

Working better together:

# CASE STUDIES

 **GOODWOLF**®

# Case Studies from the Field

Five WISE case studies were selected as part of our [WISE Learn Book](#), to share lessons from critical turning points and strategic challenges. They are diverse in their geography, industry and the cohorts they support.

Case Studies were shared with an openness and generosity that is deeply consistent with WISE leadership. There was an eagerness and willingness to speak honestly and surface the realities of what it really takes to deliver impact alongside a trading business.

These case studies and the accompanying key takeaways act as an opportunity for funders to see the work more clearly, including why WISEs often need ongoing, fit-for-purpose capital to sustain impact. These stories may also support other WISE leaders, with grounded examples that feature how different organisations think, decide, and adapt when facing complexity and innovating within complex systems.



Australian Spatial Analytics

# Dismantle Case Study

With CEO Pat Ryan



**Please note:** at the time of publication, Dismantle had entered a period of carefully planned administration while navigating the complex acquisition of its flagship program, Renew. Further details were not yet available.

## Overview

**This case study examines a period when governance disruption, funding uncertainty and cash flow pressure converged at Dismantle, bringing the organisation close to insolvency. Rather than tracing Dismantle's full history, the case focuses on this moment of pressure —when time and options were limited, leadership and the Board had to make decisions under uncertainty, and philanthropic support played a key role in bridging the transition.**

## Introduction to Dismantle

Dismantle is a Western Australian-based WISE supporting young people facing significant disadvantage through paid employment, training and wrap-around support. Dismantle exists to dismantle entrenched youth disadvantage, where compounding barriers narrow a young person's options long before adulthood.

Trade revenue is generated through social enterprise activities such as ReNew Property Maintenance and BikeRescue, with youth employees embedded directly in service delivery. ReNew Property Maintenance uses employment as the lever for change: providing real, paid work alongside training and wrap-around support that rebuilds stability, confidence, and capability in a structured environment. That support is often deeply practical, helping a young person avoid a custodial outcome, finding a safe bed to sleep in, replacing worn shoes, or teaching basic life skills that were never modelled at home. Their operating model is deeply integrated: young people are not adjacent to the business —they are the business.

Since 2013, Dismantle has supported over 3,000 young people facing significant disadvantage, creating pathways where traditional systems have failed. The social enterprise ReNew Property Maintenance has employed 150 young people, 74% in their first job, and paid \$1.8 million in wages. A \$100,000 seed investment enabled them to grow to \$5.6 million in trade revenue. In 2024, 73% of exiting employees transitioned into further employment, education, or training.

Over more than a decade, Dismantle has grown from a grassroots initiative into a respected WISE employing dozens of young people each year. That growth, however, has not been linear or stable. As Pat Ryan, Dismantle's CEO describes, the organisation has lived through multiple overlapping challenges:

***"If you think about the last two years, there have been at least three different phases of existential threat. Slightly different, but all real."***

## Trigger

Dismantle's crisis was triggered when three shocks hit in quick succession. A prolonged period of Board misalignment diverted leadership time, two anticipated philanthropic partnerships did not eventuate, and a key operating premises was lost. The convergence of these disruptions, each manageable on its own, proved destabilising and led to insolvency concerns.

### Governance Misalignment

Several years ago, Dismantle's Board was misaligned with the strategic direction of the CEO and management, creating profound

uncertainty. It took time to recruit and establish a new, fit-for-purpose board, and during this period the organisation lacked the governance support needed to thrive. As the CEO shared:

***"Time was stolen. Focus was stolen. We were fixing governance instead of taking care of the business."***

By the time a new Board was in place, Dismantle was faced with a further challenge.

### Sudden funding uncertainty

Two major potential philanthropic funders entered strategic reviews and froze their funding pipelines. While Dismantle had not written this income into its budget, it had significantly invested in developing the partnerships.

***"We looked at our cash flow projection about six months ahead and it was very clear: we were facing insolvency."***

Pat is careful to distinguish insolvency from the term financial difficulty.

Dismantle's organisational growth also stalled. Projections of 5–20% annual growth, conservative by Dismantle's historical performance, became unattainable as leadership attention and organisational energy were repeatedly diverted by crisis.

### Loss of premises with limited notice

At the same time, Dismantle lost access to a key operational site with just 60 days' notice, despite believing it had another year remaining. This created immediate logistical disruption, unplanned costs and operational uncertainty.

Individually, none of these events would necessarily have pushed the organisation toward insolvency. Together, they exposed Dismantle's limited financial buffers and created what Pat describes as a "perfect storm".

### Response

With insolvency on the horizon, the Board and leadership made a choice to act early. Dismantle entered Safe Harbour, allowing directors to continue trading while actively pursuing a recovery plan.

