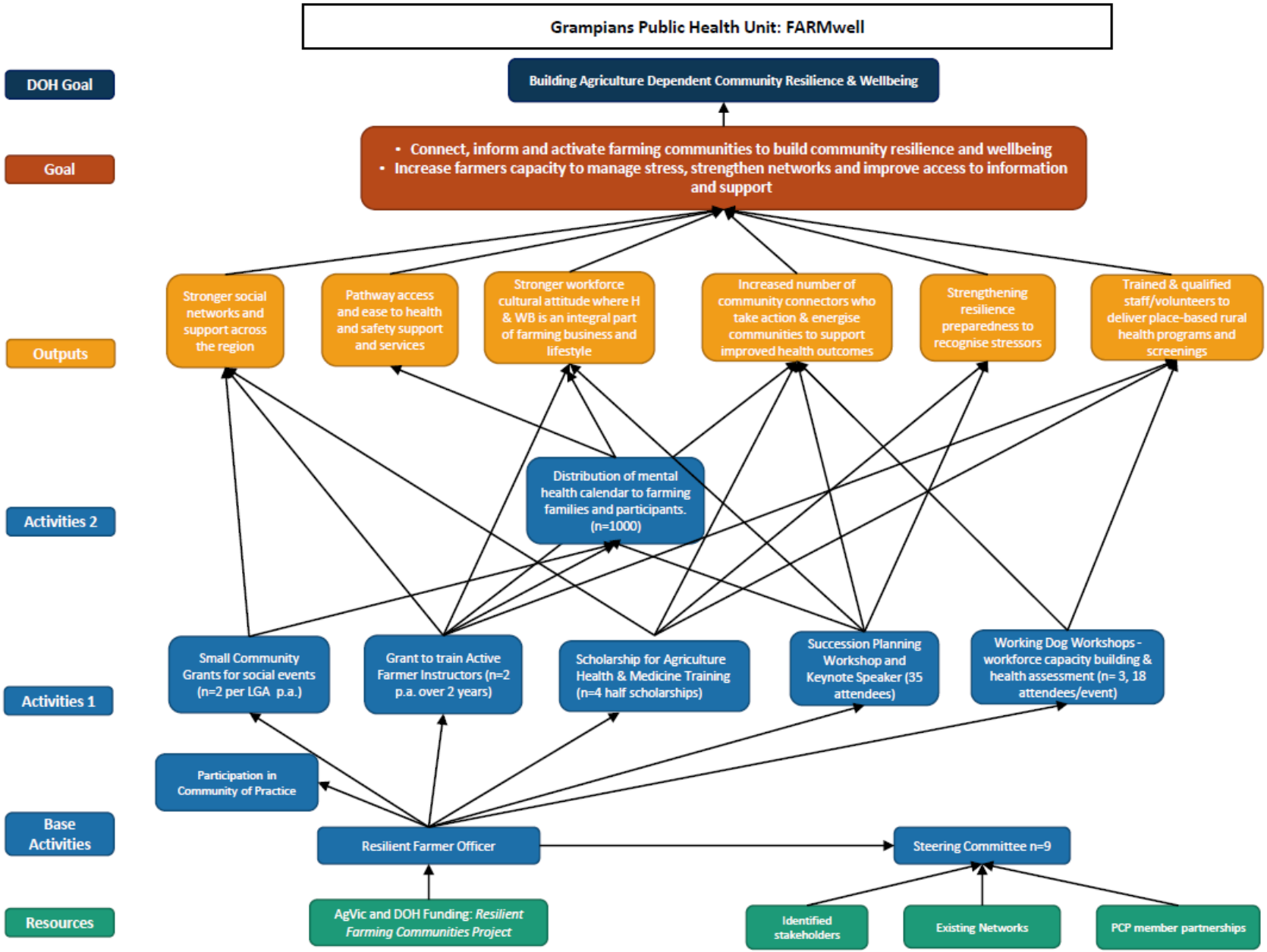
APPENDIX 8.1: PROGRAM LOGIC - FARMWELL TIME POINT 1 (DECEMBER 2021)



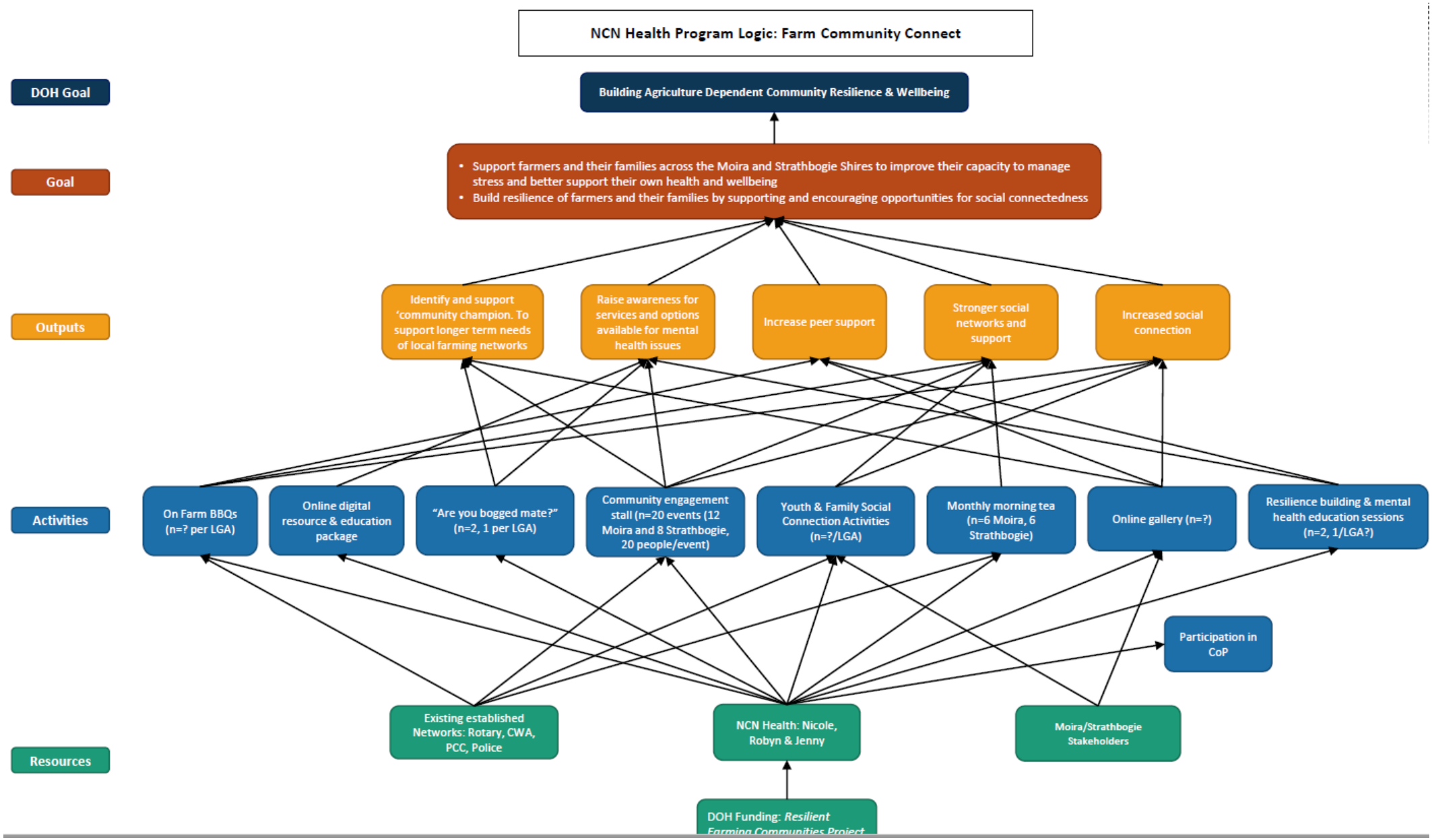
APPENDIX 8.2: PROGRAM LOGIC - FARMWELL TIME POINT 2 (FEBRUARY 2023)



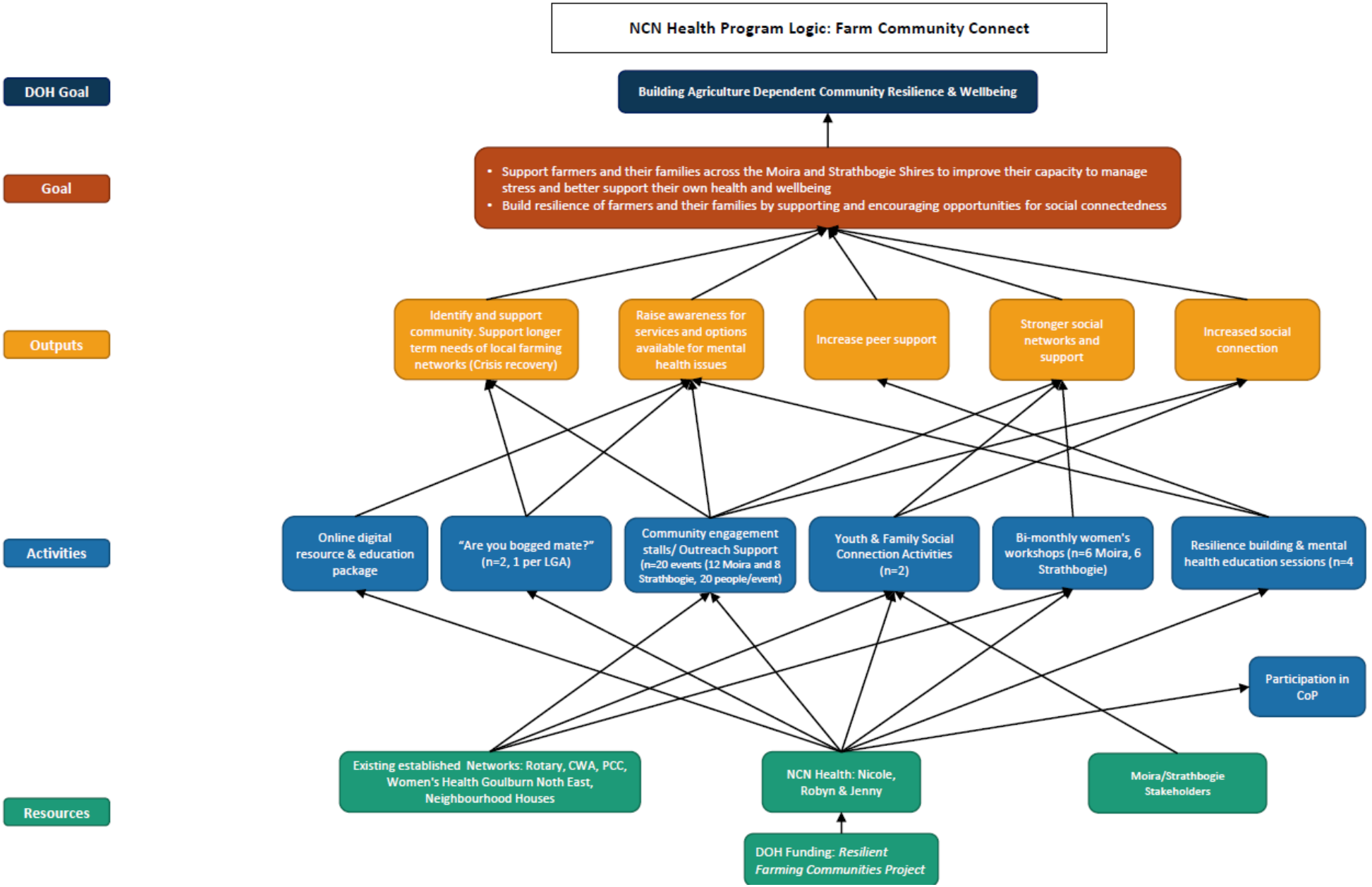
APPENDIX 8.3: PROGRAM LOGIC - FARMWELL TIME POINT 3 (DECEMBER 2023)



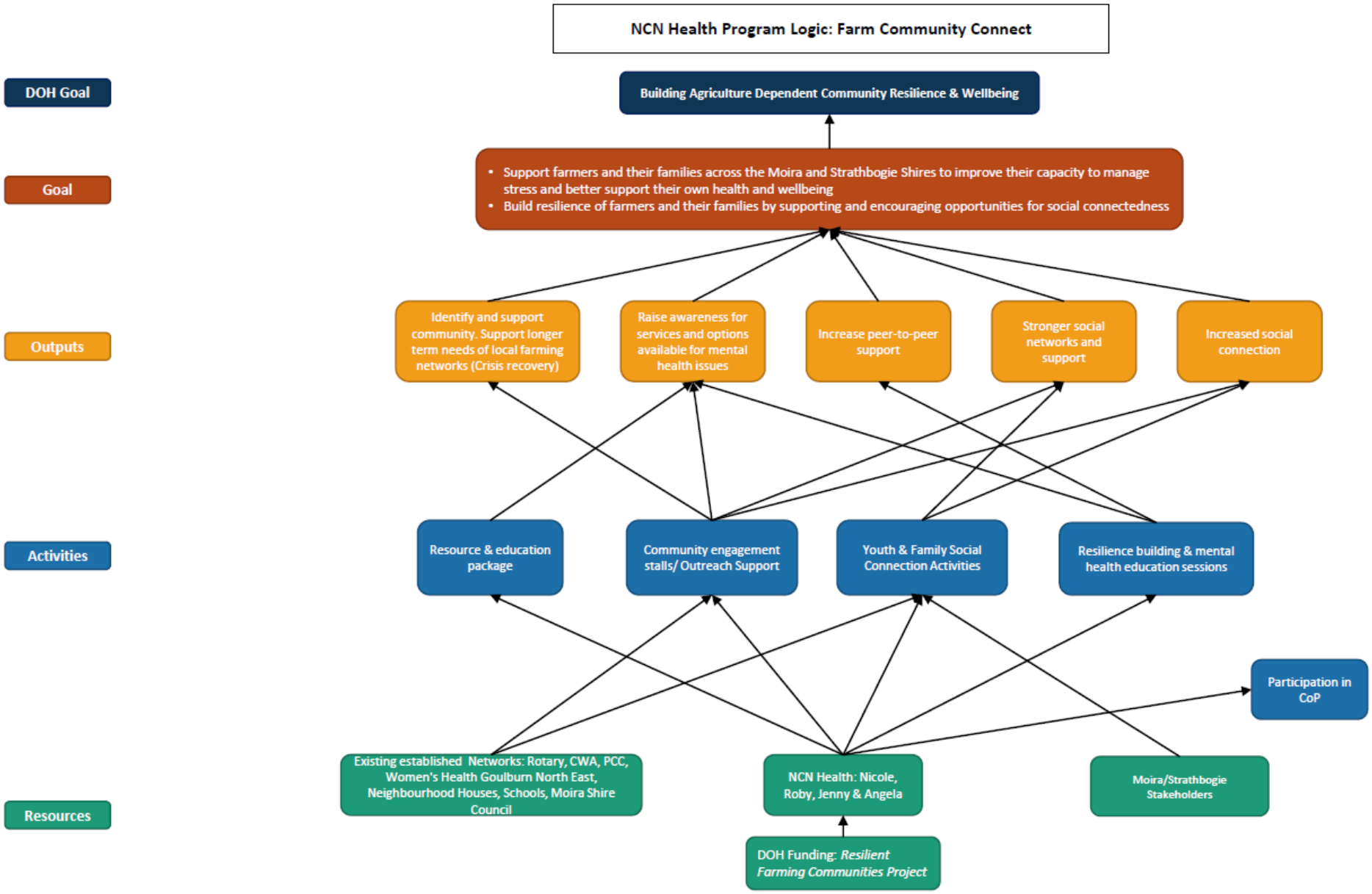
APPENDIX 9.1: PROGRAM LOGIC – FARM COMMUNITY CONNECT TIME POINT 1 (FEBRUARY 2022)



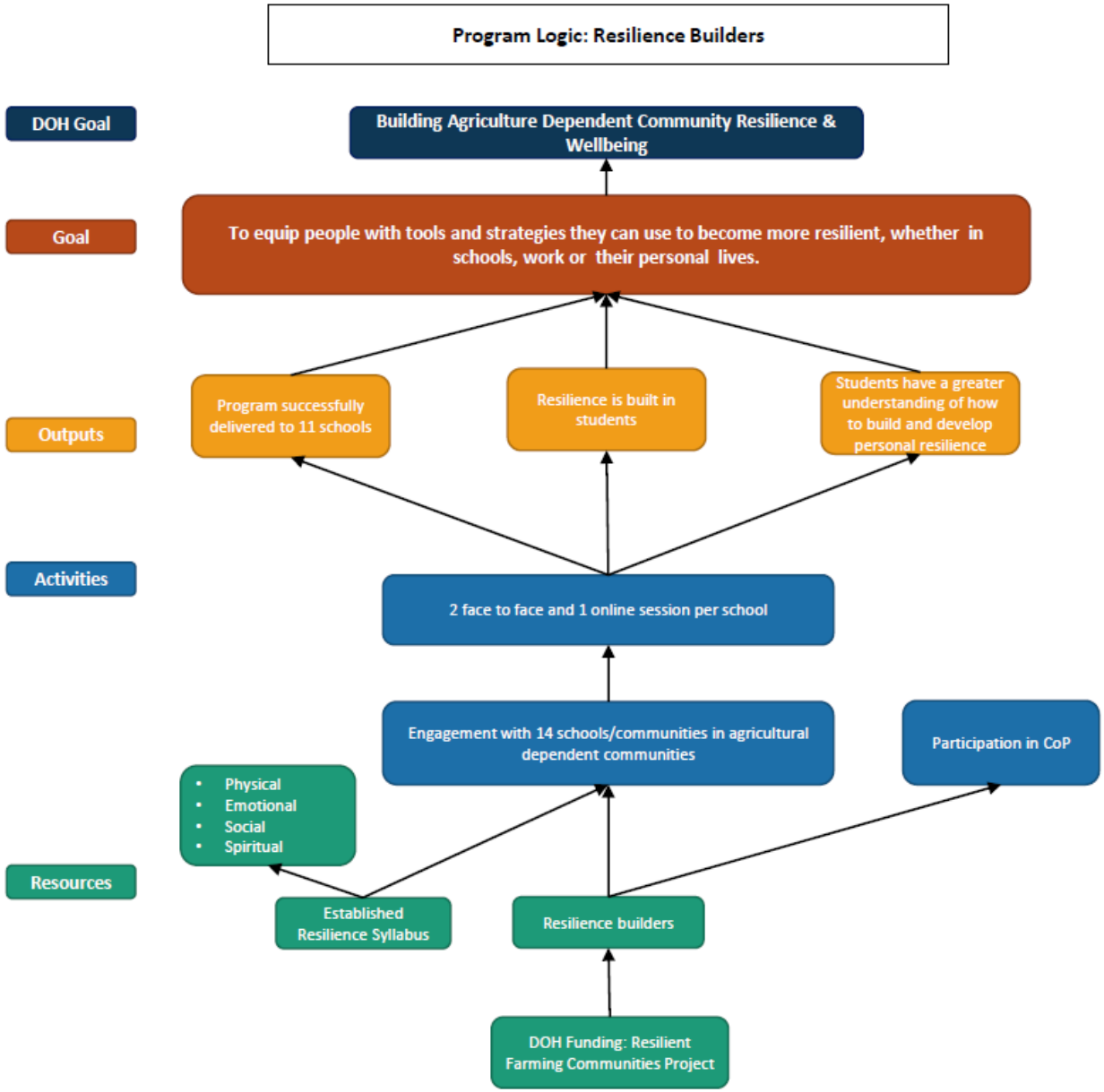
APPENDIX 9.2: PROGRAM LOGIC – FARM COMMUNITY CONNECT TIME POINT 2 (JANUARY 2023)



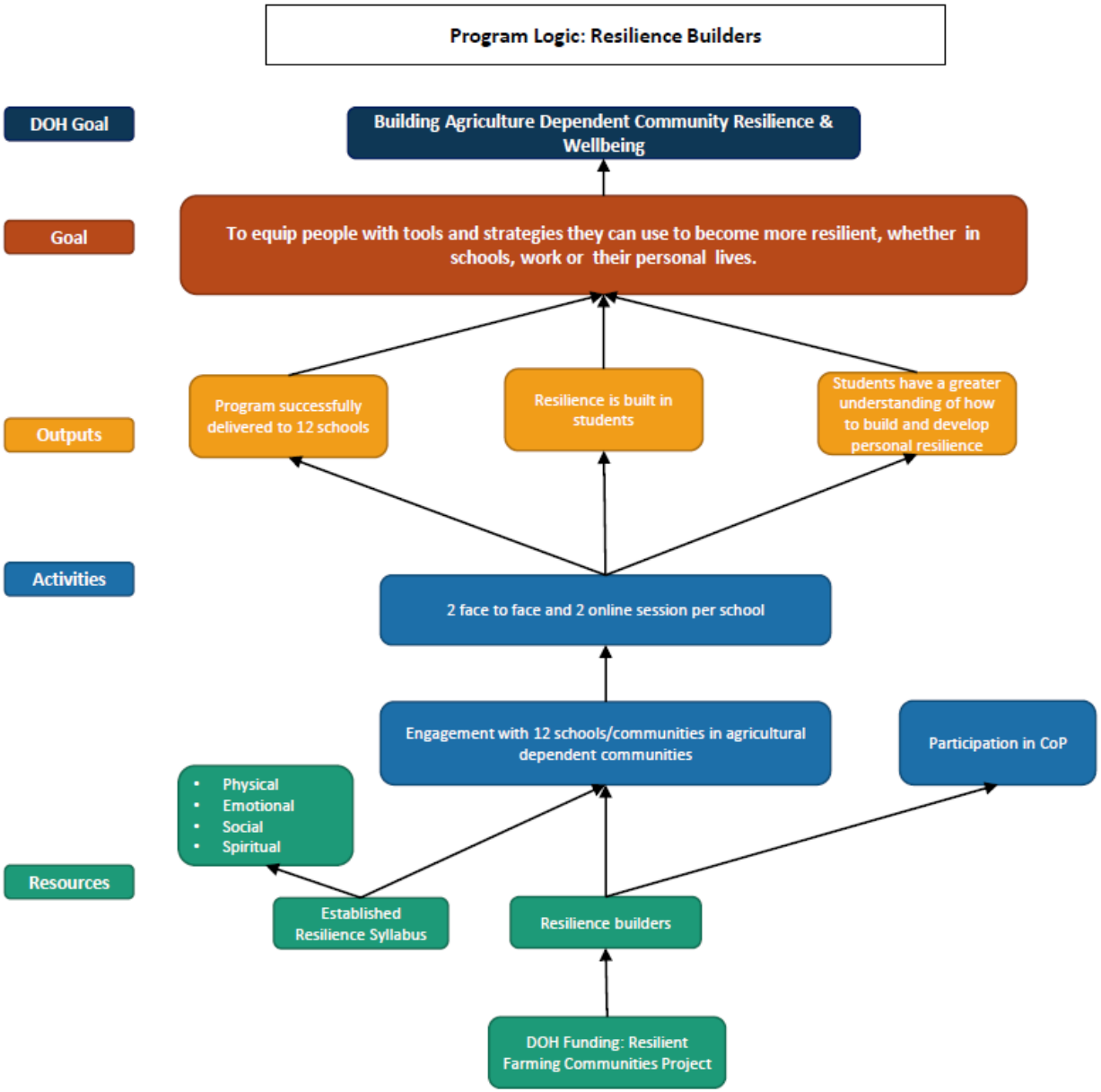
APPENDIX 9.3: PROGRAM LOGIC – FARM COMMUNITY CONNECT TIME POINT 3 (NOVEMBER 2023)



