

Strong Communities: Ways Forward

**A Report to
The Hon John Thwaites
Minister for Victorian Communities**

**Prepared by
The Ministerial Advisory Committee
for Victorian Communities**

August 2006

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Foreword

The Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities acknowledges the commitment, leadership and sustained effort of The Hon John Thwaites, Deputy Premier and Minister for Victorian Communities to make community strengthening an integral part of making Victoria fairer.

This report, *Strong Communities: Ways Forward* responds to his request for the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities to advise him on:

Successful initiatives in community building including volunteering; what works, what are the barriers to success and the lessons that can be applied across projects.

Victoria has a long history of working with communities as far back as the 1970s with initiatives such as Neighbourhood Houses, Disadvantaged Schools and the Australian Assistance Plan. Community Health Centres, Landcare, Rural Employment Victoria and the Rural Women's Network are some important legacies of the 1980s. After the competitive model of the 1990s, the Victorian Labor Government began to investigate a new approach to community strengthening when it set up 10 place-based demonstration projects. In 2001 *Growing Victoria Together* was released. Following this, the Department for Victorian Communities was created and is providing an important focus for community strengthening both across departments and within its own programs. In 2005 the Victorian Government released its social policy statement and program, *A Fairer Victoria: Creating Opportunity and Addressing Disadvantage*. When the report was released the Minister for Victorian Communities, the Hon John Thwaites, said

"The success of these initiatives will depend, in large measure, on the success of community strengthening initiatives and the ability of levels of government, both state and local, to work together in flexible ways to deliver both improved services and better outcomes."

At his recent release of *A Fairer Victoria: Progress and Next Steps* (2006), Minister Thwaites reiterated this view and emphasised the importance of supporting communities to make decisions about their own futures.

The Committee's report uses Professor Mark Considine's definition of community strengthening:

“Any sustained effort to increase connectedness, active engagement and partnerships among members of the community, community groups and organisations in order to enhance social, economic and environmental objectives” (LGV, 2004a).

In developing its recommendations, the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities has drawn on;

- *A Fairer Victoria (2005).*
- Site visits to all regions and a wealth of community strengthening initiatives.
- Departmental programs and practice.
- Community strengthening initiatives, both international and national.

The Committee’s consultation included:

- State Government departments, particularly the Department for Victorian Communities and Neighbourhood Renewal in the Office of Housing.
- Local government, including the Municipal Association of Victoria, Victorian Local Governance Association and a range of local councils.
- Business and leading practitioners in community and tertiary organisations; and
- Most importantly, people living in their communities and working to strengthen them, often as volunteers.

The Committee doesn’t pretend to have all the answers, but we are confident that our suggestions for the future, reflect what people in local communities want. Communities have made it clear that they welcome the Government’s community strengthening initiatives. They want all sectors to work collaboratively with them to build on those initiatives in ways that value, respect and support their contribution.

Over the last four years government departments, communities, local government, the non-government, philanthropic and business sectors have made a significant policy commitment to and investment in community strengthening. Many of these initiatives have been successful in improving people’s lives and can be built upon. There is now a great opportunity for community strengthening to move from a project to a systemic approach. This requires all government departments to work together to implement community strengthening policy. This will further empower communities and reform the way all sectors operate with the community and each other. It will also better integrate the resources available for community strengthening at the state, regional and local level.

This report to the Minister builds on what has been successful in community strengthening. Initially it focussed on the Department for Victorian Communities, but as our consultations and deliberations progressed it became clear that the view from the community involves all government departments, local government and the non-government, philanthropic and business sectors. It is from this broader perspective that the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities has made an assessment about what can be built on and what needs to change in community strengthening.

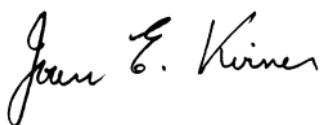
The Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities thanks all those people who shared their wisdom, commitment and stories of successful community strengthening. We thank the Departmental Secretary, Mr Yehudi Blacher and staff in the Department for Victorian Communities who provided direct advice and support to the Committee. In particular we thank Charles Lane, David Adams, Damian Ferrie, Local Teams and our immediate support team, Gina Hanson and Justin Kennedy. We also thank staff from other departments, particularly Neighbourhood Renewal, in the Office of Housing.

The members of the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities have brought significant and diverse community strengthening experience to the writing of this Report. Their experience reflects the diversity of community strengthening: rural, regional and urban; Indigenous; culturally and linguistically diverse communities; disability communities; rural women; community and business organisations; local government and the non-government sector. These members have contributed to and endorsed this Report.

It has been inspiring to have met and worked with so many people who share the same vision of community strengthening as the residents participating in Wendouree West Neighbourhood Renewal.

"We are building a community we want to be part of, be proud in and where we have a say in defining our future."

We trust that the *Strong Communities: Ways Forward* report by the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities will contribute to making this vision a reality across Victoria.



The Hon Joan Kirner
Former Premier of Victoria and
Chair, Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities

Executive Summary

This report, *Strong Communities: Ways Forward* responds to the request by the Minister for Victorian Communities, The Hon John Thwaites for the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities to advise him on:

Successful initiatives in community building including volunteering; what works, what are the barriers to success and the lessons that can be applied across projects.

This report describes the origins and subsequent development of the Victorian Government's community strengthening initiatives that are an integral part of *A Fairer Victoria* (2005). It outlines the visits to communities and the consultation undertaken by the Committee, examines success and the barriers to success in the current community strengthening provision, identifies outcomes and learnings that have emerged from its inception and makes recommendations for future actions based on these learnings.

Victoria has a long history of working with communities as far back as the 1970s with initiatives such as Neighbourhood Houses, Disadvantaged Schools, and Affirmative Action Plans. Community Health Centres, Landcare, the Rural Women's Network and Rural Employment Victoria were important legacies of the 1980s. After the competitive model of the 1990s, Victoria began to investigate a new approach to community intervention in 1999 when the Department of Premier and Cabinet set up 10 place-based demonstration projects.

In 2001 the Victorian Government released *Growing Victoria Together* its vision for the following 10 years. The Department for Victorian Communities was created in 2002 by amalgamating a broad range of government portfolios that were previously based either in central government or line departments. During this time community strengthening initiatives began to emerge, aided by the Community Support Fund, and some place-based initiatives like the Community Capacity Building Initiative were established.

In 2005 the Victorian Government released *A Fairer Victoria: Creating Opportunity and Addressing Disadvantage*. This social policy strategy has four elements:

- A renewed emphasis on prevention and early intervention; for example, increased availability of kindergarten services in disadvantaged areas to make sure children have the best chance of success once they go to school.

- Linking infrastructure development with social development, as implemented in the Neighbourhood Renewal program.
- Improving access to decision making for people in disadvantaged areas and seeing people's ability to have control over their own lives as an essential element of improving services and communities.
- Changing the way government works by cutting red tape, offering better coordination and working more closely with local people and, essentially, with local government.

A Fairer Victoria (2005) outlines five major types of initiatives:

- Ensuring that universal services provide equal opportunity for all.
- Reducing barriers to opportunity.
- Strengthening assistance to disadvantaged groups.
- Providing targeted support to highest risk areas.
- Involving communities in decisions that affect their lives and making it easier to work with Government.

When the Hon John Thwaites, Minister for Victorian Communities, launched *A Fairer Victoria* he emphasised that:

"The success of these initiatives will depend, in large measure, on the success of community strengthening initiatives and the ability of levels of government, both state and local, to work together in flexible ways to deliver both improved services and better outcomes."

The Secretary of DVC, Mr Yehudi Blacher, has identified some of the systemic changes proposed by the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) to deliver effective community strengthening in Victoria. In a speech to the United Nations Conference, Mr Blacher outlined:

- The greater use of team-based approaches to planning, funding and delivery of services. This could bring together locally (often literally in terms of co-location) officers from various government (state, local and perhaps commonwealth) agencies working on similar objectives, and would at least result in a simpler form of government, if not a single face of government.
- A move towards more flexible funding to focus on the delivery of outcomes. This allows resources to be coordinated between funders, or pooled and allocated in ways that better reflect local priorities.

- An enhanced role for area and regional managers of state departments working together with senior local government officers as key brokers between local communities and central government.
- The alignment of departmental regional boundaries and consistent use by all levels of government, but particularly state and local governments, of similar local area data in service planning.
- A move towards an integrated approach to infrastructure planning and delivery, both to ensure better use of existing facilities and to better co-ordinate new infrastructure, especially in new growth areas.
- Long-term investment by state and local governments in the ability, skills and sustainability of local agencies by funding leadership training, promoting community enterprises and encouraging volunteering.

In June 2006, the Victorian Government released *A Fairer Victoria: Progress and Next Steps*. The Government's priorities continue to be providing universal services, targeting areas of greatest need and assisting people who face extra disadvantage, and enabling people in communities to have a greater say in shaping their futures.

The Department for Victorian Communities

While community strengthening activities occur across all departments, the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) has a specific role in making community strengthening happen across government and in communities. It is responsible for promoting universal 'people' initiatives and furthering the government's goal of building active, confident and resilient communities.

The three core values in the DVC corporate plan are:

- Communities first – planning and engaging with people and building collaborative relationships before action.
- People and place, not function – understanding and appreciating the difference between people and between local areas.
- Doing government differently – brokering for communities and acting as a catalyst to streamline and simplify services and programs.

In all of the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities discussions and visits, communities have made it clear that they

welcome the Government's community strengthening initiatives including the formation of the Department for Victorian Communities.

We have learned from our site visits and consultations that:

- People have the desire and wisdom to contribute to decisions about their lives and their communities.
- Communities want to be worked 'with' rather than worked 'on' by all sectors with whom they engage.
- Communities want to ensure that community strengthening is sustainable.

To enable participation, work with communities and ensure sustainability requires a systemic approach to community strengthening that is underpinned by the following essential elements:

- A whole-of-government approach underpinned by the values of democracy, trust, equity, social justice, mutual respect, collaboration and inclusion.
- Acceptance and support from all sectors in their policy and practice, that people have the right to be part of the decisions that affect their lives.
- A local government led, inclusive community planning process as the key mechanism by which communities' interests, aspirations, needs, visions, values, and priorities are articulated and actioned.
- A system that emphasises the integration of policy, practice and resources at the state, regional and local level.
- A place-based focus where community and whole-of-government priorities can be negotiated, integrated, resourced and made sustainable.
- The continued building of community strengthening partnerships and networks between communities, local, state and federal governments, philanthropic, business and the non-government sector. These partnerships need to work collaboratively to develop innovative, sustainable solutions and mobilise the investment required to achieve them.
- Measurement and evaluation that is built in from the start of the project and which focuses on achieving social, environmental and economic results that improve people's lives. Residents are provided with the opportunity to be involved in the design, data collection and analysis of success.

- Community participation in planning for new and refurbished infrastructure, and the community's use of that infrastructure.
- The inclusion of all communities in access to community strengthening funding, resources, services and infrastructure.
- Funding that is flexible, minimum of 4 years, coordinated, and easily accessed and accounted for.
- Communication of community strengthening as an integral part of building a 'fairer Victoria.'

Importantly, these elements demonstrate that *how* community strengthening is undertaken is as critical as *what* is being done.

This Report has been divided into three parts:

Part A: Introduction and Conceptual Framework.

Part B: Development in Practice and their Learnings.

Part C: Recommendations and Ways Forward.

In our visits and consultations communities identified areas of progress and challenges for the future. They also suggested ways forward that address these challenges in community strengthening and which require collaborative action by all sectors.

The ways forward have been grouped under the following headings:

- Whole-of-government principles and practice.
- Community Planning.
- Place-based Community Renewal.
- Networks and Partnerships.
- Measurement and evaluation.
- Community infrastructure.
- Inclusion and access.
- Funding and Support.
- Branding and communication.

The Committee has drawn on and incorporated in its recommendations a number of the most successful elements of the Governments current

community strengthening initiatives that are described in detail in Section B. This includes the work of the Department for Victorian Communities in introducing easily accessible and accountable small grants for community groups and multicultural organisations, supporting local council community planning processes, and establishing Local Teams. It also includes the work of the Department of Human Services through Best Start to improve the integration and delivery of general services to parent and young children.

The Neighbourhood Renewal Program has also been instrumental in demonstrating community strengthening is best achieved when:

- Governments trust and empower communities to determine their own needs, priorities and solutions.
- These needs, priorities and solutions are negotiated directly with government, and in partnership with other sectors.

The Committee's recommendations draw together the key elements of what works in community strengthening from both the perspective of Victorian communities and the Victorian Governments most successful community strengthening programs.

Overall these recommendations call for the advice to be taken up in a systemic approach to community strengthening which is based on the principles and values of democracy, trust, equity, social justice, mutual respect, collaboration and inclusion.

The following is a detailed listing of each of the recommendations under each of the key areas:

1. Recommendations on whole-of-government principles and practice

1.1 Recognising the need for flexible responses to different communities, departments work with communities, local government and other sectors to develop and adopt a set of operating principles and practice to change the way governments work with communities. These principles and practice need to build a culture that:

- Is based on the values of democracy, trust, equity, social justice, openness, mutual respect, collaboration and inclusion
- Recognises that people have the desire and wisdom to contribute to decision making in their own community.
- Recognises that communities want to be worked '*with*' rather than worked '*on*' by *all* sectors with whom they engage.

- Is focused on achieving sustainable outcomes.
- 1.2 The Department for Victorian Communities should take a lead role in developing and implementing this set of principles and practice throughout the Department and in how it engages with communities.
 - 1.3 The Department for Victorian Communities' role should be a connector and enabler of community strengthening in partnership with communities, other government agencies, business, non-government and philanthropic sectors.
 - 1.4 Government needs to continue to build and facilitate partnerships between communities, local state and federal governments, and business and non-government and philanthropic sectors that improve people's lives and enhance the effectiveness of all investment.

2. Recommendations on Community Planning

- 2.1 The Department for Victorian Communities continues to work with the Municipal Association of Victoria, the Victorian Local Governance Association, local councils and communities to improve their planning capability including helping all local governments work with their communities in establishing and putting an inclusive community plan into action. Specific actions include:
 - The Department for Victorian Communities working with other government departments and sectors to use community plans as a key reference point for implementing community strengthening actions.
 - Adoption of local government community plans by Regional Management Forums as the basis of determining their priorities and for reporting back regularly to local governments and communities.
 - The Department for Victorian Communities providing essential data and community indicator research to local governments to assist them with inclusive and effective community planning.
 - Linking place-based neighbourhood plans with the broader local government community plan, and vice versa.

- 2.2 The State Government should continue to emphasise the importance of local government led community plans.
- 2.3 The Department for Victorian Communities' funding of community planning be made on the basis of needs for extra funds for councils to engage all the diverse groups and neighbourhoods within their communities.

3. Recommendations on a Place-Based Approach

The Committee welcomes the announcement of the Community Renewal program in *A Fairer Victoria: Progress and Next Steps 2006*. In implementing this initiative, the Committee recommends that the following elements are included:

- 3.1 Community Renewal is based on values of democracy, trust, equity, social justice, mutual respect, collaboration and inclusion.
- 3.2 Community ownership and governance that:
 - Is based on community ownership of needs, priorities and solutions.
 - Encourages active resident participation and respects their diversity, different abilities, interests and cultures.
 - Devolves decision making to a local place-based structure (for example, the Community Renewal Committee) that includes no less than 50 per cent local residents as members who set priorities, drive resource allocation and select project staff.
 - Builds on people's strengths and skills, and pride in themselves and their community.
 - Integrates Community Renewal planning with inclusive local government community planning.
- 3.3 Strengthened partnerships and networks between communities, governments, and non-government, philanthropic and business sectors.
- 3.4 Whole-of-government commitment and support that:
 - Is implemented through a whole-of-government agreement that commits all relevant ministers to provide integrated services and resources to meet communities' needs, priorities and solutions.

- Requires a bottom up, top down process for negotiating an agreement to provide infrastructure, services and investment that meet communities' needs, priorities and solutions.
- Provides long-term block funding for a minimum five years to be drawn from combining existing government community strengthening grant programs. Also new funding for community engagement, improved community infrastructure and services from government and other sectors. This funding should be flexible and allow for quick wins and longer term outcomes.
- Establishes a strong Community Renewal Team at each site that supports local residents in their decision making processes and is linked with a well-resourced Department for Victorian Communities' multifunctional local team.
- Integrates with an employment strategy that links local residents with opportunities for training and employment and, where possible, employs local residents in place-based initiatives.
- Demonstrates the interdependency between good social and economic policy that results in sustainability.

3.5 Measurement and Evaluation that:

- Is built in from the start of the project and which focuses on achieving social, environmental and economic results that improve people's lives. Residents are provided with the opportunity to be involved in the design, data collection and analysis of success.
- Enables communities to tell and share their stories about the impact of community renewal on their lives.

4. Recommendations for Networks and Partnerships

- 4.1 The Department for Victorian Communities should further extend its work with, and through, existing community, local government, non-government and business networks. This would facilitate greater ownership and buy-in to community strengthening at the local and central levels, and reduce the requirement for government to create and develop new projects and programs.
- 4.2 Funding to strengthen existing networks and partnerships, build new networks and partnerships, and ensure they are equitable

and inclusive should continue to be a priority of the Community Support Fund.

4.3 The Committee welcomes the Government's endorsement of the non-government sector's request to work with it on non-government sector sustainability, resourced by government and run as a multi-sector partnership between the non-government sector, government, local government, business and community. The Committee recommends that an agreed plan of action be developed to:

- Establish a shared agenda for the leadership role of the non-government sector in community strengthening.
- Provide non-government organisations with resources for collaboration and network development at local and regional levels to ensure they contribute to community planning and interact with Regional Management Forums.
- Improve governance and regulatory frameworks and simplify accountabilities between the non-government sector and local and state governments.
- Develop sustainable funding and resource strategies to ensure quality services and integrated programs.
- Improve non-government sector industry planning, including the use of technological solutions, asset and infrastructure improvement, human resources and volunteer management and support.
- Promote and advance joint innovation, research and development and evaluation between the government and non-government sector.

5. Recommendations for Measurement and Evaluation

5.1 All community strengthening programs within the Department for Victorian Communities and across government must build from the start a consistently applied evaluation framework that:

- Adopts the community strengthening indicators.
- Captures the personal change stories of people who take part.
- Emphasises the importance of measuring outcomes.
- Provides for the identification and measurement of economic, social and environmental benefits.

- Develops templates and tools that help community groups describe what has and has not worked in community strengthening, and to share those learnings with all sectors, the broader community and governments.
- 5.2 Provide the opportunity for residents and community members to be employed and trained in the collection, analysis and use of data and information. This would:
- Enable residents and community members to build their skills and abilities.
 - Provide pathways to meaningful employment.
 - Ensure that data is presented in a way that is meaningful and useful to communities as well as government.
 - Increase the credibility of data.
- 5.3 The Department for Victorian Communities continues to collect and analyse community strengthening data, needs to work in partnership with other organisations to ensure the learnings are shared in the public domain and inform future community strengthening initiatives. The data and learnings also need to be understood by communities and useful to inform community planning.
- 5.4 The Department for Victorian Communities continue to support and become a policy and funding partner with the University of Melbourne and Vic Health in the Community Indicators Victoria Project to:
- Broaden and strengthen the current community strengthening indicators.
 - Capture economic, social and environment benefits.
 - Improve the long-term measurement of community strengthening, both in how it improves people's lives and makes effective use of government investment.
 - Ensure over time that the Victorian Indicators Project expands its analysis of outcomes to include social epidemiological measurement of the impact of community strengthening on the community's health and wellbeing over the long term.

6. Recommendations on community infrastructure

- 6.1 Government in partnership with communities, local government, and the non-government and business sector, should carry out local audits of existing community infrastructure assets. This would consider the community use of that infrastructure, and access. These audits should include a gap analysis of community infrastructure needs to inform community planning and government priority setting for new and refurbished community infrastructure and proposals for community participation in their planning and use.
- 6.2 The Department for Victorian Communities, through Local Government Victoria continue to build on its partnership with Neighbourhood Houses in community strengthening. The Committee recommends that to further strengthen this partnership, the Department for Victorian Communities, through Local Government Victoria, should consider the formation of a Working Group which includes Local Government Victoria, the Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, Adult Community and Further Education, Municipal Association of Victorian and Victoria Local Governance Association. In particular, the Working Group would focus on ways to continue to create more effective and innovative links between Neighbourhood Houses, Departments and Local Governments, in building stronger communities.

7. Recommendations for Inclusion

- 7.1 The Department for Victorian Communities should ensure that people from Indigenous communities, newly arrived culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with a disability, unemployed, low socio-economic, young and older people have greater access to and benefit from community strengthening initiatives within the department and across government. This will require:
- Whole-of-government cooperation to support increased participation in and ownership of community strengthening initiatives by these groups.
 - Whole-of-department support for these groups as well as their respective divisional support.
 - Greater inclusion of these groups in local and state decisions.