The first step in the plan focused on capability building. Dismantle recruited a highly experienced CFO on a consulting basis—an investment that felt counterintuitive during a cash flow crisis but proved essential.

***"The question wasn't 'can we afford it?' It was 'how can we afford not to?'"***

The CFO worked in close partnership with Pat, translating operational and impact realities into legally sound, credible financial strategies.

***"I could tell him stories about the business. He could turn those stories into numbers."***

This allowed Pat to focus on people, values and impact, while ensuring decisions met legal and financial requirements. The financial target was stark: a reduction of approximately \$400,000 per year in wage costs - around 25% of total wages. However, in Dismantle's model, impact and revenue are inseparable as youth employees generate trade income.

***"If we didn't have youth employees, we'd have to employ someone else. The financial benefit was marginal - and the organisational damage: huge."***

Pat identified the greatest risk as atrophy: the slow erosion of morale, trust and purpose. Rather than imposing a final plan, Pat brought an early, imperfect proposal to the management team. What followed was a collaborative redesign of the organisation.

#### Together, the team explored:

- reducing reliance on casual staff
- redeploying full-time staff
- temporary reductions in hours
- reshaping roles to protect core impact
- avoiding redundancies wherever possible

These proposals were then stress-tested by the CFO for compliance and financial viability, resulting in a stronger outcome than the original plan.

Dismantle's approach to philanthropy during the crisis was about building credibility. Leadership worked together to present a clear recovery narrative outlining where the organisation was at, where it was going, and the specific role philanthropic capital could play.

### ***"No one wants to fund a sinking ship."***

Dismantle's experience revealed sharp contrasts in philanthropic behaviour. Some funders withdrew quickly. Others returned later with advice that contradicted earlier positions.

Pat also highlights the power imbalances that can exist between philanthropy and WISEs including the influence funders exert simply by signalling interest. WISEs can be drawn into months or years of substantive conversations about major grants that are later paused or abandoned due to internal strategic reviews.

### ***"Funders need to be aware of the bait and burley they release into the sector."***

By contrast, other funders were acutely aware of the expectations their engagement created and moved quickly to provide clarity on whether support was likely. They put their confidence in Dismantle's model in writing and provided extension funding for a further two years to bridge the transition. Using their influence, they communicated their due diligence processes and belief in what Dismantle was doing, encouraging others to get on board.

Dismantle deliberately shifted their language toward "development" rather than "growth" with a focus on strengthening quality, capability and resilience.

When asked what sustainability would actually look like if external pressures were stripped away, Pat described a model where individual business units operate at around a 5% margin after program costs, contributing to a parent

organisation that is roughly 80% trade-funded and 20% supported through grants and donations, with philanthropic capital focused primarily on development and new initiatives. This highlights that even in an optimal state Dismantle could see an ongoing role for philanthropy to fund development and innovation.

The Dismantle case study also acknowledges the work involved in managing and acquitting philanthropic funding. Despite alignment on youth employment, each funder operated with a different definition of impact, adding to the administrative burden for Dismantle.

***"One funder requested headcount of participants completing at least 8 hours of work, another wanted to know number of roles sustained 3 days per week for 12 months, both different to the Workforce Australia requirements of 6 months at 20 hours per week. Internally, Dismantle tracked a different KPI altogether: gross wages paid to young people."***

Dismantle's experience shows that survival under pressure depends not on a single decision but on governance alignment, financial capability, inclusive leadership and transparent engagement with funders. The organisation did not emerge without scars but it emerged with stronger foundations, a clearer sense of what sustainability entails, and a renewed approach to ensure its future is secured.

## Key learnings from Dismantle case study

### 1. Governance alignment is foundational

Misaligned governance consumes leadership capacity and compounds risk. WISEs need a high functioning Board in order to track multiple priorities, risks and provide clear direction in times of crisis.

#### Funder implication:

Board capability and CEO–Board alignment are worthy areas for philanthropic investment.

### 2. Invest in internal financial capability

Investing in senior financial expertise early can be the difference between recovery and collapse. In Dismantle’s case, investing in a qualified CFO was essential.

#### Funder implication:

Funding financial capability is an important step in a WISE’s maturation and journey. A competent and capable CFO can change the trajectory of a WISE in crisis and support the CEO or Founder to ensure their plans are robust.

### 3. Philanthropy can support WISE leaders to manage fatigue and burnout

Pat reflects that each crisis took more from leadership than the last, and the cycle of exhaustion and burnout is recurring in WISEs. Fatigue accumulates most acutely at the leadership level, where responsibility for the WISE vision, legal and risk implications, wellbeing, and organisational survival sits simultaneously:

*“The energy I had to contribute was less than the crisis before. This time, even less again.”*

#### Funder implication:

WISE leadership carries a unique and cumulative load. Each crisis draws down a finite reserve of energy, judgement and emotional capacity, which over time can become a risk to organisational stability.

