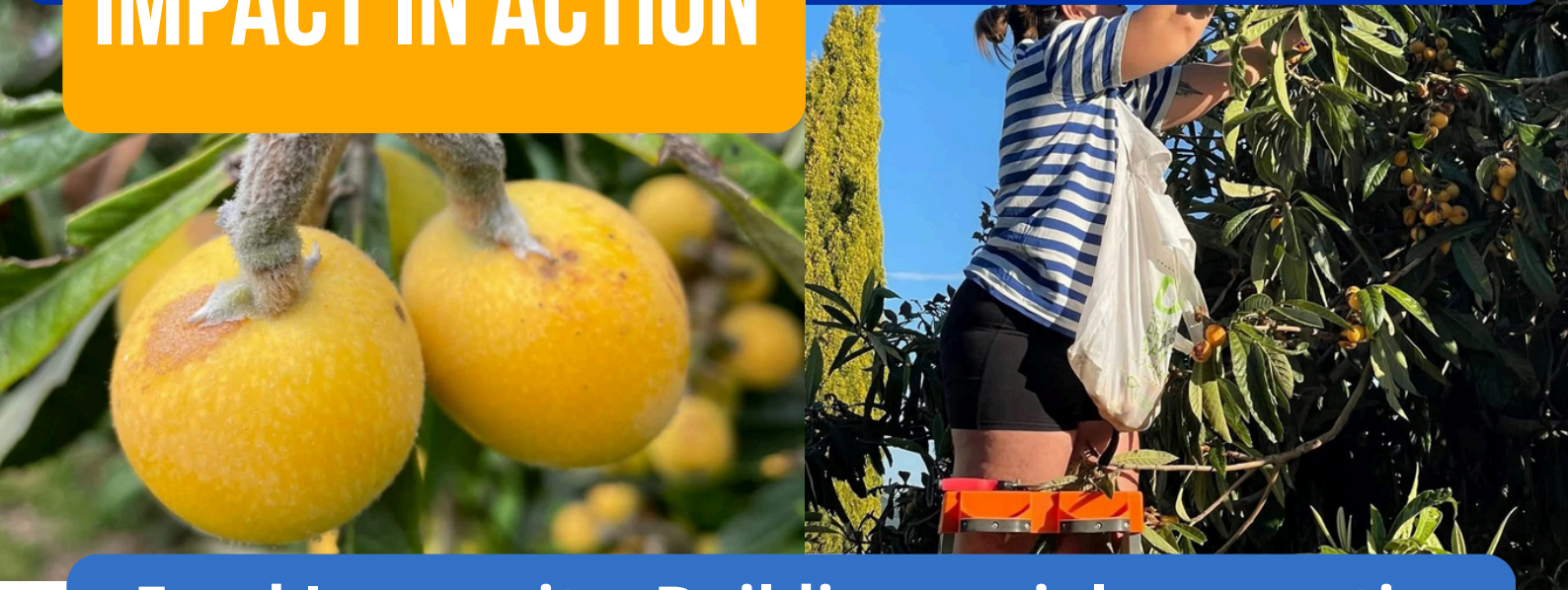


BALLARAT
FOUNDATION

IMPACT IN ACTION



Food Insecurity: Building social connection



65% of emergency food relief participants in Ballarat are chronic users



37% of regional Victoria experienced limited food availability compared to 33% nationally



Key commodity prices have increased by 21% in the last 5 years



12.63% of Ballarat households earn less than \$1,000/week

Across Ballarat and Golden Plains Shire, rising living costs, housing pressures, and financial instability are increasing the number of households experiencing food insecurity. For many families, the challenge is not only affording nutritious food but also accessing support locally and without stigma. In some rural and peri-urban areas, limited transport and the absence of local services further compound vulnerability.

Community organisations are increasingly responding to these pressures through local, volunteer-led initiatives that provide practical support while also strengthening social connection and participation.