- Ensuring these groups are full participants in a place-based approach to community strengthening.
- 7.2 The Department for Victorian Communities consider moving from an application approach to negotiated agreements as appropriate that provide adequate resources and support to include these groups. Negotiated funding agreements would allow respect for diverse cultures, suitable timelines and assistance to develop initiatives driven by these groups. The Department for Victorian Communities' Local Teams should continue to link with and support these groups and make it a priority.
- 7.3 A component of small grants should be set aside as an accessibility fund to help these groups overcome barriers to their participation like transport, lack of childcare, skills development, language, and costs.
- 7.4 To better engage multicultural communities in community strengthening, the Department for Victorian Communities should consider funding and designing with these communities a series of action research community strengthening partnerships that will:
- Investigate and evaluate the success of existing models of community strengthening involving these communities over a four year period.
 - Implement and resource a suitable community strengthening strategy within place-based multicultural community settings in two diverse metropolitan regions; for example, one area covering Moreland, Hume, Darebin and Whittlesea and a second area in the growth corridor of the City of Dandenong and Casey.
 - Establish a project steering committee driven by the multicultural community sector in partnership with the Department for Victorian Communities, local government, and the non-government, philanthropic and business sectors.
 - Further develop leadership, skills and training opportunities to advance these communities' awareness, engagement and participation in community strengthening.

- 7.5 The existing action research model currently being used with Indigenous communities could:
- Establish community identity, community boundaries, community visions, community priorities and appropriate community leadership and governance processes.
 - Build collaborate partnerships between Indigenous communities and the various sectors at local, regional, state and national levels.
 - Negotiate resources, develop programs, and establish measurement evaluation and benchmarks.
- 7.6 Extra resources to be allocated to existing support groups or organisations in these communities, and where needed and appropriate, set up new support groups.
- 7.7 Increase the availability of leadership and skills training for these communities that would include training for:
- Managing an organisation, governance, roles and responsibilities.
 - Financial management.
 - How to work with the media.
 - Public speaking training.
 - Advocacy.

8. Recommendations for Funding and Support

- 8.1 The Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) continue to move from short-term to longer-term funding of four to five years in its programs and place-based initiatives.
- 8.2 A small team comprised of DVC staff and community members and based on the successful approach used to simplify the DVC Small Grants program should be established to simplify the application and reporting requirements and continue to reduce red tape across all DVC grant programs.
- 8.3 The vital role that easily accessed small grants up to \$5000 play in communities continues as a key part of community strengthening resourcing. Small grants could also be extended to enable new community groups to be set by providing up to \$500 establishment costs for incorporation, meetings and venue hire.

- 8.4 The Department for Victorian Communities undertakes the necessary work to reduce emphasis on competitive application-based grants and in their place develop negotiated funding agreements with communities that meet their needs.
- 8.5 Recognising the value and direct experience of the Department for Victorian Communities' Local Teams working with local communities, other regional departments, local government, non-government and business sectors in local regions:
- Continue to make greater use be made of Local Teams knowledge of local needs and priorities by all of those involved in assessing all grants under all DVC grants programs.
 - The number of regional based staff should continue to be increased as the resources become available including employing local Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse community staff.
 - Continue to increase the amount of flexible funding available to local teams to support community strengthening at the local level.
 - Where possible, co-locate Local Teams with other department regional teams or in local government offices.
- 8.6 Within the governments current framework for the Community Support Fund (CSF) priority should continue to be emphasised for:
- Community driven and owned initiatives.
 - The integration of CSF project funding with local government community planning processes.
 - Neighbourhood and community renewal priorities.
 - Providing greater access to funding for the most disadvantaged community groups.
 - Attracting and developing stronger partnerships in community strengthening between communities, government, local government, non-government, philanthropic and business sectors.

8.7 Government consider moving to block funding rather than individual program funding needs to be available for place-based community strengthening through the combined allocation of:

- Community Support Funds.
- Existing divisional community strengthening programs.
- Any new government funding for place-based initiatives.

8.8 Across its funding programs, the Department for Victorian Communities should rebalance the trend of funding new programs and initiatives against maintaining and advancing the contribution that existing community organisations and networks make to community strengthening.

9.1 Recommendations on Branding and Communication

9.1 To continue to maximise community ownership, understanding and engagement in community strengthening, a state-wide communications program be developed around the values, principles and purpose of building strong communities, and communicated in the everyday language of communities.

9.2 The Department for Victorian Communities enables and supports the community, local government and non-government, philanthropic and business sectors in exchanging good practice on community strengthening. This could include:

- A working group set up in DVC with representatives from all sectors to develop ways of sharing data, learnings and good practice.
- Creating a series of sustainability templates, frameworks and models to help community groups plan, learn from and share good practice.
- The Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) in partnership with other departments, communities, local government and the non-government sector, business and DVC local teams to provide regular communications to governments, communities and all sectors which include *real* stories, of *real* successes told by *real* people active in community strengthening.

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Part A

Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Part A - Introduction and Conceptual Framework

This report responds to a request from the Minister for Victorian Communities, the Hon John Thwaites, for the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities to advise him on:

Successful initiatives in community building including volunteering; what works, what are the barriers to success and the lessons that can be applied across projects.

The Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities has responded by drawing on international experience, Victorian Government policy, departmental practice, discussions with those working directly with the community, site visits, consultations with academics and interest groups and our committee members' own diverse experiences. We have listened to over 2000 people and groups. A list of site visits and consultations is provided in Appendix B and C respectively.

Throughout its deliberations, the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities has looked through the eyes of the community. In many cases the community welcomes governments'¹ initiatives and acknowledges the benefits, but communities also express frustration with the fragmentation and disconnection they experience when dealing with the number of departments, projects and programs involved in community strengthening. The other main frustration is one that challenges both governments and the community, and that is the issue of sustainability. It is essential that government departments and the Department for Victorian Communities' divisions tackle these frustrations by moving from projects to a systemic approach that is long term and requires all departments to work collaboratively to integrate policy, practice and resources at the local community level.

The move to a systemic approach also relies on linking the process of local government community planning with the opportunity for people in communities to make decisions about their own futures. The Victorian Government has endorsed the importance of people in communities making decisions about their own lives, which is the *politics* of empowerment. People being able to shape their futures is a

¹ In the context of Victoria, the use of the term 'governments' in this report always refers to both state and local and, where relevant, commonwealth.

sustaining principle of the Government's community strengthening policy in *Growing Victoria Together* and *A Fairer Victoria*.

The Committee's report considers how the policy of community empowerment can better deliver what governments and the community want and, importantly, what putting empowerment into practice means for community strengthening in Victoria from 2006 to 2010.

The report takes into account what has been successful in community strengthening and assesses what can be built on and what needs to change. We have considered many Government initiatives, projects and programs in shaping this report. Many local initiatives have been visited. However, we have only profiled a selection to give a snapshot of examples and reflect good practice based on the policies of *A Fairer Victoria* (2005).

The report is in three parts:

- Part A defines the community and the concept of community strengthening, discusses the relevance of community strengthening to Victoria and outlines past and current government policy responses.
- Part B profiles both state and local practice in community strengthening and the Committee's assessment of that practice.
- Part C discusses what makes for successful community strengthening, and the challenges it faces, and provides recommendations on the way forward.

The meaning of 'community strengthening'

This report uses Professor Mark Considine's definition to describe community strengthening:

"Any sustained effort to increase connectedness, active engagement and partnerships among members of the community, community groups and organisations in order to enhance social, economic and environmental objectives" (LGV, 2004a).

The relationship between community strengthening and community building is well described by the Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS).

"Community strengthening is an integral part of community building but not an alternative to adequate public investment in communities for essential public services and infrastructure committed to building economic, social and

environmental benefits for the Victorian community as a whole” (VCOSS Consultation 2006).

The ‘community’ and its importance

Communities are important because they:

- Are where people live and/or meet, both physically and virtually, and work.
- Are where children grow up and make friends.
- Shape people’s identities and sense of belonging and provide the security and freedom to shape their futures.
- Are sites of learning and decisions about people’s lives and environment.
- Provide other people to turn to for support and advice.
- Provide a place to contribute.
- Encourage network building to foster relationships that help people feel happier and healthier and improve their lives.

There are many types of community: place, identity, transient, workplace, spatial/virtual and interest.

Communities are built through networks. Close personal networks of family and friends benefit people through emotional support, practical help and resources. Community networks are connections established around a common interest or place like school, the workplace, sporting club or community organisation. Some community networks link people to social institutions where they can join in decision making.

Research shows that involvement and experience in networks is linked to better physical and mental health, higher school retention, a feeling of being safe and hope in the future for oneself and for children (Department of Human Services (DHS) 2002). Involvement in few or no networks is associated with higher community and personal risk, like high unemployment, poor participation in community life and low education retention (DHS, 2002). In Victoria, people who volunteer, are members of organised groups or attend community events, are healthier, less anxious or depressed and feel more positive about the communities in which they live (Department for Victorian Communities, 2004a).

Community and non-government organisations play an important role in building stronger communities. Some are formal and structured while others are informal.

According to *Our Community* (2003), the community sector in Australia has the following profile:

- An estimated 700 000 Australian community organisations operate in Australia. The vast majority of these have budgets under \$1 million and operate at the grassroots level.
- Sixty five per cent of all Australians over the age of 14 belong to one or more community groups.
- Community organisations contribute 3.3 per cent to Australia's gross domestic product (GDP).
- Community organisations provide employment for over 600 000 Australians.
- Australia's not-for-profit sector represents 6.8 percent of the labour force and almost 12 per cent of private employees.
- Community volunteering contributes an estimated \$42 billion a year to the Australian economy.
- Non-profit organisations have approximately 30 million memberships, because many of Australia's 20 million people belong to several organisations.

There is no doubt that community organisations, the volunteer sector, neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, and the networks they represent make a major contribution to the quality of Australian life.

Building stronger communities in Victoria

There are many drivers for community strengthening policy.

Internationally these include:

- The desire to rebuild community trust in governments.
- The desire to strengthen democratic practice.
- Community pressure for more accountable and open public institutions.
- A less deferential and more educated public that is demanding a more active citizenship.
- People turning to local issues when they feel powerless to make a difference on a global scale.

- Concerns that governments and the public sector have become disconnected from local communities.
- New knowledge about how community strengthening can work, especially in tackling disadvantage and increasing the effectiveness of government planning and investment.
- New technologies that allow the community to examine and be more involved in non-government and not-for-profit organisations, networks, clubs and voluntary associations.
- A perceived loss of social capital, such as, cohesion, connection, community infrastructure and community decision making in many communities.

European policies, especially in the United Kingdom have a focus on 'renewing the public realm': promoting more active participation by people in democracy and civic institutions, with a focus on the relations between citizens and governments.

Community strengthening in Victoria originated from the perceived loss of social capital during the 1990s and communities' desire for government to be more attuned and responsive to their needs. The State Government is working to improve the lives of all Victorians, especially by tackling disadvantage, and this focus on social justice is driving community strengthening in Victoria.

Empirical evidence supports this emphasis. *Community Adversity and Resilience* (Vinson 2004) demonstrates that community strengthening interventions can break the cycle of disadvantage. This study found that babies with a low birth rate born into disadvantaged communities with low social cohesion (networks) had high school drop out rates. Those born into disadvantaged communities with high social cohesion had much lower drop out rates. The study also showed a link between communities with high levels of early school leaving, low social cohesion and imprisonment. Similar disadvantaged communities with high levels of early school leaving, but with high social cohesion, had a low correlation with imprisonment.

Community strengthening links the values of equity, social justice and fairness with improved economic development and ecological sustainability. Policies that pursue economic development are not necessarily fair, just and equitable. However, policies that pursue economic development through a community strengthening framework achieve outcomes that are not only fair, just and equitable, but can be far broader than initially realised.

Internationally, the community strengthening agenda is gathering power in many countries. Most states in Canada and the United States of America have adopted policies along with the Blair Government in the UK and other Organisation of Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD) countries, including France, Belgium, Switzerland and Italy. New Zealand has legislated for inclusive community planning as part of its Local Government Act.

In Australia, there are now specific community strengthening strategies underway in South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and Tasmania. Western Australia and Queensland have followed Victoria in establishing a dedicated portfolio and departments of communities, while South Australia and Tasmania have dedicated community strengthening functions. The Australian Government's key community strengthening agency is the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

In South Australia, the Government has appointed a Social Inclusion Commissioner to ensure that the government's social justice policies are inclusive and effective. This is a model that could be examined as a future direction for community strengthening in Victoria.

Governments overseas and in Australia are moving towards a public policy model that:

- Emphasises enabling local communities to share decision making and accountability in partnership with government. In particular, the Blair Government is now discussing and promoting the 'practice' of empowerment and the need to reorganise the roles of local and central government around communities.
- Recognises the importance of 'place' as a focus for government investment and community action.
- Provides ways to enable collaboration across and within communities, and between communities, business, governments and the non-government and progressive philanthropic sector.

Victoria's response

Victoria has a long history of working with communities as far back as the 1970s with initiatives such as Neighbourhood Houses, Disadvantaged Schools, and Affirmative Action Plans. Community Health Centres, Landcare, the Rural Women's Network and Rural Employment Victoria were important legacies of the 1980s. After the

competitive model of the 1990s, Victoria began to investigate a new approach to community intervention in 1999 when the Department of Premier and Cabinet set up 10 place-based demonstration projects.

In 2001 the Victorian Government released *Growing Victoria Together* its vision for the following 10 years. The Department for Victorian Communities was created in 2002 by amalgamating a broad range of government portfolios that were previously based either in central government or line departments. During this time community strengthening initiatives began to emerge, aided by the Community Support Fund, and some place-based initiatives like the Community Capacity Building Initiative were established.

Government response

In 2005 the Victorian Government released *A Fairer Victoria: Creating Opportunity and Addressing Disadvantage*. This social policy strategy has four elements:

- A renewed emphasis on prevention and early intervention; for example, increased availability of kindergarten services in disadvantaged areas to make sure children have the best chance of success once they go to school.
- Linking infrastructure development with social development, as implemented in the Neighbourhood Renewal program.
- Improving the access to decision making for people in disadvantaged areas and seeing people's ability to have control over their own lives as an essential element of improving services and communities.
- Changing the way government works by cutting red tape, offering better coordination and working more closely with local people and, essentially, with local government.

A Fairer Victoria (2005) outlines five major types of initiatives:

- Ensuring that universal services provide equal opportunity for all.
- Reducing barriers to opportunity.
- Strengthening assistance to disadvantaged groups.
- Providing targeted support to highest risk areas.
- Involving communities in decisions that affect their lives and making it easier to work with Government.

When the Hon John Thwaites, Minister for Victorian Communities, launched *A Fairer Victoria* he emphasised that:

“The success of these initiatives will depend, in large measure, on the success of community strengthening initiatives and the ability of levels of government, both state and local, to work together in flexible ways to deliver both improved services and better outcomes.”

The Secretary of DVC, Mr Yehudi Blacher, has identified some of the systemic changes proposed by the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) to deliver effective community strengthening in Victoria. In a speech to a United Nations Conference, Mr Blacher outlined:

- The greater use of team-based approaches to planning, funding and delivery of services. This could bring together locally (often literally in terms of co-location) officers from various government (state, local and perhaps commonwealth) agencies working on similar objectives, and would at least result in a simpler form of government, if not a single face of government.
- A move towards more flexible funding to focus on the delivery of outcomes. This allows resources to be coordinated between funders, or pooled and allocated in ways that better reflect local priorities.
- An enhanced role for area and regional managers of state departments working together with senior local government officers as key brokers between local communities and central government.
- The alignment of departmental regional boundaries and consistent use by all levels of government, but particularly state and local governments, of similar local area data in service planning.
- A move towards an integrated approach to infrastructure planning and delivery, both to ensure better use of existing facilities and to better co-ordinate new infrastructure, especially in new growth areas.
- The long-term investment by state and local governments in the ability, skills and sustainability of local agencies by funding leadership training, promoting community enterprises and encouraging volunteering.

In June 2006, the Victorian Government released *A Fairer Victoria: Progress and Next Steps*. The Governments priorities continue to be providing universal services, targeting areas of greatest need and

assisting people who face extra disadvantage. However the major focus for 2006-2007 included:

- Investing in services for growth areas and regions.
- More early intervention and prevention services for children and families.
- Increasing services for homelessness.
- Improving community transport.
- Supporting the multicultural community.

The Department for Victorian Communities

While community strengthening activities occur across all departments, the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) has a specific role in making community strengthening happen across government and in communities. It is responsible for promoting universal 'people' initiatives and furthering the government's goal of building active, confident and resilient communities.

The three core values in the DVC corporate plan are:

- Communities first – planning and engaging with people and building collaborative relationships before action.
- People and place, not function – understanding and appreciating the difference between people and between local areas.
- Doing government differently – brokering for communities and acting as a catalyst to streamline and simplify services and programs.

Its five key objectives are:

- Communities that shape their future.
- Communities that encourage participation.
- Communities that embrace diversity.
- Communities that gain lasting benefits from the Commonwealth Games.
- Government that is easier to work with.

The Department is structured under seven divisions to deliver these objectives:

- Strategic Policy and Research.
- Local Government Victoria and Community Information.

- Sport and Recreation.
- Corporate and Organisational Development.
- Community Strengthening and Volunteering.
- Office of the Commonwealth Games Coordination.
- People and Community Advocacy.

Strategic Policy and Research is responsible for developing community strengthening policy and strategy and carrying out evaluation and research. Some initiatives include the development and monitoring of community strengthening indicators, establishing and supporting the work of Regional Management Forums, development of the 'schools as community facilities' strategy and working closely with other government departments and local government to support flagship projects like the Frankston Partnership and Whittlesea Partnership.

Local Government Victoria works closely with local councils on community planning and streamlining state local planning requirements. It plays a significant role in strengthening community infrastructure through its responsibility for supporting and funding Neighbourhood Houses, community buses and libraries.

The Community Strengthening and Volunteering Division is made up of the Community Support Fund, Local Teams, Community Enterprise and Volunteering, and community strengthening programs such as the Community Building Initiative and the Rural Women's Network.

The Community Support Fund is administered by the Community Strengthening and Volunteering Division and provides funding for many of government's community strengthening programs, projects and initiatives. It also supports community and local government-initiated local projects through its three grant programs:

- Planning;
- Strengthening communities; and
- Building community infrastructure.

Local Teams play an important role bringing together regional youth, employment, local government and sport and recreation activities at the local level to strengthen communities across Victoria. The teams encourage volunteering and community participation, support networks, and broker and advance partnerships and shared achievements across government, business and community. The teams also help communities get access to information and government programs and services, and help communities shape grant applications.

The People and Community Advocacy Division in the Department for Victorian Communities includes:

- Aboriginal Affairs Victoria;
- Office of Women's Policy;
- Victorian Officer of Multicultural Affairs;
- Office of Senior Victorians;
- Veterans' Unit;
- Office for Youth; and
- Employment Programs.

These portfolios operate across all departments. For example, Employment Programs works closely with Regional Development Victoria on joint projects and industry pilots, and by participating on the Ministerial Advisory Panel to decide funding applications for employment programs. Employment Programs also enjoys a good working relationship with the Department of Innovation, Industry, and Regional Development where it provides advice and secondments.

Local government

Local government is central to community strengthening. The Municipal Association of Victoria and Victorian Local Governance Association, Local Government Victoria and many local governments in Victoria have embraced the principle that communities must have the opportunity to identify and prioritise their needs in partnership with governments, community organisations, and business. More than half the state's local councils are now committed to community planning.

Non-government and philanthropic sectors

The non-government sector engages with communities, governments and business in different ways. Community-based organisations are usually established to support and strengthen their constituency. This may be place-based such as a local progress association or 'people' based such as a disability support organisation. Over the last two decades, many non-government organisations have grown and become increasingly professionalised to assist their members and clients more effectively and efficiently. Others have remained small and strongly aligned with their original mission. Some are incorporated associations, others, non-profit companies.

Community organisations have always worked closely and creatively with their supporters in the community, with government and with philanthropic organisations to deliver their goals. As new models and ideas emerge, new sectors develop. For example, in the 1990s transitional housing management agencies established to assist people stuck between crisis and long term accommodation needs and in the last few years there has been a strong emergence of organisations that connect young people with employment and a wide range of social, emotional and financial support.

Community organisations will often operate in a place-based model, with a physical shop-front or meeting place. There are also:

- A wide range of 'virtual' networks operating electronically.
- Specialist organisations that assist a broader member base, located in regional and metropolitan centres.

The combination of community connection and relevance, together with professional and well managed programs, offer hundreds of thousands of Victorians a wide array of opportunities to engage in the community strengthening process through the non-government sector.

Business sector

Local small businesses have always been strongly connected with their communities. In rural communities, local community leaders are often the local business leaders, and they provide support, donations and other resources. Without local business there is no local employment, and while community strengthening is not primarily about generating employment, the link between local business, employment and strong communities is important.

While many large business and multinational corporations have a history of philanthropic involvement, over the last 10 years they have become increasingly interested in corporate social responsibility and corporate citizenship. Many express this through staff volunteering programs, philanthropy, sponsorships, donations and in-kind support, and partnerships.

Large corporations like resource companies do work with small communities, generally in the locations where they operate. For example, Rio Tinto works with Indigenous communities in the regions where the company mines. In particular, they work in partnership with Indigenous communities to develop their work readiness and employment skills. Some other large corporations support and work

with large non-government organisations like the Australian Conservation Foundation.