In practice, funders can reduce burnout risk by investing in trusted supports that reduce isolation and strengthen decision-making under pressure (e.g. coaching, CFO support, leadership development, enhancing the management team, executive backfill), and by designing funding that creates breathing room and support for the CEO/ Founder to lead effectively.

### 4. Trust-based or partner-centred practices require practical actions

#### Funder implication:

#### Early clarity on funding relationships:

Funders should move quickly to clarify whether support is likely so WISE leaders can prioritise time and energy.

**Simplified, aligned reporting:** WISEs and funders should align to a small set of shared metrics wherever possible, including existing organisational KPIs, to avoid bespoke reporting frameworks that create administrative burden.

**Be clear about the boundaries of the funding relationship:** Funders should be explicit about what happens if conditions change, including how decisions will be communicated and how exits will be handled. Avoid withdrawing abruptly without clarity and use influence such as written endorsements or signalling confidence to peers when due diligence supports it.

# Free to Feed Case Study

With Board Chair Rosanne Hyland and Founder Loretta Bolotin

Free  
to  
Feed

## Overview

**For this case study, we interviewed Rosanne Hyland, who chaired Free to Feed during its final nine months. Rosanne reflects on governance, financial risk, and the decision-making thresholds that shaped the organisation's final period. We also draw on Founder Loretta Bolotin's perspective from earlier phases of the social enterprise to provide a longer-term lens on the structural challenges navigated over time.**

## Introduction to Free to Feed

Melbourne-based social enterprise Free to Feed began as a simple idea: that food could be a powerful way to create work, connection, and belonging for refugees and people seeking asylum rebuilding their lives in a new country.

Over ten years, Free to Feed delivered community cooking experiences, shared feasts and events while supporting hundreds of people from refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds into paid employment and community.

Along the way, Free to Feed generated \$3 million in wages for employees and facilitated thousands of community connections, bringing people of different cultures, faiths, and perspectives together.

*"We never set out to create employment, but we enjoyed putting our participants in a position where they could influence, lead and share their culture and story and earn the dignity of a paid wage in recognition of the beautiful contributions they were making and the talents they shared." - Loretta Bolotin*

The employment model was primarily transitional, with refugees and people seeking asylum employed as Cooking Instructors in Free to Feed's cooking school. Free to Feed also provided opportunities for ongoing employment, prioritising lived experience in the core team.

*"To be honest we never set out to be a WISE. We didn't even know the term WISE until the Westpac Foundation introduced it to us in 2020. The label came later and while it provided some clarity, we were concerned that it pigeon-holed or reduced our impact to being about jobs when our impact driver was social connection." - Loretta Bolotin*

## Trigger

Free to Feed's challenges did not emerge suddenly. They accumulated over time. For Free to Feed, sustainability was constrained by a familiar WISE tension: wages and impact costs exceeded its total trading revenue.

From the Founder's perspective, the organisation carried a set of non-negotiable ethical commitments that shaped everyday decisions. In hospitality, when ticket sales drop or demand softens, a commercial response might be to cancel shifts or reduce staffing. At Free to Feed, that choice conflicted with the organisation's mission. Many participants relied on shifts as their primary income, often without access to welfare or savings. Cancelling work had immediate and serious consequences. Maintaining income stability for participants often meant absorbing short-term losses.

The costs of Free to Feed's inclusive employment model included participant training time, supervisory load, cultural safety, translation support, trauma-informed management, and program and head-office staff carrying out impact delivery. This is the work of a WISE.

*"I see impact costs in the many daily micro-decisions that distinguish a WISE from a purely commercial business. For us, maintaining the integrity of impact meant keeping participants, not profit, at the forefront of every decision. Decisions that were commercially rational were often not trauma-informed and not aligned with the values embedded in our program design. Over time, absorbing those decisions came at a real cost. At scale, those costs added up to become a substantial and ongoing financial burden. These costs cannot be recouped through trade alone. It requires sustained funding support to uphold the values at the heart of a WISE." - Loretta Bolotin*

From the Chair's perspective, several moments mattered. One decision significantly narrowed the organisation's room to manoeuvre. During a period of strong post-COVID trading, Free to Feed renewed a commercial lease for its Clifton Hill venue. At the time, the dominant perceived risk was landlord-initiated demolition. However, another worst case scenario was not stress tested: a significant downturn in trade and funding.