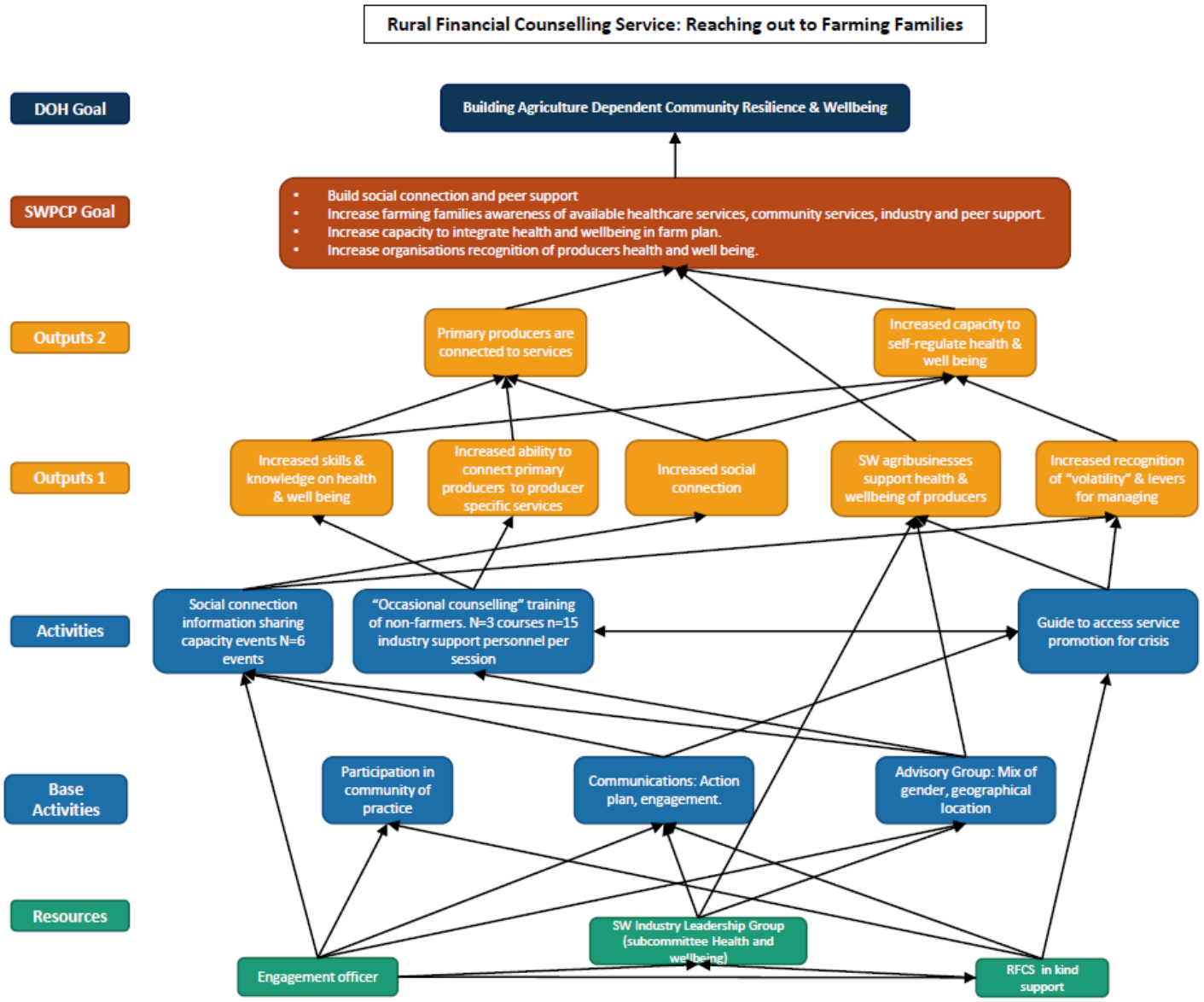
APPENDIX 10.1: PROGRAM LOGIC – TOOLS FOR TOUGH TIMES TIME POINT 1 (FEBRUARY 2022)



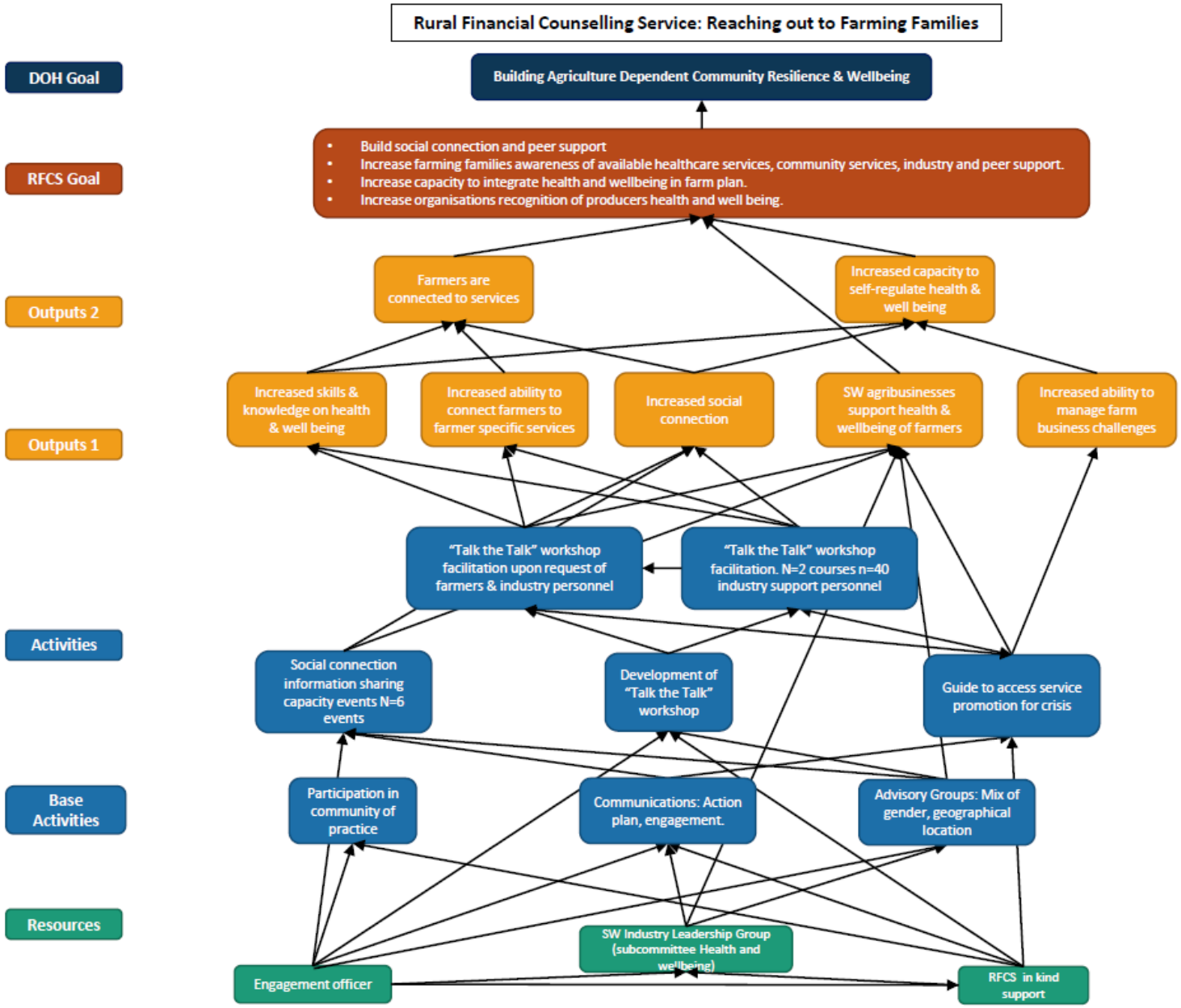
APPENDIX 10.2: PROGRAM LOGIC – TOOLS FOR TOUGH TIMES TIME POINT 2 &3 (DECEMBER 2022 & NOVEMBER 2023)



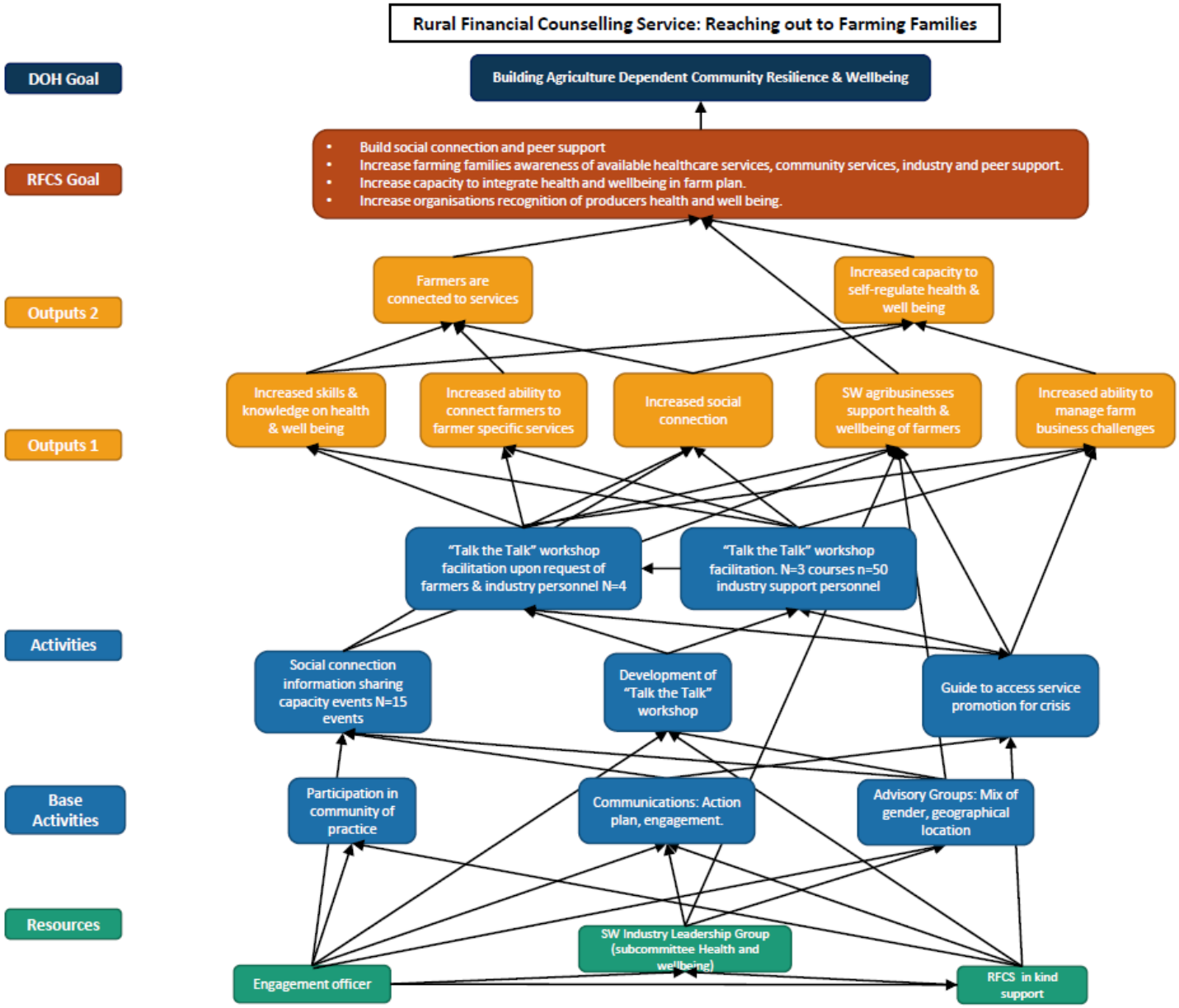
APPENDIX 11.1: PROGRAM LOGIC – REACHING OUT TO FARMING FAMILIES SOUTH WEST VICTORIA TIME POINT 1 (6TH FEBRUARY 2023)



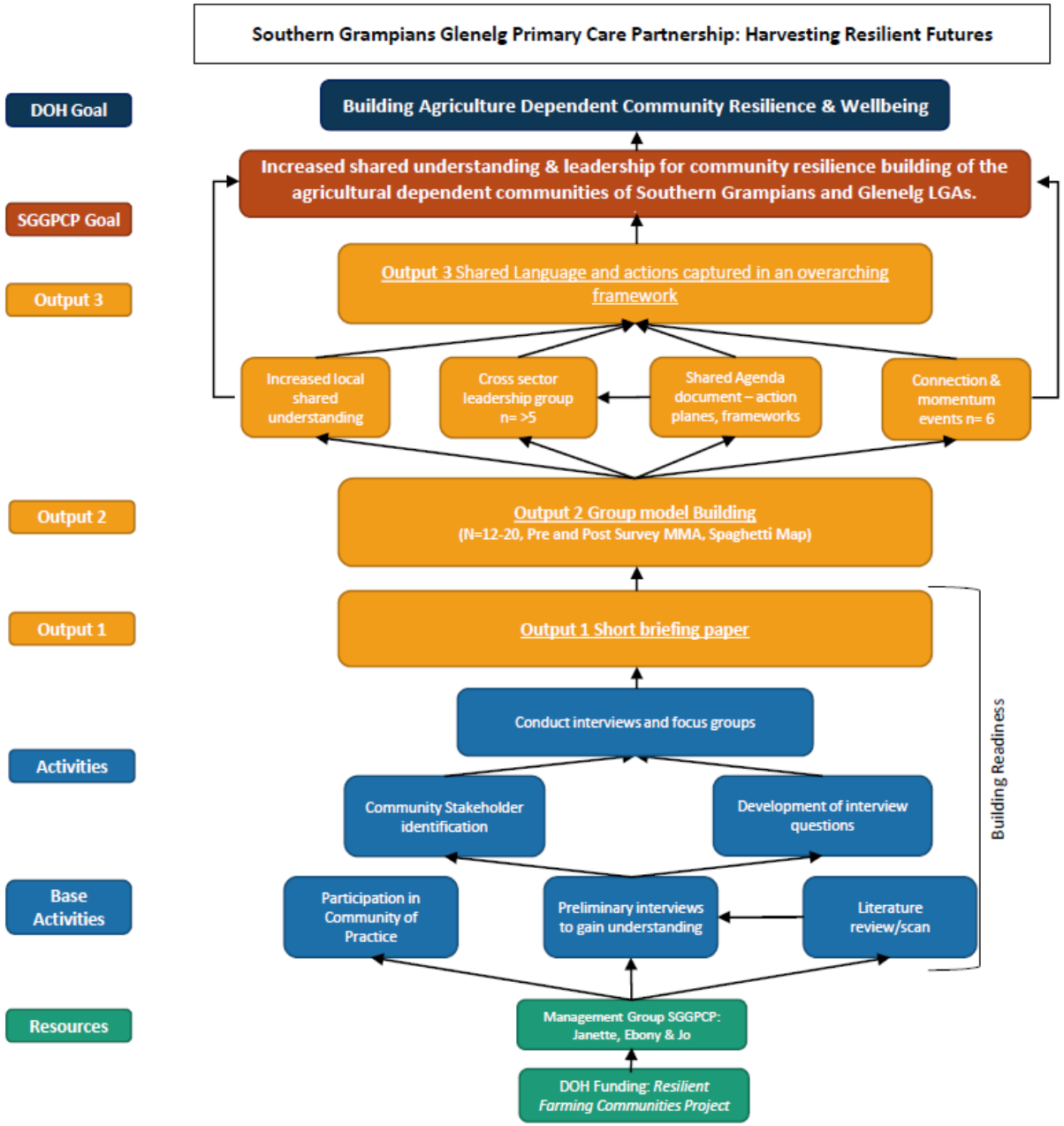
APPENDIX 11.2: PROGRAM LOGIC - REACHING OUT TO FARMING FAMILIES SOUTH WEST VICTORIA TIME POINT 2 (AUGUST 2023)



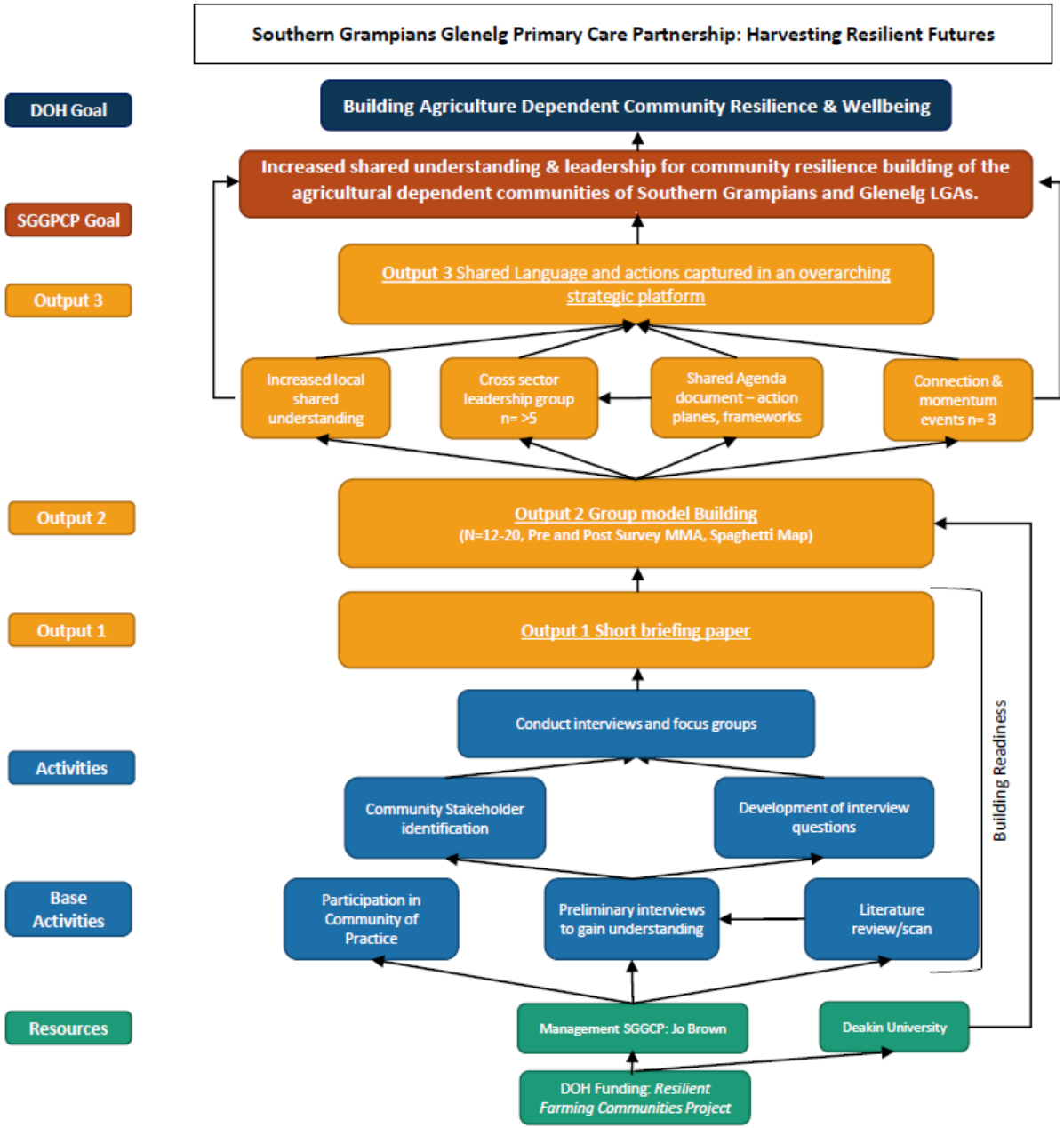
APPENDIX 11.3: PROGRAM LOGIC - REACHING OUT TO FARMING FAMILIES SOUTH WEST VICTORIA TIME POINT 3 (23RD NOVEMBER 2023)



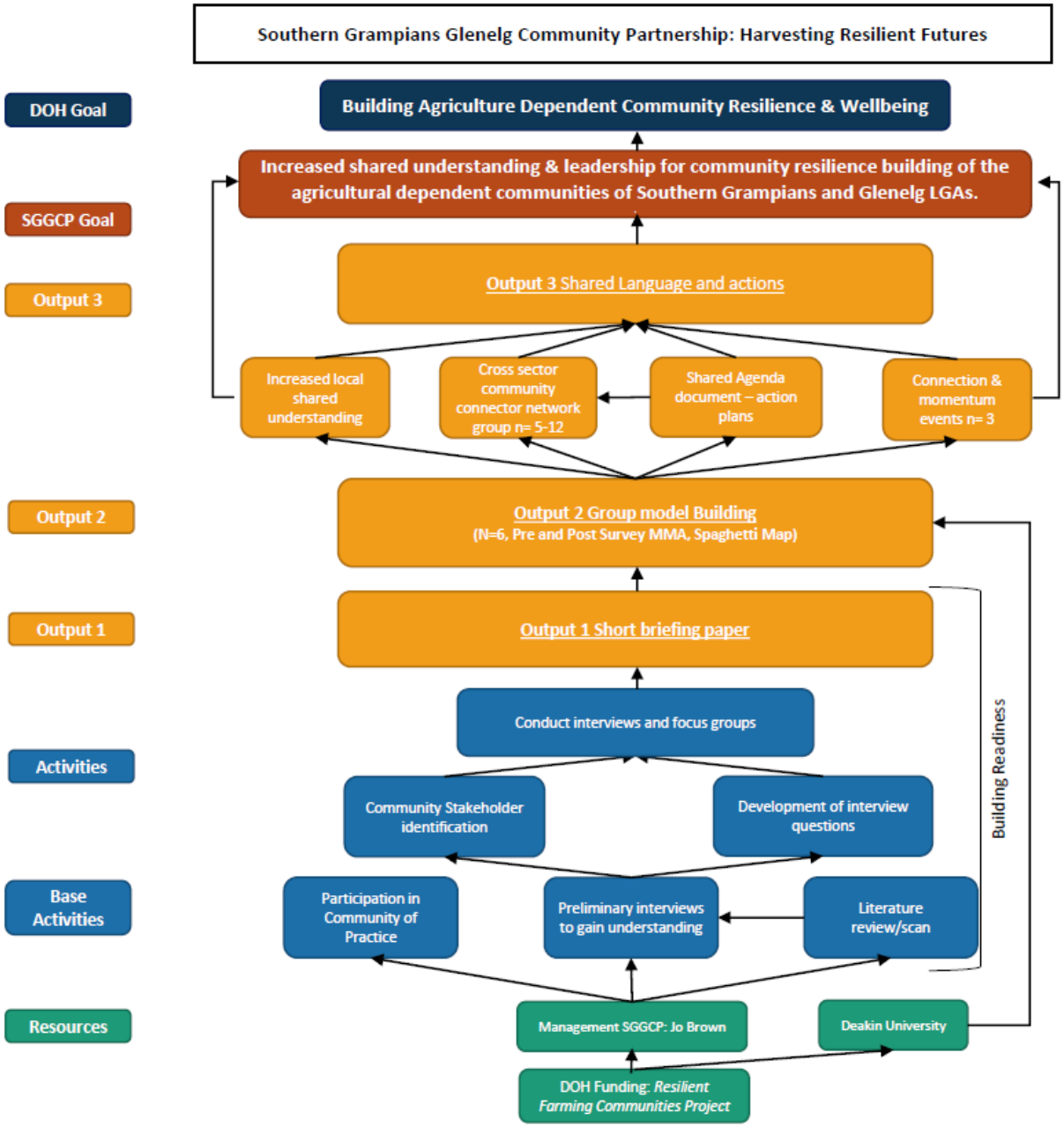
APPENDIX 12.1: PROGRAM LOGIC – HARVESTING RESILIENT FUTURES TIME POINT 1 (DECEMBER 2021)