Place-based community strengthening initiatives are providing opportunities for building partnerships with business such as the Bendigo Bank's work in youth participation and mentoring.

Next step

The Victorian Government sees community strengthening as a key factor in achieving *A Fairer Victoria*. Through the Department for Victorian Communities, other government departments, local government, communities and other sectors it has introduced a number of community strengthening initiatives. It is now time to analyse with the community, what is working in community strengthening, what can be built upon and the best ways forward.

Part B

Developments In Practice And Their Learnings

Part B - Developments In Practice And Their Learnings

“Community strengthening is not a marginal add on, but a central driver of government discussions, processes and practices”- VCOSS, 2006 MACVIC Consultation.

Victoria has a long history of community participation in building strong communities at the local and state level. An exciting new emphasis in the Victorian Government’s social policy statements *A Fairer Victoria (2005)* and *A Fairer Victoria: Progress and Next Steps (2006)* is that collaborative community strengthening has been put centre stage in the Government’s policy directions. The Minister for Victorian Communities, the Hon John Thwaites believes that the success of *A Fairer Victoria* will depend upon the success of community strengthening and the ability of all levels of government to work together.

This section of the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities *Strong Communities: Ways Forward* report examines what has been successful in the Government’s community strengthening initiatives from 2001, to the present day. While Victoria has had a long history of working with and building communities, community strengthening as an identifiable approach was piloted in 2001 with the Community Building Demonstration Projects. This program provided grants to 10 selected disadvantaged communities to carry out community strengthening projects driven by the people who lived in those areas. Community strengthening has grown since the establishment of the Department for Victorian Communities and now involves other departments and sectors and many programs, projects and initiatives.

To find out what works in community strengthening and what can be built upon, the Committee made site visits to where many of the community strengthening programs, initiatives and projects operate on the ground. The Committee also visited programs initiated by other departments such as Neighbourhood Renewal in the Office of Housing (Department of Human Services) and we included these in this report. We have also highlighted some initiatives in the report that we did not visit but that provide a better understanding of what works in the current community strengthening agenda.

This analysis of successful projects includes the learnings from formal evaluations where they exist, the Committee’s site visit observations

and our extensive consultations with all the sectors involved in community strengthening.

In this section of the report the current directions and practice of community strengthening are described under these headings:

- Place-based initiatives.
- Increasing participation and access.
- Supporting communities of identity.
- Community planning initiatives.
- Provision of community infrastructure.
- Measurement of community strengthening outcomes.
- Enhancing outcomes through partnerships.
- Cross sectoral initiatives.

Place-based initiatives

Governments in Australia have traditionally operated from the basis of:

- Centralised expert knowledge that undervalues local knowledge.
- Departments that administer programs on a functional basis (for example, health, education, and justice) and usually deliver those services from their silos, often disconnected from people's lives.

One way that governments are reconnecting with people in their communities is to focus on the 'places' where people live and work. This includes delivering services according to the needs and priorities of people in their communities rather than a 'one size fits all' approach. Re-connecting with communities at the local level recognises that democracy is strengthened when it is practised not only at election time but through ongoing citizen engagement in decisions that affect their lives. This requires re-establishing the link between place-based democracy at the local government and neighbourhood level and the allocation of state government resources according to the needs and priorities established at the local level.

Focusing on 'place' requires changing some of the Victorian Government's current structures and processes to respond better to local community needs, priorities and solutions. Government cannot respond locally or invest effectively without:

- Bringing together the resources required by that community from across government's functional areas; and

- Delivering resources and services in a collaborative and coordinated way at the local level.

Government practice is changing. There are a growing number of place-based programs and initiatives, some well established and some at an early stage. The strong common feature of these emerging place-based initiatives is that they are intended to support communities in identifying their needs, negotiating their priorities with governments, and partnering with governments and the non-government and business sectors to put their solutions into action.

This report profiles the following place-based programs and initiatives:

- Community Building Demonstration Projects.
- The Community Capacity Building Initiative (incorporating the Honeysuckle Creek Recreation and Environment Project case study).
- The Community Building Initiative.
- Neighbourhood Renewal (incorporating e-ACE case study).
- Whittlesea Community Futures.

There are many other place-based initiatives across government, such as the Small Towns Fund a particularly successful community strengthening program administered by Regional Development Victoria.

Community Building Demonstration Projects

‘Starting with what people know building on what people have. Our community has realised we can make a difference to our future’ (Asset Based Community Development Report, Ararat Asset Building and Community building Project, 2006)

The Community Building Demonstration Projects were initiated in the Department of Premier and Cabinet in 2001 and transferred to the Department for Victorian Communities in 2002. The 10 Community Building Demonstration Projects are:

- Connecting Confident Communities located in the towns of Maryborough, Bealiba, Talbot, Carisbrook and Dunolly in the Central Goldfields Shire.
- Creating Partnerships - Building Stronger Communities, located in the towns of Avoca, Beaufort, Landsborough, Lexton and Snake Valley in the Pyrenees Shire.

- Creatively Connecting Communities, located across the whole of the Bass Coast Shire.
- Darebin Community Building Project, located in the suburbs of East Preston and East Reservoir in the City of Darebin.
- Doggies to Highpoint, located in Footscray's Gordon Street precinct in the City of Maribyrnong.
- Proud to Participate in Noble Park in the City of Greater Dandenong.
- StreetsAhead Community Building Project located in the suburbs Norlane, Corio, Rosewell and Whittington in the City of Greater Geelong.
- Warrnambool Action Vision for Everyone (WAVE), located in the areas of East and West Warrnambool in the City of Warrnambool.
- Young People Building Our Community, located in the areas of North Shepparton, South Shepparton and Mooroopna in the City of Greater Shepparton.
- Youth CAAB Project - Community Action and Alliance Building in the East Gippsland Shire Council.

These projects were established in areas of significant disadvantage to understand better how the process of community strengthening works, and to use the learnings to inform new initiatives.

The specific aims were to:

- Involve the community in decision making;
- Establish partnerships for change; and
- Build capacity by increasing skills in the community.

Responsibility for the projects was shared across State Government departments or with a lead agency from the non-government sector. No complete final evaluation of the projects has been released, but the communities and staff at some sites agree that the projects have:

- Increased social participation and skills in community planning and action.
- Strengthened the capacity of community members and local organisations.
- Resulted in service delivery that better meets community needs.

- Improved the process which gets more people involved in decision making in youth advisory bodies, local organisations, local area plans and community newspapers.

The most tangible result has been to attract a significant number of assets and resources to local areas, including those created directly by the demonstration projects as well as new grants obtained for more activities.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

The Committee visited eight of the ten Community Building Demonstration Projects and spoke with community members, project staff and people involved from local government, non-government and business. The projects visited were: Doggies to Highpoint in Footscray; Connecting Confident Communities in Maryborough; Creating Partnerships – Building Stronger Communities in the town of Avoca; Young People Building Our Community in North Shepparton; Youth CAAB Project – Community Action and Alliance Building in East Gippsland; StreetsAhead Community Building Project, in Corio and Whittington in the City of Greater Geelong; Darebin Community Building Project in East Preston; Proud to Participate in Noble Park.

From our visits and discussions, the Committee considers that the outcomes of successful community strengthening achieved by communities include:

- Better relationships within communities and between communities, governments, non-government agencies and business.
- Improved community infrastructure, including more workable local decision making structures.
- Community action plans.
- Increases in volunteering.
- Better use of community skills and leadership.
- Celebration of community achievements.
- Improved community information and communication.
- More young people involved in decision making.
- More young people mentored during transition into training and work.
- Better community transport connections.

- Older people feeling more valued, less isolated and being able to share their stories with the younger generation.

These achievements were helped by:

- Employing community coordinators to support community strengthening at the local level;
- More coordinated action between government, local government and communities;
- Partnerships that built on community strength and implemented community solutions.

This program has demonstrated that future community strengthening programs will work best when they:

- Are community driven and community owned.
- Enable the community to build on its strengths, and determine its needs, priorities and solutions.
- Are flexible.
- Have a minimum four to eight year timeframe.
- Connect with inclusive local government community planning.
- Build in evaluation and measurement that includes communities in the design and implementation of the program.
- Plan for sustainability.
- Encourage and support partnerships and networking between communities and governments, non-government, philanthropic and business sectors.
- Set up processes to share information, data and real stories of the changes in people's lives from their participation in community strengthening.
- Require the resources provided by State departments to be coordinated and integrated at the local level.
- Have a process that includes all groups (including local government) and emphasises collaborative planning from the beginning.
- Have a community engagement process that ensures the inclusion of all community groups, particularly those often excluded such as newly arrived culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Indigenous communities.

It is important to note that when the Community Building Demonstration Projects were extended from three to four years, many produced better community strengthening results. For example, when the Noble Park Proud to Participate initiative shifted to local government as the lead agency partnering with the Neighbourhood House, the Sudanese community who previously had been excluded became a substantial focus of the project.

Community Capacity Building Initiative

The Community Capacity Building Initiative was a three-year pilot program that commenced in 2002. It was designed to strengthen the ability of small rural communities to shape their future. There were 11 pilot projects across the state reaching 55 small towns and rural areas:

- Ballan and surrounds.
- Balmoral and Harrow.
- Bruthen and Nowa Nowa.
- Lang Lang.
- Lismore and Derrinallum.
- Nathalia and surrounds.
- Robinvale and surrounds.
- St Arnaud and surrounds.
- The Alberton Project.
- The North West Mallee.
- Upper Murray.
- Violet Town.

With the Government providing support for community-driven action, each community had a central point where a facilitator was based and from where its pilot project was coordinated.

The Community Capacity Building Initiative project recognised how important it was to strengthen the skills and abilities of people in rural communities and support their volunteer commitment. It also acknowledged for successful community strengthening it was crucial to have a community plan, adequate resources, and build the communities skills, leadership and support for managing change.

The main reason for the initiative's success was the process it used to enable communities to identify, prioritise and own their issues. This often resulted in a community plan that successfully empowered community members, built networks and galvanised community and governments' action which addressed the community's needs, priorities and solutions.

Case study: Honeysuckle Recreation and Environment Project

The Honeysuckle Recreation and Environment Project's aim is to unite the town on either side of the creek by developing the Honeysuckle Creek Precinct. The project in Violet Town developed from the Community Capacity Building Initiative in 2001 when 120 people attended a community opportunity workshop to discuss and adopt a vision for Violet Town and enlist enthusiastic supporters.

Works include a walking/jogging track around the creek area that also links the north part of town to the main street, rehabilitation and revegetation of the creek, Indigenous wildflower garden beds and picnic tables, an historical and cultural interpretation trail, improved sporting facilities and an amphitheatre.

In all, project works totalling almost \$300,000 have either been completed or are about to start. Some 52 community working bees and 16 community activities have been held, with people contributing more than 1600 hours of voluntary labour. The precinct has become much more attractive, environmentally friendly and easily accessible and is now the hub of community, social, recreational and sporting activities.

The reasons for the project's success included:

- Strong community ownership from the beginning.
- An inclusive, open, well facilitated and well attended planning process.
- Development of a Master Plan that gave an excellent framework and was a reference point to guide future work and attract funding.
- Demonstrable achievements from the community's works that included quick wins and longer term outcomes.
- A strong relationship with local government.
- A few key people in the community with specific expertise who used it strategically and respectfully, enabling others to learn new skills.

According to the community, challenges to the project included:

- Too many 'bits and pieces' of grants that fragmented the project at the local level.
- No inbuilt evaluation in the program design. This limited the ability of the community to analyse and build on their successes and formally record their progress.
- Delays between the funding application, the decision to fund and its announcement.

"Many in the community, including many beneficiaries of government project funding (while they welcome government commitment and it benefits) are frustrated by the lack of integration of departmental action at the local level which makes these worthy goals (of community strengthening) a reality on the ground" (Tim Mahar, community activist, Violet Town in a submission to the Chair of the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities)

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

The Committee visited two Community Capacity Building sites:

- Honeysuckle Creek in Violet Town.
- The community cinema in St Arnaud.

From our visits and discussions, the Committee considers some of the main reasons for these projects' successes included:

- Including all the community in the process to develop, implement and sustain the project.
- Paying project coordinators and skilling up volunteer community coordinators.
- Establishing projects that reflected community-identified needs, priorities and solutions. For example, the refurbishment of St Arnaud hall included a cinema and upgrading the Honeysuckle reserve and surrounding environment to meet several community needs.
- Involving local government as a partner from the start of the project.
- Building better relationships within communities and between communities.
- Tapping community potential and skills.
- Forming partnerships between government, local government, non-government organisations and business.

- Developing community plans at the neighbourhood level.

The Committee considers that the success of community strengthening in the Community Capacity Building Projects could have been enhanced by:

- Allowing longer timeframes.
- Including a sustainability plan from the start.
- Ensuring evaluation and measurement of outcomes.
- Building stronger partnerships between state, local government and local communities in planning, developing and delivering community building projects.
- Ensuring better joined up government and integrated funding approaches to community strengthening delivered at the local level.

In particular, the Community Capacity Building Initiative showed how important it is to have strong and coordinated responses to the communities' priorities from the relevant departments, local government and the non-government sector and business.

"Community strengthening initiatives have to address issues of productivity, sustainability, community participation and wellbeing in an integrated way to be effective." (Tim Mahar, community activist, Violet Town, in a submission to the Chair of the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities).

Community Building Initiative

The Community Building Initiative is a place-based program of the Department for Victorian Communities. Its development was informed by the learnings from the original Community Capacity Building Initiative which include:

- Recognising that capacity building takes time. As a result, the Community Building Initiative now has a four-year time frame.
- Building in evaluation early in the program. Each successful Community Building Initiative site now receives an evaluation and reporting framework up front as part of the funding agreement.
- Improving the expression of interest process through a negotiated process at the local level that involves all players in the early discussions and planning.

The new Community Building Initiative projects are:

- Terang and District in partnership with Terang and Mortlake Health Service.
- Mount Rouse and District's Community Advancement Project MADCAP in partnership with South West Healthcare.
- Community facilitator for A Sustainable Future for Portarlington.
- Community of Lorne in partnership with the Barwon Corangamite Country Fire Authority.
- Grantville and District Business and Tourism Association Inc in partnership with Nyora and District, with funds managed by South Gippsland Shire Council.
- Building a Stronger Community in Cann River and District in partnership with Orbost and District and East Gippsland Shire Council.
- Latrobe Seven Small Townships.
- Meredith and Haddon Community Houses: The Conduit within and between Communities in partnership with Ross Creek and Golden Plains Shire Council.
- People, Places and Pipes in partnership with Edenhope Information Bays and Horsham Rural City Council.
- Alpine Shire Small Town Advisory Committees.
- Cobram.
- Kinglake Ranges Community Building Initiative.
- Buloke Shire Open for Business in partnership with Donald/Watchem Building for the Future.
- Kerang Community Plan.
- Inglewood and Bridgewater on Loddon.
- Whittlesea Township.
- Garfield and Bunyip.
- Coastal Communities Coming Together.
- Upper Yarra Community Building Initiative in partnership with Yarra Ranges Shire Council.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

It is impressive to see that in the new Community Building Initiative projects there is now emphasis on:

- Neighbourhood community planning with local government, and partnerships between communities, local government, non-government organisations and business.
- Built in evaluation and sustainability planning.
- Community-driven initiatives.
- Longer timeframes.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Neighbourhood Renewal has become a model for community strengthening. Originally conceived to improve public housing, this program is administered by the Office of Housing in the Department of Human Services. It is now aimed at narrowing the gap in power and resources between the most disadvantaged communities in Victoria (specifically those living in public housing) and the rest of the state.

Neighbourhood Renewal tackles local causes of disadvantage and is focused on people in the places where they live, learn, work and play. It has a process that engages residents and fosters partnerships between government, non-government organisations, business, service providers and the local community. Its broad objectives include:

- Increasing people's pride and participation.
- Enhancing housing and the physical environment.
- Lifting employment and learning opportunities and expanding local economies.
- Improving personal safety and reducing crime.
- Promoting health and wellbeing.
- Improving government responsiveness, especially where government services and infrastructure are provided.

Neighbourhood Renewal is an established program that has been well evaluated. Evaluation results of 15 projects show:

- High community participation in Neighbourhood Renewal. Residents make up 40 to 50 per cent of the local governance structures of most projects.
- Since 2002–03 the program has created more than 1000 community job places. Sixty per cent of participants in the Community Jobs Program have moved into ongoing employment, education or training.
- Nearly 60 public housing tenants have been employed under the Public Tenant Employment Program.
- Eleven community business enterprises are already operating in Neighbourhood Renewal areas.
- Twelve new and established enterprises are being supported in a project jointly funded by the Department of Human Services, the Department for Victorian Communities and the Brotherhood of St Laurence.
- 2500 public housing properties have been upgraded and improved, 130 new public housing properties built, and about 2000 Sustainable Energy Authority of Victoria energy improvements have been made.
- Public housing turnover, vacancies and rent arrears are down in 80 per cent of Neighbourhood Renewal areas.
- Crimes against property are down in 70 per cent of Neighbourhood Renewal areas, crimes against people are down in 50 per cent of areas, and recorded offences are down in 60 per cent of areas.
- In some crime ‘hotspots’ total offences are down by up to 42 per cent.

While these statistics are important, a closer look at the changes at any particular site highlights the difference that this program has made to people’s lives.

The Atherton Gardens Estate visited by the Committee is located in Fitzroy in Melbourne. It has an extremely diverse population of people from more than 50 countries, of whom 11 per cent are Australian born. The largest population group is Vietnamese born (34 per cent), followed by people of Chinese background (17 per cent).

Neighbourhood Renewal has made significant improvements to people's lives at Atherton Gardens:

- Two thirds of residents believed their housing had got better;
- More than 30 per cent said their physical environment had improved; and
- More than half felt safer in their neighbourhood. This last result is significant given that the crime rates in 2002 were five times the state average.

“Atherton Gardens is a 100% better. Since the introduction of Neighbourhood Renewal I have lived here since the flats were built and I have never been better. I feel safe and people talk to each other these days”. (Josip Langer, Chair, Atherton Gardens Residents Association).

Case Study: e-ACE

The Atherton Gardens Estate now operates a successful community enterprise called e-ACE. A community enterprise is a not-for-profit initiative that combines community developments with business principles and practices.

e-ACE emerged from an initiative where discarded computers and information technology (IT) training were made available to public housing residents. The first objective was to recycle computers and now more than 550 recycled and refurbished computers with software, email, intranet and internet access have been installed in residents' homes. Three hundred residents have been given a basic 10-hour training session offered in different languages. Six residents living on the estate are currently employed to work on the intranet site to roll out the network, run the help desk, provide training to residents, and manage the website. In all 13 residents have been employed on the project. These IT services are now sold to outside organisations including the Community Bank and the City of Yarra. This project is expanded on in Appendix A.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

The Committee was inspired by its visits to Neighbourhood Renewal and discussions with Neighbourhood Renewal staff and residents. We visited:

- Wendouree West in Ballarat;
- Parkland Estate in Shepparton;
- Atherton Gardens in Fitzroy;

- Eaglehawk in Bendigo;
- Maidstone and Braybrook in the City of Maribyrnong;
- Morwell East in the Latrobe Valley;
- Norlane and Corio in the City of Greater Geelong.

From our site visits and discussions, the documentation and evaluation studied, the Committee considers that some of these projects' key success factors can be applied to all community strengthening initiatives.

They include:

- Emphasis on social justice.
- Community ownership of needs, priorities and solutions.
- Longer timeframes.
- Built-in sustainability planning.
- Inclusive processes.
- Operating principles based on trust and respect for everyone's contribution.
- The creation of training and employment opportunities for resident development.
- Support across all levels of government and investment in connected local action.
- Long-term planning combined with quick wins on certain community needs.
- Integrated block funding obtained to meet community needs, priorities and solutions.
- Flexibility on all levels by all involved.
- Opportunities for residents to tell the stories of how community strengthening has improved their lives.
- Built-in evaluation and measurement, with residents who experience the results taking part in the evaluation.
- Identifying and achieving the economic, social and environmental issues that are important to residents.
- Best use of government investment so that it effectively improves people's lives in real terms.
- Communities having a real say in decision making.

- Learnings, skills, knowledge and decisions shared amongst residents and the broader community.
- Bottom up top down negotiating processes for government and other sector investments.

Neighbourhood Renewal is the most effective community strengthening program the Committee observed. So the questions for government are:

- How can this model be translated across government and across communities?
- Is it possible to achieve neighbourhood renewal without focusing on public housing as the major common interest for people and major infrastructure investment?
- How do neighbourhood planning and local government planning inform and enhance one another?

Whittlesea Community Futures

The City of Whittlesea is the fastest growing municipality in the north. It is recognised by Melbourne 2030 as a growth area of significance. The population is expected to increase from 127 000 to 250 000 by 2030.

Currently, there are only a handful of community organisations with services targeted to the municipality. These organisations are overstretched and struggle to provide support to vulnerable families.