Two Ballarat Foundation-supported initiatives, Meredith Mart and The Hidden Orchard, demonstrate how community-led responses can help reduce immediate hardship while creating stronger connections between people, volunteers, and local organisations.

Program response

Meredith Community Centre established the Meredith Mart after recognising that Golden Plains Shire had no structured local food relief service. Prior to the program, families experiencing hardship often needed to travel outside the area for assistance, while others went without support entirely due to transport or financial barriers.

The Meredith Mart now provides accessible local food relief, emergency and seasonal food support, Christmas hampers valued at more than \$400 each, local delivery options for vulnerable households, and a trusted, community-based point of support.

The Hidden Orchard is a volunteer-led initiative that harvests unwanted fruit from private and public land across Ballarat and redistributes it through local food relief organisations. The Foundation grant supported the purchase of safer and more accessible harvesting equipment for the organisation's growing volunteer base. The project strengthened the organisation's ability to safely harvest larger quantities of fruit, involve volunteers of different ages and physical abilities, increase volunteer participation, and redistribute fresh produce to food relief organisations and community food tables.

Needed Relief

For families accessing Meredith Mart, the impact was often immediate and deeply personal. One Christmas hamper recipient shared that the support would make "a HUGE difference to us over Christmas and the New Year." Another parent reflected that they would leave the hamper for their children to unpack because "they will be excited."

While the program primarily addressed immediate food needs, the Meredith Community Centre also observed that the service reduced stress and allowed families to redirect limited finances toward essentials such as rent and utilities.

At The Hidden Orchard, volunteers described the project as being about much more than fruit collection. Harvests became opportunities for teamwork, social interaction, outdoor activity, and community participation. One harvest involving adults and children collected more than 100 kilograms of fruit, with produce redistributed through Ballarat food relief tables and community organisations.

The organisation also noted that improved equipment enabled older volunteers and people with physical limitations to participate more safely and confidently, helping create a more inclusive volunteer environment.

Outcomes

Foundation Outcome 2 - Increased community connection and cohesion

These initiatives most strongly contributed to stronger community connection and participation through increased volunteering, reduced stigma around seeking support, stronger local relationships, and greater inclusion for people experiencing hardship. Both initiatives created trusted local spaces where people could contribute, connect, and support one another.

Foundation Outcome 1- Reduced disadvantage in the Ballarat area

The initiatives also contributed to reducing immediate hardship by improving access to food relief, reducing short-term financial pressure, increasing access for people experiencing transport barriers, and improving the availability of fresh food through community redistribution.

However, the initiatives primarily addressed the symptoms and immediate impacts of food insecurity rather than the underlying structural causes such as income insecurity, housing stress, or unemployment. Their greatest contribution was in helping households manage periods of acute financial strain with dignity and local support.

Foundation Learning

These projects also reinforced an important learning for the Ballarat Foundation. While emergency food relief plays a critical role in helping households manage periods of acute financial stress, the growing demand for these services highlights the increasing complexity and persistence of food insecurity across the region.

As the Foundation's Food Insecurity focus area matures, there is growing recognition that long-term change requires more than access to emergency food alone. Future investment directions are increasingly focused on wraparound and preventative approaches that address the underlying drivers of food insecurity, including financial stress, social isolation, transport barriers, housing instability, skills development, and community participation.

Why This Matters

These stories demonstrate that food insecurity in regional communities is not only a matter of food access, but also of social connection,

dignity, and local support systems. While emergency food relief alone does not solve the structural drivers of disadvantage, community-led initiatives such as Meredith Mart and The Hidden Orchard play an important role in reducing immediate hardship, strengthening local participation and volunteering, creating trusted pathways to support, and building community resilience during periods of economic stress.

By building wraparound services to emergency relief, local organisations can respond quickly and compassionately to emerging community needs but also building the skills and knowledge required to break the cycle of food insecurity across the region.

Photos front and back cover: courtesy of Hidden Orchard



ballaratfoundation.org.au