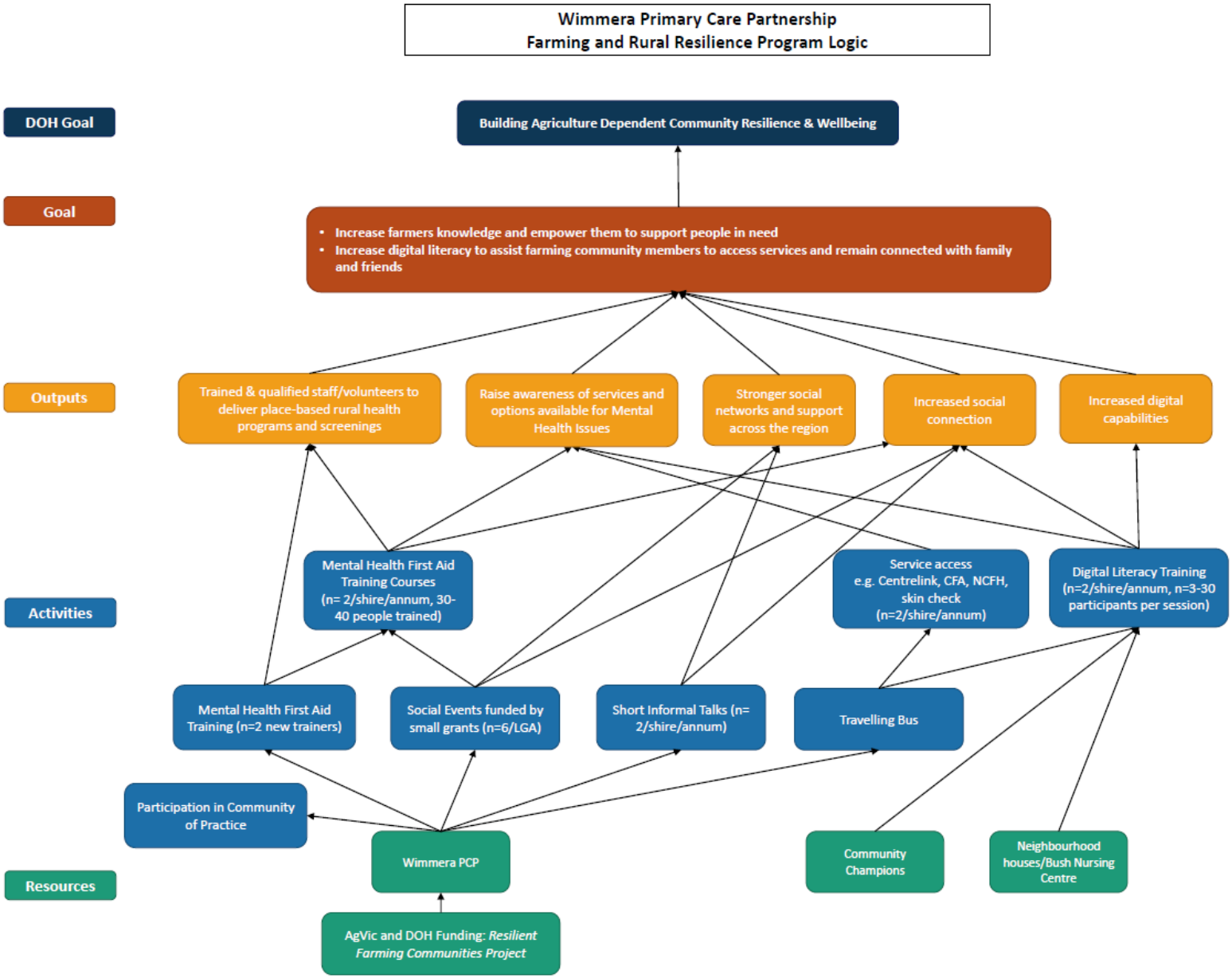
APPENDIX 12.2: PROGRAM LOGIC – HARVESTING RESILIENT FUTURES TIME POINT 2 (21ST FEBRUARY 2022)



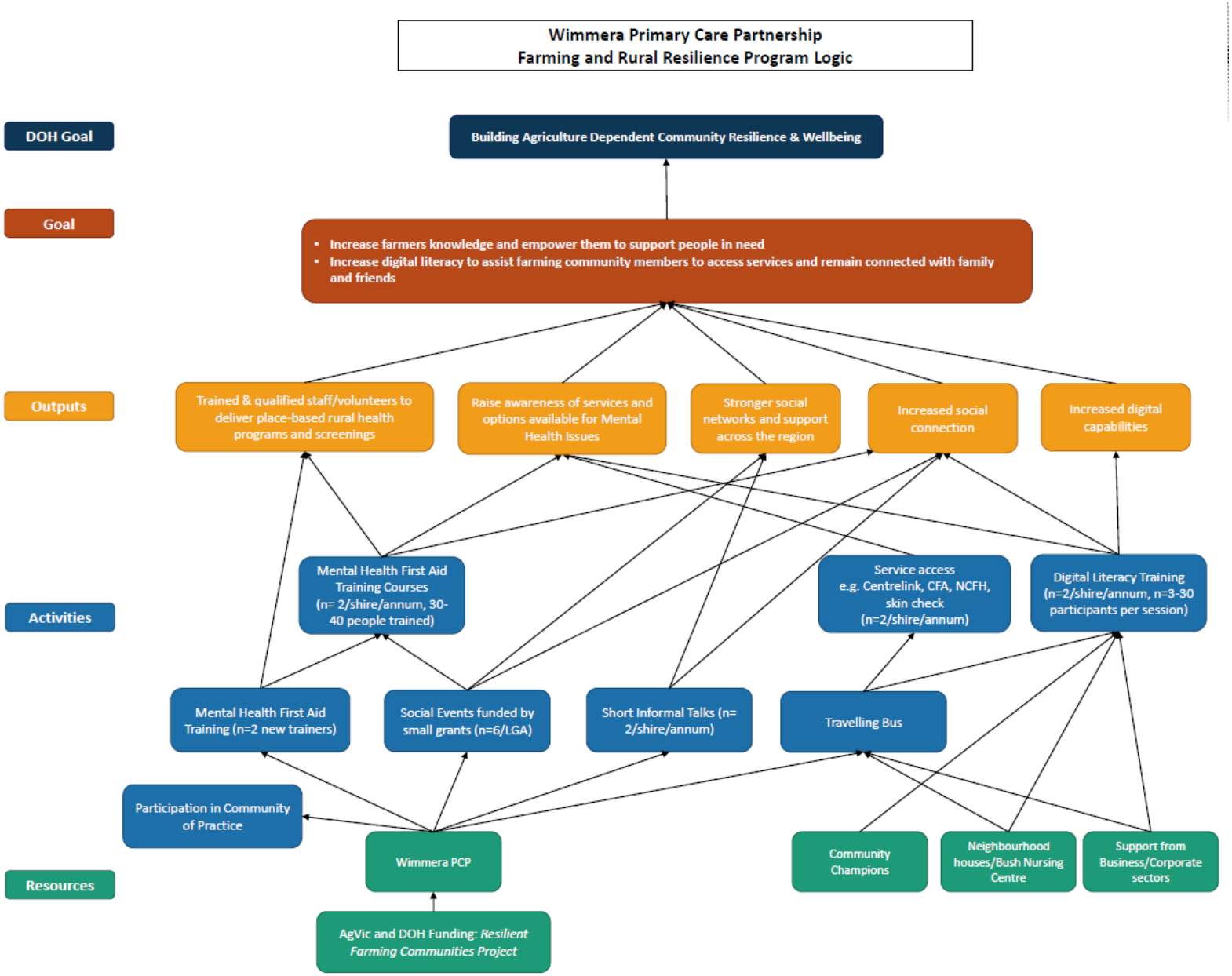
APPENDIX 12.3: PROGRAM LOGIC – HARVESTING RESILIENT FUTURES TIME POINT 3 (OCTOBER 2023)



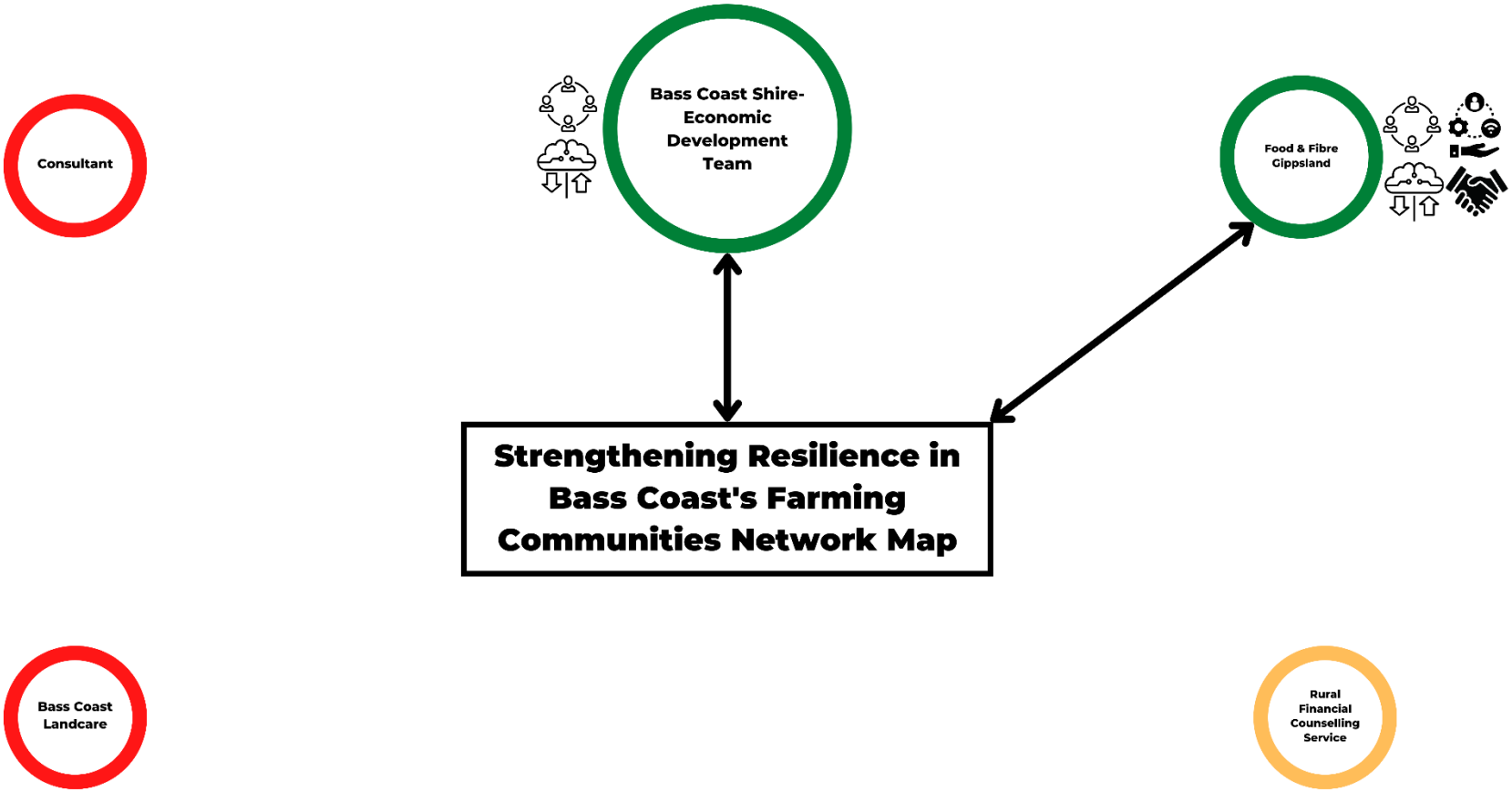
APPENDIX 13.1: PROGRAM LOGIC – HINDMARSH AND YARRIAMBIACK RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 1 (21ST DECEMBER 2021)



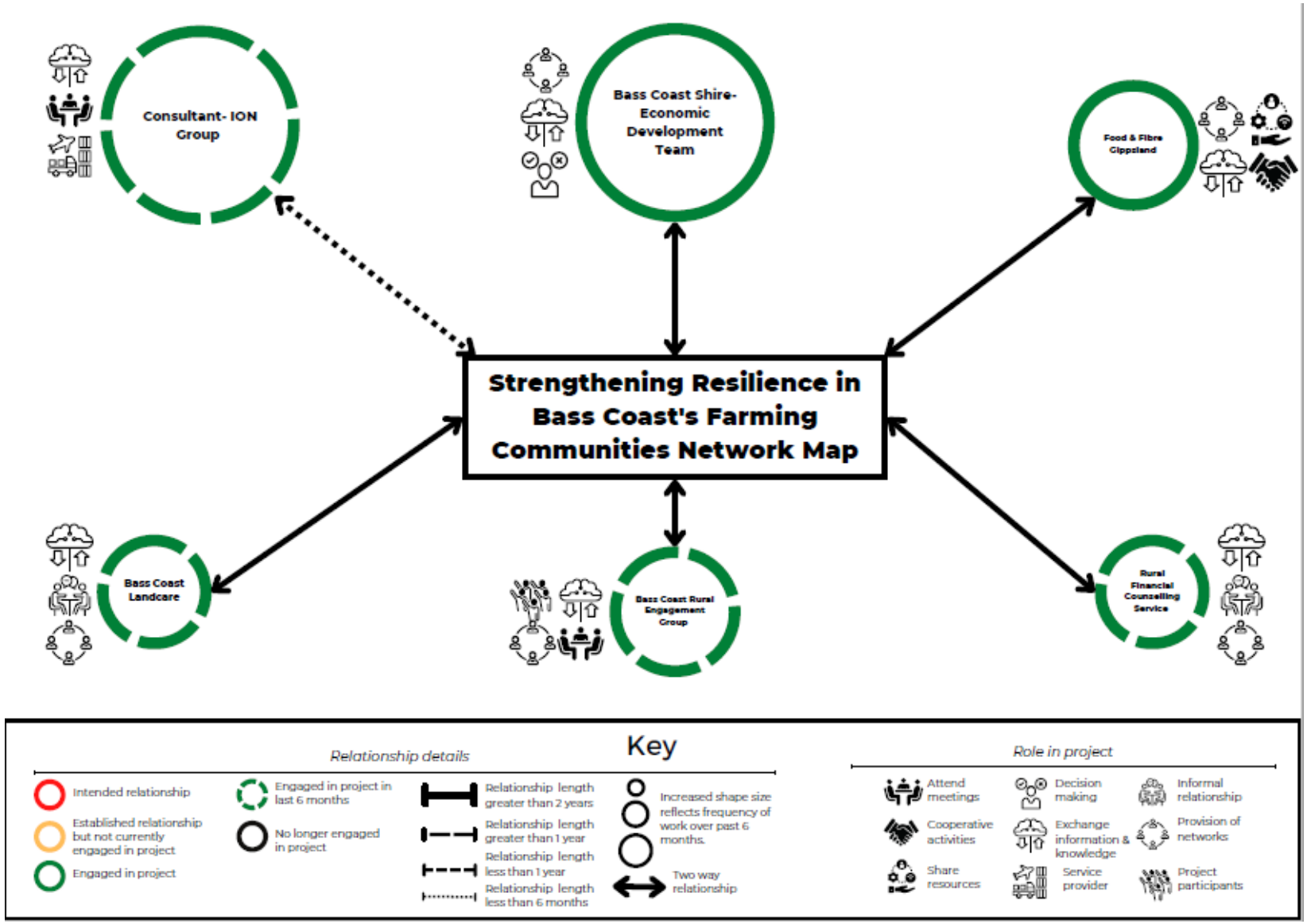
APPENDIX 13.2: PROGRAM LOGIC - HINDMARSH AND YARRIAMBIACK RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 2 (DECEMBER 2022) & TIME POINT 3 (JUNE 2023)



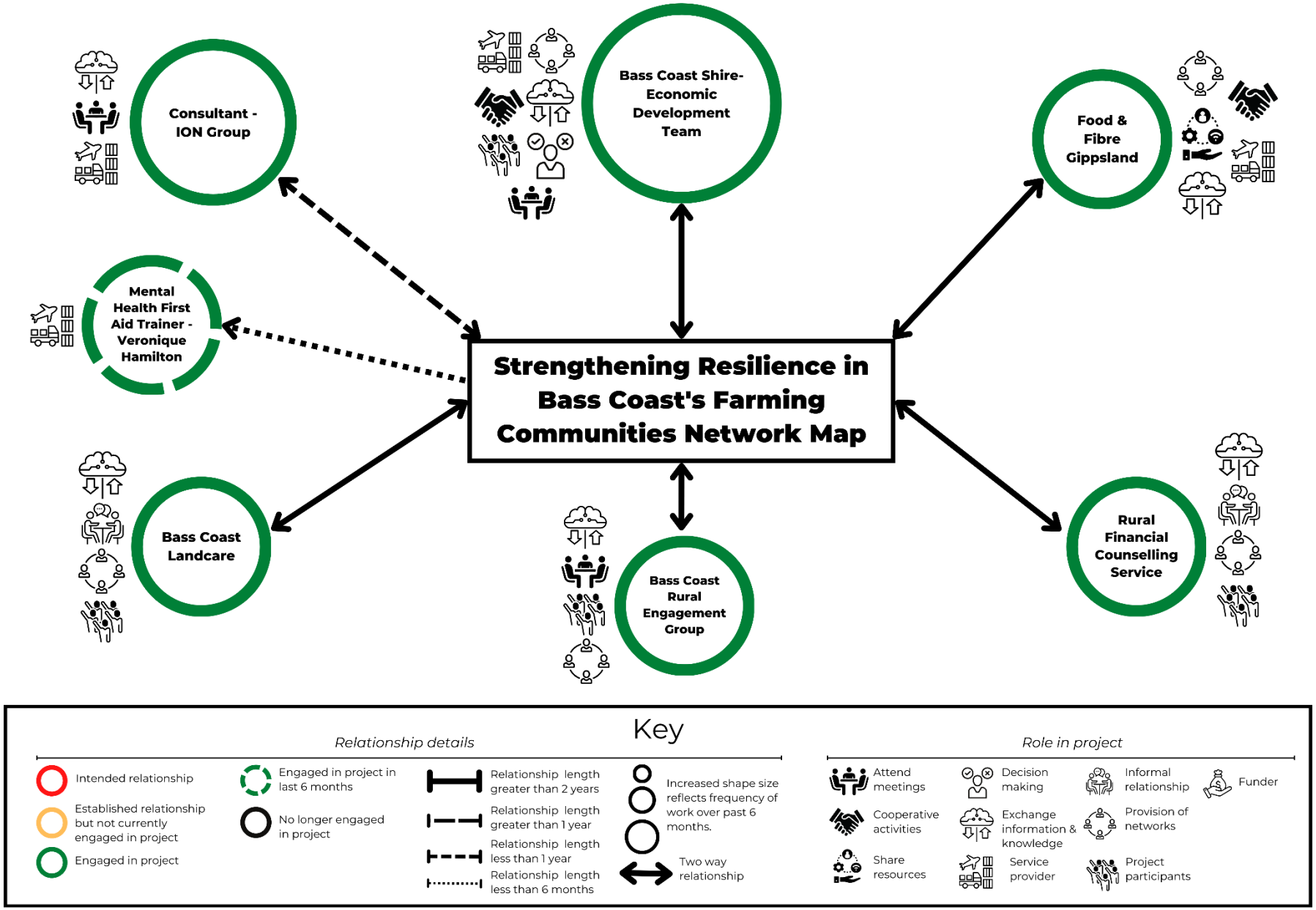
APPENDIX 14.1: NETWORK MAP – RESILIENT FARMING COMMUNITIES TIME POINT 1 (MARCH 2023)



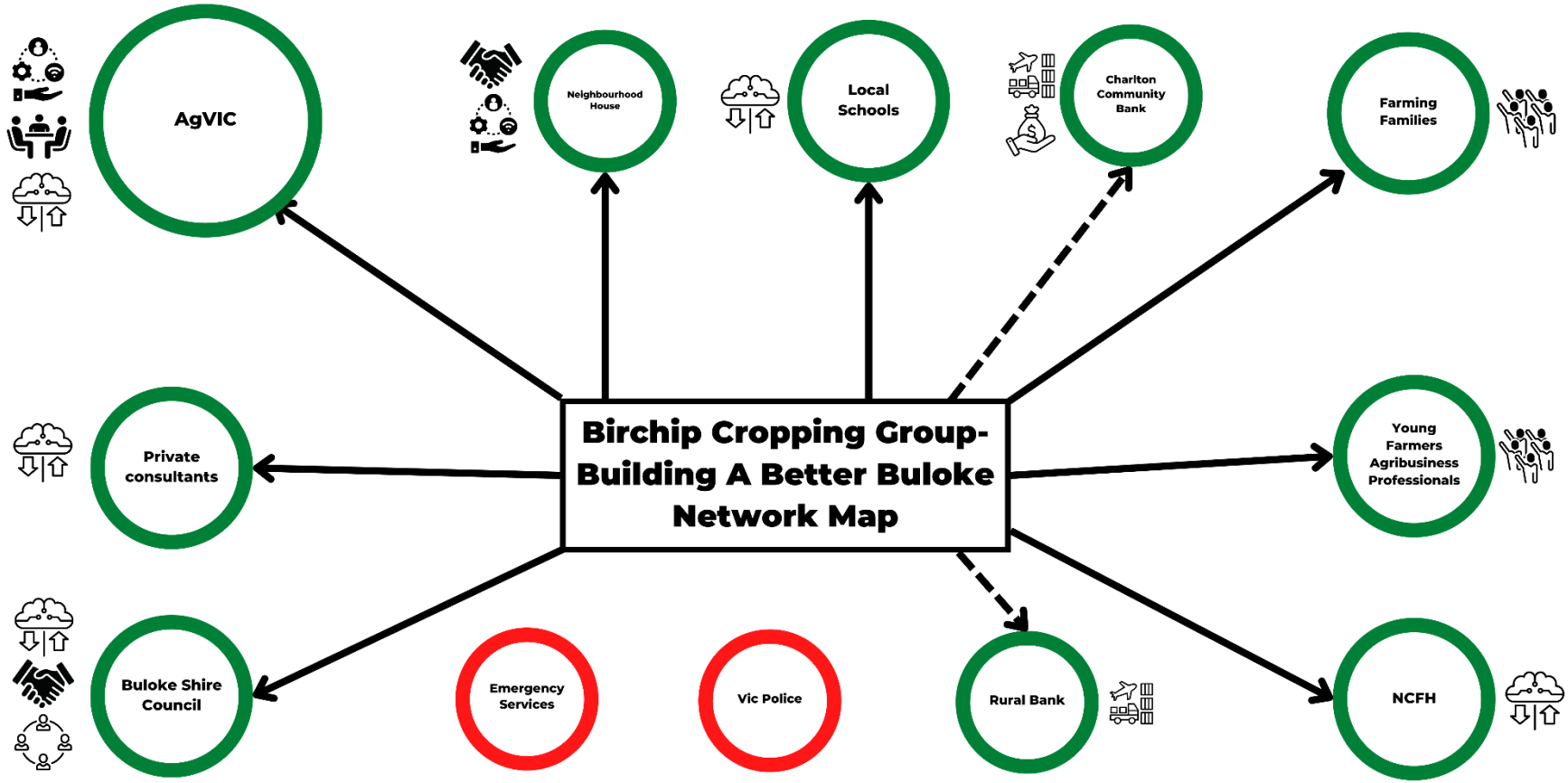
APPENDIX 14.2: NETWORK MAP – RESILIENT FARMING COMMUNITIES TIME POINT 2 (AUGUST 2023)