In 2002 the Council and local community agencies began to investigate the current socio-economic circumstances for children, young people and families, and the minimum services and community facilities needed to support a growing municipality.

Up to 20 community organisations worked closely together over 18 months to prepare a plan for delivering essential services, *The Strategic Service Plan for Human Service Delivery in the City of Whittlesea, 2004*. This document provided a foundation for local community agencies and the City of Whittlesea to act on the identified priorities for community services and facilities.

In June 2005 the Department for Victorian Communities joined this collaboration to create the Whittlesea Flagship Partnership. This encouraged the Department of Human Services, Department of Education and Training, Department of Sustainability and Environment, VicUrban, and others to come on board.

The partnership's aim is to improve outcomes for children, young people and families, with a focus on disadvantage in Thomastown and Lalor and new urban development in the growth areas of Epping North and Mernda.

The North West Regional Management Forum has made this partnership a priority, ensuring that it is incorporated into State Government planning structures.

The next step is to involve the community in developing plans for their neighbourhoods.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

The Committee has not yet visited the Whittlesea Community Futures project, but it is included as an example of another place-based initiative happening in the Melbourne metropolitan area. A striking feature of this project is the way it has been instigated and led by the non-government organisations with a presence in the area. This emphasises the leadership role that non-government organisations can play in strengthening communities together with the State Government, communities and business.

There are several other place-based initiatives supported by the Department for Victorian Communities. These include the Frankston, Caroline Springs, and Braybrook Partnerships. The Department for Victorian Communities works together with local government, the non-government sector and business to facilitate community planning in new growth or disadvantaged communities. To ensure long term success, it is important that these initiatives also engage communities in determining their needs, priorities and solutions.

The Community Demonstration Projects, Community Capacity Building Initiatives, and Neighbourhood Renewal all tell a similar story. Place-based approaches have the potential to change people's lives in ways that traditional approaches have not. However to work well and be sustainable they require:

- A whole-of-government focus at the state level and a partnership that connects locally with the community, local government, non-government sector and business.
- Residents participating in a suitable evaluation of community strengthening achievements, to verify that the initiative is continually helping to make peoples lives better.

- Local Government leadership to develop inclusive community plans and an effective link between place-based plans and the overall local government community plan.
- Engagement processes that are based on a culture that supports and respects people's contributions and ownership of the project.
- The development of decision making process and structures that allow negotiation between community needs, priorities and solutions ('bottom up' processes) and government systems and resource allocation ('top down' processes).
- Integrated funding at the place level that is not tied to programs or grants and is accessible by communities to meet their priorities and solutions.

Successful place-based initiatives demonstrate clearly that one of the key challenges for a government committed to *doing government differently* is:

*"How do we make the shift in government services generally from working **on** communities to working **with** them."* (The Hon Candy Broad, MLC, Minister for Local Government and Housing, Victorian Health Care Conference, 2006)

Increasing participation and access

Strong communities feature high levels of participation in community life (both social and economic) by all community members. Hence, increasing the participation of groups within the community that may be marginalised is an important element of community strengthening.

A Fairer Victoria (2005) is concerned with addressing the circumstances that prevent individuals from fully participating in social and economic life, including low income, poor health, unemployment, poor housing, lack of skills, family breakdown and poor access to services. This section will focus on several of the governments initiatives aimed at increasing participation and access for all Victorians. In particular the report will consider:

- Volunteering as a mechanism to increase social and economic participation;
- Programs and initiatives aimed at increasing participation in employment and training;
- Access as it applies to the disability community; and
- Programs and initiatives aimed at improving access to services such as transport and finance.

These programs and initiatives are described under:

Increasing participation in volunteering

- Volunteering Small Grants
- Volunteering Support Grants

Increasing participation in employment

- Community Enterprise (incorporating Just Romans and Sorghum Sisters)
- Workforce Participation Partnerships

Access for the disability community

- Darebin Council Disability Action Plan
- Access all Abilities Program (incorporating the Wimmera Access all Abilities Project)

Access to transport

- Transport Connections (incorporating Wimmera Transport Connections)

Access to finance

- Saver Plus

Increasing participation in volunteering

Volunteering not only provides benefits to communities but also strengthens networks, creates opportunities and reduces isolation for people who participate. In Victoria, up to one million volunteers, one third of the state's adult population, give more than 220 million hours and provide around \$10 billion worth of unpaid services each year. Many of these volunteers are seniors or people who are not in full time paid work. In small communities, many people already volunteer. Hence it is important to ensure that the necessary support and resources are provided for people to sustain their volunteering work as well as attract new volunteers.

The Ministerial Advisory Council for Senior Victorians is currently conducting a consultation project on the role in and contribution to senior Victorians in volunteering. This project will consider the:

- Barriers to participation.
- Support needs to maintain and extend participation.

- Ways to give recognition to their volunteer contributions.

The Department for Victorian Communities supports volunteering through its Community Enterprise and Volunteering Strategy that incorporates:

- The Victorian Volunteer Small Grants which provide direct funding to community organisations to attract new volunteers from diverse backgrounds and create new volunteering opportunities.
- The Victorian Government's recently advertised Volunteer Support Grants, specifically designed to support, extend and sustain volunteer participation in communities across the state.

Volunteer Small Grants

Launched in 2002 the Volunteer Small Grants provide \$5000 to community organisations to support practical ways of attracting volunteers. The money has been used by community organisations to:

- Organise a community event or celebration.
- Provide education and training for volunteers.
- Attract new volunteers.
- Purchase essential assets like computers.
- Strengthen organisational support for volunteers.

These grants have been welcomed and used well by volunteers and volunteer organisations, particularly from regional and rural Victoria, low socio-economic areas, the disability community and culturally and linguistically diverse groups.

Some examples (expanded in Appendix A) of how organisations use these grants are:

- Forming Lasting Friendships, where school children from Noojee Primary School have become 'buddies' to residents of the Fairview Home for the Aged in Warragul.
- The Coatesville Uniting Church Youth club disco, Holy Smoke Chill Zone, which provided volunteer training and mentoring and essential equipment.
- Volunteer Umpires Blow the Whistle for their Community, where one-on-one coaching trains young volunteers to umpire sporting activities.

- Volunteering – It’s Interchanging, where Interchange, a not-for-profit community-based organisation that supports more than 450 children and young adults with disabilities and their families, recruited 20 young men from Melbourne’s outer eastern suburbs, who now see volunteering as one of their favourite things to do.

Volunteer Support Grants

The larger Volunteer Support Grants aim to support volunteer participation at organisation, community and state-wide levels. These were developed through a partnership between the Department for Victorian Communities and the Municipal Association of Victoria, in consultation with local governments and community organisations across Victoria. These grants encourage new partnerships and networks between and within local governments, local community groups and business organisations. The grants will provide resources and support systems for volunteers where they do not currently exist, as well as strengthening existing volunteer support services and networks.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities’ observations and comments

The Committee considers the Volunteer Small Grants are an extremely effective community strengthening strategy. They are community driven and respond to community needs when the volunteer communities need it, in the form of rolling and ongoing grants. The grants section of the Department for Victorian Communities has worked effectively with community organisations to make the grants process as effective and simple as possible. Communities can access them easily because of the guidelines, paperwork, accountability, timing and quick turnaround between application and grant.

However the next stage of Volunteers Small Grants can be improved further by:

- Broadening the guidelines to provide start up funds for new organisations.
- Allowing some funds to be used to make it easier for people to take part, like paying for travel costs, childcare, general care and support.
- Authorising the Department for Victorian Communities’ Local Teams to administer small grants that are particular to a local area.

- Simplifying the accountability process more by allowing Incorporated Boards of Community Organisations to sign off that grants were spent on allocated purposes.

Increasing opportunities for employment

While generating employment itself is not necessarily a community strengthening initiative, strong employment is linked to strong skilled communities. Community strengthening initiatives can create opportunities for people without access to training or employment, by giving them a chance to increase their vocational skills, experience and get confidence to participate. The Department for Victorian Communities supports people in this way through its Community Enterprise strategy and its Workforce Participation Partnerships. This complements the major employment, training and development initiatives carried out by the Department of Education and Training and Regional Development Victoria.

Community enterprise

The Community Strengthening and Volunteering Division in the Department for Victorian Communities supports community enterprises, like e-ACE profiled in the previous section on Neighbourhood Renewal and Just Romans profiled in this coming section, through its Community Enterprise and Volunteering Strategy. This promotes the development of community enterprise, community and business partnerships, and engagement with the not-for-profit and philanthropic sectors.

The Department for Victorian Communities considers a social or community enterprise as an organisation that:

- Delivers social and environmental outcomes;
- Uses business methods in its planning and development;
- Sets out to be financially viable; and
- Puts profits back to develop the enterprise further.

Most importantly, a community enterprise is an organisation whose core business has a social rather than financial purpose.

Community enterprise under this model is viewed as a work training environment that trains people so they can go on to work in specific industries such as catering rather than providing large scale permanent employment opportunities within the enterprise.

Current initiatives for developing community enterprises focus on achieving employment and training opportunities for disadvantaged people and communities. These include:

- The Community Enterprise Grants, small grants available to not-for-profit and community organisations to test the feasibility of a community enterprise.
- A partnership agreement with the Brotherhood of St. Laurence to develop community enterprises in Neighbourhood Renewal areas, for example, Just Romans.
- A partnership agreement with Adult Multicultural Education Services to develop community enterprises with recently settled migrant groups, for example, Sorghum Sisters.

An interim evaluation of the Community Enterprise Strategy by Four Pillars Consulting² found that the Brotherhood of St Laurence, with Neighbourhood Renewal, is supporting community enterprise development in 12 Neighbourhood Renewal communities across Victoria by providing tools, mentoring, support and seeding funds. This has involved supporting ideas that were developed through a grass roots community development process, and exploring their feasibility with the intention of developing an operational enterprise. The project will contribute to an understanding of how to develop a community enterprise, as well as the establishment of a significant number of community enterprises.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence model uses the community building infrastructure developed by Neighbourhood Renewal. This includes existing local decision making arrangements and the Neighbourhood Renewal network of employment and learning coordinators to promote and enable community enterprise development activities. The approach by the Brotherhood of St Laurence to community enterprise focuses on work training models, both paid and unpaid. It also emphasises volunteering and community development as components of the enterprises.

In the context of Neighbourhood Renewal, the Brotherhood of St Laurence considers that community enterprise must be driven by the need for highly disadvantaged people to get pathways into employment. Vocational training like the experiences offered through community enterprises gives them an opportunity to complete

² This is an internal report used with the permission of the Department for Victorian Communities and is not available to the public.

accredited training in a real workplace with very little focus on desk-based learning. Community enterprise can create a bridge to paid work for many people who are currently not being helped effectively out of long-term unemployment.

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence also regards place as important in the development of community enterprise. A place-based approach ensures that the enterprise is influenced by those who live in the community, is tailored to the needs of that community, and can positively impact on the self-esteem of the whole community developing the enterprise, not just individual participants.

Case study: Just Romans

Just Romans is a community enterprise from the Neighbourhood Renewal Parkside Estate in Shepparton. It began with a resident supporting a newly-arrived family who urgently needed window coverings in their public housing property, because the Office of Housing removes all soft furnishings when properties become vacant. That one act of support in the community flourished into a community enterprise funded by the Sustainable Energy Association of Victoria and the Community Jobs Program. It employs eight members from the Shepparton community who had been long-term unemployed, often with a history of difficult social, medical and family issues.

Just Romans has been able to grow in a viable way. The enterprise now sells blinds at full price to other Neighbourhood Renewal projects in the Seymour, Chadstone and Ballarat areas. There is further information about this project in Appendix A.

The interim evaluation of the Community Enterprise Strategy by Four Pillars Consulting also considered the Adult Multicultural Education Services Partnerships. It found that Adult Multicultural Education considers that community enterprise helps provide work and training environments for culturally and linguistically diverse communities in an active business and industry context.

Newly-arrived refugees often face systemic barriers to finding paid work and have low personal funds and assets and very low bases of personal capital when they arrive in Australia. With little or no formal education, low skills and insufficient English, these people have few structured opportunities to get into formal work.

Case study: Sorghum Sisters

Sorghum Sisters is a thriving, fully operational enterprise that produces and sells traditional Horn of Africa food with an Australian twist. A community enterprise supported by Adult Multicultural Education Services, it provides Somali and Eritrean women with work and training experience in an active industry setting from the kitchen of the Carlton Primary School.

Sorghum Sisters' employees are all mothers or grandmothers of children from the local primary school who previously had little contact with the school community. These women often come from war-ravaged homelands, experience significant social dislocation, and have little or no formal schooling. Women come together in the Sorghum Sisters enterprise to be trained by a qualified chef who adapts the program to suit their various literacy, language and social needs. The tailored package involves training in good work and business practices, food handling and English language skills.

This community enterprise offers vocational training to a target group that commonly slips between the gaps of typical employment and social support. There is more information about the enterprise in Appendix A.

Important features of the community enterprise model that make it suitable for overcoming employment barriers are:

- Training and support provided in a 'real' workplace environment.
- Sustained social support.
- Training and skills acquisition programs that can operate at a number of levels including full certificate courses, targeted short course training and long-term training support programs.
- The communities that are targeted for vocational training own and manage the enterprise.

The Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

The Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities has visited the following Neighbourhood Renewal sites that have community enterprises:

- The Tool Library at Braybrook Maidstone.
- Eaglehawk.

- Just Romans at North Shepparton.
- Furniture Works at Doveton.
- e-ACE at Atherton Gardens.

Community enterprises also emerge independently of Neighbourhood Renewal and support provided by the Department for Victorian Communities. The Committee has visited the following examples:

- Create in Geelong.
- Our Future Our Place at Morwell.
- Rupanyup Community Hotel.
- Laverton Café.

The Committee observed the following features of successful community enterprises:

- The development of confidence, work readiness and skills particularly of long-term unemployed people.
- Community enterprises that emerge from a place-based approach strengthen individuals and the community.
- Support for people moving from unemployment to work experience to training for employment in the open market.
- Providing an opportunity for training and employment of newly-arrived culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Some important outcomes observed by the Committee included:

- The achievement of social, economic and, in some cases, environmental benefits in local communities.
- Connecting government with the non-government, tertiary and business sectors at the local level to support community enterprise.
- Linking community enterprises into the broader framework of economic participation, employment and skill training, through close working relationships at the regional and local level between Regional Development Victoria, the Department of Human Services and the Department for Victorian Communities.
- If community enterprise is to be sustainable it is best generated from the bottom up rather than top down, so that that it builds on the communities strengths and fits the communities' needs, priorities and solutions.

- The most effective community enterprises are based on cooperation at the local and state level between all relevant government departments.

Workforce Participation Partnerships

“The projects are developed by talking to local employers and are run by local partnerships that bring together industry, local government, training providers, employment services, community organisations, unions and employers. Funding is flexible and can be used for traineeships, apprenticeships, mentoring and other support, such as short-term rental or transport assistance” (The Hon Jacinta Allan, MLC, Minister for Employment and Youth Affairs, May 2006).

Workforce Participation Partnerships is a new initiative by Employment Programs in the People and Communities Advocacy Division in the Department for Victorian Communities. It provides resources for place or industry-based partnerships between industry, unions, local government, employment services, training providers, and community organisations. Each partnership has to use its knowledge and skills to create effective and innovative solutions that increase workforce participation and address employer needs. The program addresses two priorities of the Victorian Government: increasing sustainable employment opportunities for Victorians facing significant barriers to work, and addressing areas of emerging labour and skill shortages. The funding to individual partnerships varies according to each one’s size, duration and scope and will be linked to the employment achievements.

Thirty-seven employment projects have been funded so far and are tailored to meet the demands of the local areas. They include:

- A project to help Indigenous Victorians enter building and construction apprenticeships;
- A Shepparton job seekers project to help young locals find work in agriculture and horticulture; and
- A project to help people in Gippsland find work in areas ranging from meat processing to child care.

This program illustrates another direction in community strengthening that encourages local partnerships to form between service providers. The government will willingly enter into funding negotiations with a local level partnership. This differs from the previous model of agencies and service providers competing against each another through an application process for funding. While, the program still contracts service delivery to a third party, it does it in a way that strengthens

partnerships between the non-government sector, local communities and government. In this way, the Workforce Participation Partnership Project becomes more than an employment program; it is an integral part of place-based community strengthening.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

The Workforce Participation Partnership gives employers and job network brokers' vital links to community initiatives. It is important that these community strengthening programs (including community enterprise) are not seen mainly as employment programs, but more as providing opportunities for overcoming barriers by increasing confidence, skills and work experience. Even the jobs created in the initiative itself are best seen as stepping stones to employment beyond the project, rather than an ongoing job within the project.

It is crucial that the Workforce Participation Partnership Program and the Community Enterprise Program work together and in partnership with Regional Development Victoria to make sure that people in disadvantaged communities receive the best employment and training opportunities available.

Access for the disability community

"A community which includes people with a disability is not some experiment of over-bold social engineers; it is a real community that we have now, waiting to be acknowledged. Accessibility is not an experiment we can or should defer, while we procrastinate over whether this or that is really the right time or the right way to try it". (Dr Sev Ozdowski OAM, Former Human Rights and Opportunity Commissioner).

There are more than 3.9 million people with disabilities living in Australia, or 20 per cent of the population. There are also 2.6 million carers. In Victoria there are 987 000 people with disabilities, or 19.9 per cent of the population, and 609 400 carers.

While people with a disability receive most of their care and assistance from family, carers and friends, local communities - including local councils - supply many day-to-day supports. These include health and community services, recreation, education, employment, transport, housing and income.

In *A Fairer Victoria (2005)* the Government outlined a range of strategies to make Victoria a more accessible place for people with a disability. The State Disability Plan also outlines the right of people with

disabilities to live and participate in the community on an equal basis with other citizens of Victoria. The State Disability Plan emphasises that to create the most opportunities for community participation, the government, community and business must support communities to be more inclusive and accessible.

Many local governments across Victoria help communities become more inclusive through:

- Disability action plans being widely implemented.
- Disability Advisory Committees operating in many places.
- Local governments increasing access and inclusion in the community by adopting a whole-of-council approach.

Councillor Geoff Lake, President of the Municipal Association of Victoria, recently emphasised the importance of a cooperative state government local government approach to ensuring access and inclusion are integral to every council's entire operations. Councillor Lake suggested that the integration into broader community life of the disability community is assisted by councils:

- Determination to make up for the gaps in services that have been identified in infrastructure.
- Adoption of a works program to make buildings more accessible.
- Genuine interest in hearing from the community through the Disability Advisory Committees.
- Determination to try different ways of ensuring access and inclusion.

Accessibility to buildings, homes, schools and roads, public spaces and transport directly contribute to the ability of people of all ages with disabilities to do what people without disabilities take for granted – go to school, go to work and go out to socialise.

This section profiles:

- Darebin Councils Disability Policy and Action Plan; and
- The Access for All Abilities program and a description of a local recreation project in the Wimmera.

Darebin Council Disability Policy and Action Plan

Darebin Council has an active Disability Working Party that works on access and inclusion for disability. The Working Party includes people with disability, carers, disability agencies and council staff. It is

supported by the council's full time Disability Action Coordinator, who ensures parallel staff development, and an inclusion and access culture and management.

The council's achievements include disability audits of local shopping centres involving local business and shopping centre managers to ensure that local shopping centre and facilities are accessible to all. The local council and the Community Support Fund also funded the refurbishment of Northcote Town Hall as a community arts centre and meeting place is fully accessible to people with disability.

Access for All Abilities

Participation in sport and recreation helps people to be healthier, build networks, increase self-esteem and explore their potential. By promoting more recreation environments that all people can enjoy, the Access for All Abilities Program helps build stronger and more inclusive communities.

Access for All Abilities is funded by the Disability Services Division in the Department of Human Services, and managed by Sport and Recreation Victoria in the Department for Victorian Communities.

The program increases the number and overall availability of sport and recreation environments for people with a disability. It works to influence local planning processes and encourage more development of accessible sport and recreation environments.

Access for All Abilities has three components:

- A network of 23 Access for All Abilities Program providers (including councils and community organisations) to deliver of sport and recreation environments that include people with a disability right around Victoria. This network links with other key community-based organisations like health centres, neighbourhood houses, local government, sporting groups and disability service providers to make it possible for people with disabilities to enjoy sport and leisure in their community.
- A strategic partnership provides advice to Sport and Recreation Victoria on relevant access issues for people with a disability.
- The Access for All Abilities Initiative Fund makes funds available to projects that come up with original and lasting solutions to include more people with a disability in sport and recreation.

Case study: Wimmera

Wimmera Uniting Care, the Access for All Abilities program provider in the Grampians region, had recognised a correlation between the lack of positive media images of people with a disability in sport and low participation levels in sport and recreation by people with a range of abilities.

The agency initiated a project in partnership with the Wimmera Mail Times to develop feature stories on 10 athletes of all abilities participating in 10 different recreation and sporting activities.

The success of the newspaper articles became the platform for a travelling photographic exhibition formally launched by the Minister for Sport and Recreation in December 2004. A booklet based on the Stories About Ability newspaper articles was then developed with Sport and Recreation Victoria and launched in November 2005.