***“We did not at any point acknowledge if trade and funding changed dramatically that we will be encumbered with this lease for three years and it is very expensive - \$120K annually before we turn the lights on.”***

- Rosanne Hyland

When conditions shifted, that fixed rental commitment became a critical constraint. What had felt manageable during a surge became a heavy, inflexible burden once volatility returned.

The final trigger that led to the closure of the organisation was the shock of three anticipated funding outcomes not materialising within a matter of days. One had been expected and two others were uncertain, but all were significant and critical at that point in time. Without a financial buffer, the organisation was forced into accelerated decision-making under pressure, ultimately leading the Board to decide to cease operations.

## What this revealed

Free to Feed's experience highlights the true cost of trauma-informed, culturally safe inclusive employment. The organisation invested in the conditions that made work viable and dignified for people rebuilding their lives, including minimum weekly hours, additional wage stability during quiet periods, translation support, culturally safe supervision, and community-building events that supported belonging and lifelong community connections.

Even as the organisation matured, trade alone could not reliably cover true costs, even in strong years.

***“We couldn't design programs without acknowledging participants' financial realities. The wages or stipend weren't a 'nice to have' they were the cost of placing newly arrived refugees and people seeking asylum at the centre of decision making. But those costs couldn't be recovered through trade, leaving the program and organisation heavily dependent on philanthropy.”*** – Loretta Bolotin

Free to Feed's model evolved across multiple revenue streams. It began with public and corporate cooking experiences and later added catering and events, including taking on a significant lease and fit-out to expand trading capability. In practice, these operated as distinct business units. Catering could scale as a quality hospitality operation, employing people across kitchen and front of house roles. Cooking experiences were high-touch and facilitation-heavy, requiring specialised support to enable participants to lead, share culture and lived experience, and maintain safety, privacy, and consent.

As the organisation grew, the need for increased financial oversight became more acute. An external CFO provided financial oversight and modelling, reporting monthly to the board. However, in-house capability may have supported further analysis, closer cash flow vigilance and identified opportunities to strengthen profitability on the existing cost base. Free to Feed's experience highlights the value of having finance capability embedded within the organisation, particularly through volatility, when decisions need to be made quickly and with confidence.

***“You need a CFO with a seat at the table.***

***Someone who can wrestle constructively with impact leadership so you can hold the line on support and still make decisions that keep the enterprise viable. It's also about being able to model the next steps quickly when things aren't going well.”*** -Loretta Bolotin

Free to Feed operated in hospitality, a sector where demand fluctuates, margins are thin, and costs rise quickly. In that context, a WISE is constantly managing a three-way tension: commercial viability, employment stability, and impact integrity.

From the Chair's perspective, one of the most important strategic disciplines was not simply generating 'more revenue'; it was about deeply understanding profitability.

***“The financial advice that we were getting was far too focused on chasing revenue and not focused on profitability. We were working really hard to lose more money. That's just ridiculous.”*** - Rosanne Hyland

If trade is intended to subsidise impact, then the commercial activities need to generate a surplus. Otherwise, as with Free to Feed, an organisation accumulates fatigue, complexity, and risk.

A WISE, like many businesses, needs to be able to flex variable costs, such as staffing, in response to downturns. A commercial lease is far harder to unwind. Rosanne's reflection is that Boards need to stress test downside scenarios properly, especially in volatile markets. This is not just about having a risk register; it is about selecting the right risks.

Faced with limited options, Rosanne described a clear threshold guiding the Board's decision-making:

***“Making sure that we were making a decision while we still had the resources to pay all of those accruals for the staff. That was the line in the sand.”*** - Rosanne Hyland

Prior to closure, Free to Feed's board and leadership made a series of significant strategic decisions that reshaped the operating model. Exiting the lease and closing the venue and catering operations reduced financial exposure but also fundamentally shifted the organisation's revenue mix and the role philanthropy was being asked to play. The resulting model was a much smaller charitable social enterprise. As the enterprise engine scaled back, external conversations moved quickly from vision and value to survival and urgency. This can be a difficult shift for philanthropy to respond to, particularly in a competitive funding environment and during CEO succession, when confidence, clarity and continuity are under heightened scrutiny.

***“While I was not seated at the table at the time, I do think it's a significant transformation to change the revenue model. It changes identity. Suddenly the message becomes 'we need funding to survive'. Crisis conversations don't usually end well, especially if the organisation is reshaping its model in a very competitive funding environment alongside a leadership succession.”*** - Loretta Bolotin

## Key learnings from Free to Feed case study

### 1. Fund impact costs

Impact delivery requires ongoing investment in supervision, training, stability, and culturally safe practice. Treat these as essential WISE operating inputs, not an overhead to be minimised or a short-term gap that can be funded through trade alone.