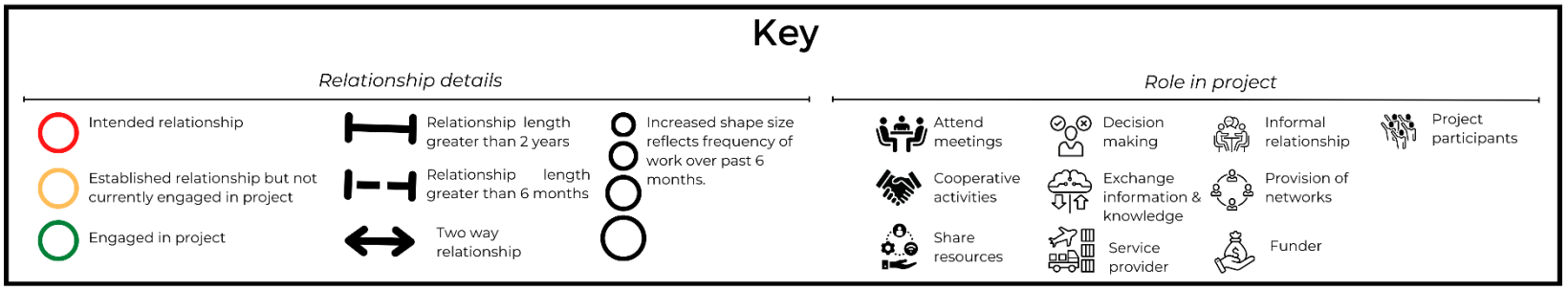


APPENDIX 14.3: NETWORK MAP – RESILIENT FARMING COMMUNITIES TIME POINT 3 (NOVEMBER 2023)

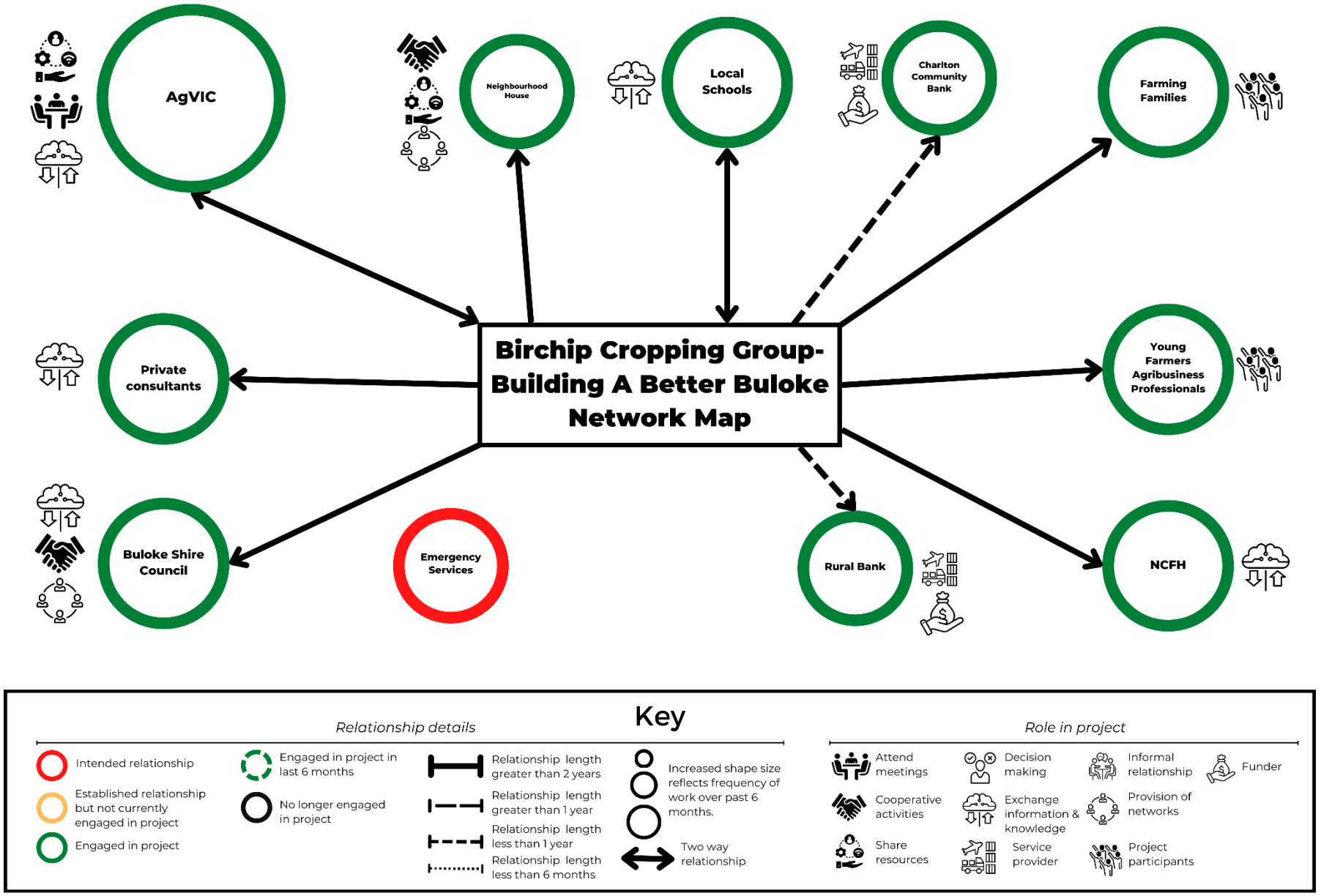


APPENDIX 15.1: NETWORK MAP – BULOKE RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 1 (MARCH 2023)

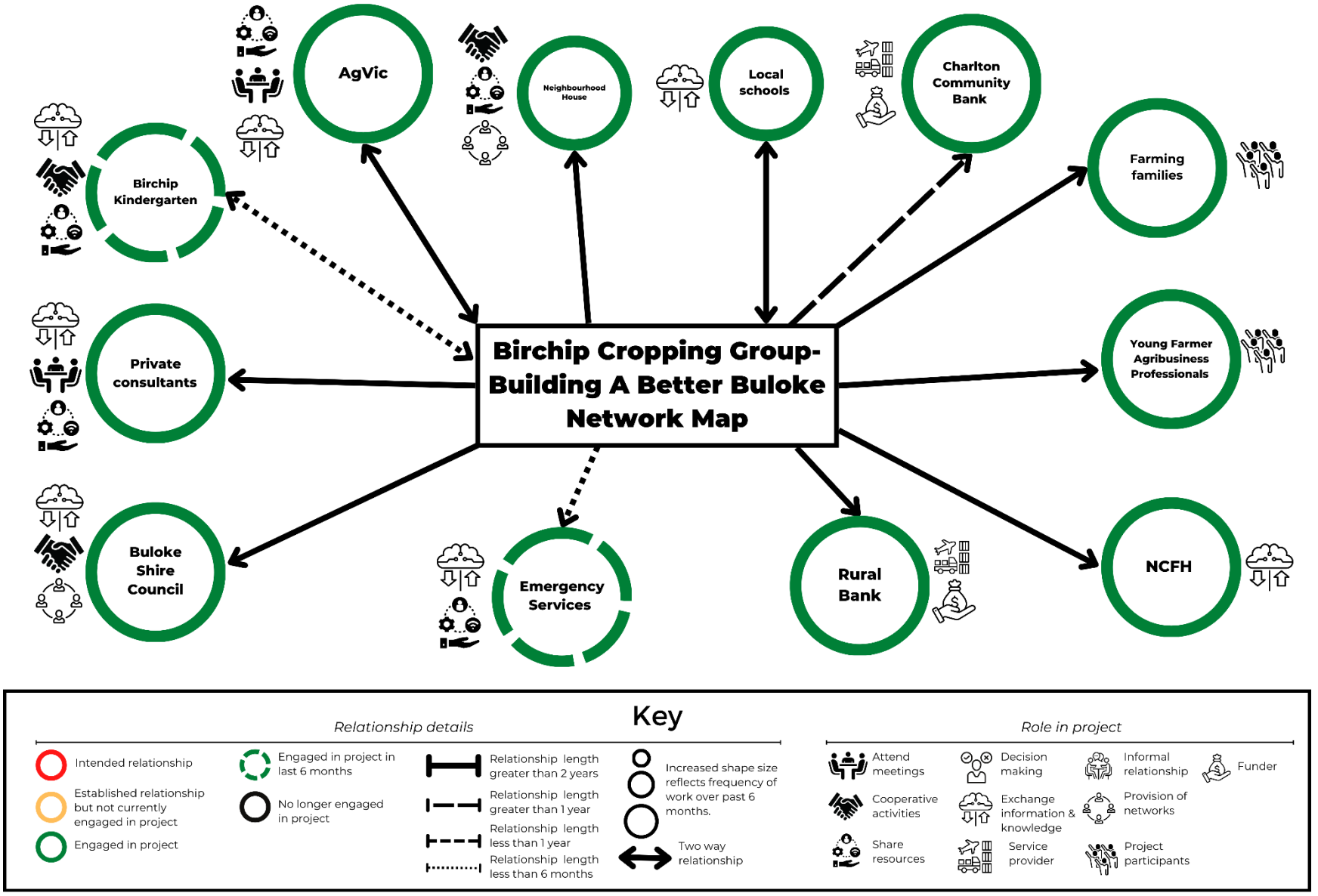




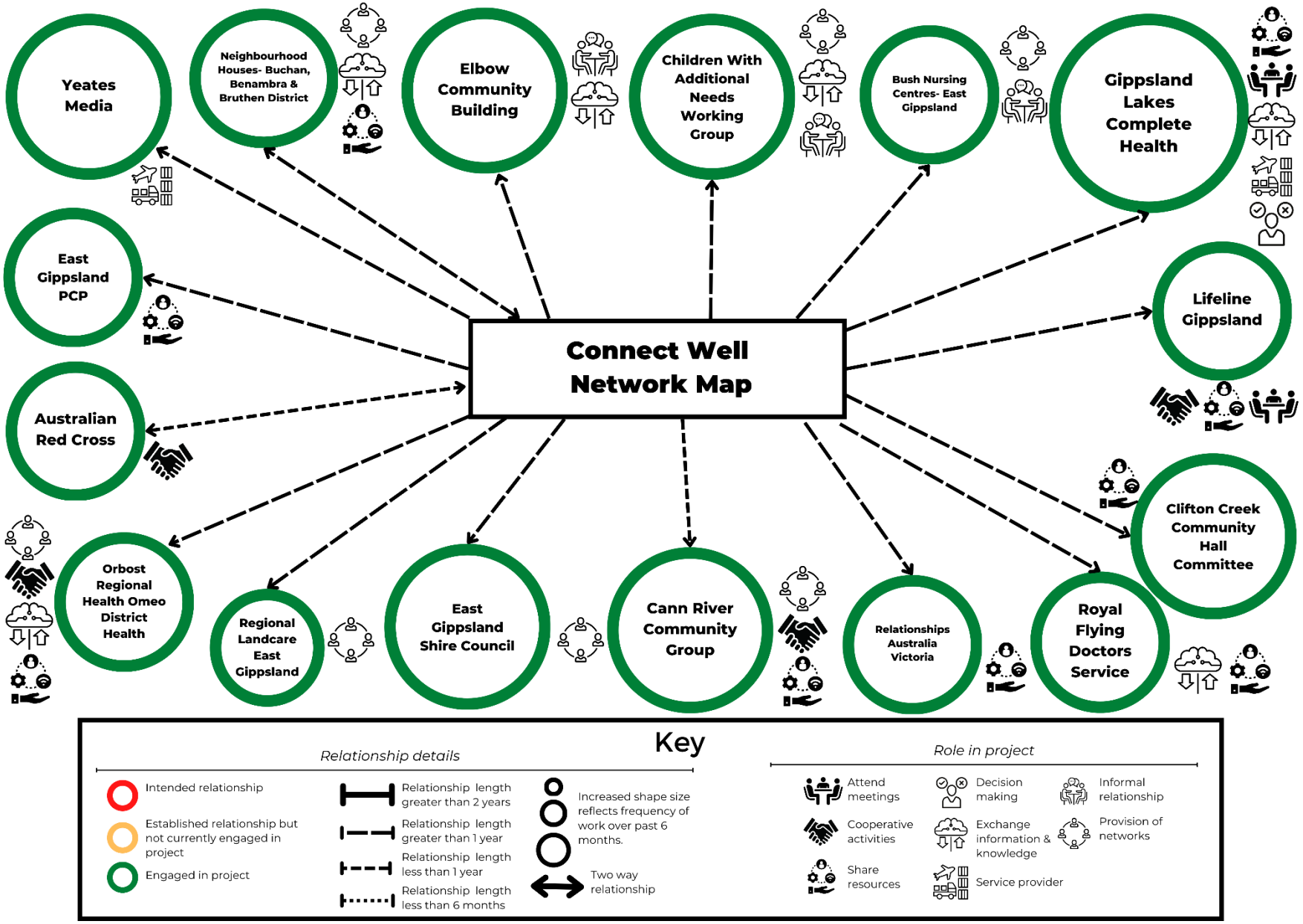
APPENDIX 15.2: NETWORK MAP – BULOKE RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 2 (AUGUST 2023)



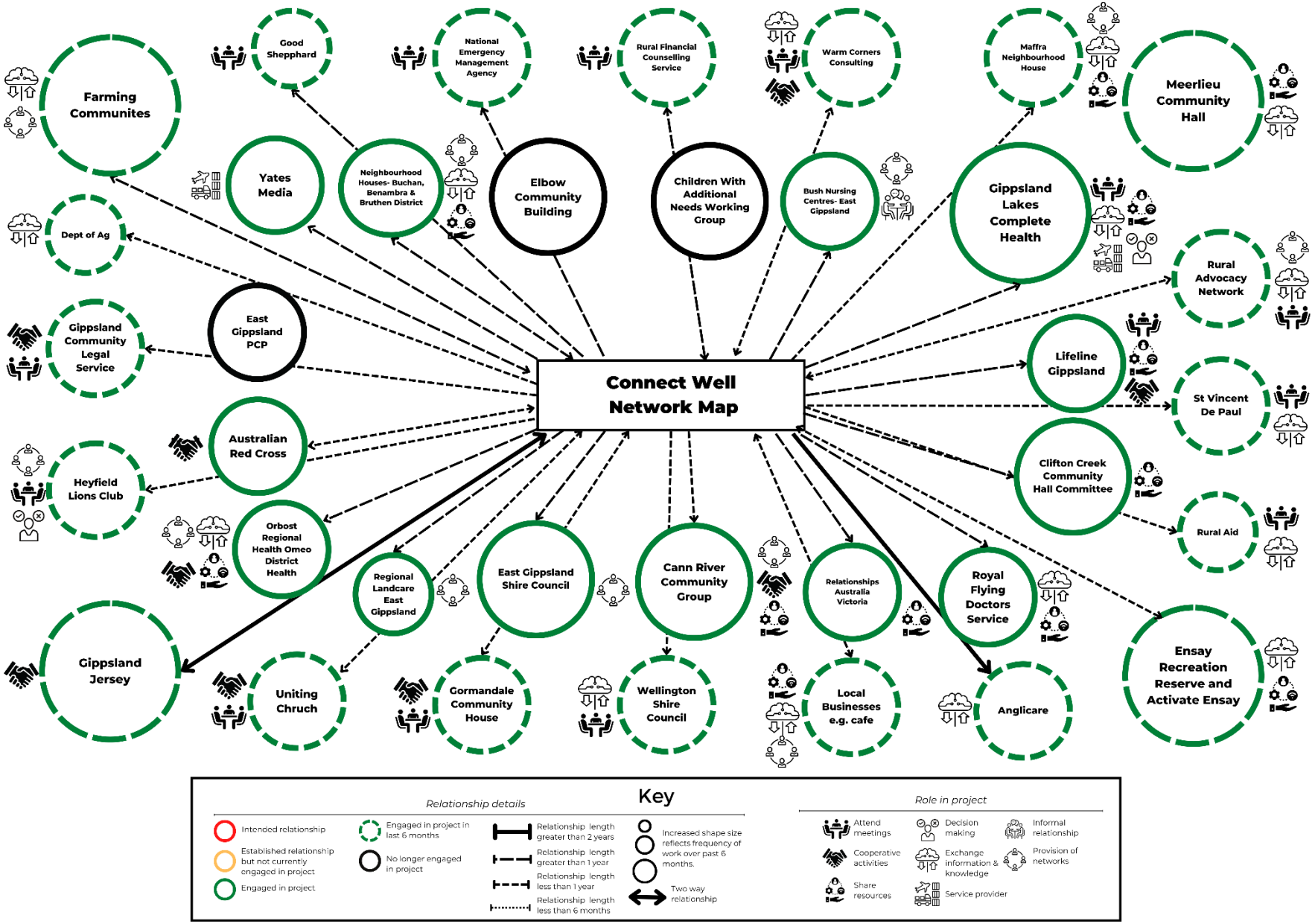
APPENDIX 15.3: NETWORK MAP – BULOKE RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 3 (NOVEMBER 2023)



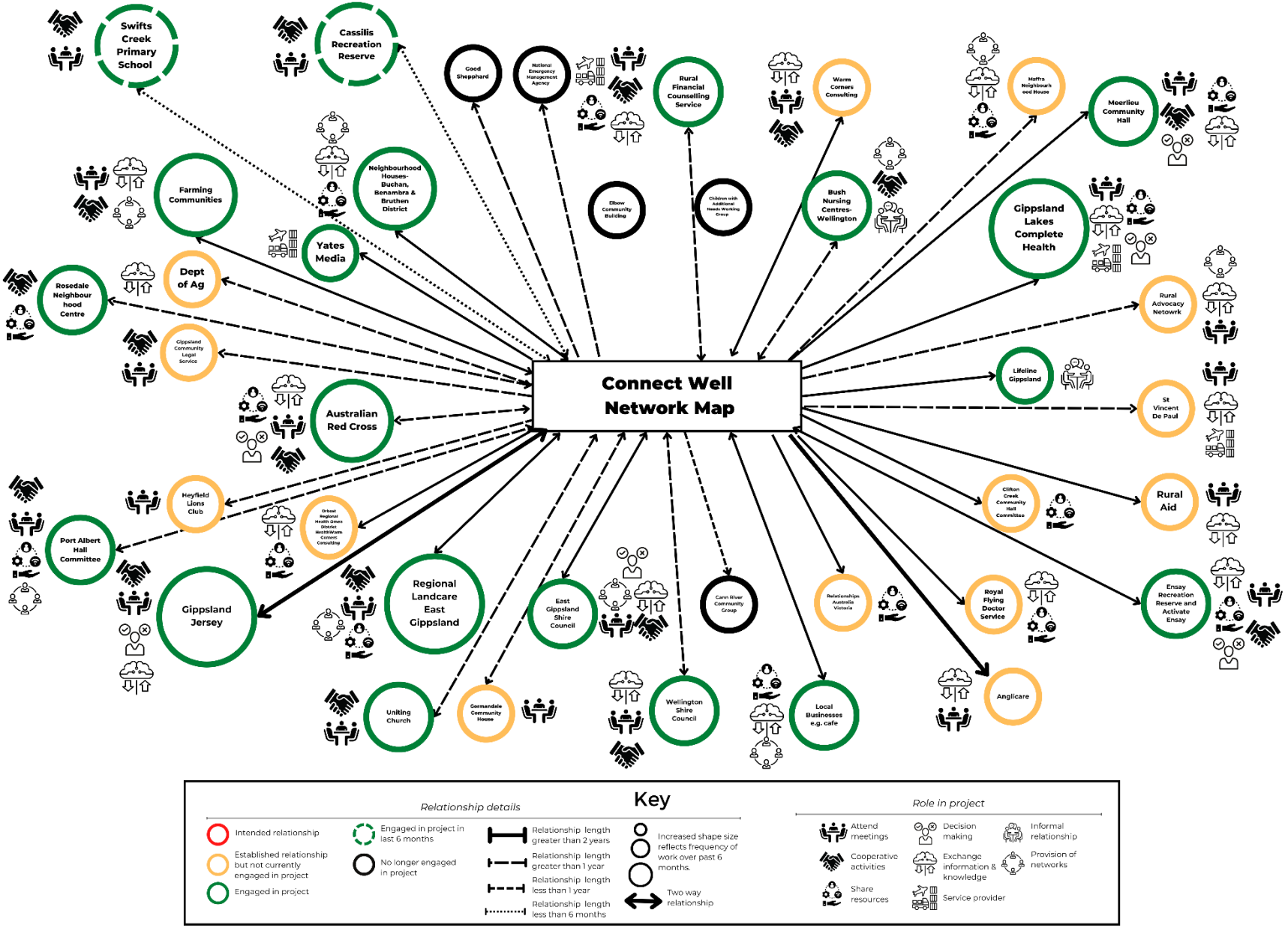
APPENDIX 16.1: NETWORK MAP - CONNECT WELL EAST GIPPSLAND & WELLINGTON FARMER RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 1 (JUNE 2022)