Over 3000 Stories About Ability booklets were initially published and distributed, and a second print run did not meet demand. It features people with and without a disability taking part in community recreation activities, and tells stories from a participant's and sports club's perspective.

The project's main achievement is that people with a disability now have a greater choice of recreation activities. More sports clubs and associations have enjoyed the benefits of becoming more open, accessible and inclusive through their connections with the project.

This project confirmed the power of a simple, positive message and increased understanding of the benefits of using sport and recreation as a vehicle to increase social connectedness can reap continuing rewards.

There is more information about this example in Appendix A.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

On its site visits the Committee was particularly impressed with Darebin Council's Disability Policy and Action Plan. However the overall participation of the disability community in community strengthening is spasmodic and needs to be improved. Participation is still often defined on a medical model focused on service and cost, rather than a social framework on advocacy and investment where accessibility is defined as those things that 'disable' the disability community from participating. To achieve full participation and empowerment of the disability community in community

strengthening, the Committee believes there must be a systematic change that can only be achieved through an integrated community-wide approach. Developing this approach will be an important challenge of the Office for Disability to be created in the Department for Victorian Communities.

Access to transport - Transport Connections

Increasing participation in community life is also about ensuring access to services that enable participation. For example access to affordable transport.

The Victorian Government established the Transport Connections Project in 2003 to address, in a series of pilots, the access and mobility needs of communities and individuals who did not have suitable and reliable transport in rural and regional Victoria. The Transport Connections Program supports nine pilot projects and is run jointly by the Department of Human Services (DHS), Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development, Department for Victorian Communities and Department of Education and Training.

This interconnected approach helps to work flexibly to address the many aspects of transport disadvantage. These include:

- People who don't have adequate transport;
- Communities or places that are transport disadvantaged; and
- Providing commercial and community transport services to meet the needs of people who are transport disadvantaged (DHS, 2006).

The mix of these different dimensions of people, place and provision varies in each pilot project and requires a different response. The Transport Connections Program model allows Government agencies to work collaboratively to address local issues in a coordinated and flexible way. The Transport Connections Program also allows the Department of Human Services, Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development and Department for Victorian Communities' regional officers to be involved at the local level through the local pilot project steering committees (DHS, 2006).

An evaluation of the program highlighted the challenges to the future outcomes of the Transport Connections Program:

- The need to clarify and identify results to be achieved, and to improve data collection.
- A transition strategy for pilot projects to increase in scale and ensure their sustainability.
- The need to put projects in a state-wide framework to respond to transport disadvantage.
- Assess the transport regulations that inhibit flexibility and responsiveness.

Case study – Wimmera Transport Connections

Wimmera Transport Connections is one of the nine pilot projects. Auspiced by the Wimmera Volunteers Inc, its coordinator is based at the Wimmera Volunteers' offices in Horsham. The project's main aims are to;

- Improve access and mobility for people experiencing transport disadvantage in the Wimmera region.
- Develop community-orientated, inclusive and flexible transport services in the Wimmera Region.
- Make better use of existing transport services and resources.
- Address isolation and alienation caused by a lack of transport.

There is a steering committee made up of local government, health service providers, transport providers and representatives of state government departments and state-funded projects, like Rural Access Wimmera and the Wimmera Primary Care Partnership.

Achievements of some successfully implemented projects include:

- Increasing recognition by state and local governments' of the need for flexible transport solutions in rural and regional areas.
- Awareness of existing community opportunities to make better use of available transport resources that are available, including school buses.
- More enthusiastic and positive discussion about opportunities at the local level.

The key learnings from this initiative are:

- Success is more likely when partners continue to collaborate beyond planning into implementation, and community ownership is sustained.
- Resources are specific to a project and don't have to be shared.
- Funding is flexible to develop and implement smaller projects without having to source external funding.
- Community transport may not be viable and may always require supplementary income from government or other sources. Providing transport services to our most isolated and disadvantaged rural community members is often more expensive because of the distances involved.

There is more about this example in Appendix A.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

The Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities visited Wimmera Transport Connections in its early stage in May 2005 when school bus transport was being varied to enable young people to stay after school in Horsham to be involved in arts and recreational activities. At that time the project committee and staff were concerned that the project was not financially sustainable and would be passed around different departments. This highlights the current difficulty in scaling up pilot projects to a sustainable change in government service delivery that meets community needs and requires joined-up government approach and funding.

The Committee welcomes the recent announcement in *A Fairer Victoria Progress and Next Steps (2006)* of \$18.3 million over four years to build on and extend the Transport Connections Program. Funds will help communities get the best out of existing community transport services. This includes both the coordination of current resources such as public transport, school buses and volunteer drivers, as well as improving access to railway stations, transport interchanges and community services.

This is a good example of 'Doing Government Differently' and working *with* rather than *on* communities. Local communities welcome it warmly as a demonstration of community strengthening that is relevant to their community's transport needs and involves a partnership

approach between community, local and state government and the private sector.

Access to financial products and services

Some groups in the broader community do not have equal access to financial products and services. Low income earners, small business and non-government organisations often cannot get suitable low-cost, fair and safe financial products and services from mainstream providers.

Saver Plus

Saver Plus is a matched savings program in Frankston and Shepparton, run through a partnership between the ANZ Bank and the Brotherhood of St Laurence, since July 2003. It is a matched savings scheme aimed at families with children starting high school to pay for education expenses such as computers, special tuition, camps, excursions, and uniforms. The aim is to help low-income families develop money management skills and save for educational purposes through a financial literacy and matched savings scheme.

Saver Plus recognises that it is crucial for people on low incomes to develop a savings plan to manage their vulnerability, create a buffer in case of unexpected expenses and make lump sum purchases. It does this by:

- Providing an incentive to save through matching each dollar saved by two dollars from the bank.
- Providing support through financial literacy training and relationship managers.
- A compulsory financial training course.
- A requirement to spend the fund on educational assets such as computers, books etc.

This matched savings scheme focuses on education expenses because the partners identified education as critical to broadening life chances, community participation and participation in the work force.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence provides counselling, a relationship manager and a face-to-face relationship with participants. The Brotherhood has contributed its expertise, access to target groups and recruited participants through secondary schools, which has been vital to the successful development of the project. ANZ provides the product

and funding, including support for an evaluation by RMIT University. ANZ helps pay for a project manager employed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, as well as providing its expertise and services.

In 2005 the Victorian Government provided financial support to the Saver Plus pilot program in Shepparton, and this enabled Berry Street Victoria to translate the services into Arabic, thus opening up the program to new communities in Shepparton. The Program will also be expanded to Frankston and six more sites across Victoria.

Results for participants to date include:

- Learning about money and developing a savings habit.
- Relief of pressure and stress and feeling more in control of their lives.
- Sense of achievement in reaching a goal and increased self-confidence.
- Positive impact on families and children, especially the positive difference their matched savings participation has made to the child's education experience.
- The increase in their child/children's interest in saving.
- A sense of hope for the future by planning further savings goals.

Key success factors include:

- The partnership between ANZ and the community organisations. Each partner organisation brought unique and valuable perspectives and skills that contributed to the program's success.
- The role of the financial literacy education program in helping participants to achieve long-term goals. At the start of the project, 88 per cent felt that their main motivator for joining the program was the matched fund. At the end of the project, this had dropped to 44 per cent as participants realised the value of the financial education.
- Participants highly valued the support provided by the relationship managers.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

The Committee sees Saver Plus as an example of an emerging approach to asset building, based on the premise that people and families with an asset base are more likely to remain strong during periods of hardship. In other words, hardship does not become entrenched.

There are other examples aimed at providing access to equitable services. For example the Westpac Bank has formed a partnership with Our Community to provide to community groups:

- Access to a Westpac banking and financial services package called “Community Solutions” that offers fee free banking and other tailored products and services.
- A high yield investment account that gives Victorian community service groups an increase in their interest payments of approximately \$2 million each year with a typical mid-sized agency earning an extra \$10,000 over a year.

Supporting communities of identity

Participation in communities is usually built around:

- Place (home, school, work, shops – geographical communities)
- Interest (recreation, sport, hobbies, pets)
- Identity (religion, culture, age, gender, etc.)

These are not necessarily related. For example, communities that form around specific interest or identity are not necessarily located in geographical places.

Communities of identity include, but are not limited to, culturally and linguistically diverse groups, Indigenous groups, and younger and older people.

The People and Community Advocacy Division in the Department for Victorian Communities supports communities of identity, who are generally under-represented, to participate in the broader community. The Division includes:

- Aboriginal Affairs Victoria
- Office of Women’s Policy
- Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs
- Office of Senior Victorians
- Veterans’ Unit
- Office for Youth
- Employment Programs.

The Community Support Fund and other grant programs in the Department for Victorian Communities support community strengthening in communities of identity through state or local level initiatives.

Other state departments fund projects that improve the lives of people in communities of identity. For example, the Department of Human Services and VicHealth fund community strengthening projects to improve health in Indigenous and aged communities.

Programs, projects and initiatives profiled in this section are only some of many 'community of identity' programs:

Indigenous Communities

- A New Partnership with Indigenous Victorians
- Community Dreaming Leadership Project

Young People

- *Youthcentral*
- The Young Parents Access Project

Cultural and Linguistically Diverse Communities

- Enterprising Women

Women

- Women Who Mean Business

This report is not intended to provide examples covering all communities of identity. It focuses on examples the Committee has seen and discussed and believes suggest ways forward in community strengthening.

Indigenous communities

There are 38 Indigenous communities around Victoria. Many of the people in these communities experience high levels of disadvantage in employment, school retention, sense of feeling safe, mental and physical health, housing and income. Disadvantage in Indigenous communities is compounded by their lack of equity in power and resources, and in many cases, past and current social marginalisation of Indigenous communities from the broader community.

The community and government are increasingly aware that top down government interventions have not succeeded in breaking the cycle of disadvantage. They don't succeed partly because traditionally there is little Indigenous community ownership of the needs, priorities and solutions. Community strengthening processes and projects led by Indigenous people in partnership with governments, non-government and business sector are beginning to deliver better outcomes for some Indigenous communities. However, much more has to be done to ensure that Indigenous communities get access to community strengthening initiatives, where they own the needs, priorities and solutions and are well-resourced to have an organisational capacity to contribute.

This section profiles the ground breaking concept of a new partnership with Indigenous Victorians introduced in *A Fairer Victoria (2005)* and being developed by Aboriginal Affairs Victoria in the Department for Victorian Communities in consultation with Indigenous communities. It also profiles a partnership project, the Community Dreaming Leadership Project (expanded in Appendix A) that is an example of where community strengthening has delivered better results for young Indigenous Victorians in their local rural community.

A new partnership with Indigenous Victorians

In *A Fairer Victoria (2005)*, the Government has committed to develop a new partnership with Indigenous Victorians that provides for a more effective working relationship with the Victorian Indigenous community. The work currently being done by Aboriginal Affairs Victoria within the Department for Victorian Communities is based on the community strengthening findings from Vinson's study on disadvantage, *Community Adversity and Resilience: the distribution of social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales and the mediating role of social cohesion (2004)*, and Professor Fiona Stanley's principles for overcoming Indigenous disadvantage:

- An all-encompassing community-centred approach, locally and regionally driven, that involves community members in setting priorities and planning.
- Developing partnerships within and across Indigenous services, communities and government, which help to prevent disadvantage.
- Establishing an agreed framework for joint planning across government agencies and sectors to promote children's developmental health and community wellbeing.

- Creating funding frameworks that are accountable but flexible in accommodating local needs.
- Getting people actively involved and supporting key community leaders and interested parties at the local level.
- Investing in prevention programs that are based on evidence and respect Indigenous culture, and which can be put into action throughout the Indigenous population.
- Supporting all prevention work by measuring and checking how people respond.
- Ensuring that Indigenous personnel have ongoing training and development.

Aboriginal Affairs Victoria will work with Victoria's Indigenous communities to translate these principles into a place-based and negotiated approach to Indigenous community strengthening. Research suggests that this approach may improve outcomes for Indigenous communities and the broader community.

Case study - The Community Dreaming Leadership Project

This project illustrates how local community strengthening initiatives can improve for the lives of Indigenous Victorians. The Community Dreaming Leadership Project was originally developed by the Winda Mara Aboriginal Corporation in 2001 to enhance the self confidence, resilience and leadership skills of young Indigenous people living in the Shire of Glenelg. It was funded by VicHealth and the Department for Victorian Communities.

The program's main aim is to promote young local Indigenous people's active involvement in future planning, community building and leadership, and to build collaborative partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations and community members to ensure the long-term future of the Winda Mara Aboriginal Cooperative. The success of the project in 2002 resulted in the training and activities being integrated into the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning senior school curriculum at two schools in 2003. The current project 2004-2006 is based in two secondary schools and an employment program in the Heywood/Portland area.

Both the original and the current program are coordinated into three phases. The first involves the young people exploring the relevance and meaning of community. This phase includes leadership camps, community workshops and community liaison and networking. In the second phase the young people design, manage and implement their

own individual community projects with the facilitators' support. The final review and celebration phase includes reviews, presentations and evaluation, and future planning.

The many outcomes from this program include:

- An increased sense of belonging.
- More flexible and persistent attitudes.
- Greater awareness of how to network with the wider community.
- Considerable exposure to a diversity of organisations.
- Positive feedback from the wider community and growing trust and confidence between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.
- Positive media exposure of young people in the community.

This case example is one of six community-based Indigenous leadership programs under the Victorian Indigenous Leadership Network, a strategy of the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation under its mental health policy. This leadership program is acknowledging the void and isolation that Aboriginal people experience about their future and the future of their culture in Victoria.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

The Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities held discussions with Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, and visited:

- Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Cooperative in Horsham.
- Ramahyuck Cooperative at Sale.
- Koori Resource and Information Centre in Shepparton.
- Academy of Sport Health and Education in Shepparton.

At each of these sites, the Committee talked with Indigenous communities who are developing and implementing programs that include education and training, employment, health and well-being, action against domestic violence and abuse, and youth sport and recreation. The committee also saw Indigenous leaderships taking initiatives to ensure a shift from focusing on 'Indigenous problems' to addressing community strengthening with Indigenous communities as a whole-of-government and whole-of-community issue.

All the Indigenous communities we visited wanted to:

- Improve their access to community strengthening information and resources.
- Have a stronger say in policy and funding decisions that affect their lives and that of their communities.
- Build stronger and respectful community strengthening partnerships between Indigenous communities, State and Local Governments, non-government, philanthropic sectors and business.

The Committee welcomes the recent announcement in *A Fairer Victoria: Progress and Next Steps (2006)* that significantly increases the funds available over the next three years through Aboriginal Affairs Victoria for community strengthening with and in Indigenous communities.

The Committee believes that successful implementation of community strengthening with Indigenous communities requires a stronger partnership within and across Departments, local government and indigenous communities.

Projects like the Academy of Sport Health and Education in Shepparton which uses sport as the basis for general education and school to work transition for young Indigenous people, are producing early stage positive results in re entry to education, training and employment and reduced criminal justice interventions. The Academy of Sport Health and Education is a partnership between the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club, the University of Melbourne Education Faculty and with some financial support by the Department for Victorian Communities and the Department of Human Services.

In 2005 the Academy's retention rate was 65% and more than half of the graduating students have since gained employment. The Committee is delighted that *A Fairer Victoria: Progress and Next Steps (2006)* has provided 2.7 million dollars over 4 years for the Academy to continue and extend its program.

Overall, the Committee is concerned about the low levels of engagement of Indigenous people in community strengthening programs and the low percentage of funds accessed.

Indigenous communities experience historical and current social isolation from the 'whole' community. For example it took 15 years to establish the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club in 1997 and there has been a continual struggle for its acceptance by other clubs and the wider community. This has not been fully resolved even though the club has

advanced into the Murray Football League in 2006. Hence when government develops whole-of-government / whole-of-community approaches to community strengthening it needs to ensure that Indigenous communities have an equal share in decision making and access to resources and support.

The Committee believes there is an urgent need for community strengthening to continue to more fully include Indigenous communities. This means the excellent community strengthening and capacity building work being done by Aboriginal Affairs Victoria (AAV) needs to be better supported by and integrated with community strengthening initiatives across the Department for Victorian Communities. This is starting to occur between AAV and Workforce Participation and should be broadened.

Indigenous communities with whom we spoke considered that for community strengthening to work in their communities it must have three phases:

- Establishing community identity, community boundaries, community visions, community priorities and appropriate community leadership and governance processes.
- Identifying levels of collaboration required across local, regional, state and national levels consisting of leadership at all levels of the private (business) sector, civic (key community leaders), the three levels of government (bureaucratic), political (bipartisanship) and all these working effectively with the Indigenous leadership. This means each sector being willing to provide leadership in appropriate initiatives, and leadership that responds to priorities and direction identified by the Aboriginal leadership.
- The process of negotiating strategies, identifying and providing necessary resources where deficits exist and establishing and measuring benchmarks as a precursor to evaluation and to guide resource management.

Indigenous leadership and inclusion in community strengthening is essential to building collaborative partnerships and generating Indigenous ownership built on mutual esteem, trust and place. It is important that funding to support Indigenous leadership in community strengthening is made available and considered an investment.

“There is now a greater willingness and trust from Indigenous people to come into Council and share their concerns, and just as importantly, people recognise the boundaries of what the Council can provide. The (Indigenous) community has also become more involved in mainstream Council services so

there is less segregation". (Shirley Bourke, Aged and Disability Coordinator, Rural City of Swan Hill, 2006).

Young People

There are nearly one million Victorians aged between 12 and 25. Young people's energy, creativity and enthusiasms are essential characteristics of our society and need to be supported by government and other sectors. When a diverse range of young people participate in society it encourages community connectedness and promotes the unique perspectives and needs of the young. Meaningful youth participation involves young people becoming active in making decisions and taking action around issues that affect them and they care about. When young people own their decisions it increases their commitment and responsibility for the results of those decisions.

The youth initiatives profiled in this section are:

- *youthcentral*.
- The Young Parents Access Project.

youthcentral

youthcentral is a web-based initiative targeting young people. Since its launch in December 2004, *youthcentral* has brought together previously fragmented information for young people from across government departments into one -user-friendly online entry point.

A whole-of-government initiative led by the Office for Youth in the Department for Victorian Communities, this is a new engagement with young Victorians which has improved the access to and quality of specialised employment and training services and information.

Youthcentral:

- Delivers information and services.
- Supports community-driven responses.
- Increase opportunities for a diverse range of young Victorians to take part in government and local community life.

Its development was driven by:

- The Government's commitment through the Department for Victorian Communities to young people becoming more involved in their local communities.
- Young people's limited awareness of, and access to, coordinated information that meets their needs and interests.

- The continuing pockets of high levels of unemployment and marginalisation among young people in some local communities across the state.

The Department for Victorian Communities through the Office of Youth Affairs is the lead agency for this project. It runs collaborative partnerships with the Department of Human Services, Premier's Drug Prevention Council, Consumer Affairs Victoria, Privacy Victoria, Department of Education and Training, Department of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria University, TAFE, Multimedia Victoria, Vic Roads, Transport Accident Commission, Victorian Police, local shires and community organisations. The creation of a *Schoolies Week* sub-site has been a very successful initiative for young people, departments, schools and local communities.

Achievements to date include:

- Young Victorians now have access to improved skills and work experience, better community networks and quality information.
- Almost 3300 young people from all over Victoria have participated in creative content, design, multimedia productions, workshops and consultation.
- More than 110 individual young people have been actively employed on the project as roving reporters and editorial team members.
- User research with more than 1000 young people indicates the project is exceeding their expectations in information, design and opportunities to participate.
- *youthcentral* has performed well, often enjoying the highest weekly market share in visits and pages viewed of all other state government youth websites. There have been more than one million page impressions since the launch 18 months ago.

Outcomes include:

- Better chances for a wide range of young people to shape their community's future and develop skills and networks through locally driven *youthcentral* participation.
- Improved access for young people to relevant, youth-oriented information on local employment, training and services.
- New opportunities to forge local partnerships between young people, government, local businesses and their community.

A key learning is that young people, the community organisations that support young people and relevant departments all need to participate in the planning and design of the project. This initiative is expanded in Appendix A.

Young Parents Access Project

The suburb of Corio in Geelong's North, is one of Victoria's most disadvantaged communities. It has a higher than average number of low skilled workers, unemployed people and sole parent households.

In 2002, the Principal of Corio Bay Senior College approached the City of Greater Geelong with the idea of providing on-site child care for teenage mothers who had left school early. The aim was to help them complete their schooling and ensure they remain connected with the community.

A pilot was established in 2003, and in 2004 Corio Bay Senior College opened a registered childcare centre on-site. At present, 43 childcare places are offered, allowing young mothers who left school early because of pregnancy (and a few fathers) to complete their education. Some places are also available to the general community.

Results for students have been significant. Of the six students enrolled in the program in the first year, two have enrolled in TAFE courses, two have enrolled in university degrees, one student became a mother happily for the second time and one student discontinued her studies. From the present cohort of 30 young mothers, one student has been elected as school captain and another is demonstrating a level of academic excellence to achieve her goal of acceptance into a university science degree. Over a dozen students have also completed a range of short course TAFE qualifications, like food handling and first aid, to strengthen their job prospects.

