



Community Housing Website Upgrade



Thanks

The Project Team would like to acknowledge and thank the Committee for Geelong and Catherine Bell for facilitating the valuable Leaders for Geelong Program.

A big thank you also to our sponsor organisation, Northern Geelong Rental Housing Co-operative (NGRHC) for their support and time, in particular Vicki Ross (Manager) and Narelle Lorbeer (Communications & Member Engagement). It really was a pleasure working with the NGRHC.

We would also like to acknowledge the support of our Project Mentor, Mairead O'Sullivan.

The Leaders for Geelong Program is made possible through the support of our generous Program Partners and Scholarship Providers

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The Project Team acknowledges the Wadawurrung People as the Traditional Owners of the lands, waters, seas and skies on which we operate. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Australia's First Nations people.

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Foreword

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The Northern Geelong Rental Housing Co-op Ltd (NGRHC) is a member driven not for profit Community Housing Provider. This project came about because the members had a desire for a more reliable way of lodging maintenance requests. As with most projects, the NGRHC commits to focus on the benefits that can be given to our member-renters and that principal is the catalyst for what we do.

The Leaders for Geelong Project team were tasked with making a more intuitive and technological way for members to lodge requests at any time of the day or night as their needs arose.

The project team have been diligent in their work to create an easy straight forward way to not only raise a maintenance work request but to also navigate through other forms which are required to be completed by the member-renters of this Co-operative such as rent rebate review and scholarship.

I would like to commend the Project team for their hard work and I would also like to thank the Leaders for Geelong Program for giving these opportunities to finesse the leadership skills of these professional people.

Executive Summary

Every person has a right to safe, affordable, and adequate housing. The lack of social and affordable housing has long been a key issue lobbied for by not-for profit organisations and community groups to improve government policy and increase the availability of housing that is affordable for people who just need a safe roof over their heads.

Whilst providing a roof over people's head is seen as the biggest hurdle, the ongoing management and maintenance of properties is an afterthought and Rental Housing Co-operatives such as NGRHC who are staffed by volunteers do the heavy lifting.

NGRHC is a not-for-profit community housing organisation that provides low-cost affordable rental housing on behalf of Homes Victoria in the region of North Geelong. Homes Victoria are a government agency who work across government, industry and the social housing and homelessness service sectors to provide stable and secure homes. NGRHC are responsible for managing a total of 58 properties, collecting rent, and delivering responsive maintenance.

The emergence of COVID in 2020 and subsequent lockdowns including government orders to work from home highlighted a gap in how renters report maintenance issues, and the ability of the NGRHC to address them in a timely manner. During this period the NGRHC identified better communication and interaction through the website as a means to improving the issue.

Our project team were tasked by NGRHC to deliver an improved and more interactive website, where renter-members could have access to a member's portal page which housed relevant information such as policies and relevant forms.

To understand what the renter-members and NGRHC were hoping to see as improved outcomes, a consultation period was held where the team attended sub-committee meetings and collection of survey data was carried out.

The recurring theme was an improved maintenance request lodgement procedure through the website. In addition, implementation of social & visual improvements such as event calendar, photo gallery, logo redesign and acknowledgement of country.

Through the implementation of the website upgrades within the budget constraints and rollout to the members, the NGRHC will be able to address the gaps in their system and provide timely close out of maintenance requests.

Whilst not all upgrades were achievable within the website upgrade budget, the project team identified and provided the NGRHC with additional opportunities that could be explored should further funding be allocated.



Why we chose this project

The opportunity to contribute to a project that aims to help provide housing to those who would otherwise go without, drew each of our project team members in.

The passionate pitch from the Northern Geelong Rental Housing Co-operative (NGRHC) Manager and her clear understanding of the issues with the current website made for a project that provided a lot of hope, and a high chance of success.

Housing access and affordability has been headlining news over the past few years, particularly in Geelong where a population boom has led to decreased housing affordability for those already under significant cost of living pressures. NGRHC are experiencing high demand for their service and our project team knew that we could help reduce their workload by implementing enhancements to their existing website, enabling them to dedicate more time to their renter-members.