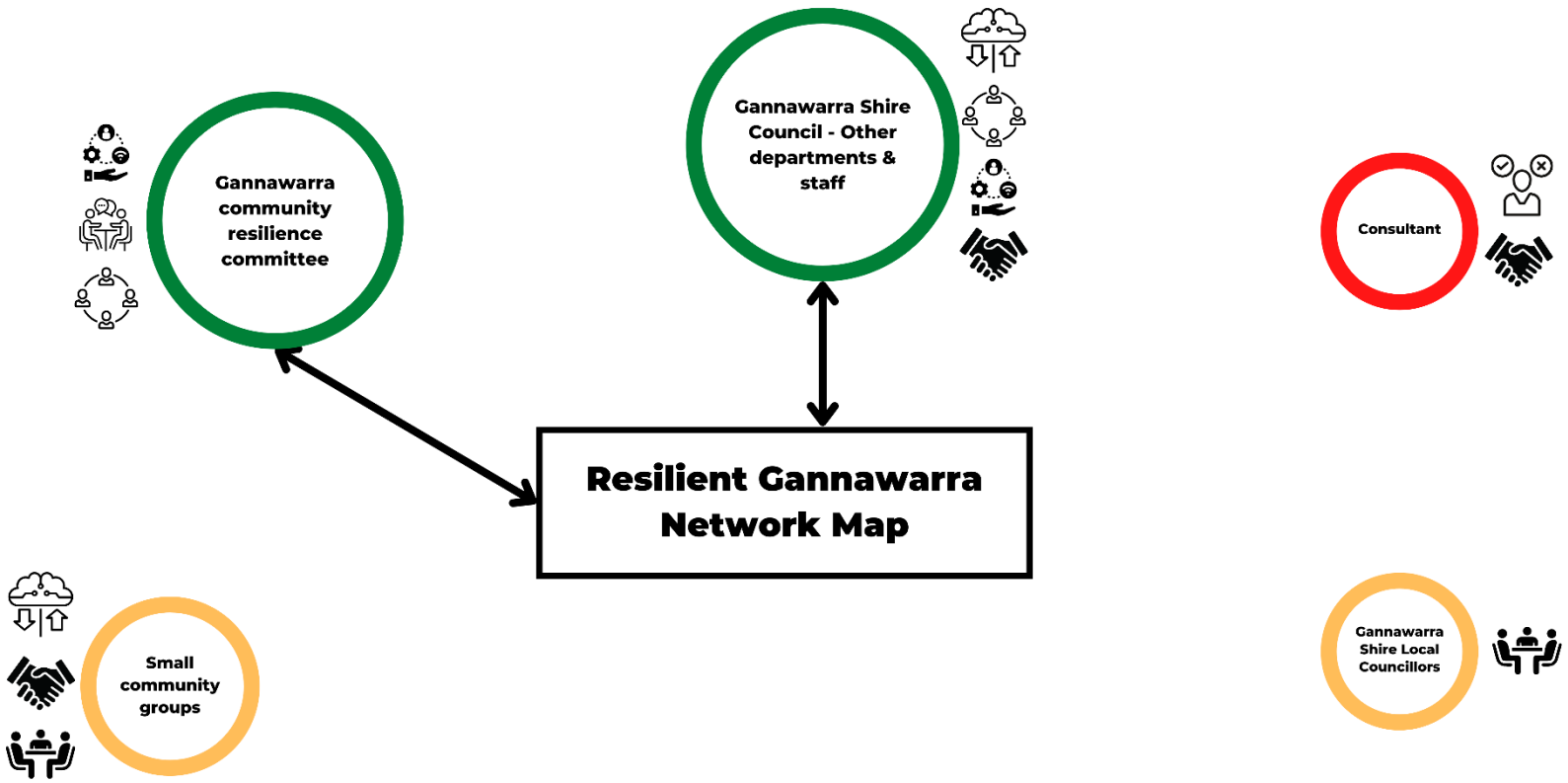
APPENDIX 16.2: NETWORK MAP - CONNECT WELL EAST GIPPSLAND & WELLINGTON FARMER RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 2 (DECEMBER 2022)



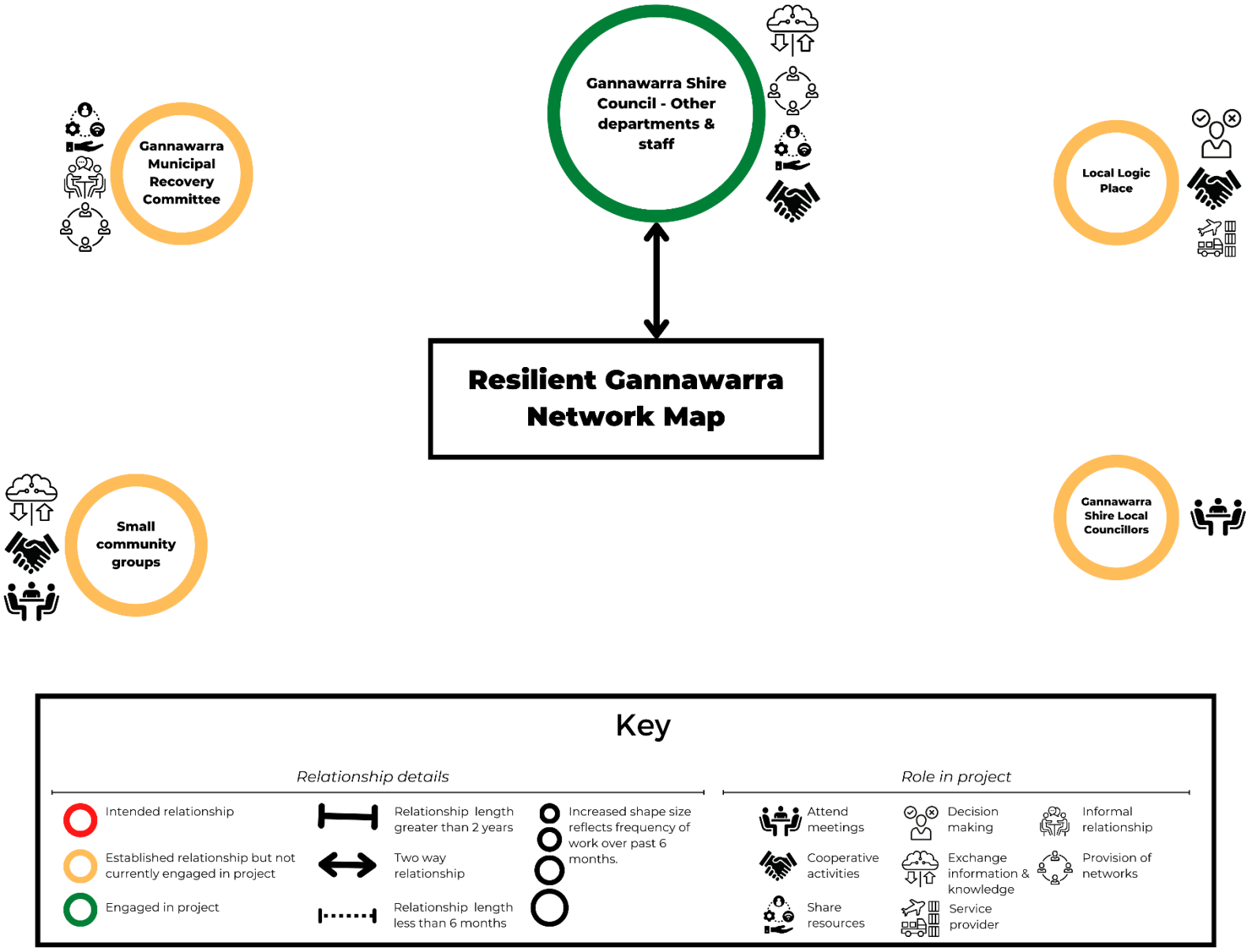
APPENDIX 16.3: NETWORK MAP - CONNECT WELL EAST GIPPSLAND & WELLINGTON FARMER RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 3 (NOVEMBER 2023)



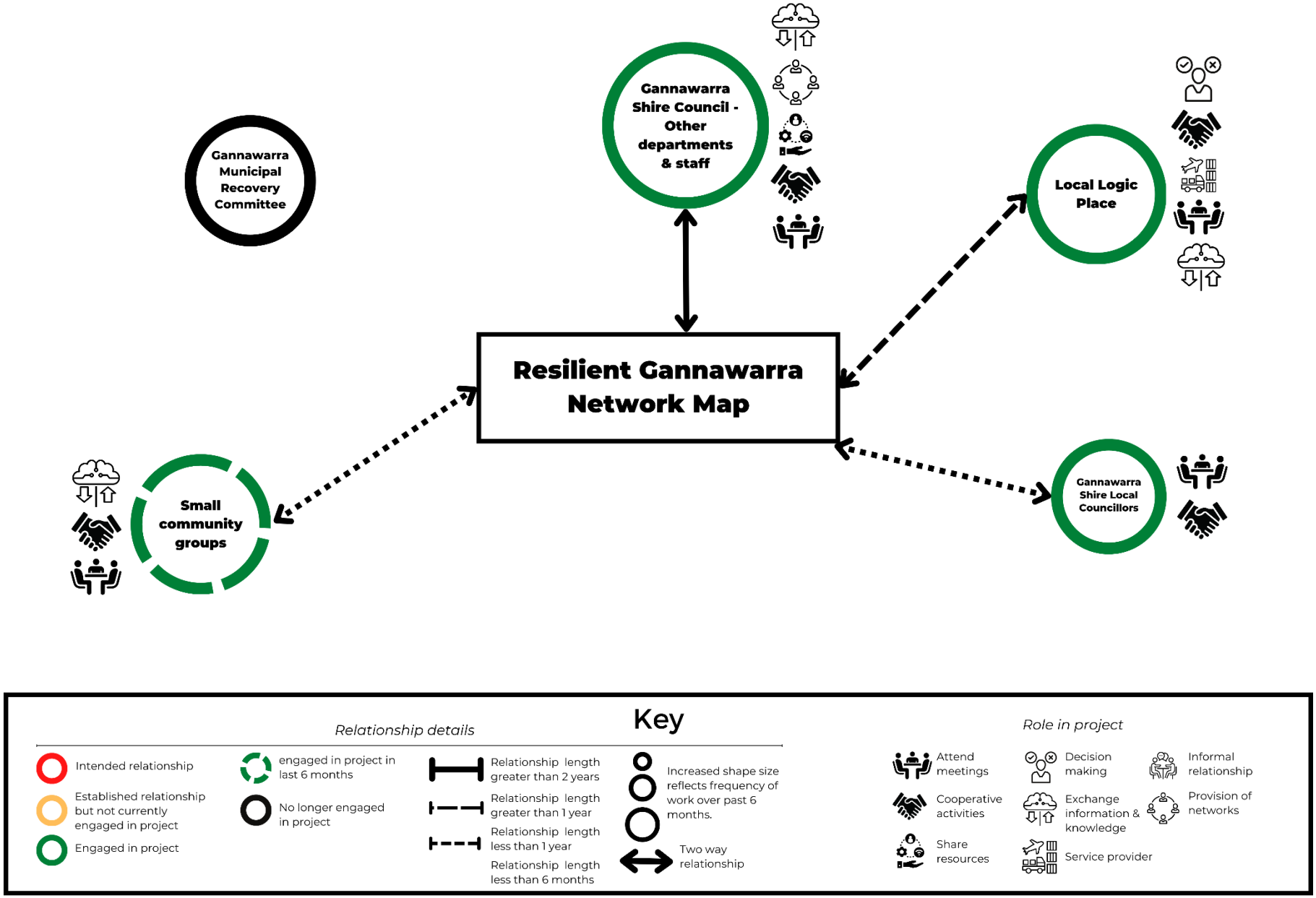
APPENDIX 17.1: NETWORK MAP - CONNECTING GANNAWARRA TIME POINT 1 (JULY 2022)



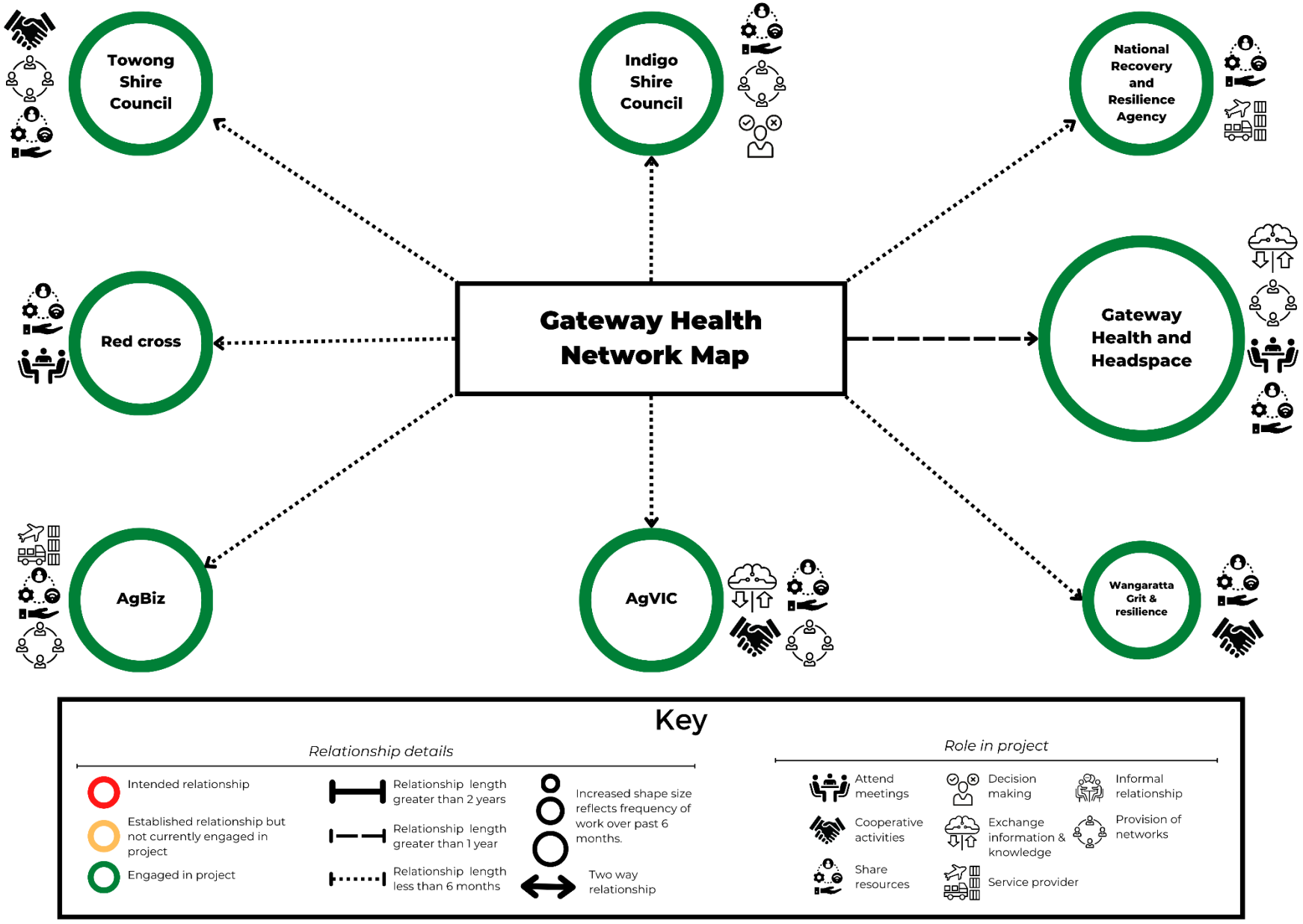
APPENDIX 17.2: NETWORK MAP - CONNECTING GANNAWARRA TIME POINT 2 (DECEMBER 2022)



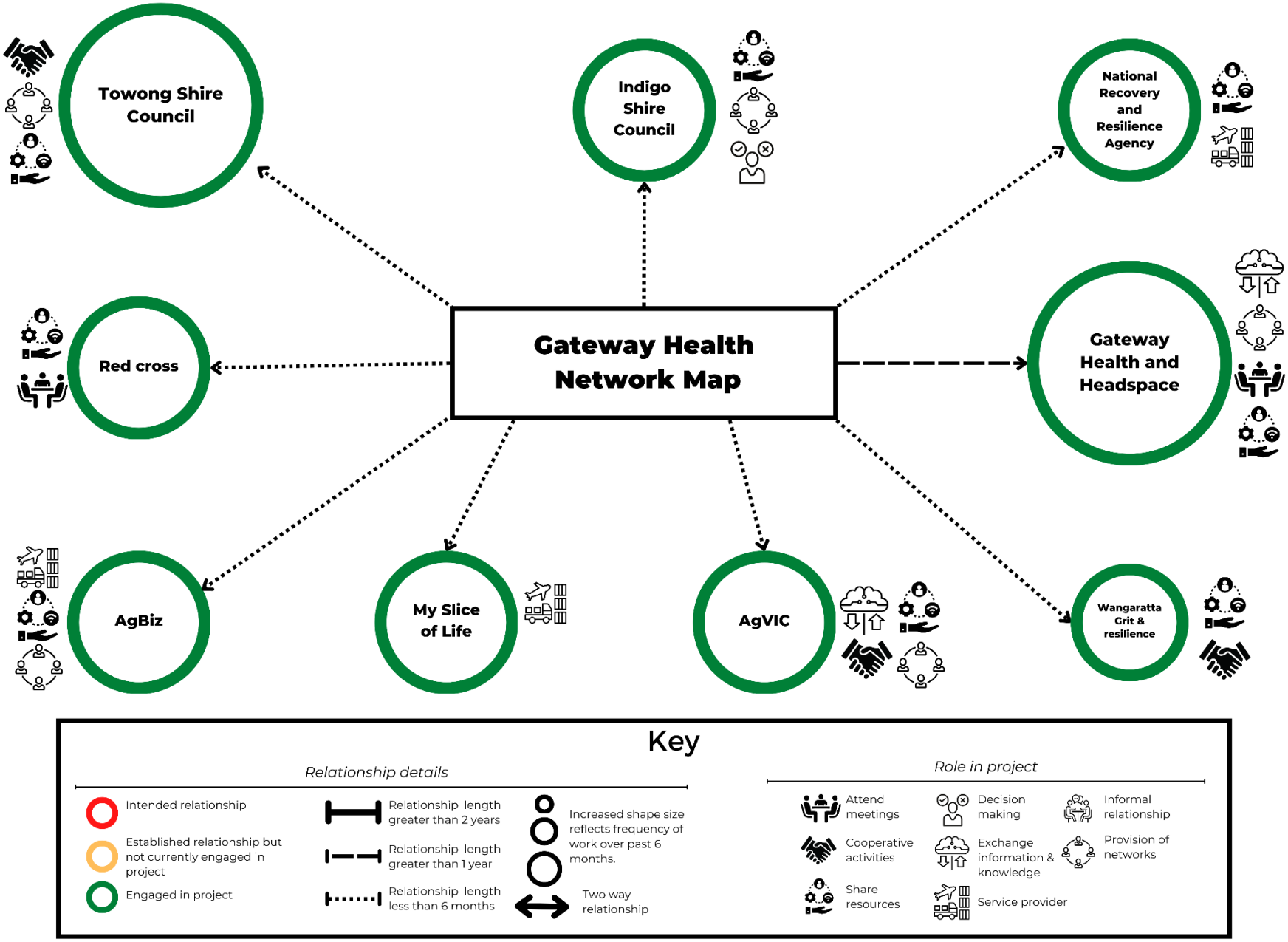
APPENDIX 17.3: NETWORK MAP - CONNECTING GANNAWARRA TIME POINT 3 (NOVEMBER 2023)



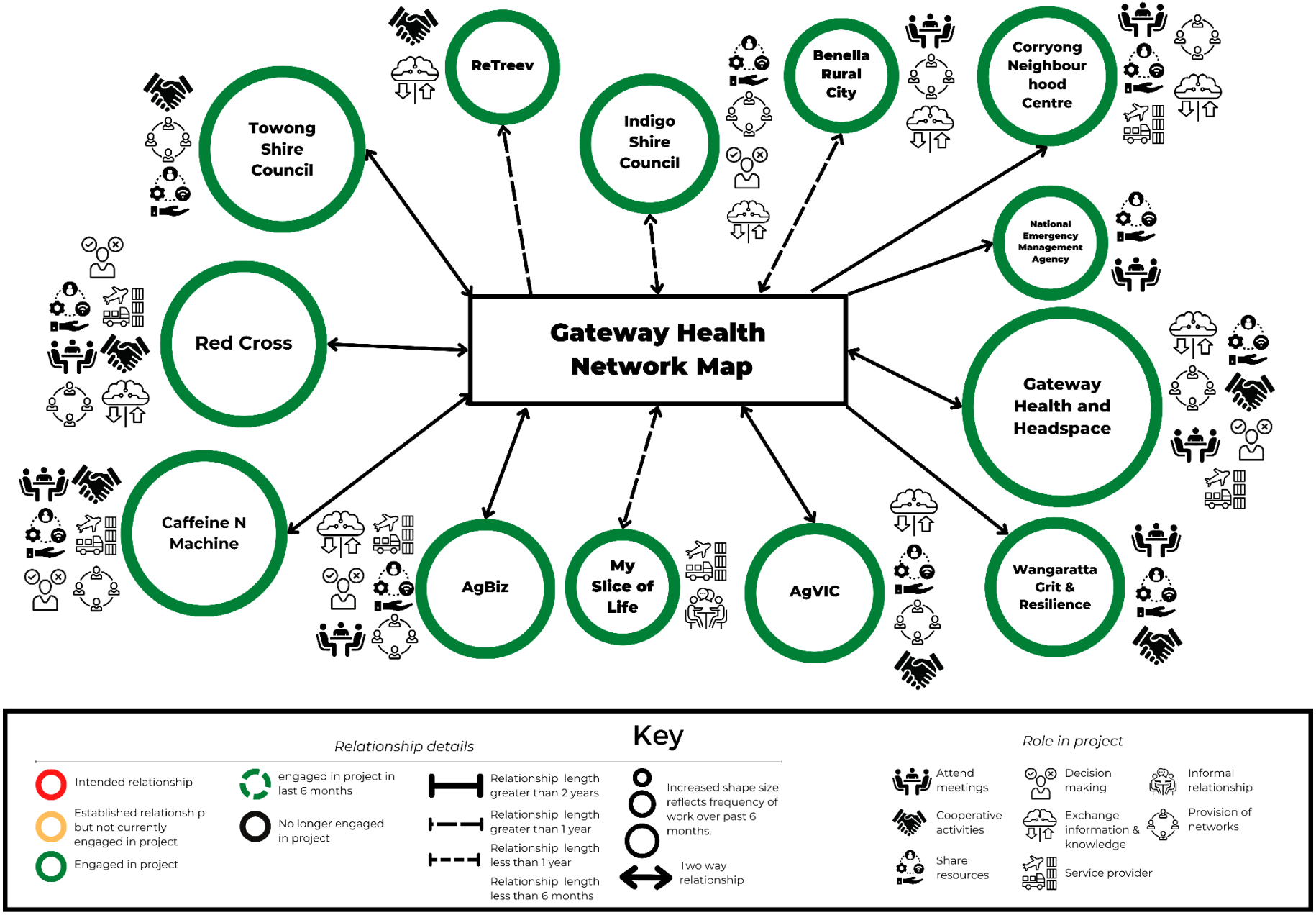
APPENDIX 18.1: NETWORK MAP – BUILDING OVENS-MURRAY AGSECTOR PROJECT TIME POINT 1 (JULY 2022)