Some key aspects of this project are:

- The need for government 'functional' programs to be flexible to accommodate locally-generated innovative solutions to local needs. It took some time for this project to be supported by state government because it didn't fit within one single portfolio area, since it's neither strictly education nor health.
- The important role that local government can play to support, make things happen locally and in connection to state government.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

Our Committee visited many programs and projects aimed at youth and spoke with project staff, young participants and often local government. These visits included:

- A presentation from the young people involved in *youthcentral* (profiled in this report).
- Advance Program in Horsham (NEXUS) - an excellent transport project for students in outlying areas who have problems getting to and from school.
- The Gippsland Mentoring Alliance whose vision is: 'Every Gippsland young person who needs a positive, ongoing relationship with a caring and skilled supporter will have access to a trained mentor'.
- Plan-It Youth in Gippsland that supports through mentoring young people in transition between school and work.
- Our Future Our Place in Gippsland - a successful innovative program that engages 60 unemployed young people in building five star energy rated homes on vacant state government Office of Housing land in the Neighbourhood Renewal areas of Morwell and Churchill. The project is led by TRY conducted in partnership with Latrobe City Council, the Trades and Labour Council and local businesses.
- Youth CAAB Community Building Project in East Gippsland, one of the 10 Community Capacity Building Demonstration Projects funded across Victoria.
- B-Central in Bendigo that aims to develop a service coordination model around youth services through a joined-up approach to services and the provision of a community centre for youth.
- Young Parents Access Project in Corio (profiled in this report).
- Freeza Community Arts youth project Courthouse in Bellarine, Corio and Geelong.
- A football and basketball team coaching initiative for Somali youth in Darebin supported by Victorian Police.

Overall the Committee found a huge demand in the community for community strengthening initiatives that support young people, and an enormous willingness by the non-government, philanthropic and business sectors to invest in youth programs. There is great community concern about critical issues for young people like youth retention in

education, youth leadership, employment, substance abuse, and the need for harmony between diverse youth communities.

The Committee saw many impressive youth programs. Nearly all of the successful ones:

- Were partnerships involving all the departments and agencies working with young people – such as schools, local government, Local Learning and Employment Networks, health services and Sport and Recreation Victoria.
- Were youth and community driven.
- Connected with young people in their own language, culture and their own spaces.
- Delivered many benefits like reduced crime and greater school retention.
- Involved young people in making decisions about their own lives.

There is now an opportunity to build on these approaches.

Specifically, the Committee felt that the Young Parents Access Project was outstanding and was making a significant difference to the lives of young people and their families. We were also impressed by the dedication of the Principal and staff at Corio High School in establishing this successful project.

This project now needs to become sustainable. This will require the State Government Departments involved accepting joint responsibility for a whole-of-government approach to the provision of sustainable funding working in partnership with the Principal and the school.

For community strengthening to work in the eyes of the community, it is imperative for Government to make sure that successful community initiated cross department initiatives, like the Young Carers Access Project, are funded sustainably and flexibly. This requires a whole-of-government joined up funding and services approach, which leads to systemic change and improvement in education and community outcomes.

Culturally and linguistically diverse communities

Forty-three percent of Victorians were either born overseas, or have a parent who was born overseas. Victorians come from over 200 countries, speak over 180 languages and dialects and follow over 110 religious faiths. The challenge we face is to ensure that people feel that

they can participate fully in society, be treated as equals and have equal access and opportunity so that they feel accepted and a part of their community.

Multiculturalism is about recognising the rights of all individuals and communities of interest. It recognises that in our diverse society, prescriptive or universal policies do not always address the needs of the whole community. Multiculturalism recognises the need to target specific programs and policies to help people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds overcome barriers that prevent them from participating fully in society.

Such an approach does not lead to segregation and marginalisation, but provides a vehicle by which to create an egalitarian society. The embracing of multiculturalism has led to the creation of an open, vibrant and respectful society, one that conveys acceptance which in turn leads to a sense of belonging and commitment from new arrivals.

Since coming to office in 1999 the Victorian Government has certainly shown considerable leadership in promoting the values of respect, tolerance and understanding by passing the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act (2001)*, the *Multicultural Victoria Act (2004)* and by promoting the Community Accord.

The government has also directed resources to a myriad of targeted programs to enhance our cultural, linguistic and religious diversity. Some of its achievements to date include:

- Boosting language other than English (LOTE) education funding.
- Celebrating Victoria's multiculturalism through the 2006 Commonwealth Games.
- Implementing a recruitment strategy to increase the number of police officers from ethnic backgrounds.
- Enhancing the Victorian Multicultural Commission through increased resources for community consultations and quadrupling its Community Grants Program to increase from \$750 000 to \$2.85m.
- More funding for interpreting and translating services.
- Establishing the annual Awards for Excellence in Multicultural Affairs.
- Establishing the Victorian Refugee Recognition Record.

It has also released policies like the whole-of-government approach to multicultural affairs and the 2002 *Valuing Cultural Diversity* policy

statement. This identified four key policy themes that dovetail well into the government's *Growing Victoria Together* vision of caring communities and in particular the goal of a fairer society that reduces disadvantage and respects diversity. The four themes in *Valuing Cultural Diversity* are:

- Valuing diversity;
- Reducing inequality;
- Encouraging participation; and
- Promoting the social, cultural and economic benefits of cultural diversity for all Victorians.

Case study: Enterprising Women

Enterprising Women is a community strengthening initiative that targets women from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. This example is described in full in Appendix A.

Enterprising Women works with women from culturally and linguistically diverse communities who live in the northern metropolitan region of Melbourne and is funded through the Community Support Fund. It focuses on women who are marginalised because of language, ethnic or cultural background, lack of income, education, settlement/arrival status and employment/unemployment, and their access to services.

The project increases social and economic participation by:

- Engaging women in financial literacy programs delivered through interpreters;
- Pre-business training with access to no interest business capital and ongoing support;
- The development of a peer-directed network offering women leadership opportunities.

Culturally and linguistically diverse women developed the project with the lead agency Women's Health in the North and the Northern Migrant Resource Centre.

Partners in the project include: ANZ, United Nations Australia Association, Northern Area Consultative Committee, Office of Small Business Victoria, Kildonan Child and Family Services, Adult Multicultural Education Services, the Victorian Local Governance Association. The many extra partners helping to deliver results include the Australian Taxation Office, Consumer Affairs Victoria, local

business women in the northern region, Darebin Enterprise Centre and Work Cover.

Enterprising Women's many achievements include:

- Involving more than 200 women in business training, financial literacy programs and women's network meetings.
- Attracting women from 14 different cultural backgrounds, many of who, especially new arrivals, cannot get welfare assistance and rely on partners or family and friends.
- Setting up businesses including childcare, importing bookkeeping, women's driving school, Spanish language school, exercise programs, clothes retail, catering, art and traditional crafts.
- Establishing an incorporated association *Northern Enterprising Women*, a not-for-profit support network for women from culturally and linguistically diverse and marginalised backgrounds starting out in small business/self employment.
- Linking women into services like employment assistance, TAFE training and education, welfare, domestic violence support, health, housing, financial counselling, English language training, childcare and mainstream business networks and training programs.
- Inspiring women to take on leadership roles and advocate on behalf of other women in their community.

Key learnings include:

- Overcoming the barriers that stop women participating is critical for success. For example, free childcare at all programs, sessions and meetings has given many more women the chance to join in.
- The best results are achieved when people get the power to make their decisions about their future. In this program, women are seen for their potential, not labelled or dismissed because of their current circumstances.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

On its site visits to see the Community Building Demonstration Projects, the Committee identified a number of existing gaps in information about participation of culturally and linguistically diverse communities in community strengthening. Data needs to be developed on:

- How existing community building projects have engaged with culturally and linguistically diverse groups.
- What the outcomes of community strengthening projects have been for culturally and linguistically diverse groups; that is, volunteering rates, involvement in committees, deciding priority issues, improving community relations, and so on.

Issues to be considered and addressed so that existing community strengthening frameworks can be adapted to satisfy the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD) include:

- How do models of community strengthening which work in small neighbourhoods be translated to larger and very diverse communities?
- How do terms such as participation, empowerment, volunteering and community translate to communities that operate outside this model?
- How do models of community building that are based in rural settings translate to the urban setting, and vice versa?
- How do community building strategies genuinely engage CALD communities in a respectful, linguistically accessible and culturally sensitive way – considering practical factors like lack of time, language, childcare, transport and financial resources?

Overall the Committee saw culturally and linguistically diverse communities involved in a number of community strengthening initiatives supported by local government, migrant resource centres, Neighbourhood Renewal and the Department for Victorian Communities particularly the Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Victorian Multicultural Commission.

The projects set in the multicultural cities of Darebin, Maribyrnong and Dandenong are examples of the successes and challenges in engaging some culturally and linguistically diverse groups' particularly new arrivals, women and young people.

However, as with Indigenous communities, the Committee saw very few examples of these communities' involvement in community strengthening as a whole. Other than in Neighbourhood Renewal there is not a strong sense of ownership of community strengthening in the broader community by culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

This especially applies to newly-arrived groups, Islamic women and young people. There is an enormous need to engage these groups in

community strengthening in the broader community. The recent request to the Premier by the Islamic Women's Council to address the issues around racial harmony is evidence of this. As a result the next Women's Summit will focus on racial harmony and diversity. This summit will recommend on ways to handle these issues and work towards greater inclusion of culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Our view is that the Department for Victorian Communities as a whole needs to focus much more strongly to include culturally and linguistically diverse communities in community strengthening. The allocation of resources in community strengthening, while higher for CALD than Indigenous communities, is still below their representation in the community.

Women

Women make up more than half of Australia's population but are under-represented in leadership and management positions in business, industry, public service and government. They are more likely to work in temporary and low paid jobs, do the majority of unpaid work and are more likely to have higher levels of fear for their safety. The challenge for governments and communities is to make sure that women have social, economic and political equity in our society.

Women Who Mean Business is an example of a project aimed at increasing the voice of rural women in local decision making and the local economy.

Case study: Women Who Mean Business

Women Who Mean Business is a three-year project that works with women across the Gippsland region to develop their talents in leadership, business and the arts. The project grew through the Gippsland Women Network's The Box initiative, which highlighted issues of youth, unemployment, lack of community volunteers, apathy about community participation and pride, lack of artistic and cultural appreciation, lack of exhibition space, and other issues affecting many rural communities. Eight local projects were set up, involving more than 3000 Gippsland residents in activities, and with more than 160 government, business and community groups taking part.

The results and contributions of each local project have significantly impacted on the local economy and made a difference to the lives of the women taking part. These are included in full in Appendix A.

The project's success has been generated by:

- A combination of skills development and a local project that utilises those skills.
- A combination of start up funding with a government grant and community-sourced funds and in-kind support.
- Involvement with local government.
- Involvement by people of all sectors, ages and backgrounds across the community.
- Part time locally-based project officers giving guidance and support.
- Ongoing support from Gippsland Women's Network.
- Projects and initiatives tailored to suit the local community.
- Offering women opportunities to step up and take on new challenges.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments on communities of interest

All the successful programs and projects focussed on communities of identity that our Committee observed featured the establishment and/or strengthening of networks. Networks reduce isolation and empower people to participate in community life. In this context, community strengthening programs need to be resourced to strengthen community networks within and between local government areas. These networks need to welcome and support people currently excluded from participation in communities.

Community planning initiatives

Community interests, aspirations, needs, visions, values and priorities are articulated and out into action through the process of community planning. Good practice community planning includes all groups and helps their members own identified needs, priorities and solutions. Community Planning is encouraged through one of the three grant supports offered by the Community Support Fund. Although it is not required, many councils are beginning to use community planning processes to inform their local government plans.

The Community Capacity Building Initiative and Community Building Initiative also support community planning processes in their place-based projects.

Two community examples included in this report are the Golden Plains Shire and the Ararat Asset Building and Community Building Project. They are outlined in full Appendix A.

Golden Plains Shire

“Developing partnerships between residents, community groups, Governments, service providers and business increases the likelihood of positive and sustainable responses to local needs and issues” (Golden Plains Shire Council during the MACVIC site visit).

There are more than 35 small communities in Golden Plains Shire, many with little or no infrastructure and limited services. There is no secondary school, one pharmacy, one doctor’s clinic and one bank. The shire recognised that the best way to address local issues and plan for the future was to carry out community planning. More than 80 community coordinators have been nominated to bring residents together in their local shires to put community plans into action, based on the identified needs, problems, goals and opportunities. They are committed to building a working relationship with council and other stakeholders based on trust and respect.

Over 19 towns have developed their own community plan. The plans became a key negotiation point between local communities and commercial, community and government stakeholders to partner and address priorities in the community plan.

The project’s key learnings are that:

- The community, not the council, must own community plans.
- Appointment of an external facilitator builds trust and openness into the community planning process.
- The allocation of a small amount of funds, for example \$400, through the shire’s Community Grants Program helped local communities to immediately get on with short-term priority projects.
- The use of an ‘action learning model’³ to help community coordinators increase their experience, knowledge and skills in facilitating the development of local community projects.

³ Action research or learning is a process by which change and understanding is pursued at the same time. It is a cyclic process, commonly undertaken by a group of people, where action is followed by critical reflection that then informs the next action.

- Successful results generate further community interest and motivation for the project.
- Developing partnerships between residents, community groups, governments, service providers and business increases the likelihood of positive and sustainable responses to local needs and issues.
- It's important to celebrate the successful implementation of projects. Community building is a long-term process that brings cultural change in how communities, governments and service providers work with each other to produce lasting benefits for the community.

Ararat Asset Building and Community Building Project

The Ararat Asset Building and Community Building Project is an initiative of Ararat Rural City Council in partnership with the state government through The Department for Victorian Communities Community Support Fund. This project builds on another extremely important community building initiative, the Asset Based Community Development Project funded by VicHealth. An 18-month project established in 2001, it aimed to engage local rural communities to promote and develop economic participation “through a collective and community-owned approach to economic growth and social productivity”.

Seven communities were supported to survey their communities to determine its skills, assets and qualities build into the Community Action Plan. Training was provided for necessary skills, including project management, team building and submission writing.

Since community planning began in 2001, local communities have achieved excellent results in education, childcare, recreation, health, social services, transport, housing, economic opportunity and infrastructure development. There has also been an increase in participation, networks and skills and relationships between sectors have improved.

Contributing to the success of the project was:

- The financial and administrative support provided to the local projects and groups.
- A council-based coordinator/facilitator.
- Creating networking opportunities for communities.
- The community action plan's place-based planning approach.
- Resources and funding support provided to community groups throughout the process, and acknowledgment of their time and effort.

Challenges to the project were:

- The low availability of volunteers and volunteer burnout. Much time, energy and resources are required for community planning and decision making. There is a need to re-evaluate the role of volunteers in the community and the support to sustain their efforts.
- The difficulties in engaging all residents and groups and keeping them involved through the development and implementation of the community action plan.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

The Committee visited many good community planning initiatives including:

- The Loddon Shire's township model that involved community committees and council staff. In this initiative there was good liaison with the Department for Victorian Communities' local teams and strong leadership by the local council. This Shire initiative has now been extended by a successful application for a Community Building Initiative grant.
- Greater Bendigo Council and Bendigo Community Health who have begun a process with 200 invited guests. The challenge here is ensuring those not normally involved in decision making are encouraged to feel comfortable about contributing.
- Golden Plains Shire (profiled in this report).
- Ararat Asset Building and Community Building Project (also profiled).
- The Ballarat Community Blueprint.

Successful community planning observed by the Committee featured:

- Commitment and leadership by local councils supported by the Municipal Association of Victoria and the Victorian Local Governance Association.
- Including all communities in the local government area, both geographical and of identity.
- Integrating local community plans or township plans into the local government plan.
- Recognising diversity and having ways to identify and resolve tension and conflict.
- Supporting community people to make decisions with a community facilitator and local people trained to be their township facilitator.
- Small grants available to keep the community engaged through quick wins.
- A focus on solutions rather than problems.
- Plans to attract more effective buy-in by other agencies and departments.

Generally, the Committee found that there was far more community participation and cohesion in those local government areas that had developed a community plan. But not all local government community plans do demonstrate inclusive practice particularly with some Indigenous and low-income communities. It is particularly important that the Department for Victorian Communities, the Municipal Association of Victoria and the Victorian Local Governance Association continue to work with local councils and communities to support the use of inclusive processes in community planning.

Providing community infrastructure

Community infrastructure refers to infrastructure that contributes to or supports social and cultural purposes (Department of Infrastructure, 2002). It has two components:

- Social Infrastructure that is state-supported mainstream services like education, health, justice and emergency services; for example, hospitals, schools, courts and emergency service facilities. (Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2005)
- Community infrastructure includes those facilities that the Department for Victorian Communities and other departments

fund, often in partnership with local government, the community and other sectors, through grants programs like libraries, sport and recreation facilities, pools, neighbourhood houses, and community centres.

Information communication technology is also emerging as an essential community facility, with so many government and business services now provided through the internet.

The objectives of the Department for Victorian Communities Community Support Grants Program outline the Government's priorities for providing community facilities. These are:

- Developing quality community facilities throughout Victoria.
- Creating more accessible community infrastructure.
- Encouraging more participation in social, learning, recreational, cultural and civic activities.
- Building strong community ownership and involvement in the management of community facilities in growth areas.

The importance of community infrastructure in building stronger communities is evident to the Committee through its site visits and discussions. The initiatives profiled in this report demonstrate how community facilities contribute to community strength. The initiatives included in this section are:

- Neighbourhood Houses (incorporating Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre case study).
- Tangambalanga Community Centre.
- Rosedale Multipurpose Community Centre.

Neighbourhood Houses

"Neighbourhood Houses are the combined efforts of communities, paid workers, Local Government, State Government, and other service providers. It is through collaborating and partnering with others that Neighbourhood Houses form the platforms needed for building stronger communities." (Sue West, Victoria University, May 2006).

Neighbourhood Houses are local organisations offering a broad range of community events and social, education and recreational programs at low cost. The Department for Victorian Communities through Local Government Victoria provides operational funding and support for Neighbourhood Houses and their community education funding is

provided by Adult Community and Further Education in the Department of Education and Training.

Neighbourhood Houses make an important contribution to Victoria as they operate on the principles of inclusive participation, community empowerment, lifelong learning and active citizenship. They are particularly important to disadvantaged people as the first point of access to community participation and community education.

A research project in 2004 explored how participants at nine Neighbourhood Houses in the City of Whitehorse developed social capital through their involvement in programs, activities, roles and events hosted by Neighbourhood Houses (Department for Victorian Communities, 2005a). The study showed that Neighbourhood Houses have a significant impact by building community networks to give people social support and improve people's skills and abilities through learning activities.

Case study - Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre

Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre (an example of a Neighbourhood House) provides important programs to build learning and language skills of migrant and refugee parents and children living nearby at the Carlton housing estate.

The Centre works with other local agencies through the Carlton Local Agencies Network, including the Carlton Baths Community Centre, Church of All Nations - Community Support Agency, Carlton-Parkville Youth Services, Carlton Family Resource Centre, North Yarra Community Health Centre and Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria. For example, a Horn of Africa's Women's program has been run in conjunction with local agencies through the Carlton Local Agencies Network.

Like other Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, Carlton offers a wide selection of community development and further education programs, from literacy, numeracy and English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) to programs for elderly people, mildly intellectually disabled adults, women, and community members from all walks of life.

The Centre is also involved in several education based projects such as:

- The development of assessment modules for low literacy learners in partnership with North Melbourne Language and Literacy.
- Generic skills research with Victoria University.
- Strategies for low level literacy learners.

- TAFE Frontiers professional development training.

The Centre also acts as an advocate on issues and has developed important networks for Neighbourhood Houses, including organising and assisting with a Horn of Africa Women's Forum and acting as secretary of the North East Neighbourhood House Network.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

On its site visits, the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities made contact with:

- Morwell Neighbourhood House
- Fitzroy Learning Network
- Buchan Neighbourhood House
- Wendouree West Neighbourhood House
- Maidstone Community Centre
- New and emerging Delacombe Neighbourhood House
- Create Neighbourhood House in Corio
- Eaglehawk Neighbourhood House

The Committee observed some well established and newly emerging Neighbourhood Houses and believes they can be the backbone of community strengthening, particularly in rural communities. For many people Neighbourhood Houses are a welcoming first connection with community, services and information.

Neighbourhood Houses have been doing community strengthening for 30 years as have migrant resource centres, community health centres, and arts organisations, often in partnership with local government. They all continue to be crucial to community strengthening. It is important to recognise that it may be a better investment for governments to fund and build upon these existing networks rather than create new community strengthening initiatives. Local Government Victoria in the Department for Victorian Communities has recognised the importance of Neighbourhood Houses to community strengthening by:

- Significantly increasing the organisational and network funding for individual Houses.
- Being committed to building a strong partnership with the Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Network.

“Neighbourhood Houses are a key element in developing stronger communities and we plan to explore opportunities for more local community links with Neighbourhood Houses” (Hon. Candy Broad, Minister for Local Government and Housing, May 25, 2006).