Background

Housing Co-operatives are regulated organisations under the Housing Act 1983 and are a public and social housing model operating under the following core principles;

- Voluntary and open membership
- Democratic member control
- Member economic participation
- Autonomy and independence
- Education, training, and information
- Co-operation among Co-op
- Concern for the community

The NGRHC aims to provide positive and beneficial renter-member outcomes. This is achieved through a member engagement & development sub-committee, where every member is involved in the direction and make important decisions about the strategic and financial interests of the NGRHC.

Members identified an opportunity to provide a more interactive website where maintenance requests can be lodged online via a maintenance request form and promote the social principles of member participation through news, social events, and engagement.

Both in person attendance & survey results were used to identify common themes and how these could be addressed in a website upgrade within the allocated budget. Common themes included

- Improvement of maintenance request process
- Event Calendar
- Photo Gallery
- Acknowledgement of Country
- Member Portal

By improving the design & accessibility of the website, members and the NGRHC will be able to streamline the maintenance process, improve communication and provide a greater connection through social engagement. This will ultimately lead to a more efficient administration process and improve member participation and empower members in alignment with the core principles.

Project Purpose

The purpose of the project was to provide the NGRHC with an improved and more interactive online website experience. The project also considered alternative ways of communicating with renter-members that may not rely on the website.

The project was guided by the following outcomes and objectives as identified at the commencement of the Project:

- Seek feedback from renter-members to determine best outcomes for the website upgrade through committee meetings and member surveys.
- Conduct Assessment of best practice website design from other key housing organisations and ensure this is considered when upgrading the NGRHC Website.
- Create 'website wish list' through member engagement and feedback to present to the NGRHC.
- Undertake feasibility assessment of the wish list by liaising with the website developer to determine if there are any constraints and limitations.
- Investigate and consider other methods of communication with renter-members outside of the website platform.
- Present and seek approval from NGRHC on technical website upgrades as well as any other methods of communication to be implemented in conjunction with project risks and constraints.
- Engage and collaborate with website developer to successfully implement finalised website upgrades.
- Handover of successful website implementation to NGRHC along with potential further website upgrades once funding is available.

Approach to stakeholder engagement

In order to determine the true needs of the committee, our Project team conducted research into the current trends of various rental housing cooperative websites. Engagement with NGRHC and renter-members was carried out to understand what was important to the people who matter the most.

Engagement was successfully carried out through attending multiple member engagement committee meetings. At these meetings, the project team was fortunate enough to be in attendance with renter-members who make up the committee, where they were able to voice preference of website upgrades. This below wish list was derived from our initial meeting with the member engagement committee and recorded as raw data to be referred back to for the duration of the project.

Further to this, a key takeaway from the initial meeting as raised by a committee member was "the need for the website to be more interactive for users". This comment was something that the project team kept coming back to and was most keen to deliver on.

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Member Engagement Meeting - 20/04/22

Notes:

WishList for Website

- * General upgrade on accessibility from mobile devices - people access the website via phone
- * Online lodgment procedure - maintenance request form
- * Acknowledgement of country banner
- * Member portal - Important for confidential info
- * Online calendar - upcoming committee meetings, social events, functions
- * Various online prescribed forms - co-op to develop forms
- * Online photo gallery - ability to upgrade regularly

WISHLIST TO BE COSTED, EVALUATED AND PRESENTED
TO THE CO-OP FOR THEIR
APPROVAL



The project team also developed an early survey which was distributed to members for their input as secondary data.

Continued stakeholder engagement

Furthermore, the project team sought endorsement from the NGRHC on the proposed project scope. Once agreement of the scope had been reached and consideration of the functional requirements that were presented by the NGRHC, the project team was able to develop a list of technical requirements for the website upgrade which was presented to the incumbent web developer for quotation. Whilst completing this, the project team also investigated and developed other alternative methods of communication that was equally effective and cost efficient.

The costed requirements were then presented back to the NGRHC for consideration, a feasibility assessment was undertaken between the project team and the NGRHC's key stakeholders to determine what desired upgrades were going to be most beneficial to the NGRHC. The project team was then able to support the implementation of the approved website developments by facilitating user acceptance testing. The project team, through meeting with the NGRHC's key stakeholders regularly, were able to ensure the web developer provided adequate documentation and handover material to ensure a smooth transition and management of new components.