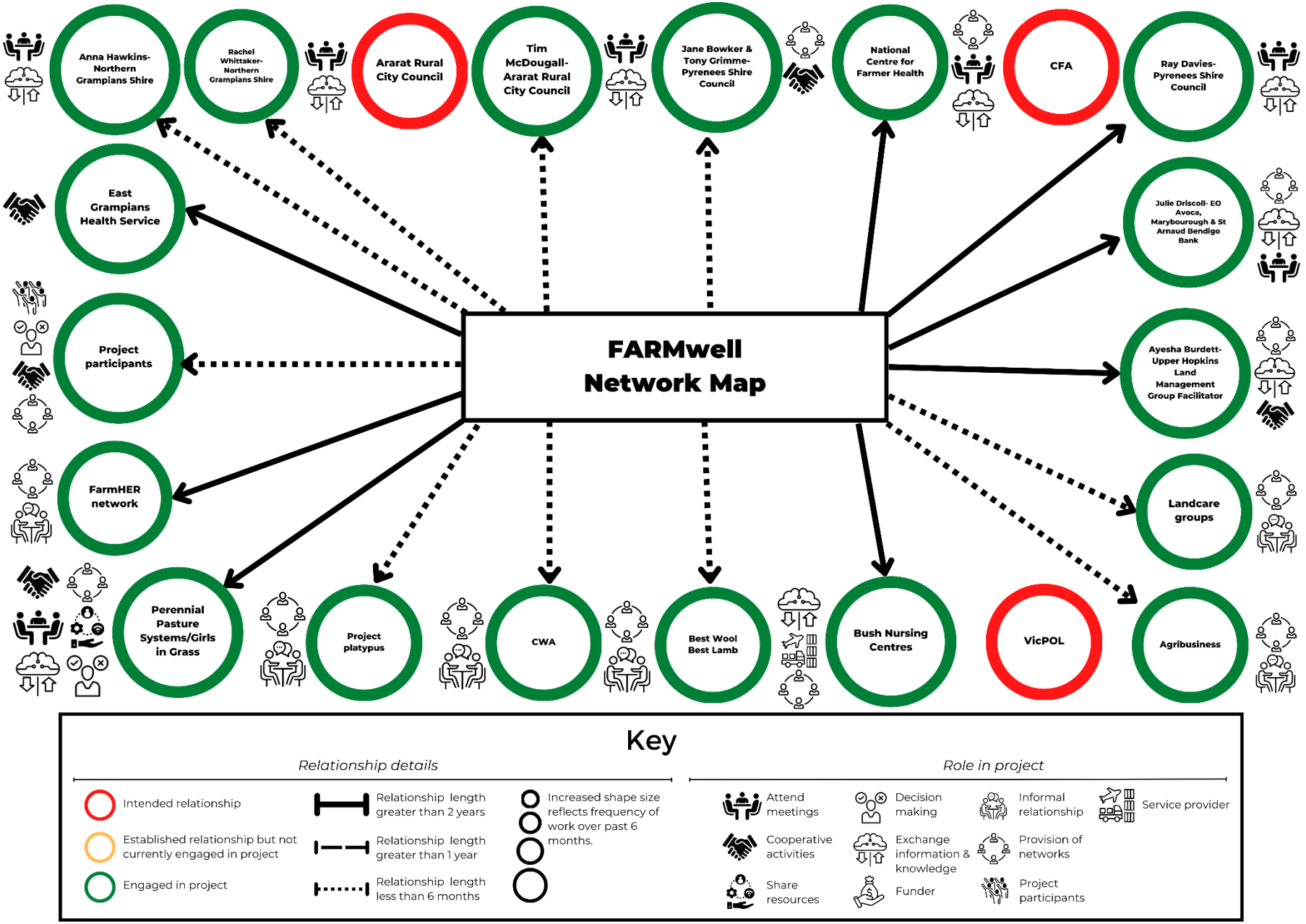
APPENDIX 18.2: NETWORK MAP – BUILDING OVENS-MURRAY AGSECTOR PROJECT TIME POINT 2 (JANUARY 2023)



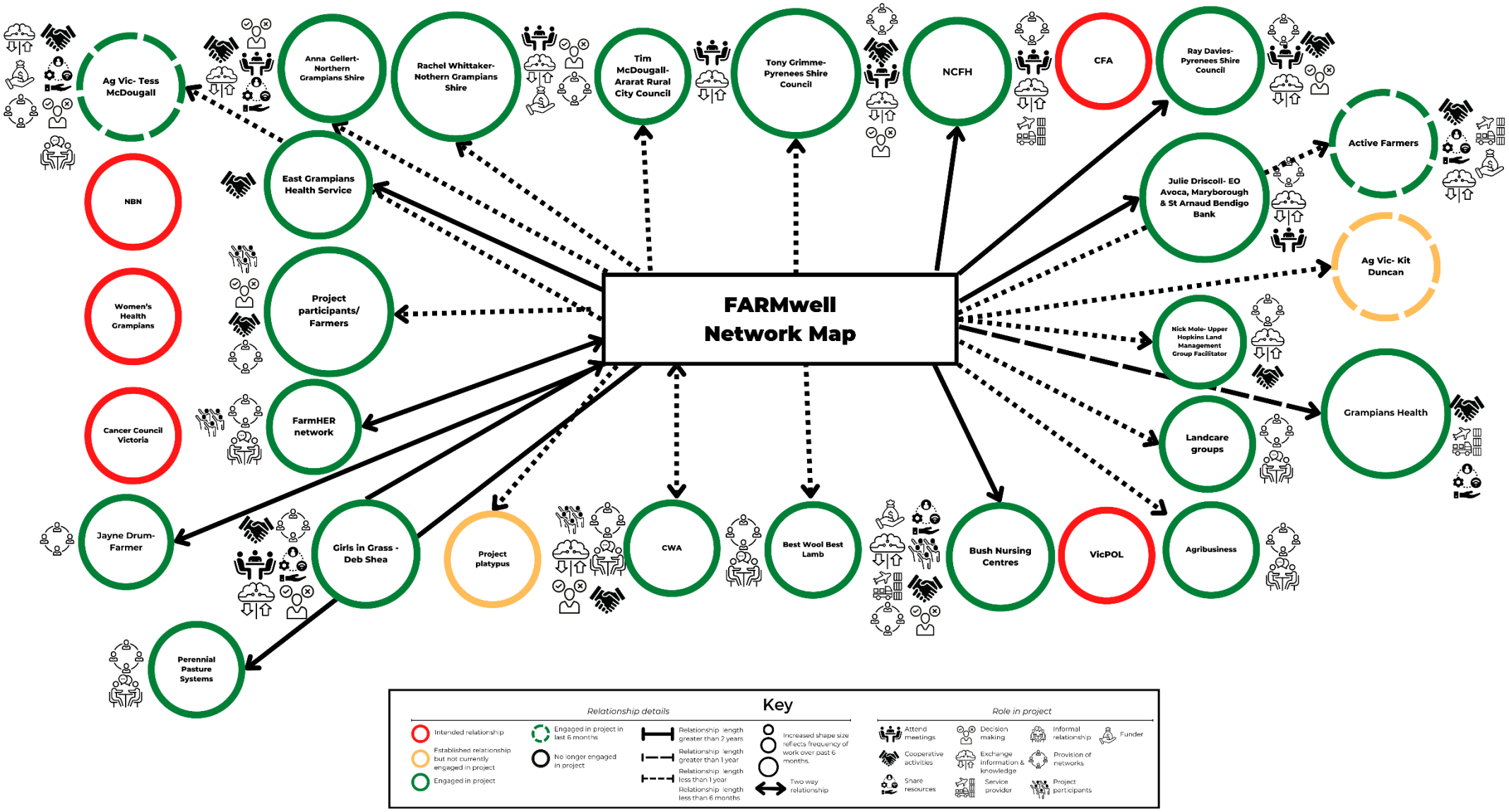
APPENDIX 18.3: NETWORK MAP – BUILDING OVENS-MURRAY AGSECTOR PROJECT TIME POINT 3 (NOVEMBER 2023)



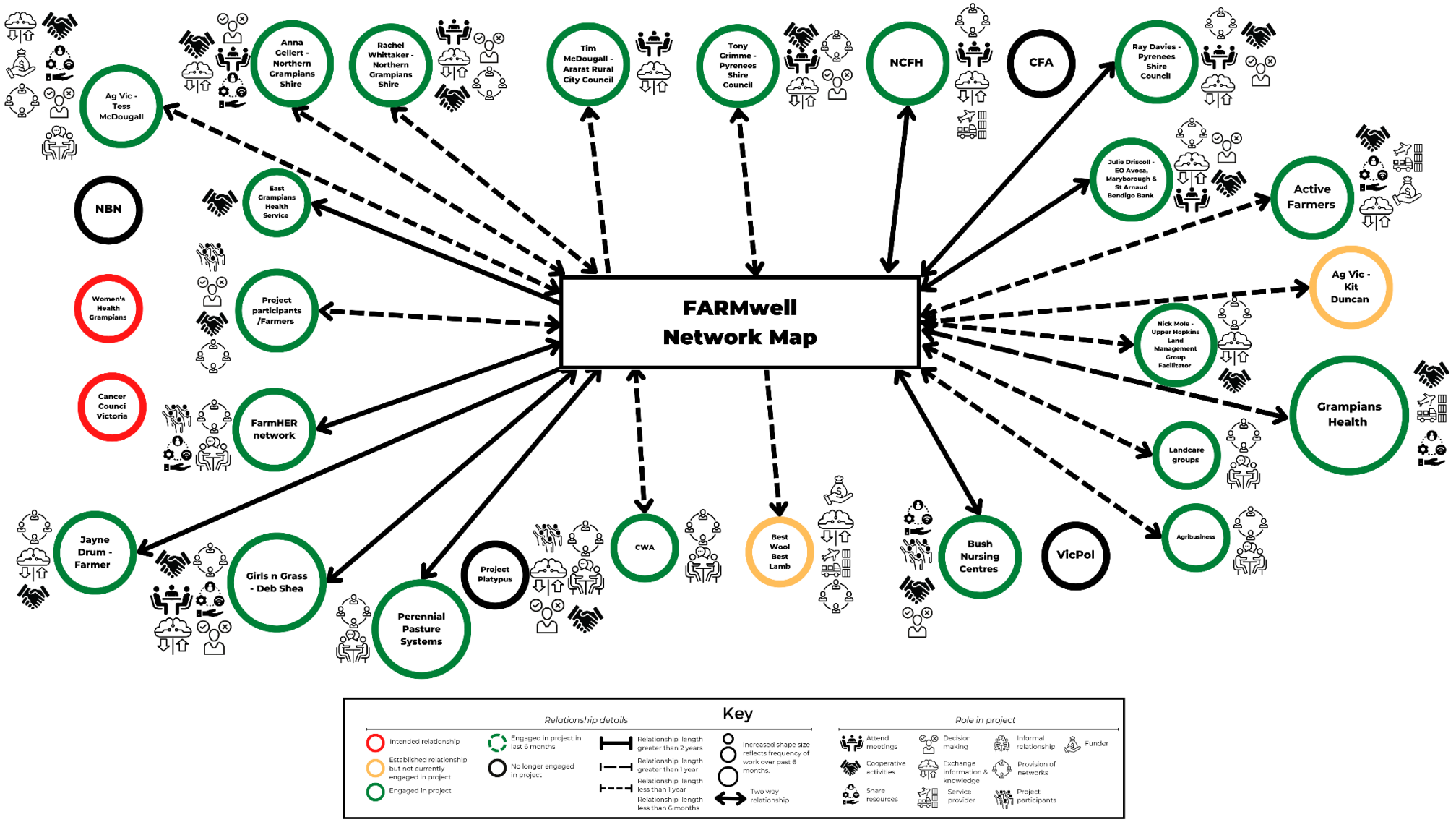
APPENDIX 19.1: NETWORK MAP - FARMWELL TIME POINT 1 (DECEMBER 2021)



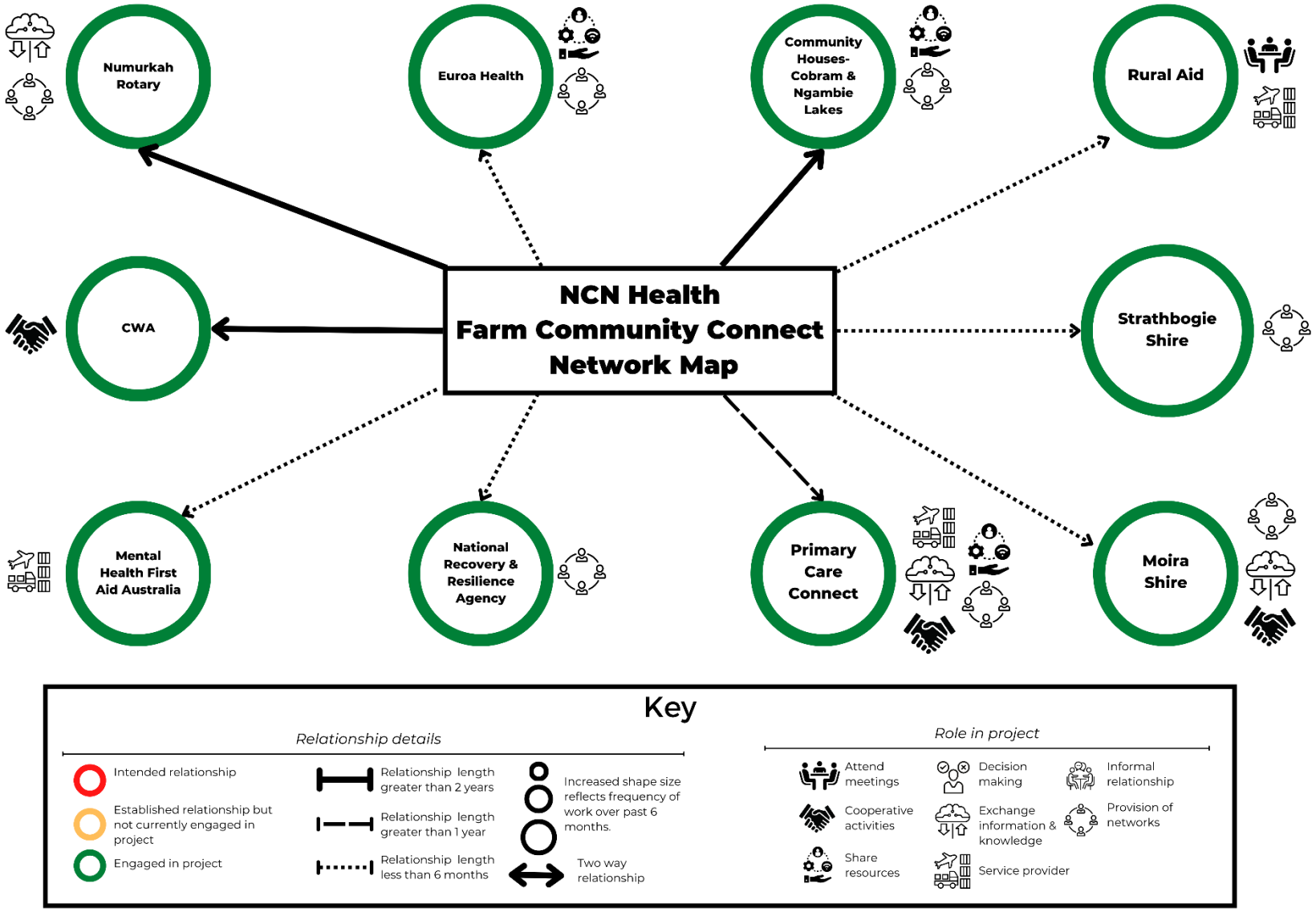
APPENDIX 19.2: NETWORK MAP - FARMWELL TIME POINT 2 (FEBRUARY 2023)



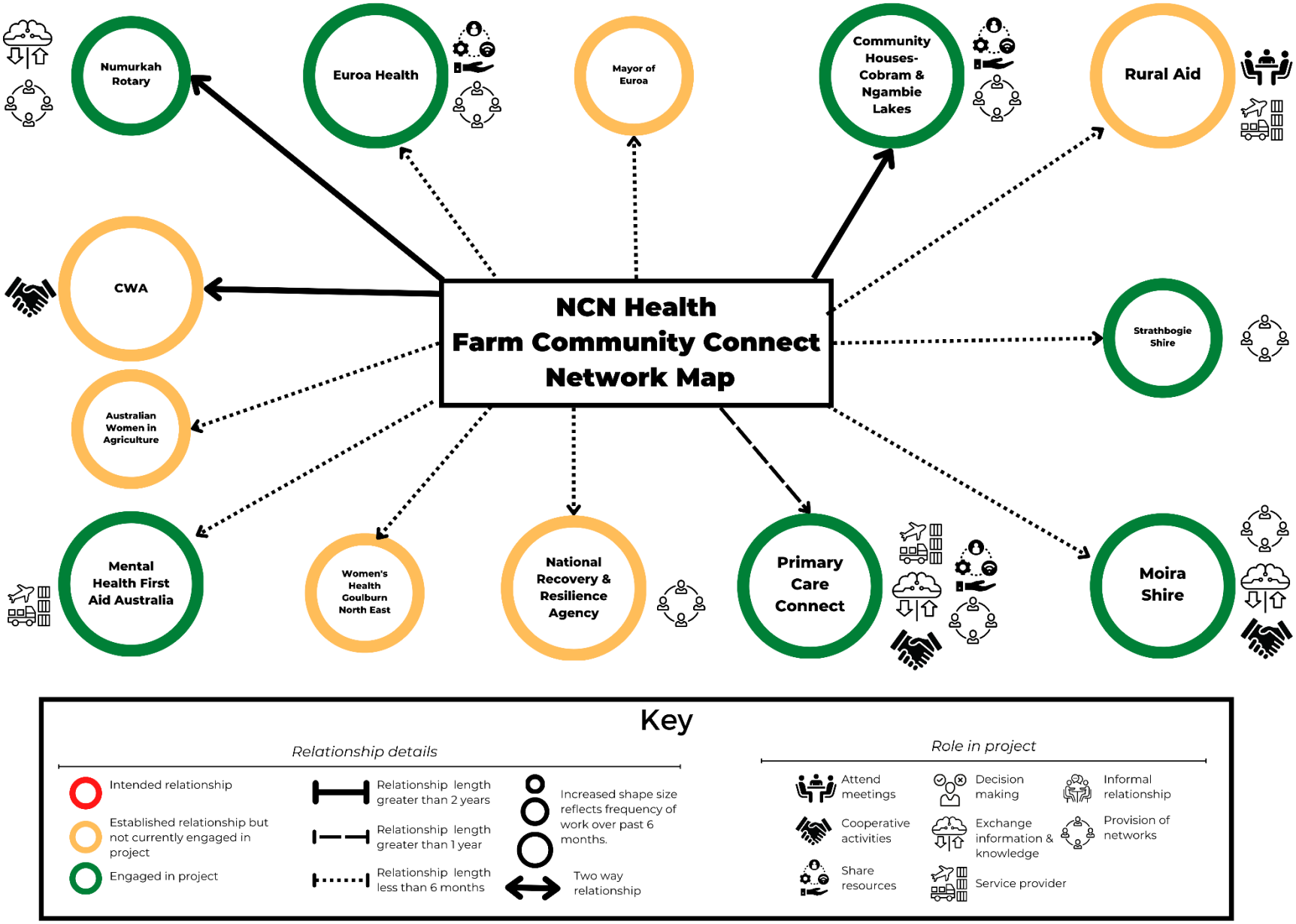
APPENDIX 19.3: NETWORK MAP - FARMWELL TIME POINT 3 (DECEMBER 2023)



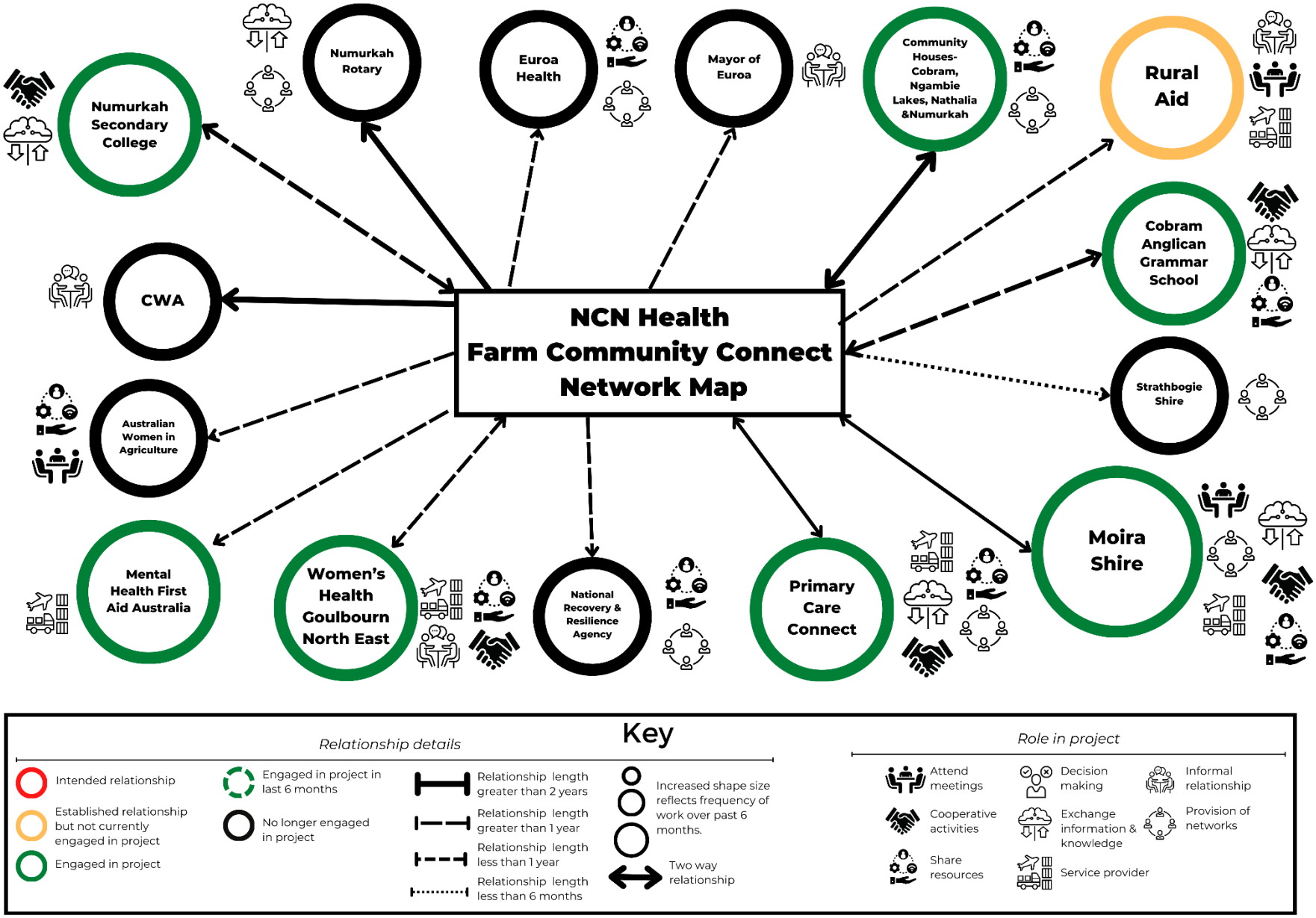
APPENDIX 20.1: NETWORK MAP – FARM COMMUNITY CONNECT TIME POINT 1 (FEBRUARY 2022)