Tangambalanga Community Centre

The Tangambalanga Community Centre near Albury/Wodonga is being built as a multipurpose facility for all community groups, and for use by the primary school and as consulting rooms for visiting services.

The town’s sporting and social activities have traditionally focussed on the Coulston Park area with facilities housed in a hall and several other smaller. As part of the new community centre development nearby, the current facility will be refurbished with State Government support for upgraded sports facilities. The community’s financial and in-kind support has been vital in achieving these milestones.

Key success factors include:

- A very open planning and consultation process renegotiating the Indigo Shire’s master plan with the community.
- The Indigo Shire continuing to work closely with the community, especially through the shire’s health and wellbeing officer.
- Community groups’ strong participation, including sport and recreation, integrated services, senior citizens and young people.

Difficulties and challenges for the project include:

- Involving the commuting community, many of who live in Tangambalanga but work for and engage in Albury/Wodonga.
- The timing of grant applications by various divisions of the Department for Victorian Communities was not sympathetic to the communities’ timeline. A place-based integrated block funding approach to community projects like these can overcome this.

Rosedale Multipurpose Community Centre

Rosedale, a town about 200 kilometres east of Melbourne, experienced significant economic decline in the 1990s and has since relied on a number of substandard community facilities scattered throughout the town.

These have been replaced by the newly-built Rosedale Multipurpose Community Centre. It incorporates a new public library, community

health centre, children's centre (providing pre-school, day care, before and after school care, occasional care and maternal and child health care), neighbourhood house, senior citizens centre, meeting rooms for various local community groups and consulting rooms for health and allied professional service providers.

This project is an example of cooperation between different tiers of government and the service sectors they support. The funding partnership included the Department of Human Services, Small Towns Development Fund (Regional Development Victoria), Community Support Fund (Department for Victorian Communities), Regional Partnerships (Australian Government, Department of Transport and Regional Service) and Wellington Shire Council.

The Central Gippsland Health Service, Wellington Library Service, Rosedale Neighbourhood House, Rosedale Pre-school, Rosedale Senior Citizens Club and Wellington Shire Council were also involved.

This example is further described in Appendix A.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

The Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities visited many community facilities. Our observations underlined the important role that community-planned community facilities play in strengthening communities. There are many examples where government, local government and community are providing new facilities, as well as refurbishing and using existing facilities. Examples include the Northcote Town Hall's refurbishment as the Northcote Arts Centre and the restoration of the community hall in St Arnaud to include a community cinema. Providing quality infrastructure shows the community that it is valued.

Key features of success the Committee observed are:

- The community participating in the planning and ongoing management of community facilities.
- Linking the provision of community facilities with sound community strengthening processes like community planning.
- The multi-use of community facilities requires partnerships, cooperation and a joined-up approach. This, in turn, adds to community strengthening by increased and improved community relationships and networks.

- The need for a local government database of existing and planned community facilities, and community use of those facilities, in each local government area.

One particular issue of concern raised by Islamic women is the need for public space to be a safe space for the whole community. There are groups within communities that do not feel safe using community facilities. People with disabilities also have difficulty in accessing public space and facilities. It is these groups that need to be included specifically in the planning and management of community facilities.

The Committee welcomes the Government's emphasis in *A Fairer Victoria: Progress and Next Steps (2006)* on increased funding for the provision of better community infrastructure and enhanced community access to and use of that infrastructure.

International and national research and experience demonstrate that both education and community strengthening outcomes are improved when communities are welcome in schools and schools participate in the wider community. The Committee's site visits to Wanganui High School (Shepparton) and Yarrunga Primary School (Wangaratta) are impressive examples of these outcomes.

There is a great opportunity in the next stage of community strengthening 2006-10 to extend community use of school facilities and the participation of schools in their wider communities. It is important that the Department of Education and Training, Department for Victorian Communities and the Department of Human Services through Neighbourhood Renewal work together to support Principals and School Councils to build stronger links with their broader community and extend the community access and planning of school facilities.

Achieving better results through partnerships

Partnerships at the state and local level are fundamental to the implementation of community strengthening initiatives. The three examples in this report demonstrate how forming partnerships to implement initiatives and deliver services improves the outcomes for government and the community. The three initiatives are:

- Local Learning and Employment Networks.
- Primary Care Partnerships (incorporating the Inner East Primary Care Partnership Seniors 'Go for your Life' Project case study).

- Best Start (incorporating Broadmeadows Best Start Project case study).

Local Learning and Employment Networks

Local Learning and Employment Networks were established by the Victorian Government in 2000 and there are now 31 local networks of education and training providers, industry and other agencies across the state. They were set up to create a more seamless system of collaboration and integration between providers and stronger links between education, training, industry, other government agencies and the community. The local focus was aimed at meeting communities' diverse needs. The Local Learning and Employment Networks model is made up of cross-sectoral networks or partnerships responsible for local decision making, solutions and funding. Their chief role is to bring all the stakeholders together in strategic and collaborative connections to improve outcomes for young people.

Apart from achieving their purpose, the Local Learning and Employment Networks have added value to other state wide government programs (Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission, 2005). The Local Learning and Employment Networks enabled these initiatives to link quickly into local networks, and customers to connect with the right departments. This helped overcome one of the most common difficulties encountered by new initiatives: how to keep interested parties involved and set up networks.

In 2004 the Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission reviewed the Local Learning and Employment Networks, with the result that funding was secured for a further three years until 2008.

The Victorian Learning and Employment Skills Commission review identified the following features for a successful partnership approach like that of the Local Learning and Employment Networks:

- Patience from local representatives and committee members who recognise that new partnerships which link new broader networks with existing networks take time to develop.
- Balanced representation from all stakeholders, and a committee of management with a mix of skills and experience.
- The experience and skills brought by the executive officer and chair.
- A locally determined configuration of Local Learning and Employment Networks rather than mandated.

Primary Care Partnerships

The Department of Human Services has set up Primary Care Partnerships to improve primary care services and results for people who use them, and to increase the community's health and wellbeing. The Government funds groups of primary care providers and supports them to form voluntary alliances. Each partnership covers two to three local government areas and develops and puts a community health plan for their community into action. There are of 32 partnerships across Victoria.

The Australian Institute of Primary Care (AIPC) evaluated the Primary Care Partnerships Strategy in 2003. It concluded that the strategy was an important vehicle for improving the Victorian community's health and for reducing unnecessary, expensive and inappropriate use of acute, sub-acute and residential care services (AIPC, 2003). This means reducing the inappropriate use of all health services in emergency and short hospital stays, through to facilities for people who cannot live at home.

More than two thirds of agencies reported that the Primary Care Partnership has helped improve the working relationships between agencies and services. This greater level of cooperation between agencies translated to an improvement in service coordination for consumers. A survey of health consumers found the rate of having a care plan among people who visited more than three services, making more than 10 visits in the previous three months, was 46 per cent in 2002, 49 per cent in 2003 and 58 per cent in 2005, indicating a change in the expected direction in service coordination.

The key success factors include:

- Committed leadership from senior managers and local leaders, a shared understanding of why reforms are necessary and a willingness and the authority to overcome barriers and find new solutions to problems at the regional level.
- Involving people decision making about their health services.
- Coordinated planning and improved Joined-up service delivery.
- Integrating diverse funding sources at the regional level.

Key challenges are:

- Continuing to build bridges between state-funded agencies, community services agencies and private health providers.

- Alignment of the catchment areas of key participating organisations.
- Incomplete information and data on local areas to feed into the planning process.
- Organising how to coordinate services between key partners including the community.

Primary Care Partnerships focus on the delivery of health and aged care services, but also have a strong connection with the Department for Victorian Communities' community strengthening agenda, as seen in the 'Go for your Life' Seniors project.

Case study –Seniors 'Go for your Life' Project

The Office of Senior Victorians in the Department for Victorian Communities funds the Inner East Primary Care Partnership for a Seniors 'Go for your Life' project. It aims to improve the quality of life for older people who have complex needs and may be isolated, by helping them to take part in strength training programs.

In 2001 the Boroondara Primary Care Partnership identified 10 significant primary care issues that were impacting on the Boroondara community, including older people who were depressed and isolated.

Research showed that lack of door-to-door community transport, assistance in from direct care workers or volunteers and information about what is available stopped older people participating in community activities.

Funding from the Department for Victorian Communities' Community Support Fund helped develop and set up a project to support older people in strength training programs in community health and rehabilitation settings and locally based YMCAs.

Fourteen organisations have been involved in the project that has:

- Introduced 88 older people to strength training programs in their local community and reduced isolation and loneliness.
- Encouraged and supported older people with complex health issues to successfully participate in a health and wellbeing program in a community-based setting.
- Built the capacity of community based organisations to identify and respond to the needs of older people with complex health issues.

- Encouraged management of Caritas Christi, Normanby House and Auburn House to continue funding and delivering strength-training programs from their own budgets.

Success factors include:

- Access to detailed and suitable information to develop service responses.
- The City of Boroondara's commitment to underwrite the cost of the program, as the program funding did not reflect the actual costs.
- Relationships between the City of Boroondara and local aged and community care providers, resulting in many agencies' involvement and easy access to suitable clients and/or participants.
- Recognising the critical role of direct care staff in the lives of clients. These staff were instrumental in generating demand for the program and have since presented a range of issues to consider about the social support needs of clients.
- Understanding that barriers to participation must be considered and factored into the design of a service model.

Best Start

Best Start is a prevention and early intervention project set up in 2002 to improve the health, development, learning and wellbeing of all Victorian children from conception to eight years of age. It does this by bringing together parents, health education and community services, and government at the local level in new partnerships to better meet the needs of all young children and their families.

There is now strong evidence that the relationships, experiences and environments that a child is exposed to in the first few years of life lay the foundation for health, wellbeing, learning and development throughout life.

Understanding how crucial these first few years of life are, it is vital that we find new ways of engaging and supporting parents, strengthen the resilience of children and families, and address well-known risks to child health, development, wellbeing and learning.

There is also clear evidence that better results for children and families, particularly vulnerable children, are achieved when agencies and services work together, providing a seamless service system, using the

skills of all providers and helping families to get a complete range of support. An integrated service system means that families can get support they need it most. Children can be nurtured and supported, join in play activities that help their development and social skills, and get health services that can monitor their development.

Best Start brings together key agencies and services like maternal and child health nurses, preschools, child care, early intervention services, primary schools, family support services and other community. It supports them to work in partnership and with families to provide unified and coordinated services.

There are projects in 22 local government areas in Victoria, and 6 in Indigenous communities. *A Fairer Victoria: Progress and Next Steps (2006)* provides for a further 9 in Melbourne's outer suburbs.

Each is unique, developing solutions that meet the different and specific needs of children and their families.

Best Start aims to achieve:

- Improved access to child and family support, health services and early education for families and children.
- Improvements in parents' capacity, confidence and enjoyment of family life.
- Communities that are more child and family friendly.

It strengthens the local capacity of parents, families and communities and early years services to better provide for the needs of all young children and their families through:

- Listening to parent and family knowledge and expectations.
- Including vulnerable children and families in early years services.
- Including Indigenous children and their families.
- Ensuring services include culturally diverse children and families.
- Pulling together community interest, resources and infrastructure to create child-friendly communities.
- Translating early childhood evidence into practice.
- Coordinating and integrating existing services.
- Introducing new changes to services based on evidence.
- Developing strong local partnerships across sectors.

Case study: Broadmeadows Best Start Partnership

The Broadmeadows Best Start Partnership was formed in 2002. It is a formal partnership of 15 agencies, with parent representatives, working locally with families and children under a signed partnership agreement. It operates in the targeted neighbourhoods of Broadmeadows, Dallas, Jacana, Campbellfield, Coolaroo, Meadow Heights and Westmeadows.

The lead agencies in the partnership were Dianella Community Health Service, Hume City Council and Broadmeadows UnitingCare. These three agencies formed an executive group, along with Anglicare Broadmeadows Family Services. Dianella Community Health became the lead agency and funds holder for the partnership and Broadmeadows UnitingCare, the facilitating partner, employed the community facilitator. This executive group set the partnership.

The Broadmeadow Best Start Program aims to connect with vulnerable community members, especially Indigenous children, children experiencing marked poverty, children from different ethnic backgrounds and children with special needs.

Importantly Best Start has created increased partnerships between primary schools and other early years services and community agencies, with an increase in referrals to support services and the first steps towards integrated service delivery on school sites.

The specific changes in services include:

- Better capacity to meet families' needs by collaborating and sharing resources.
- More agencies working with families through partnerships with Hume City Council Maternal and Child Health Service, and a bigger profile for maternal and child health through community hub sites and playgroups.
- More families attending playgroups, and playgroups being set up at primary schools.
- Preschool and primary school staff attending joint professional development sessions focusing on the early years.

Some examples of emerging positive change include:

- An increase in the children starting school who attended a preschool / child care program in the previous year.
- More preschool participation in 2005.
- Offering three new four year old groups in 2006.

- One school reporting 90 per cent of the children who enrolled for prep in 2006 had attended a preschool program in the previous year.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

The Committee visited many partnerships projects throughout Victoria where Local Learning and Employment Networks, Primary Care Partnerships and Best Start were involved.

The Committee was particularly impressed with the Grampians Region Primary Care Partnership. The Partnership was linking into the Golden Plains Shire community planning processes to engage with people in the smaller towns to develop improved mental health services.

There are many partnership projects to plan services, but the outstanding and sustainable initiatives are where the community identifies its needs and priorities and then engages the departments and agencies they need to support their solutions. Community strengthening delivers better results when community-owned solutions are implemented in partnership with the community, governments, the non-government and business sectors. These partnerships integrate planning, funding and action at the state, regional and local level.

Measuring the Outcomes from community strengthening

"Is what we're doing making differences in people's lives and if so, how could we quantify it and how can we measure which parts of what we do are most effective and what are the least." (Evan Thornley at Communities in Control Conference, Our Community 2005)

Evaluating community strengthening programs captures the learnings from projects so they can be built upon. In the past, assessment of government programs and projects has mainly emphasised outputs rather than outcomes.

Effective evaluation and measurement of community strengthening, as practised in Neighbourhood Renewal, shifts the emphasis in evaluation to measuring outcomes that communities and governments want to achieve.

For example, Doveton Neighbourhood Renewal measured the success of their community safety initiative, not only by the output of an increased police presence, but by the achievements of their desired

outcomes which included a decline in 'hooning' on the roads in their neighbourhood, decreased noise, and greater safety for pedestrians.

Community strengthening indicators

The Department for Victorian Communities' indicators of community strength were developed through the joint efforts of the Department for Victorian Communities and Department of Human Services. While the full set of indicators is reported annually by the Department of Human Services, the Department for Victorian Communities has adopted a smaller set of indicators from the complete survey that focuses on how people express their connectedness to their communities. It covers attitudes to community life, participation and people's ability to get help when they need it.

These indicators measure community strength to monitor the overall effect of community strengthening actions over time. The first survey was conducted in 2004 and a second survey has been completed, with the collated and analysed data to be available in 2006.

The first survey revealed that when community strength is considered across local government areas, aspects such as participation and attitudes to living in local areas vary between neighbourhoods. There is a striking difference between rural and metropolitan areas, with rural areas sustaining greater networks than metropolitan areas. This has implications for where and how community strengthening funds are invested.

But there is need for further investigation, as the causal links between these indicators and government policies is not yet known. For example, we do not know why more Victorians participated in volunteering over the period 2001-03.

Empirical data collected and analysed to date suggests that:

- A community strengthening approach must be responsive and flexible to meet the local needs and circumstances.
- Different strategies are necessary for rural and metropolitan settings, with more emphasis on understanding the particular context of place.
- There are particular community groups that are unlikely to participate equally in networks unless government intervention specifically targets them.

Victorian Community Indicators Projects

The Department for Victorian Communities is now working with VicHealth and the University of Melbourne to broaden the community indicators framework. Initially funded by VicHealth, the project has determined a set of draft indicators to measure local community wellbeing and sustainability across Victoria⁴. It is envisaged that these measures will produce regular reports on the state of Victorian communities, providing governments and communities with accessible evidence on local and regional trends in community wellbeing.

Sixty-four indicators are grouped in five categories:

Healthy, safe and inclusive communities:

- Personal health and wellbeing.
- Community connectedness.
- Early childhood development.
- Lifelong learning.
- Service availability.

Dynamic, resilient local economies:

- Economic activity and employment.
- Income and wealth.
- Work-life balance.

Sustainable built and natural environments:

- Space.
- Housing affordability.
- Transport accessibility.
- Sustainable energy.
- Air quality.
- Water quality.
- Biodiversity.
- Waste management.

⁴ Sourced from material provided by John Wiseman and Sue West from the Institute for Community Engagement and Policy Alternatives, Victoria University.

Culturally rich and vibrant communities:

- Participation in arts and creative activities.
- Participation in recreational and leisure activities.

Democratic and Engaged Communities

This has no categories but the four indicators are:

- Percentage of people who believe they have an opportunity to have a real say on issues important to them.
- Percentage of people who are members of local community organisation or decision making body.
- Percentage of women elected as counsellors.
- Percentage of people who feel they have an opportunity to vote for a political candidate they trust.

There is a current proposal arising from this project for a structure to support the collection and management of data. It is expected that Community Indicators Victoria will be auspiced by and accountable to the *VicHealth Centre for the Promotion of Mental Health and Social Wellbeing* in the School of Population Health at the University of Melbourne.

Its potential role will be to⁵:

- Provide a mechanism to collate, analyse and distribute data on trends in local community wellbeing and sustainability across Victoria.
- Function as a resource centre supporting the development and use of local community wellbeing indicator data by local governments and their communities.
- Operate as a resource centre for policy makers and researchers to develop and use relevant data.
- Contribute to learning and policy research so that local community wellbeing indicators can be used to improve community engagement, planning and policy making.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

The Committee saw very few community strengthening programs and projects involved residents in determining, measuring and evaluating

⁵ Sourced from material provided by John Wiseman and Sue West from the Institute for Community Engagement and Policy Alternatives, Victoria University.

community strengthening outcomes. For communities and governments to demonstrate progress in community strengthening programs and continually improve, evaluation and measurement needs to be part of the design and implementation of the project.

An important reason for including residents or community members in developing measures is to make sure those measures capture outcomes for all of the community, including Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

The best examples of this kind of measurement and evaluation our Committee observed were from Neighbourhood Renewal at Atherton Gardens in Fitzroy, Gippsland's Women Who Mean Business and Ararat Asset Building and Community Building Project.

Cross sectoral initiatives

Partnerships across sectors are the most constructive way to get *all* sectors working together on new and creative solutions to benefit Victorian communities.

The initiatives profiled in this report are:

- The Agora Think Tank.
- Melbourne Cares.
- Baclinks.
- Bendigo Bank.

Agora Think Tank

The Agora Think Tank is collaboration between the not-for-profit, business, philanthropic, local government and government sectors working together in partnership to tackle social disadvantage for young people and their families in new and different ways.

The Agora Think Tank originated from an event held to celebrate Melbourne City Mission's 150-year anniversary. The event brought all sectors together to talk about inclusion, and the initiative was set up from this by Melbourne City Mission and funded by the Community Support fund, Ernst and Young and the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust.

Five working groups have been established to understand and promote cross sector working relationships. They will focus on:

- Crime and substance misuse preventative projects.

- Asset-based approach to economic participation, like Saver Plus.
- Education and training programs for disadvantaged young people.
- New infrastructure projects, specifically community facilities.
- The common themes across all partnership programs.

The Agora Think Tank is due to report to government on its priority action areas at the end of 2006.

Melbourne Cares

The aim of not-for-profit organisation Melbourne Cares is to improve the quality of life for the people of Melbourne, particularly the most disadvantaged.

Melbourne Cares brokers volunteering opportunities for employees of its business supporters to fulfil a broad range of needs identified by community organisation partners. Volunteers can participate individually, or in teams to complete activities that may include:

- Mentoring youth at risk.
- Literacy support.
- Mock interviews.
- Providing IT advice.

More than 20 businesses support Melbourne Cares and the Department for Victorian Communities is a founding member.

Activities over the next three years will concentrate on:

- Social inclusion and diversity, to reduce inequalities that exclude people from opportunities to achieve stable and fulfilling lives.
- Young people and education, to encourage young people to take part in high quality learning and training experiences.
- Employability, skills and enterprise, to provide opportunities for individuals and organisations to develop personal, occupational or entrepreneurial skills.
- Community safety, environment and city pride, to promote active citizenship and instil pride in Melbourne by improving community safety, the environment and the city's image.

Baclinks

BacLinks (Business and Community Links) is an initiative of Karingal Inc, an agency with a long history of working with people with disabilities in the Geelong region, and formed in partnership with United Way Geelong and supported by the Geelong Chamber of Commerce. BacLinks makes links between interested parties from business and community sectors and investigates creative alternatives to tackle a variety of community issues.

Projects can range from workplace volunteering, in-kind support, donations of goods and services, an exchange of skills, knowledge and resources, and sponsorship.