Following the completion of the project teams' scope, the project team provided the NGRHC with a carefully curated list of opportunities to further develop the website in line with the identified needs of the members should future funding and projects allow for it.

Internally, the project team met weekly over the course of the project to complete all the tasks identified within the project management plan. The

team also arranged for fortnightly catch up meetings with the NGRHC's key stakeholder and project champion to continually provide updates and receive feedback on all items regarding the website upgrade.

The project team utilised the online platform 'Trello', a project management system used to manage and assign various tasks to each group member, providing accountability and clarity throughout the duration of the project. For a clear communication process, the project team implemented the messaging app, 'WhatsApp', to ensure all group members were updated with any key information in between weekly catch-up meetings.

A detailed Gantt Chart was developed to record our group objectives and tasks. The Gantt chart provided clear accountability and transparency of the project's deliverables.



April

Member Engagement Meeting

Listen to needs of the renter-members



May

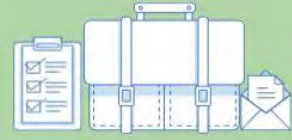
Develop Project Wish List

Website Developer Collaboration



June

Costing Exercise & Feasibility Assessment



July

Execute Implementation Plan

Ongoing collaboration with Website Designer



August

**Website Testing
Design Fridge Magnets**

Draft report and presentation

September

Project Handover

Finalise presentation



October

Presentation Luncheon

Completion of report





Deliverables

Having worked extensively with NGRHC and their Member Engagement Committee, we determined that the initial scope needed to be refined in order to provide specific functionality enhancements to the website which would be of most benefit to NGRHC and their renter-members.

Member Portal + Acknowledgement of Country

NGRHC had identified a strong requirement for renter-members to have a 'portal' that they would log into to access member-only content. This portal would be accessible via the existing website, and crucially work just as well from a mobile device as it does on a tablet or computer.

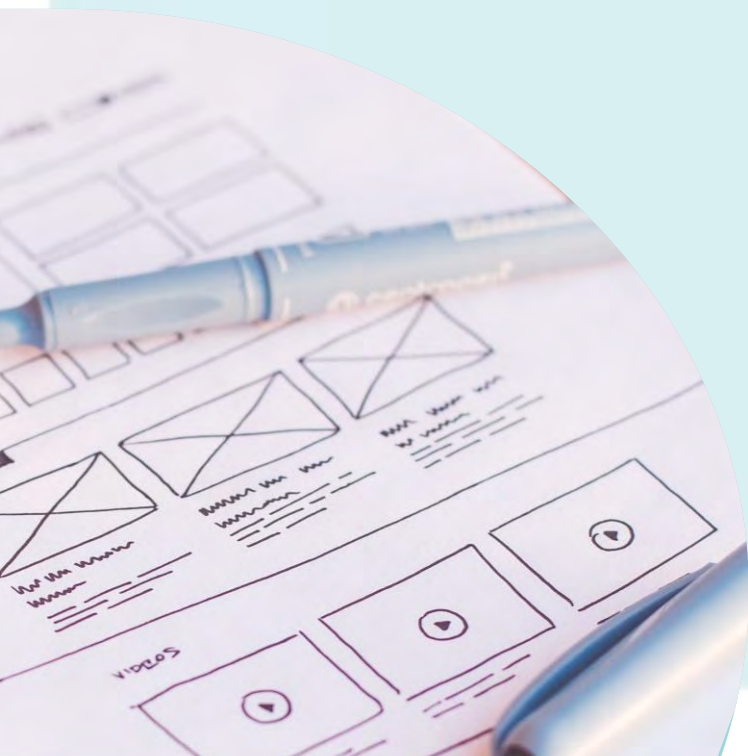
Again, working with the incumbent web developer, a portal was created for renter-members to access from any internet-connected device. This portal provides a private space for NGRHC to make resources available to renter-members only.

The first resource provided to renter-members in this portal were the newly launched interactive forms. NGRHC have already been discussing additional resources to make available in the future to further enhance the benefit to renter-members accessing the portal.

Another clear requirement from NGRHC was to have their Acknowledgement of Country published on their website to recognise the deep connection that NGRHC has with the region and the lands on which they operate, and to respect the Traditional Owners of those lands.