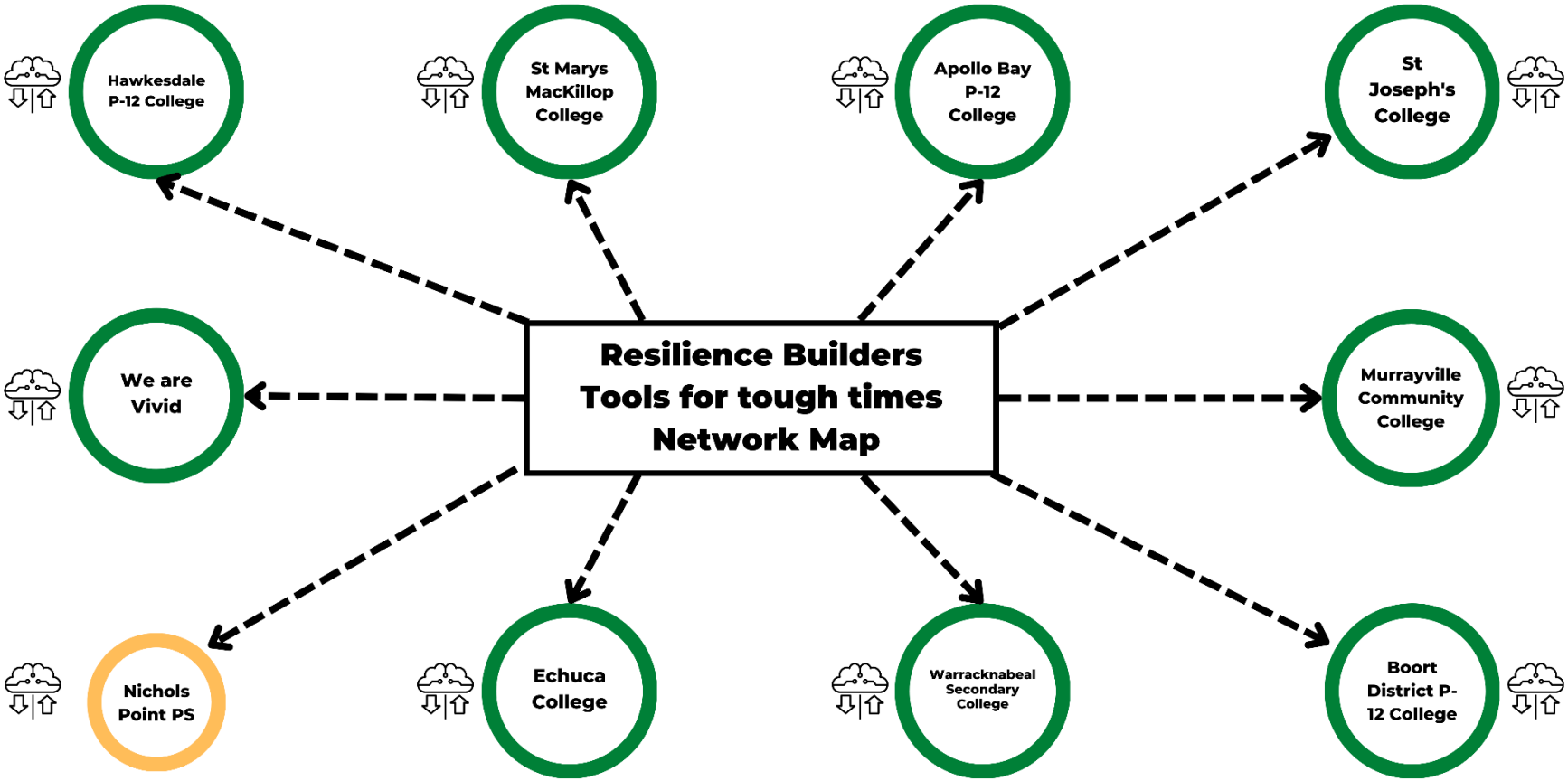
APPENDIX 20.2: NETWORK MAP – FARM COMMUNITY CONNECT TIME POINT 2 (JANUARY 2023)



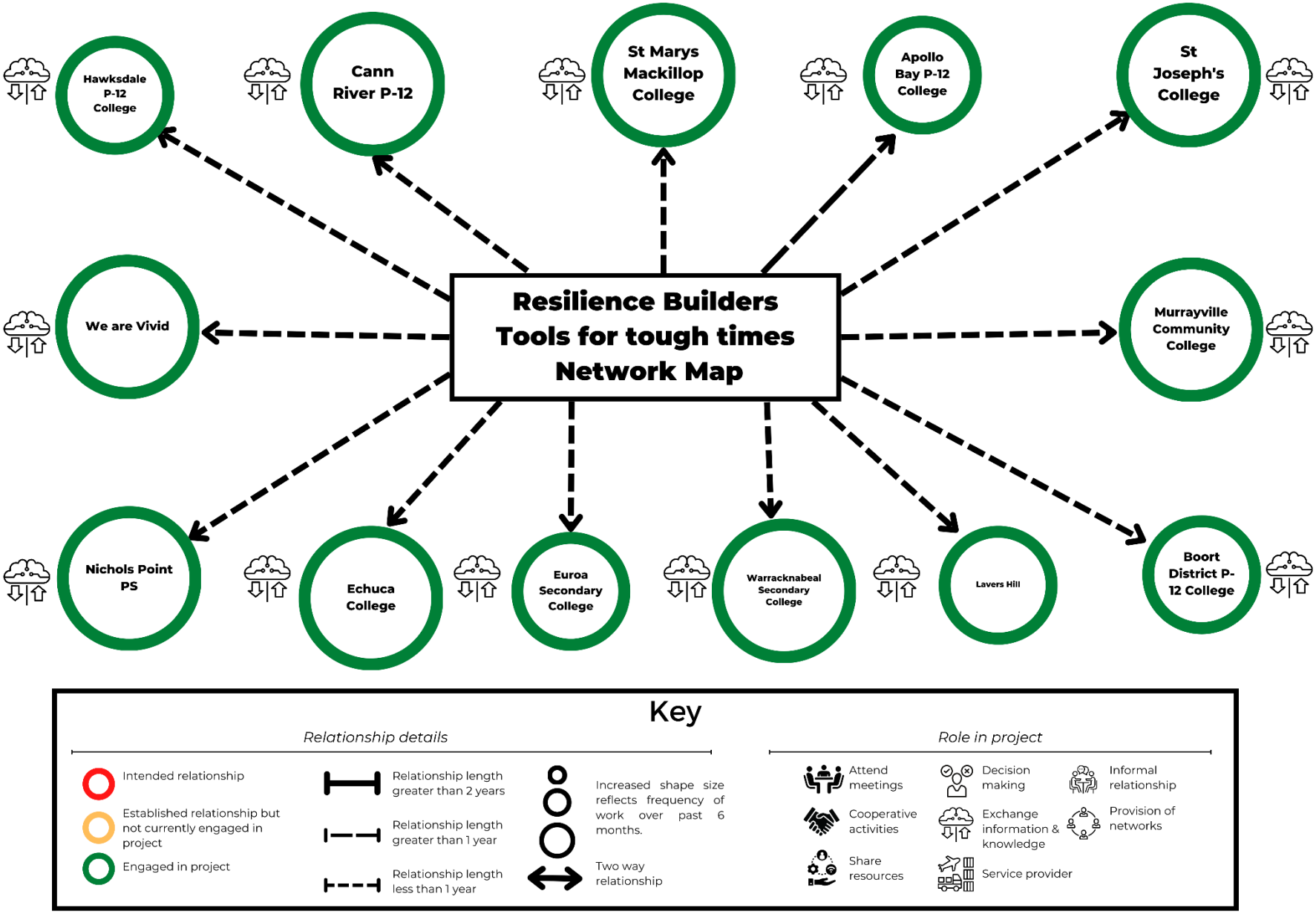
APPENDIX 20.3: NETWORK MAP – FARM COMMUNITY CONNECT TIME POINT 3 (NOVEMBER 2023)



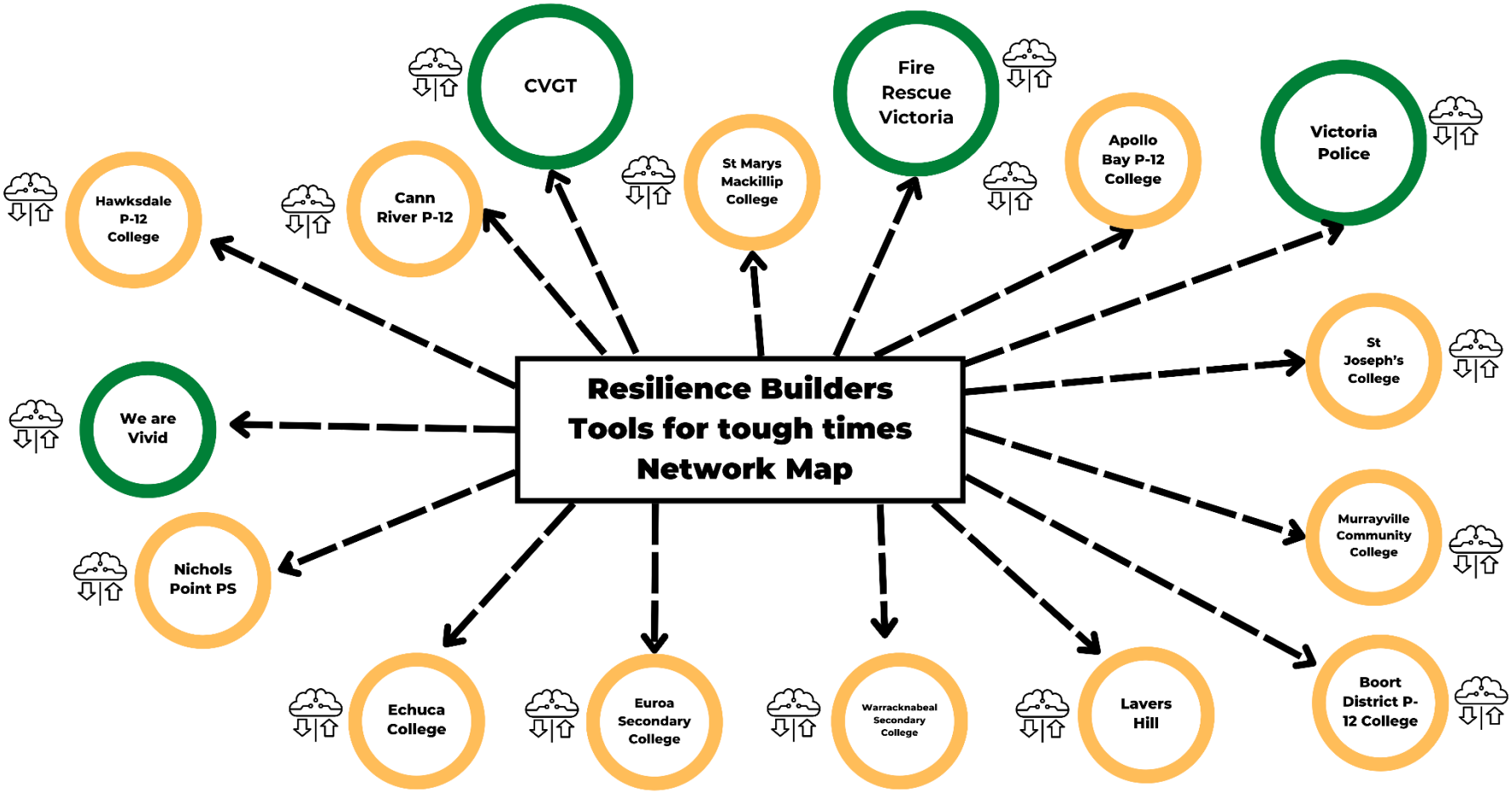
APPENDIX 21.1: NETWORK MAP – TOOLS FOR TOUGH TIMES TIME POINT 1 (FEBRUARY 2022)



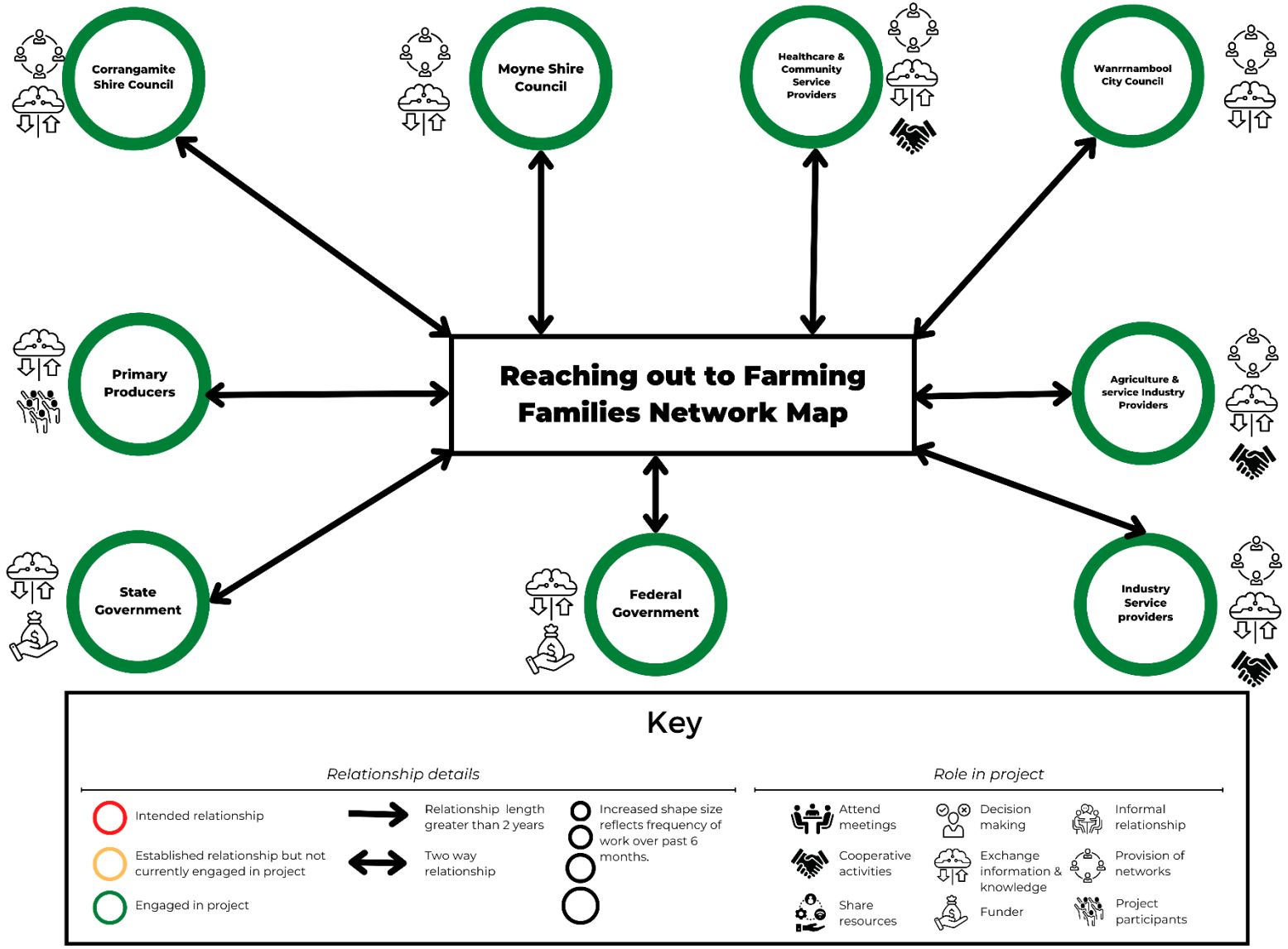
APPENDIX 21.2: NETWORK MAP – TOOLS FOR TOUGH TIMES TIME POINT 2 (DECEMBER 2022)



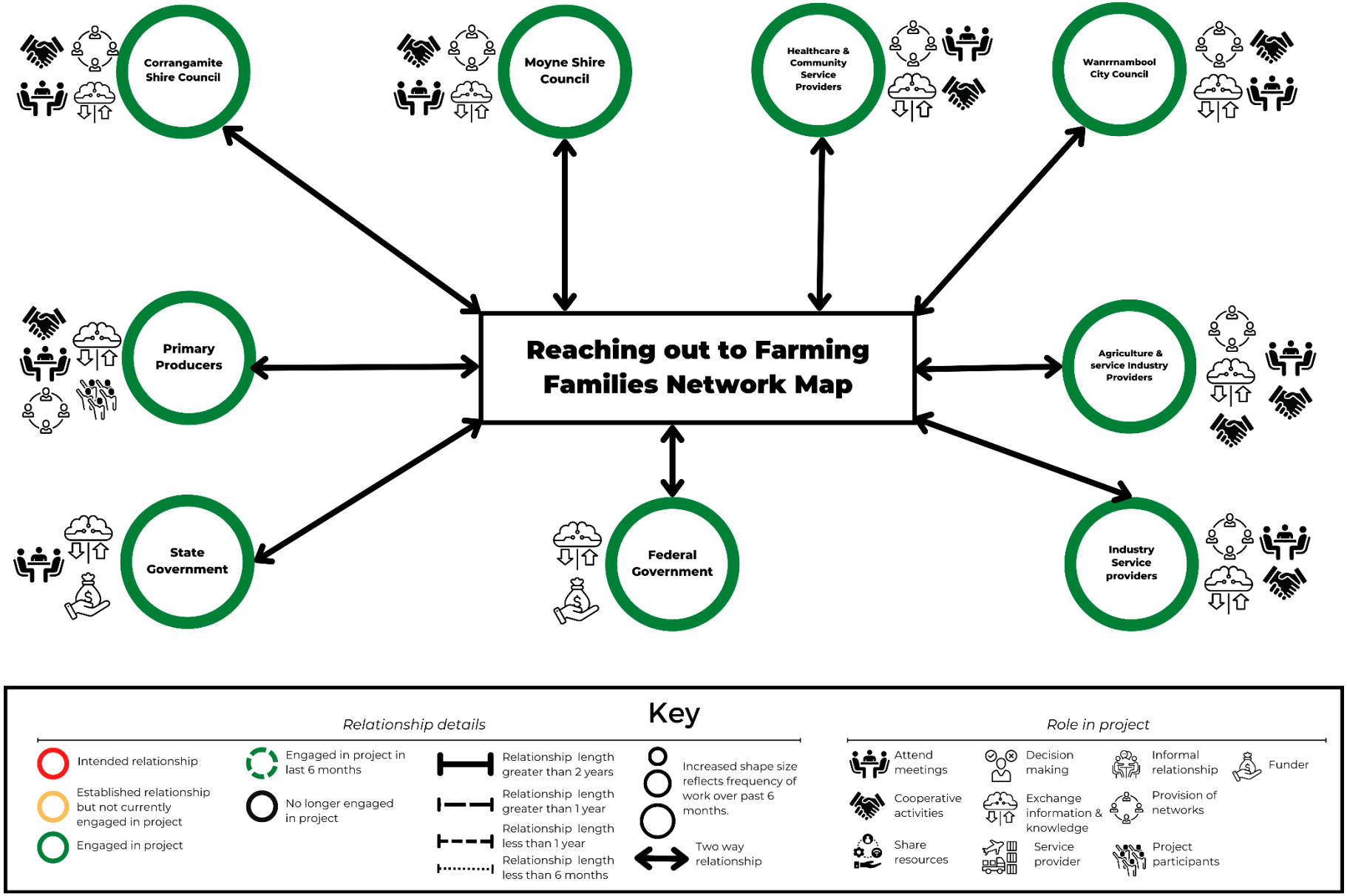
APPENDIX 21.3: NETWORK MAP – TOOLS FOR TOUGH TIMES TIME POINT 3 (NOVEMBER 2023)



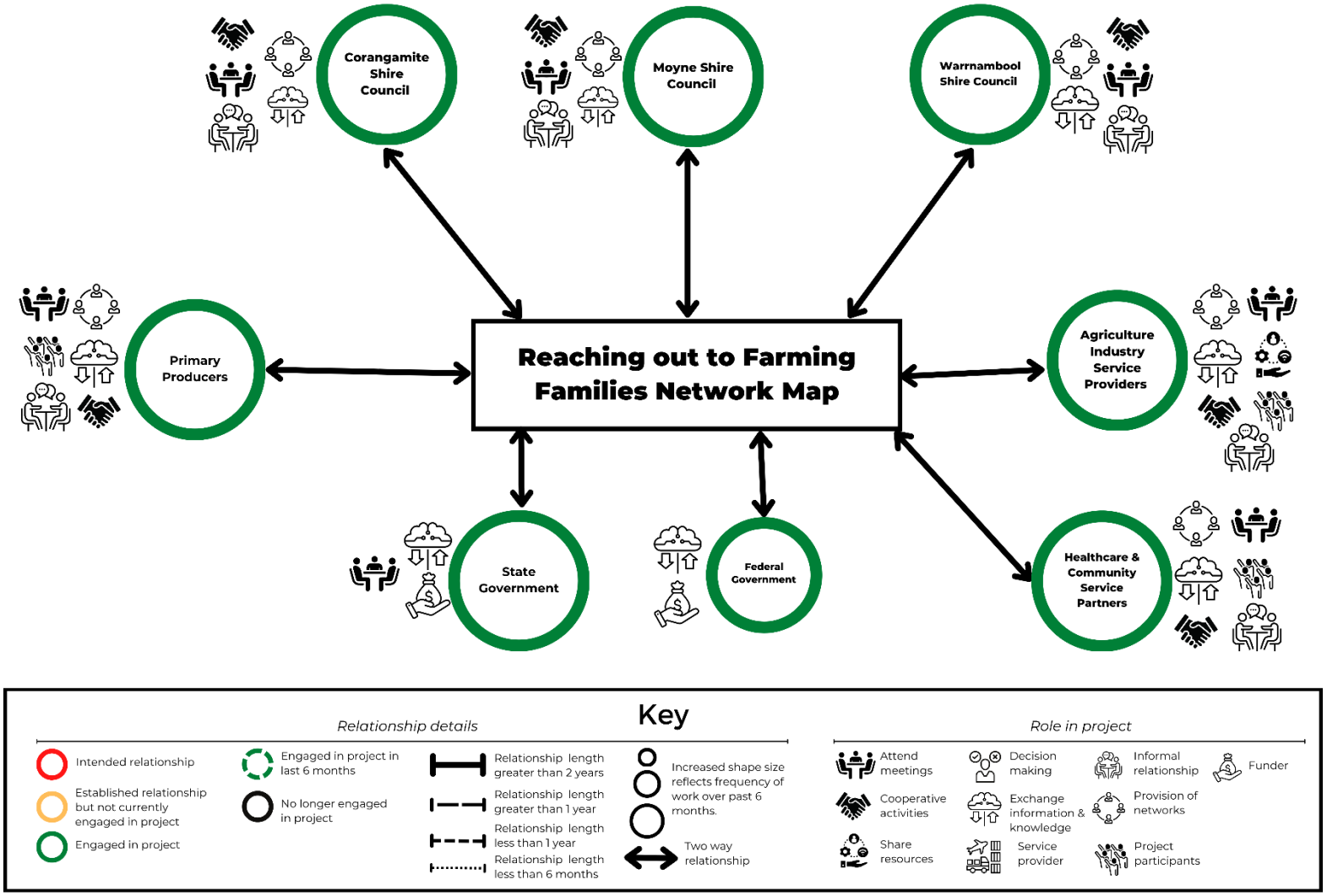
APPENDIX 22.1: NETWORK MAP – REACHING OUT TO FARMING FAMILIES SOUTH WEST VICTORIA TIME POINT 1 (FEBRUARY 2023)