#### Funder implication:

Multi-year funding for impact delivery costs, and willingness to fund core roles make a big difference for WISEs.

### 2. Encourage scenario planning

Boards and Founders/CEOs need support to build their financial acumen, especially when the organisation runs multiple business units with different risk profiles.

#### Funder implication:

Contribute to CFO capability, financial modelling, and stress-testing. Use those outputs to shape realistic funding structures.

### 3. Categorising, measuring and understanding Impact

Free to Feed had a powerful impact story centred on facilitating social connection, evidenced through employee and community testimonials. However, as is often the case, evidence-building lagged behind delivery

where it was not explicitly funded and prioritised. When Free to Feed adopted the WISE label its focus shifted toward employment metrics, with less attention given to measuring its broader impact on addressing social isolation.

This highlights a broader risk: when organisations are narrowly defined (for example, solely as a WISE) it can unintentionally shape who sees themselves as a relevant funder and what kinds of outcomes are considered “core”. In doing so, important dimensions of impact may be overlooked and under-measured, even when they sit at the heart of the organisation’s purpose.

#### Funder Implication:

Support WISEs to build their evaluation and data capability early to capture the range of both employment and broader social outcomes.

### 4. Talk about challenges before the cliff edge

Across many WISE journeys, funding conversations become hardest when an organisation is already in visible distress. Once the narrative shifts from impact and future potential to urgency and survival, it can be harder for philanthropy to respond with confidence, even when the organisation has a strong track record. For WISE leaders, this highlights the importance of raising risks early,

seeking support before options narrow, and framing the ask around stabilisation, transition or resilience rather than last-minute rescue. For funders, it suggests a need to recognise distress not only as a sign of weakness, but often as the result of accumulated structural pressure in complex and volatile operating environments.

#### Funder implication:

Create the conditions for early candour. WISE leaders need relationships where they can raise risks and emerging pressure points before crisis becomes the only story. This requires signalling that honesty will not damage trust and that challenges, missteps and course corrections are a normal part of the journey.

Pairing this trust with flexible forms of support —such as bridge funding, transition funding, core funding or strategic and financial assistance —can enable organisations to respond early, before pressures escalate into existential threats.



# Green Collect Case Study

With Founder and CEO Sally Quinn

## Introduction to Green Collect

**Established in 2005, Green Collect is a Melbourne-based WISE and circular economy leader. It creates secure and meaningful employment for people facing complex barriers to work, while delivering inclusive and sustainable solutions for businesses, households and individuals. Operating across retail, logistics and waste diversion, Green Collect combines environmental outcomes with inclusive employment. It diverts office items and furniture, plus a wide range of household goods, out of landfill through reuse, repair, re-manufacture and recycling. In doing so, the organisation works towards a world where all people and resources are valued, generating social value through jobs, training and supported employment pathways.**

In FY2025, Green Collect worked with 222 businesses, saved 410 tonnes from landfill, and recirculated 87,000 items. It directly supported 59 people from priority cohorts through paid work and training, including refugees, young people at risk, and people facing complex barriers due to health and social disadvantage.

## Trigger

Following several years of consistent growth, Green Collect strategically opted to expand its operations by entering the container deposit scheme market through a new business initiative. The venture required significant upfront investment.

Despite extensive due diligence, the venture performed worse than the worst-case scenario they had modelled. The underperformance placed immediate strain on cash flow, cost structures, and organisational resilience.

## What this exposed

Green Collect's goal was for its social and environmental ambition to grow alongside the business. More trade would mean increased

circular economy outcomes for resources and more inclusive jobs. They were in a strong financial position and on a path to financial sustainability.

***"We were covering about 90 per cent of our operating costs through trading. It probably got up to about 93 per cent, and we thought we were really going to crack sustainability."***

The organisation's sites were busy, demand was strong, and the team felt bursting at the seams. Through a partnership with White Box Enterprises, Green Collect leased a new property, a move that felt necessary to relieve pressure and pave the way for their growth ambition.

Green Collect made a strategic decision to enter the container deposit scheme market, creating a new (but related) business unit. The opportunity aligned strongly with its environmental mission and promised scale.

***"Within three years, we wanted to double our trading income and double jobs and employment."***

However, despite extensive due diligence on the container deposit scheme business, the commercial returns failed to materialise. The new business unit required significant

upfront investment and when the trade income did not meet forecasts, Green Collect had very little time or cash reserves to absorb the cost of underperformance.

The new business did not have its own legal entity, so the failure did not sit neatly outside the core organisation. Instead, it exposed Green Collect to significant financial risk.