NGRHC staff had already created an Acknowledgement of Country that was used in their email signatures and chose to have that same Acknowledgment placed onto the website.

To ensure that the Acknowledgement was prevalent across the website, the project team worked with the incumbent web developer to place NGRHC's existing Acknowledgement into the website footer to ensure that it was visible on each page across the website.



Yes, this is urgent

No, this is not urgent

Urgent Notice

***If maintenance is urgent (gas leak, electricity faulty, etc) and is outside of office hours, please contact**

First Name

Last Name

Current Address

Interactive Forms

Previously, the only way renter-members were able to submit forms to NGRHC was to visit the office, request a form, print it off, and then return it to the office after completion. This process was identified as difficult for both the renter-member and NGRHC staff.

Being that PDF documents are proprietary document format not all devices be able to access them, a problem particularly affecting older smartphones, or those with lower specifications. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only half of households owned a printer meaning that a significant proportion of renter-members needing to submit forms were required to either purchase and operate a home printer, or utilise a print service at cost.

Finally, once the form was printed and filled in, it had to be either posted to, or dropped off at the NGRHC office that could only be staffed part-time (and was often unstaffed during the COVID-19 lockdowns). This added extra delay and inconvenience to the process. Of course, with hand-written responses, some data was often inaccurate, illegible, or insufficient.

To provide a more modern and accessible alternative, the project team worked with NGRHC and

their existing web developer to create and produce four online forms to deploy to a new interactive forms system embedded entirely within the existing website.

The four online forms developed were, Maintenance Request, Rental Rebate Application, Member Transfer, and Scholarship Application.

The online forms were designed to replicate the PDF versions, but with some input validation to improve data accuracy. These online forms are accessible to all renter-members, regardless of what device they use and can be accessed, completed, and submitted 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Each form submission is delivered immediately to the relevant email inbox for NGRHC staff to access remotely, avoiding the requirement for office attendance to action returned forms.



Maintenance Magnets

We also identified opportunities beyond just website functionality to create efficiencies for renter-members in their interactions with NGRHC and their services.

Thinking beyond the website

While creating a member portal with interactive forms had centralised and simplified access to forms, it was clear that sometimes renter-members needed more immediate access to NGRHC staff and services. A recurring example was the maintenance request form that was a useful tool for non-urgent maintenance requests such as wear-and-tear issues. NGRHC publish a phone number for urgent maintenance requests that can be contacted 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. However, that phone number was published at the bottom of one page on the website that was always at least a couple of clicks away. The project team understood that no matter how enhanced the website became, a renter-

member having to browse to a website and search for a specific phone number while their broken tap sprayed water around their kitchen was never going to be ideal.

The project team developed the concept of a fridge magnet that would list the NGRHC's emergency numbers, as well as the website's address for non-urgent matters. A space was also included for renter-members to write their portal password for ease of recollection. NGRHC endorsed this concept and provided input into the project team's design. Magnets were then printed and provided to each renter-member household.

Challenges

Our experience working with the NGRHC was very positive with relatively few challenges. Our project champion remained accessible and responsive from start to finish. Being able to attend the committee meetings at the beginning of the project allowed us to understand quickly and easily what was of most importance and prepare our scope accordingly.

Regardless, no project would be complete without at least a couple of challenges and although these were relatively minor, they did limit the scope of the project.

Budget + Suppliers

Web design, website upgrades or website changes typically attract a significant cost. So, when the NGRHC specified their budget of approximately \$1500 we knew it would be important to really understand the critical requirements so as not to waste the modest budget available. Unfortunately, there were elements of the project that had to be excluded from the scope simply because the budget did not allow for every item on the wish list to be delivered.

In a perfect world when delivering a project like this from scratch you would generally go out to market to find the most efficient and cost-effective consultant. However, given the timeframe and budget for this project there was no opportunity to test the market. Fortunately, the NGRHC has an existing relationship with a web developer who was more than capable of delivering the required changes/upgrades. Given there was an existing relationship between the two parties time was not wasted on seeking out this service. The incumbent web designer was also able to liaise directly with NGRHC as changes were being made and tested, further saving time.