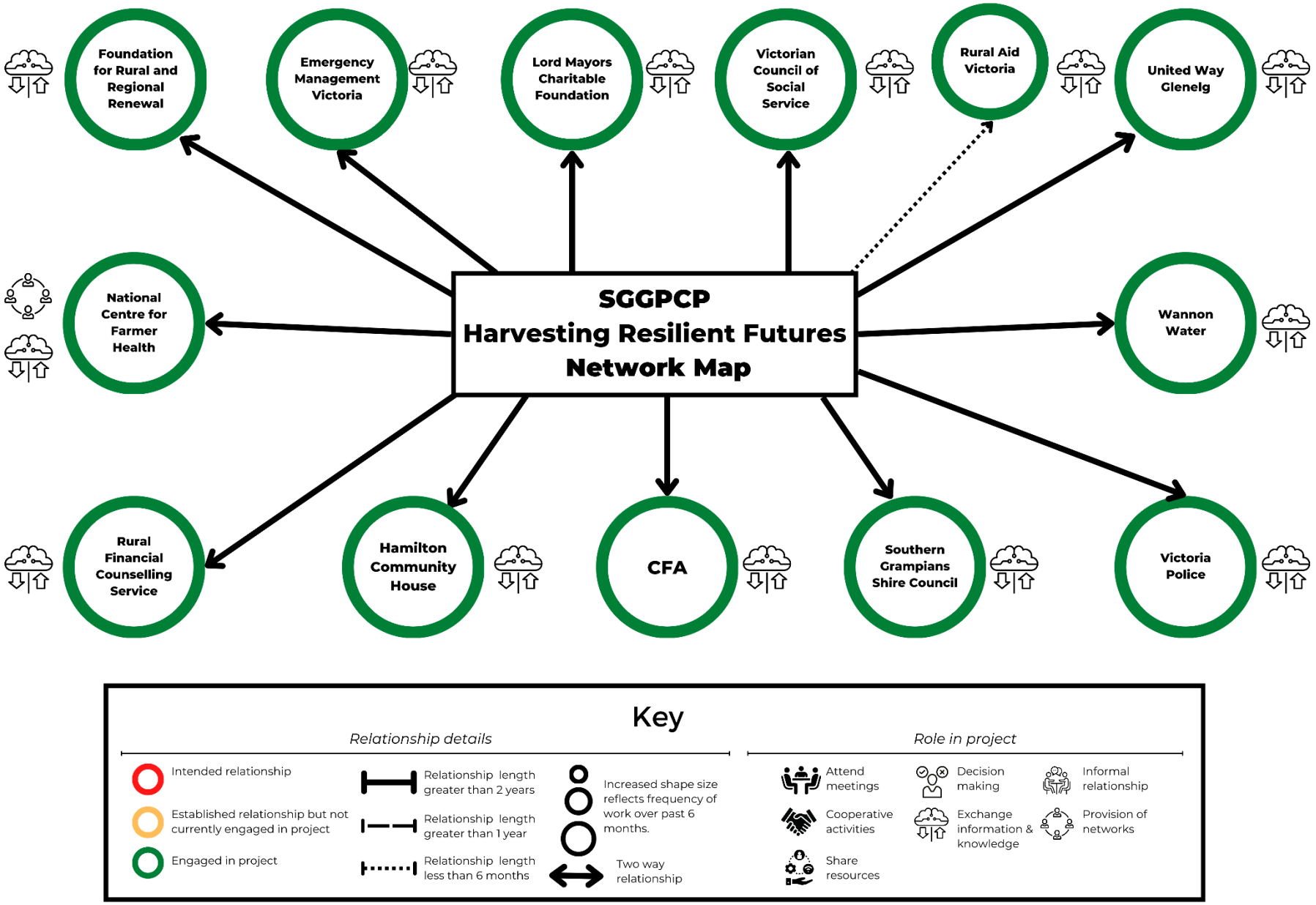
APPENDIX 22.2: NETWORK MAP – REACHING OUT TO FARMING FAMILIES SOUTH WEST VICTORIA TIME POINT 2 (AUGUST 2023)



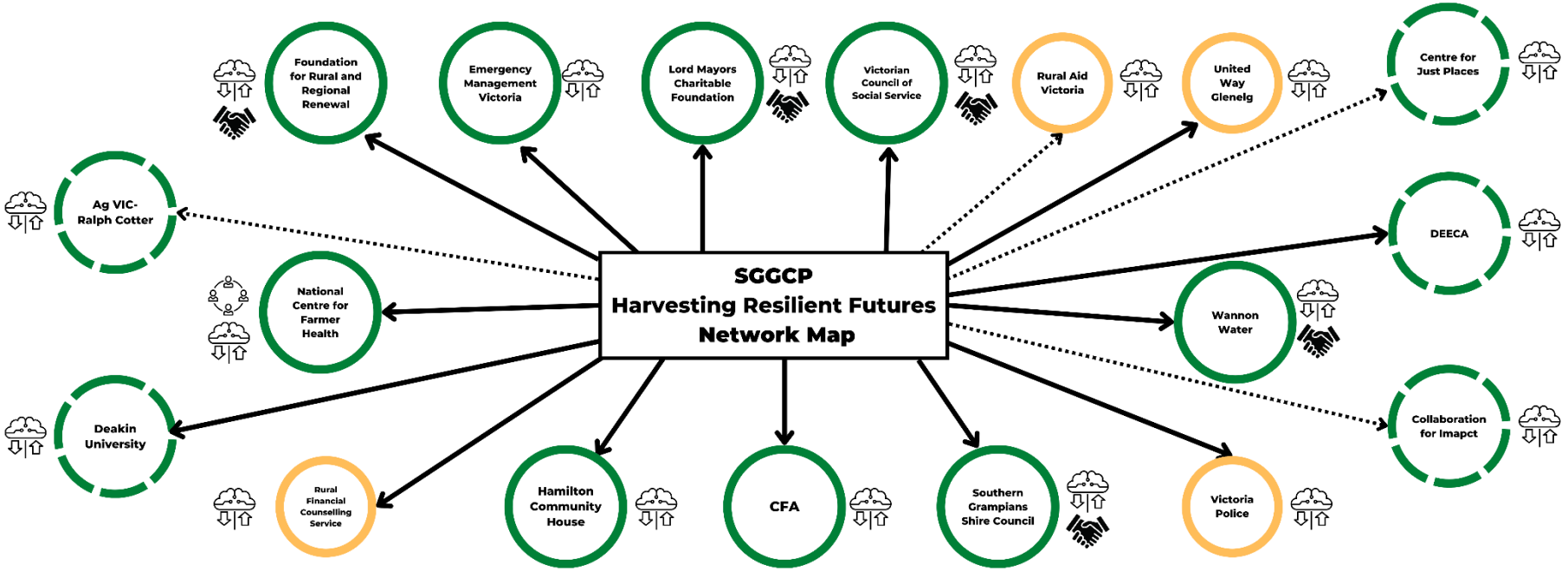
APPENDIX 22.3: NETWORK MAP – REACHING OUT TO FARMING FAMILIES SOUTH WEST VICTORIA TIME POINT 3 (NOVEMBER 2023)

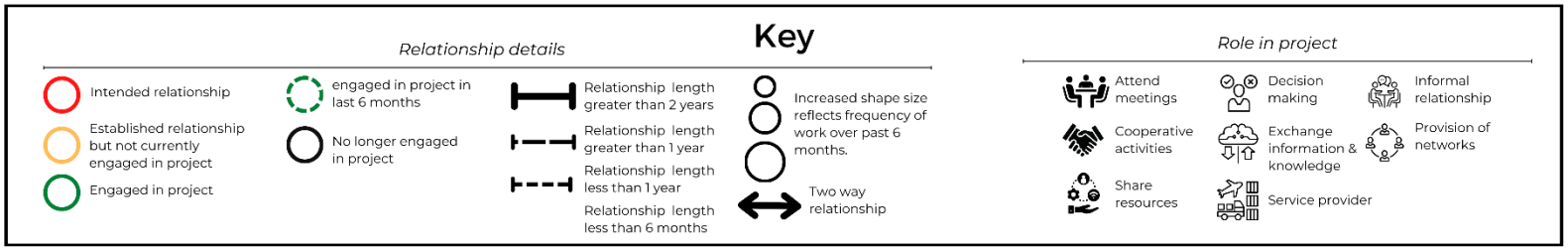


APPENDIX 23.1: NETWORK MAP – HARVESTING RESILIENT FUTURES TIME POINT 1 (DECEMBER 2021)

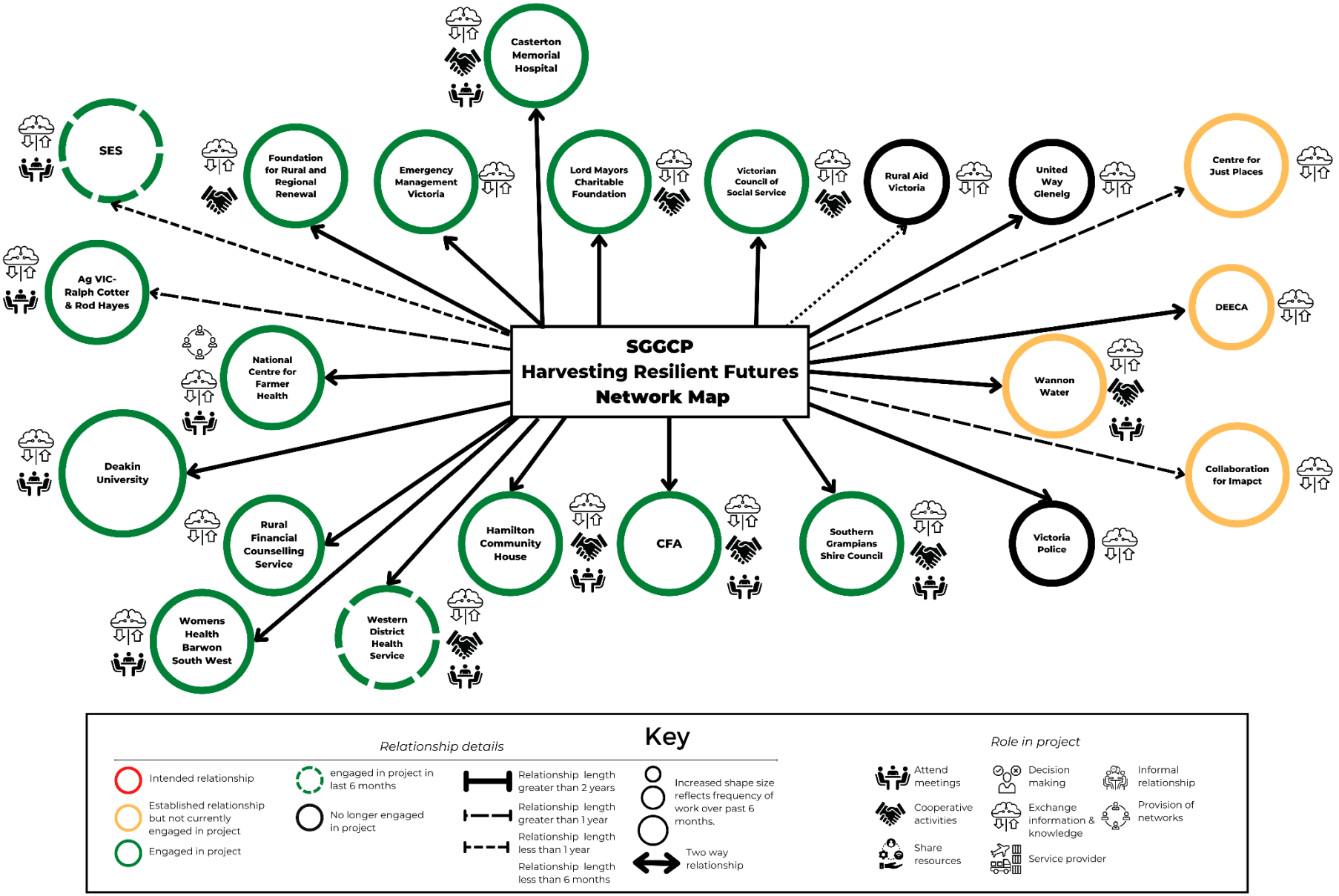


APPENDIX 23.2: NETWORK MAP – HARVESTING RESILIENT FUTURES TIME POINT 2 (FEBRUARY 2022)

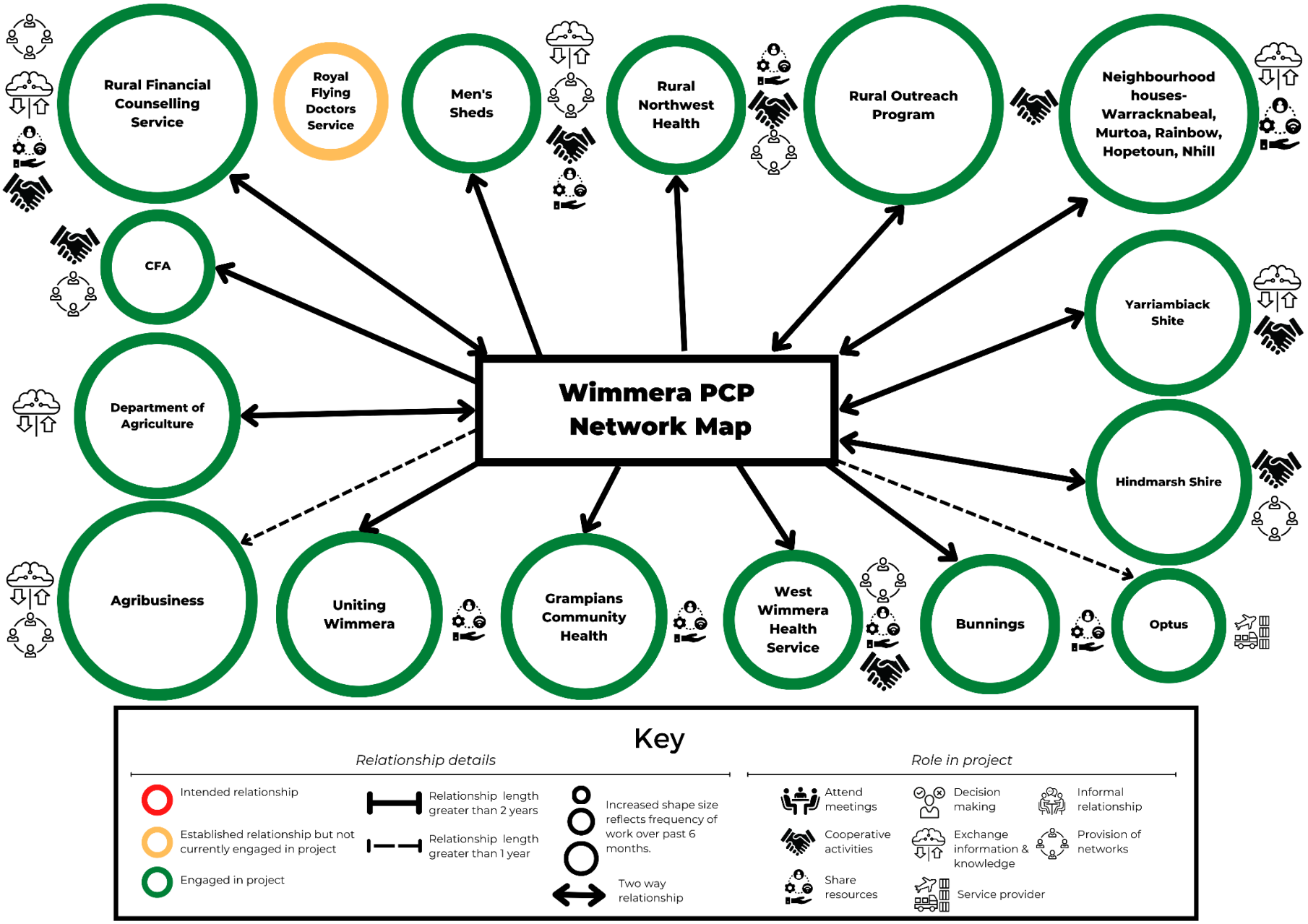




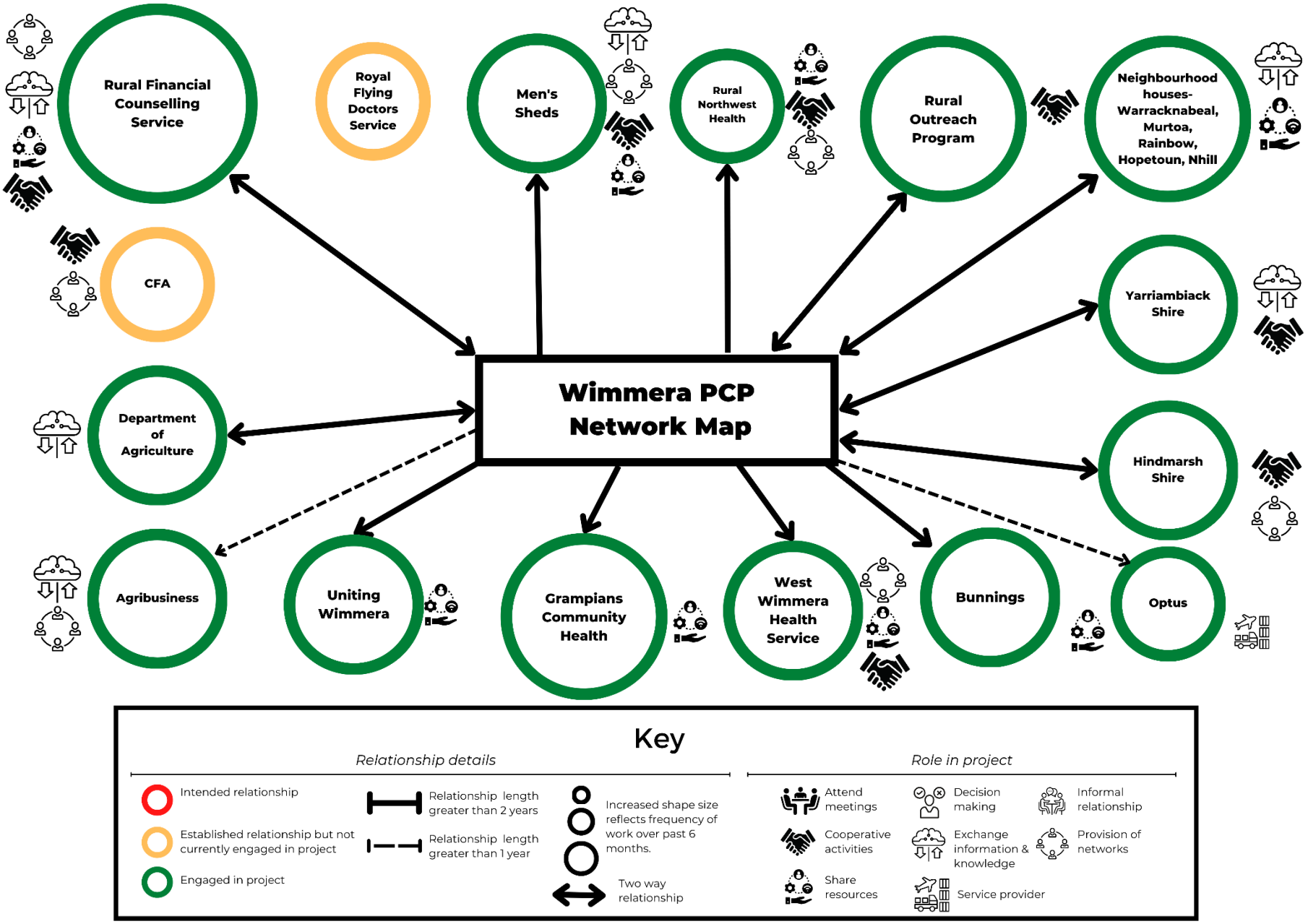
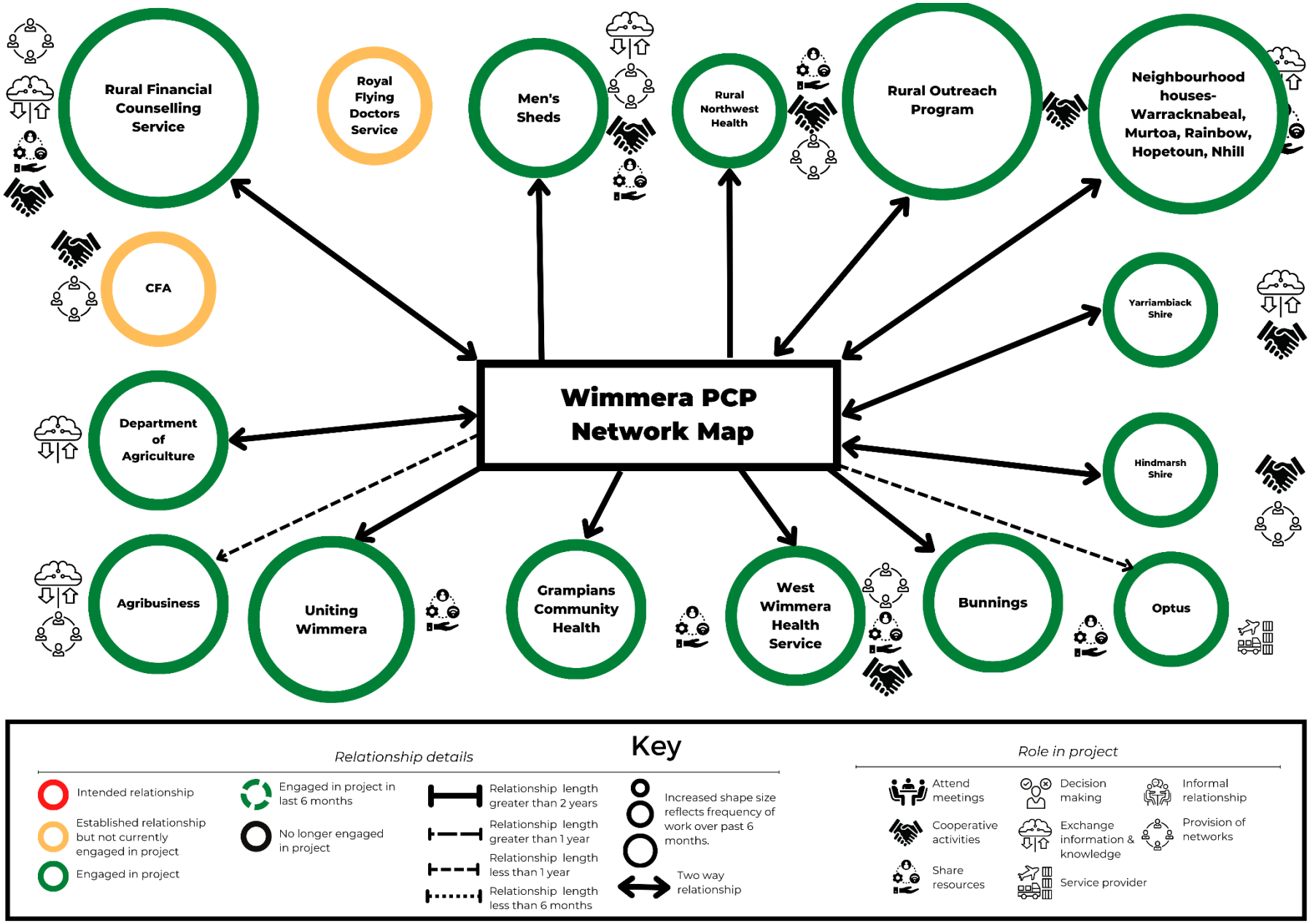
APPENDIX 23.3: NETWORK MAP – HARVESTING RESILIENT FUTURES TIME POINT 3 (OCTOBER 2023)



APPENIDX 24.1: NETWORK MAP – HINDMARSH AND YARRIAMBIACK RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 1 (DECEMBER 2021)



APPENDIX 24.2: NETWORK MAP – HINDMARSH AND YARRIAMBIACK RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 2 (DECEMBER 2022)



APPENDIX 24.3: NETWORK MAP – HINDMARSH AND YARRIAMBIACK RESILIENCE PROJECT TIME POINT 3 (JUNE 2023)