***"It wasn't as simple as closing the new entity down," Sally reflects. "Our core organisation was suddenly at major risk."***

This experience surfaced an enormous learning for Green Collect. Growth projections based on external data, particularly data that is not grounded in local operating conditions, can carry significant risk. In this case, the modelling assumed a smoother trajectory, yet volatility and underperformance occurred.

Green Collect's experience echoed a pattern in the broader sector with WISEs investing in an organisation's infrastructure to meet a projected growth curve only to find that reality does not follow the model.

***“You can have the projections, but if the growth doesn’t play out the way you expect, everything underneath it becomes exposed.”***

In hindsight, Green Collect cautions other WISEs to approach growth with far greater conservatism. More modest assumptions, stronger separation of risk, and modelling grounded in local data may have mitigated the risks in the expansion.

Green Collect’s experience of philanthropic support during this period was mixed. Sally had established long standing relationships with her funders so she could share the organisation’s journey as it unfolded. Funders offered clarity, including setting clear boundaries about how they would support Green Collect during the crisis, even when they were not in a position to provide grant funding.

## Response

As financial pressure intensified, Green Collect’s Board developed a plan to manage risks and stabilise the enterprise. This included reaching out to trusted funding partners and intermediaries to help resource the plan. While the enterprise had grant funding and purchase orders for large jobs in the short term, it needed immediate cash flow support.

***“After weeks of open conversations with funders and key stakeholders, it became clear that help was not coming from external sources. There was no appetite for***

***emergency funding or loans to help see the enterprise through this crisis, despite a strong track record, a robust plan, future funding and trading sources.”***

Instead of calling for emergency funding, the organisation accepted that survival depended on acting quickly and decisively. This included exiting the container deposit scheme venture and turning inward to identify ways to reduce costs. The pivot was funded through small patient loans from long-term supporters and friends.

Sally deliberately shifted focus from external growth to internal stability, staff wellbeing and organisational coherence. While workforce capacity was reduced by 50%, priority was given to supporting cohort staff with reduced hours.

The process was painful but intentional. Roles were clarified, operations simplified and expectations reset. While capacity was reduced, complexity was also stripped away.

Sally describes the team uniting around a shared purpose during this period, including lived-experience staff, even as the organisation contracted. She is candid about the toll this period took on the team.

***“This stuff accumulates. You don’t reset to zero after a crisis like this.”***

Fortuitous timing meant that during this process Sally participated in a leadership course that focused on personal resilience and regeneration. She describes this investment, made possible through philanthropic support, as essential.

***“It made me a more resilient leader, and gave me the tools I needed to remain focussed and well in the face of huge challenges. I felt very aware of the need for me to keep my head above water at times when it felt like if I went under, so would the whole enterprise - risking decades of work, but more importantly than that, people’s livelihoods.”***

In addition to restructuring its business and operating model, Green Collect refined its social impact framework and employment model. The organisation now applies a deliberate hybrid approach that balances its existing longer-term employment opportunities with structured short-term programs. For example, they now offer six-to-twelve-month contracts that allow people to build skills, try new types of work and move on when they are ready. Every employee has an individual learning and development plan, recognising that for some people a short intervention can be just as impactful as long-term employment. This has enabled the enterprise to more closely align its mission with business demand and reduce the tension that can often exist between business and social outcomes in WISE models.

The organisation works closely with specialist partners (including refugee employment services) to support transitions into ongoing roles in the open labour market where appropriate. This approach allows Green Collect

to create greater outcomes over time while remaining sustainable. The organisation’s goal is to create approximately 20 new job opportunities each year, drawing on a blended cohort that includes young people, refugees, and people experiencing long-term unemployment. This is in addition to its lived-experience staff who make up approximately 60% of its permanent workforce of 70.

The organisation is more stable now, more focused and aware of its limits. The journey involved major loss, but it also delivered clarity. Green Collect emerged with a stronger internal culture and a more sustainable operating model.

***“You have to know what kind of organisation you are, and build from there.”***

## Key learnings from Green Collect case study

### 1. Consider the best entity structure to limit exposure

New ventures can unintentionally put the core mission and employment model at risk if financial, legal, and operational exposure is not considered. If the venture underperforms, losses can cascade into the core organisation.

#### Funder implication:

WISEs need support to design growth pathways and access the right legal support to protect the core organisation, particularly when piloting new commercial ventures.

### 2. Model growth projections conservatively and build buffers

WISE forecasts can unintentionally overstate demand and underplay local volatility or fail to plan for possible market disruptions.

#### Funder implication:

Encourage realism while also recognising that what makes WISEs unique is their ability to think outside the box with innovation and spirited entrepreneurialism. Support conservative assumptions, working capital buffers, and staged growth plans with clear decision points to sit alongside more ambitious projections.

