

Learning From Wattlestone: Backing Local Leadership

In the heart of an Australian wheatbelt region sits Wattlestone, a small town under big blue skies. Maybe you've passed through Wattlestone once before: on that road trip to your friend's parents' farm in Nyngan, or as a kid in the backseat driving to Esperance, or rolling through the vast, flat lands north of the Grampians. Can you remember your Wattlestone? It probably had a fantastic bakery where you inhaled a pie for lunch and bought an extra apple turnover for the road.

It's a town that many people pass through on their way somewhere else, but for those who stay it's home - and they work steadily to make it the best home it can be.

Not so long ago it was known as a thriving service hub for surrounding farms, with a strong and proud identity. It's getting harder to maintain that spirit of self-reliance and confidence, as the economy and environment continually changes around it.

Wattlestone has a strong First Nations community, with families who have lived there for generations and who hold deep connections to the land. There are also new families that have moved here, attracted by the promise of an affordable home and a quiet life. There is a thriving sense of community as is often common in smaller towns. However, with no public transport and few jobs, the little kids who once happily spent their days riding bikes around Wattlestone's streets now move away as soon as they become young adults. For those who stay, finding opportunities takes persistence.

In recent years, government programs and services have come and gone too, leaving behind more reports than results. Everyone is working their hardest - the health services, education, policing, and employment - but the dots don't seem to join up. Funding runs out, programs end, the government changes. The services that remain compete with one another for meagre funds, and when those run out, so too does locals' trust in anything good being there to stay.

Yet Wattlestone endures. It endures because people keep showing up:

The youth worker from the community centre who drives young people home in the old RSL minivan after dark because there's no bus.

The First Nations Elder who takes the kindergarteners down to the local creek every Wednesday for Bush Kinder, and shows them how to care for the plants, trees, & waterways.

The Council worker who volunteers to open up the neighbourhood house every Saturday morning so that local groups have somewhere to meet and socialise.

Then in the last couple of years, these small but steady acts have begun to weave something together. A handful of local employers, community 'connectors', and training providers decided they didn't want to wait for a fix to come along. Over many cups of tea, they talked about what was already in motion in the community: fundraiser bake sales, parents volunteering at the school, Elders leading land care. Then they began to experiment. They developed micro-credentials in hospitality and digital skills that could be completed locally. They set up peer networks for community workers who were feeling isolated and alone in their work. They arranged mentoring led by respected local Elders. They got local small businesses on board to offer on-the-job learning, and they ran some training sessions at the local library to support the new social enterprises that young people were wanting to get off the ground.

None of it is perfect. Funding remains patchy. The burnout is real as people take on more responsibilities in order to change the

way things work, and the systems that could be supporting them better are still hard to navigate. But it feels real, and local, and full of promise.

When you talk to Wattlestone locals now, you might not hear about transformational programs, but you might hear that the native frogs are back in the creek, or that young people from the local high school are running digital literacy programs for seniors at the library. When you stop at that bakery next time, you might notice the skate ramp set up in the carpark running after-school sessions, and you might also grab a takeaway from the newly opened coffee window.

The work in Wattlestone isn't finished but for the first time in a long time, people are starting to believe that change is possible and that it's coming from within as local leadership creates small but steady wins.

The story of Wattlestone isn't just about one town or suburb or place. It's about what can happen anywhere where people show up with thoughtful actions and care. And it's about what we can do to sustain people in this work.

As we move into the case study questions, think about what this story stirs for you or think about your own place.

What's growing, what's working, what's ready to begin, and where might possibility take root and grow the change you'd like to see.



Partnerships for Local Action &
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Reflect Together: Learning from Wattlestone

- 1. What is the one thing that feels familiar in that Wattlestone story? (5 mins)**

Where have you seen or experienced something similar in your place? What strengths can you build on? Discuss a key example.

- 2. What do you think it takes to grow and sustain the people doing place-based work in your community? (10 mins)**

Think about yourself, your staff, your community, the systems. In your experience, what do you think helps people start, stay, stretch and sustain? What gets in the way?