Ageing Residents/Disadvantaged

NGRHC has a high percentage of ageing renter-members who are, generally speaking, not as confident with the use of technology as the younger generation or rely on older technology/smart phones. It was important to recognise this challenge and consider other ways to communicate. This is where the idea for the magnets stemmed from. Having contact details close at hand which did not require the use of a computer we felt was a really great value add, particularly for those who might find searching for the website, logging into the portal etc quite stressful, and even more so if also being faced with a challenging maintenance issue.

Similarly, there may be renter-members who simply cannot afford a computer, iPad or smart phone and as a result are not able to access information via a web-based platform. Again, having the magnets for these renter-members is vital in ensuring they are not overlooked, and are able to access the contact information when required.

Recommendations

NGRHC identified several enhancements they had intended to bring to the website, only some of which could be achieved within the constraints of this project. The project team have documented suggested approaches to leave with NGRHC for their consideration when future budget allocations allow.

Member Calendar

Through the research undertaken as part of this project, we see an opportunity for the NGRHC to create an online interactive renter-member calendar which can be accessed within the portal. The calendar was part of the initial website wish list created through the member engagement committee meeting. The committee noted the importance of NGRHC being able to control additions to the calendar, to avoid further website adjustment costs. This would allow for upcoming social events to be kept and managed within the website for all renter-members to access. The project team sees this as a beneficial upgrade and would ensure social benefits for all members.

Logo Redesign

Throughout the project, the NGRHC expressed their desire to refresh the organisations current logo. As we have heard first-hand the logo is strongly linked to the vision, mission, goals, identity and history of the organisation, and any redesign would require a very considered approach. Unfortunately, the redesign was not able to be achieved within the given time frame and budget constraints. This would however be a great project moving forward, perhaps for a future Leaders for Geelong cohort.



Recommendations continued

Photo Gallery

It was clear when listening to the needs of the members that there was an appetite for a member only photo gallery space.

Again, this request formed part of the initial website wish list, created through the feedback formed from the member engagement committee. This could again be located behind the member portal to ensure confidentiality of photos, whilst still having social benefits for the members.

The project team believe this could lead to more effective member engagement by having social event photos available for members to access.

For the time being, the Leaders for Geelong project team reiterated to NGRHC that the use of other social media platforms that current members form a part of is a great opportunity for photo and other media sharing ability.

The use of an online social media platform would greatly reduce costs incurred by the Co-op, with minimal administration required, compared to a website listed photo gallery, where constant monitoring is required, as well as an ongoing website fee.



Making the most of
free market-leading
tools rather than
bespoke development

Group Reflection

The Project team are proud to have had the opportunity to work with NGRHC in identifying and implementing some key website enhancements that will improve engagement between staff and members. Our participation in the project has highlighted to us some of the key challenges faced in providing and maintaining low cost, affordable rental housing.

Basic needs (i.e power, heating, water supply) at your home and how we engage support for the maintenance of these basic needs is sometimes taken for granted, especially in rental housing. Members living in the housing provided by NGRHC all come with different life experiences and backgrounds, along with varying degrees of confidence in using technologies to engage support when needed.

The project team were provided examples of renter-member and staff experiences associated with engaging maintenance support and the lengthy delays that resulted in getting those issues resolved. The frustrations felt by renter-members in not being able to maintain basic needs in a household, such as power and heating, would be totally relatable to most people and drove an empathetic approach within our project team. Considering what those delays could mean to those individuals and families waiting

for support, focused our team's efforts to work towards enhancements that would be simple, intuitive, and meet the needs of NGRHC staff and members.

We thank Vicki Ross (CEO and Project Sponsor), Narelle Lorbeer (NGRHC), the member engagement sub committee, and the renter-members for their support and willingness to share their experiences. The insights we gained from their day to day challenges were pivotal in ensuring the enhancements scoped and developed, aligned to their needs.

We hope the website enhancements delivered, and the further upgrade opportunities scoped will provide a platform to continue simplifying communications and engagement between NGRHC and its renter-members into the future.



NGRHC WEBSITE UPGRADE SURVEY

1. Currently, what is the main reason you access the NGRHC website?
2. What do you currently enjoy about the NGRHC website?
3. What would you like to see added to the NGRHC website?
4. What is the most important change you would like to see on the NGRHC website?