### 3. Sustainability is not a fixed percentage of trading revenue

Green Collect's experience challenges assumptions around the path to sustainability. At different points in the organisation's history, it has covered between 68% and over 90% of its total costs through trade. These shifts reflected market conditions, restructuring decisions and deliberate investment in people and growth.

#### Funder implication:

There is no one-size-fits-all model of financial sustainability for WISEs. Focus on financial resilience more than static ratios reflecting trading income.

### 4. Philanthropy can support leader wellbeing

One of Green Collect's learnings is that organisational sustainability is inseparable from leadership wellbeing. Repeated crises, restructures and periods of uncertainty place cumulative strain on leaders, particularly founders.

#### Funder Implication:

Philanthropy can provide support for WISE leadership sustainability and resilience through investments in the individual leader, coaching, peer support initiatives.

### 5. Testing and failing is part of the work

WISEs need the freedom to experiment, because they are tackling complex problems in messy, real-world markets. Even with strong planning and due diligence, not every venture will succeed, and some failures only become visible once a model meets local conditions.

#### Funder implication:

Funders can explicitly resource responsible experimentation and pivots by underwriting learning and iteration, not only 'successful' outcomes. This can include dedicated innovation funding, clear parameters for acceptable risk, staged grants linked to decision points, and support for evaluation and reflection so that failures generate usable learning for the organisation and the field.



# Australian Spatial Analytics Case Study

With CEO Geoff Smith



## Overview

**This case study examines what happens when a high-performing WISE experiences commercial shock - and what that moment reveals about their employment model, growth strategy and the role of philanthropy in funding scale.**

## Introduction to Australian Spatial Analytics

Australian Spatial Analytics (ASA) is a WISE that creates award wage employment for neurodivergent people as junior data analysts. Their vision is to build a data economy that values and employs diversity, delivers geospatial, digital engineering and data management services to government and commercial clients across Australia.

Founded in 2020, ASA was established in response to persistently high rates of autistic unemployment and the growing demand for

data and digital skills in the Australian economy. Its purpose is to increase workforce participation of neurodivergent people while building a generation of skilled data professionals.

Since its establishment, ASA has built a strong reputation for quality and impact. By 2025, the organisation had supported more than 220 neurodivergent people into paid employment, paid over \$12.5 million in wages, delivered more than \$16 million in data services, and supported dozens of transitions into mainstream careers with \$12.5M in wages paid to people with a disability.

## Trigger

ASA lost two major commercial clients almost overnight. Revenue was effectively halved, exposing the organisation to immediate financial risk and forcing rapid decision making. The loss of these contracts also led to a significant reduction in staff.

## What this exposed

For CEO Geoff Smith, the core issue was not simply the loss of work for ASA. What concerned him was what it revealed about the organisation's underlying structure, particularly the way its employment model had evolved during a period of sustained growth.

ASA had invested heavily in creating a neuro-inclusive workplace. Extensive internal wrap-around supports helped employees succeed in professional work environments and prepared them for transitions into mainstream employment. Over time, this approach worked, but the focus on a supportive environment also reduced transition momentum.

***"We had all the supports in place to promote neuro-inclusion but it meant that most of our team didn't want to move on. And so we became effectively an award wage sheltered workplace, and we had the comfort of having revenue growth to be able to cover that."***

This tension was sharpened when Fair Work introduced casual employee conversion provisions that enabled staff working regular hours to request permanent roles. ASA moved quickly to mitigate risk and comply with the new policy by offering casual employees permanent positions.

***"We went from about 20 per cent of our cohort being permanent to 85 per cent. And that was a mistake in hindsight."***

ASA's work is inherently project based and uneven. When revenue dropped, the workforce could not scale back in line with demand. This created significant liabilities, including redundancy costs and operational constraints.

***"We had employees who were permanent whose hours couldn't scale or reduce according to the available work."***

## Response

ASA responded by redesigning how employability and transitions were delivered so that impact remained central, while the operating model stayed commercially viable.

They engaged an external recruitment business with deep expertise in neurodiversity coaching and workforce transition. This external advice was key to ASA's recovery and ability to deliver on government employment outcomes programs, now a core part of their revenue mix. Through their redesign, ASA was able to identify that their workforce transition was valued by government and would unlock significant funding. This encouraged Geoff to focus on integrating this approach into their revenue strategy.

The redesign of their employment model also clarified accountability. The transition of employees became an active outcome rather than an aspiration. Impact was measured not only by how well neurodiverse young people were supported within ASA, but by how effectively they moved into mainstream employment when they were ready.

This period of significant change also prompted reflection on their growth strategy. Backed by a significant funder, ASA had expanded rapidly into multiple locations across Australia. In hindsight, Geoff reflects that this expansion prioritised geographic footprint over incremental, contract-led growth.

***“We put the cart before the horse. We should have been growing from Brisbane and metro Melbourne, expanding where demand already existed, rather than opening offices and hoping the work would follow.”***

The lesson was not that growth funding was wrong or that the impact achieved was not valuable. Rather, it highlighted how philanthropic incentives can sometimes encourage scale that increases fixed costs before commercial foundations are secure. Geoff shares that he would be open to geographic expansion in the future if it was in response to a commercial contract.

Today, ASA operates at a lower level of trade income than previously, approximately \$3.8 million in trade annually compared to the previous \$7 million, yet ASA is in a stronger financial position.

Costs have been reduced, the sales function has been streamlined, operational productivity has improved, and the ‘lumpiness’ of work has been better managed through service diversification. ASA's employment pathways are now directly linked to government contracts that fund transition outcomes. For ASA, federal government programs also play a major role in their revenue diversification strategy. Given the uncertainty of philanthropy, Geoff sees a clear role for the government outcomes-based funding to support WISEs going forward.

Geoff also notes that ASA now utilises a hybrid employment model, combining transitional employment with permanent employment

through internal progression opportunities. However, many funders tend to prioritise transitional models where an employee exits over internal promotion, leaving significant skill development and career progression invisible.

***“This is the most sustainable we've been in our existence - not because the organisation is bigger, but because it is clearer about its employment model, its limits and its core purpose.”***

For ASA, philanthropy offered more than funding. It also generated reputational capital. Geoff reflected that early philanthropic support signalled credibility at a formative stage of growth. Being able to point to trusted backers strengthened ASA's position in client pitch decks and external negotiations, including commercial opportunities. In Geoff's view, this association helped reduce the perceived risk of engaging a relatively young social enterprise. As he put it, “no one wants to be first”. For WISEs this kind of endorsement can play a critical role in opening doors, building trust and unlocking opportunities that extend well beyond the direct value of the grant.

## Key learnings from Australian Spatial Analytics case study

### 1. Sustainability depends on a clear relationship between the impact and business model

When ASA's revenue dropped suddenly, the organisation's underlying assumptions were exposed. A workforce with a high number of permanent employees in a project-based business, was not sufficiently flexible when there was a downturn in demand.

#### Funder implication:

WISE funding should explicitly interrogate whether employment models can flex with revenue volatility. Models that work in growth phases may fail in later stages unless adaptability is designed in from the outset.

### 2. There is no single "right" WISE model - hybridity is legitimate

ASA invested heavily in creating a neuro-inclusive workplace. While this enabled people to succeed, it unintentionally reduced transition momentum. Employees stayed longer than the model intended. ASA now operates a hybrid model, combining transitional employment with internal promotion. This has strengthened sustainability, talent retention, and skill depth.

#### Funder implication:

Funders should recognise the hybridity of WISEs and value jobs created and retained within the WISE as well as transitions to mainstream employment.

### 3. Clarity of growth ambitions and robust modelling should precede expansion

Growth capital enabled ASA to expand across multiple geographies. In hindsight, this prioritised footprint before there was clear demand, increasing fixed costs before revenue was secure. When trade contracted, those costs became liabilities.

#### Funder implication:

Funders play a powerful role in influencing scaling strategies and can support WISEs to align funding with the most appropriate and sustainable long-term strategy for their impact and business model.

### 4. Philanthropy shapes behaviour - whether intentionally or not

ASA's experience shows how funding can encourage organisations to:

- expand geographically before commercial foundations are secure
- stretch beyond their core cohort to meet misaligned expectations

Sustainability ultimately depended on ASA holding a clear line around its core purpose and ensuring funding matched their business and impact goals.

#### Funder implication:

Trust based approaches in funding relationships are essential. Funders have an opportunity to not only back ambition, but to support disciplined decision-making and strategic capacity building alongside their funding.

### 5. Role of government in WISE sustainability

Over time, ASA has reduced reliance on philanthropy by integrating government outcomes funding into its diverse revenue mix.

#### Funder implication:

For many WISEs, long-term sustainability will require government funding or subsidy to support and pay for outcomes. Philanthropy can play a central role in advocating for government support.

### 6. Reputational capital is valuable to WISEs

Philanthropy played multiple roles throughout ASA's journey. Early funding from well-known foundations was catalytic, not only in financial terms but in the reputational capital it conferred.

*"Being associated with those funders mattered. It gave us credibility in pitch decks, in conversations with clients, even in negotiations like rent."*

#### Funder Implication:

For many WISEs, reputational capital and endorsement from philanthropic funders can unlock additional opportunities and is highly valued by WISEs.