In the Geelong region BacLinks currently has:

- An active working relationship with more than 155 businesses and 80 community groups in which it brokers partnerships and employee volunteering programs.
- A formal partnership with the Geelong Local Learning and Employment Network in its Jobs4Kids strategy, a major initiative of the Geelong Region Employers' Reference Group. BacLinks is responsible for the Industry/Education Links Program to help young people, their parents and teachers understand the range of vocational options available in the area. BacLinks also connects businesses and industry and education and training providers with young people and their families.
- Active involvement in a range of education and employment local networks and working groups, including the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning Network, Geelong Employer Reference Group and Geelong Professional Women's Association.

BacLinks is now working with the local Chamber of Commerce to explore sustainable models of business community partnerships that extend beyond volunteer placement.

Bendigo Bank - Community Banks / Enterprise

The Bendigo Bank currently contributes through its community banks significant funds to communities across Australia in projects that range from youth programs to building community facilities. Through their community bank enterprise they are now identifying and funding a greater number of community strengthening projects and are seeking to

form partnerships with government in the provision of funding and support.

The aims of the future partnerships are to:

- Increase State and Federal Government investment in Community Bank/Enterprise identified community projects.
- Facilitate 'clustered projects' where a number of regional areas have similar projects.
- Facilitate State-wide projects as an extension to the clustered project objective.
- Facilitate projects of national significance.
- Streamline application processes for communities.
- Ensure Community Banks and Community Enterprises are formally recognised through Government planning processes.
- Develop relationships with Mentors, Regional Managers & Branch Managers & Community Banks with Local Government and relevant funding authorities to achieve project sustainability.

Bendigo Bank community enterprise concept provides an innovative partnership model for business community and government investment.

Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities' observations and comments

The Committee welcomes the BacLink initiative to develop concepts of business community partnership that move beyond mentoring and volunteering programs. Two important issues in building stronger business community partnerships are:

- Broadening business's role beyond mentoring and volunteering.
- How governments can better support these partnerships.

The effectiveness of cross-sectoral partnerships could be enhanced by their participation in place-based community strengthening. Such an approach brings together the communities identification of their needs and priorities and engages business in helping to develop sustainable solutions. This will have a better chance of success/acceptance if the government scales up its placed-based pilots to a systemic approach. When this occurs, large business will be able to engage better in places in partnership with government. This kind of approach is being adopted by the Bendigo Bank.

Another way of engaging the different sectors in community strengthening would be to extend the Community Support Fund into a Community Investment Fund with business and philanthropic investment. A whole-of-government/ whole of community approach would provide genuine investment for real returns for communities and business.

Ten key success factors for community strengthening

In all the Committees discussions and consultations and visits, people made it clear that they welcomed the Government's community strengthening initiatives and the opportunity to participate. They identified the key success factors that they want the government to recognise and build upon. These key success factors require that community strengthening be:

- An integral part of governments policy and practice and not just an add on.
- Underpinned by values of democracy, trust, equity, social justice, mutual respect, collaboration and inclusion.
- Community driven and community owned and supported by funding that is flexible, minimum of 4 years, coordinated, and easily accessed and accounted for.
- Based on governments working with rather than on communities in ways that develop and maintain networks and strong partnerships with government, local government, and non-government, philanthropic and business sectors.
- Linked with local government led inclusive community planning processes.
- Focussed on place where community and whole-of-government action and resources can be negotiated, integrated and made sustainable.
- Informed by measurement and evaluation that is built into the start of the project and provides residents with the opportunity to have a say in what is being measured.
- Focussed on social, environmental and economic outcomes that improve people's lives according to their needs, priorities and solutions.
- Inclusive of all groups in the community particularly those who are often excluded.

- Resourced and supported by a whole-of-government commitment and approach at the state and local level that links Bottom up and top down negotiation processes with community needs.

'We want to change the ways we work with community groups – cutting red tape and making action more accessible. (The Hon John Thwaites at the launch of A Fairer Victoria: Progress and Next Steps, June 2006)

Part C

Ways Forward

Part C - Ways Forward

The key premises of this report are those put to us by all the communities with whom the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities has engaged:

- 1. People have the desire and wisdom to contribute to decision making in their own community.**
- 2. Communities want to be worked *'with'* rather than worked *'on'* by *all* sectors with whom they engage.**
- 3. Communities want to ensure that community strengthening is sustainable.**

Realising these premises requires a systemic approach to community strengthening that is underpinned by the following essential elements:

- A whole-of-government approach underpinned by the values of democracy, trust, equity, social justice, mutual respect, collaboration and inclusion.
- Acceptance and support from all sectors in their policy and practice, that people have the right to be part of the decisions that affect their lives.
- A local government led, inclusive community planning process as the key mechanism by which communities' interests, aspirations, needs, visions, values, and priorities are articulated and actioned.
- A system that emphasises the integration of policy, practice and resources at the state, regional and local level.
- A place-based focus where community and whole-of-government priorities can be negotiated, integrated, resourced and made sustainable.
- The continued building of community strengthening partnerships and networks between communities, local, state and federal governments, philanthropic, business and the non-government sector. These partnerships need to work collaboratively to develop innovative, sustainable solutions and mobilise the investment required to achieve them.
- Measurement and evaluation that is built in from the start of the project and which focuses on achieving social, environmental and

economic results that improve people's lives. Residents are provided with the opportunity to be involved in the design, data collection and analysis of success.

- Community participation in planning for new and refurbished infrastructure, and the community's use of that infrastructure.
- The inclusion of all communities in access to community strengthening funding, resources, services and infrastructure.
- Funding that is flexible, minimum of 4 years, coordinated, and easily accessed and accounted for.
- Branding and communication of community strengthening as an integral part of building a 'fairer Victoria.'

Importantly, these elements demonstrate that *how* community strengthening is undertaken is as critical as *what* is being done.

Recommendations on Ways Forward

The Hon John Thwaites, Minister for Victorian Communities, requested that the Ministerial Committee for Victorian Communities provide advice on 'what works in community strengthening.' In responding, our Committee has made many site visits to see how community strengthening programs and initiatives are operating on the ground.

We found that communities across Victoria welcome *A Fairer Victoria* and want to be engaged in its delivery. We have included some new policy initiatives in this report like Community Renewal and strengthening the strategic long-term contribution of the non-government sector. These policy initiatives were developed with discussion between the Committee, the Community and Volunteering division of the Department for Victorian Communities and VCOSS. They have now been accepted in *A Fairer Victoria: Progress and Next Steps (2006)*. But our main focus and that of the broader community is the challenge of putting *A Fairer Victoria* into action.

Getting *A Fairer Victoria's* community strengthening strategies and action to work on the ground is complex and requires a commitment and collaborative support from all departments and between departments, communities, local government and the non-government, philanthropic and business sectors. The Committee's recommendations suggest ways forward to meet the big challenges of making community strengthening a reality.

Our recommendations are grouped under these headings:

- Whole-of-government principles and practice
- Community Planning Place
- Based Community Renewal
- Networks and Partnerships
- Measurement and evaluation
- Community infrastructure
- Inclusion and access
- Funding and Support
- Branding and Communication

The Committee has drawn on and incorporated in its recommendations a number of the most successful elements of the Governments current community strengthening initiatives that are described in detail in Section B. This includes the work of the Department for Victorian Communities in introducing easily accessible and accountable small grants for community groups and multicultural organisations, supporting local council community planning processes, and establishing Local Teams. It also includes the work of the Department of Human Services through Best Start to improve the integration and delivery of general services to parent and young children.

The Neighbourhood Renewal Program has also been instrumental in demonstrating community strengthening is best achieved when:

- Governments trust and empower communities to determine their own needs, priorities and solutions.
- These needs, priorities and solutions are negotiated directly with government, and in partnership with other sectors.

The Committee's recommendations draw together the key elements of what works in community strengthening from both the perspective of Victorian communities and the Victorian Governments most successful community strengthening programs.

Overall these recommendations call for the advice to be taken up in a systemic approach to community strengthening. An approach based on the principles of democracy, trust, equity, social justice, openness, mutual respect, collaboration and inclusion.

1. Whole-of-government principles and practice

Principles and their inherent values shape a culture that influences the:

- Way in which decisions are made, and by whom.
- Decisions that are made.
- Ways in which they are carried out.

These values may not be apparent or documented but, when reinforced and rewarded over time, they coalesce into a culture that forms a basic system for decision making and action. The values of democracy, trust, equity, social justice, mutual respect, collaboration and inclusion must be the foundation of community strengthening decisions and actions.

For governments to take a whole-of-government approach to community strengthening in partnership with communities, their culture, policy and practice needs to:

- Be based on mutual trust and openness.
- Recognise the importance of collaborative change and action.
- Demonstrate willingness to develop and implement shared agendas and shared responsibilities.
- Seek, respect and use the knowledge and contribution of all participants.
- Emphasise their department's role of connectors and facilitators.

“Governments cannot remain as firmly in control of the policy decision-making process as they have in the past and, at the same time, move towards a more facilitative or enabling role.” Meredith Edwards – Director, National Institute for Governance, University of Canberra, 2001.

Changing the way sectors and organisations work with each other means recognising how current culture influences decision making and action. In other words, when governments move to a whole-of-government, joined-up departmental approach to community strengthening, it is vital to change their culture as well as the structures.

Community ownership is the fundamental principle inherent in working 'with' communities. That is, people have the right to be part of the decisions that affect their lives, and they have the desire and wisdom to make this contribution. What people and communities require from governments, the non-government sector and business is their support to make it happen.

Communities participating in community strengthening initiatives have indicated that community ownership of needs, priorities and solutions is fundamental to achieving sustainable results. It is vital to recognise and celebrate the work of communities and volunteers; it is equally important that communities and volunteers are sustained by having the opportunity to realise their aspirations in partnership with governments.

Recommendations on whole-of-government principles and practice

- 1.1 Recognising the need for flexible responses to different communities, departments work with communities, local government and other sectors to develop and adopt a set of operating principles and practice to change the way governments work with communities. These principles and practice need to build a culture that:
 - Is based on the values of democracy, trust, equity, social justice, openness, mutual respect, collaboration and inclusion
 - Recognises that people have the desire and wisdom to contribute to decision making in their own community.
 - Recognises that communities want to be worked *'with'* rather than worked *'on'* by *all* sectors with whom they engage.
 - Is focused on achieving sustainable outcomes.
- 1.2 The Department for Victorian Communities should take a lead role in developing and implementing this set of principles and practice throughout the Department and in how it engages with communities.
- 1.3 The Department for Victorian Communities' role should be a connector and enabler of community strengthening in partnership with communities, other government agencies, business, non-government and philanthropic sectors.
- 1.4 Government needs to continue to build and facilitate partnerships between communities, local state and federal governments, and business and non-government and philanthropic sectors that improve people's lives and enhance the effectiveness of all investment.

2. Community Planning

Community Planning is a process through which community interests, aspirations, visions, values, needs and priorities are articulated and put into action. The Victorian Government, Municipal Association of Victoria, and Victorian Local Governance Association now all have a policy of local government-led, inclusive community planning. Community planning is now practiced by more than half the local governments across Victoria in partnership with their local communities and non-government and business sectors. Inclusive community planning processes are being funded by local councils themselves, through the Community Support Fund in the Department for Victorian Communities, and also by the Community Building Initiative.

At present, local government is required to prepare a number of plans that currently do not include a community plan. However, Local Government Victoria has commissioned Professor Bill Russell to carry out the Joint State-Local Government Planning Project. This was initiated to strengthen strategic planning at the local level, streamline planning required of local government by the state, and promote more joined-up planning between state and local government. Out of the findings, the State Government is considering options for enabling local councils to have greater flexibility in responding to some state planning requirements and encouraging local government led community planning.

The Government has set up Regional Management Forums in each region, involving all local government chief executive officers and heads of department agencies. This initiative can improve regional priority setting if inclusive local government community plans are used as a framework for their recommendations to State Government and their reporting to local government and communities. In this way, they can more effectively carry out their role to:

*“Work directly **with** local communities, to set and deliver on key priorities and pool government resources” (A Fairer Victoria 2005)*

The adoption of community planning by local government and the use of those plans as the framework for Regional Management Forum priority setting will lead to a more joined-up response when government works to meet community needs. The community plan becomes the basis for action by communities, local and state governments and other sector partners.

A plan in which all sectors have confidence will:

- Allow communities to better employ their resources through the redesign and reorientation of existing infrastructure and services, and
- Generate increased participation and investment in the plan from sources beyond government.

For these reasons, the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities considers that local government-led, inclusive community planning is **fundamental** to build stronger communities by fostering community ownership, partnerships between all sectors, and shared plans and responsibilities.

Recommendations on Community Planning

2.1 The Department for Victorian Communities continues to work with the Municipal Association of Victoria, the Victorian Local Governance Association, local councils and communities to improve their planning capability including helping all local governments work with their communities in establishing and putting an inclusive community plan into action. Specific actions include:

- The Department for Victorian Communities working with other government departments and sectors to use community plans as a key reference point for implementing community strengthening actions.
- Adoption of local government community plans by Regional Management Forums as the basis of determining their priorities and for reporting back regularly to local governments and communities.
- The Department for Victorian Communities providing essential data and community indicator research to local governments to assist them with inclusive and effective community planning.
- Linking place-based neighbourhood plans with the broader local government community plan, and vice versa.

2.2 The State Government should continue to emphasise the importance of local government led community plans.

- 2.3 The Department for Victorian Communities' funding of community planning be made on the basis of needs for extra funds for councils to engage all the diverse groups and neighbourhoods within their communities.

3. Place-Based Community Renewal

An essential element of scaling up community strengthening to a systemic approach is to focus on place-based Community Renewal. The Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities welcomes the Victorian Government's commitment to fund Community Renewal as developed by our Committee and the Department for Victorian Communities in April 2006.

Neighbourhood Renewal has shown that this approach generates sustainable results and benefits that traditional government intervention from the top down has been unable to achieve.

In presenting its view of the key elements for successful Community Renewal, the Committee has drawn on the key success factors of Neighbourhood Renewal and the key success factors of community strengthening outlined by communities in our site visits and discussions.

Recommendations on a Place-Based Approach

The Committee welcomes the announcement of Community Renewal in *A Fairer Victoria: Progress and Next Steps 2006*. In implementing this initiative, the Committee recommends that the following elements are included:

- 3.1 Community Renewal is based on values of democracy, trust, equity, social justice, mutual respect, collaboration and inclusion.
- 3.2 Community ownership and governance that:
- Is based on community ownership of needs, priorities and solutions.
 - Encourages active resident participation and respects their diversity, different abilities, interests and cultures.
 - Devolves decision making to a local place-based structure (for example, the Community Renewal Committee) that includes no less than 50 per cent local residents as members who set priorities, drive resource allocation and select project staff.

- Builds on people’s strengths and skills, and pride in themselves and their community.
 - Integrates the Community Renewal planning with inclusive local government community planning.
- 3.3 Strengthened partnerships and networks between communities, governments, and non-government, philanthropic and business sectors.
- 3.4 Whole-of-government commitment and support that:
- Is implemented through a whole-of-government agreement that commits all relevant ministers to provide integrated services and resources to meet communities’ needs, priorities and solutions.
 - Requires a bottom up, top down process for negotiating an agreement to provide infrastructure, services and investment that meet communities’ needs, priorities and solutions.
 - Provides long-term block funding for a minimum five years to be drawn from combining existing government community strengthening grant programs. Also new funding for community engagement, improved community infrastructure and services from government and other sectors. This funding should be flexible and allow for quick wins and longer term outcomes.
 - Establishes a strong Community Renewal Team at each site that supports local residents in their decision making processes and is linked with a well-resourced Department for Victorian Communities’ multifunctional local team.
 - Integrates with an employment strategy that links local residents with opportunities for training and employment and, where possible, employs local residents in place-based initiatives.
 - Demonstrates the interdependency between good social and economic policy that results in sustainability.

3.5 Measurement and Evaluation that:

- Is built in from the start of the project and which focuses on achieving social, environmental and economic results that improve people's lives. Residents are provided with the opportunity to be involved in the design, data collection and analysis of success.
- Enables communities to tell and share their stories about the impact of community renewal on their lives.

4. Networks and Partnerships

Networks and partnerships play an important part in building stronger communities. They build knowledge between groups, promote advocacy and can increase participation and opportunities for people often under-represented in decision making. The building of networks and partnerships achieves better lasting results for communities. Community strengthening initiatives and projects carried out in isolation are less likely to be sustainable than those that connect and link with other projects and programs, such as those that link in with employment and training initiatives.

Inclusive community strengthening initiatives will generate expanded new networks and partnership as community members come together to identify their needs, priorities and solutions. Examples of emerging networks and partnerships identified by the committee include:

- Rural women through Women Who Mean Business,
- Cooperation between women of different faiths and cultures to strengthen racial harmony and respect for diversity, and
- Emerging regional organisations that bring together local councils and community organisations to cooperate in regional forums.

Community strengthening does not necessarily only mean the creation of new programs and projects. The Local Learning and Employment Networks and Association of Neighbourhood House Networks and Learning Centres prove that using and strengthening existing networks and partnerships can make very effective use of government initiatives without relying on the creation and funding of new projects and programs.

A key role for the Department for Victorian Communities is to work with all sectors and local communities to support networks and help

form stronger partnerships between state and local governments, communities, and non-government and business sectors at the local and state level.

To make this happen networks and partnerships need:

- To be sustainably resourced.
- Access to relevant information and data.
- Opportunities to develop a shared agenda and shared responsibilities between governments, communities and other sectors.

Forming equitable, inclusive and sustainable partnerships is not only a challenge for government, but for all the sectors. For example, the non-government sector is extremely diverse and relies primarily on volunteers. In many cases the way in which government has supported the sector in the past, with short-term funding cycles and excessive accountability frameworks, has constrained its ability to position itself for the future. Now that we are moving out of the competitive climate of the 1990s and all sectors are recognised as having a role in community strengthening, they will need support to strengthen their ability to work together in partnerships.

Recommendations for Networks and Partnerships

- 4.1 The Department for Victorian Communities should further extend its work with, and through, existing community, local government, non-government and business networks. This would facilitate greater ownership and buy-in to community strengthening at the local and central levels, and reduce the requirement for government to create and develop new projects and programs.
- 4.2 Funding to strengthen existing networks and partnerships, build new networks and partnerships, and ensure they are equitable and inclusive should continue to be a priority of the Community Support Fund.

4.3 The Committee welcomes the Government's endorsement of the non-government sector's request to work with it on non-government sector sustainability, resourced by government and run as a multi-sector partnership between the non-government sector, government, local government, business and community. The Committee recommends that an agreed plan of action be developed to:

- Establish a shared agenda for the leadership role of the non-government sector in community strengthening.
- Provide non-government organisations with resources for collaboration and network development at local and regional levels to ensure they contribute to community planning and interact with Regional Management Forums.
- Improve governance and regulatory frameworks and simplify accountabilities between the non-government sector and local and state governments.
- Develop sustainable funding and resource strategies to ensure quality services and integrated programs.
- Improve non-government sector industry planning, including the use of technological solutions, asset and infrastructure improvement, human resources and volunteer management and support.
- Promote and advance joint innovation, research and development and evaluation between the government and non-government sector.

5. Measurement and evaluation

The Victorian Government and Department for Victorian Communities need to demonstrate clearly that community strengthening improves people's lives and that the aggregate investment made by government and other sectors contributes to building a fairer society. Scaling up community strengthening makes this even more of an imperative. It is difficult to build upon something when the improvement is not effectively measured. At the program level, this means that all community strengthening programs, projects and initiatives need to determine their desired outcomes and build them into an appropriate evaluation framework when the initiatives begin. At the state level it means that the overall results for individual communities and the state are measured.

The first step in this is to change from measuring outputs to measuring outcomes. The programmatic approach used by government departments focuses largely on products or quantities rather than the

benefits to be achieved. For example, the number of people trained in using the internet might be an output, but the outcome might be that 30 per cent of those who participated went on to volunteering their time to train others. The second piece of information may be more valuable in assessing the strength of that particular community.

Recognising and capturing the many outcomes that can result from community strengthening is a related issue. The Workforce Participation Partnerships demonstrate that community strengthening can produce social benefits as well as jobs. Neighbourhood Renewal demonstrates that a process of community strengthening not only delivers better housing but also reduces crime, increases employment and improves the environment. In this way community strengthening can enhance other government initiatives and, if measured, can indicate how the government is improving the social, economic and environmental quality of life for Victorians.

The Department for Victorian Communities indicators of community strength are an important measurement tool for local and state community strengthening outcomes. They also apply to community strengthening results at the program level. The Department for Victorian Communities needs to support these vital indicators and incorporate them into all community strengthening programs and initiatives.

However, to capture all of the outcomes from community strengthening approaches across government, like employment, environmental benefits and reductions in crime, it is necessary to broaden and strengthen the current indicators of community strength. This can be achieved by the Department for Victorian Communities entering into a policy and funding partnership with the University of Melbourne and VicHealth in their Community Indicators Victoria Project. Community wellbeing is much broader than community strengthening and the proposed wellbeing indicators have the potential to measure the aggregate outcomes of all government programs. Importantly, communities will also have access to local data to better inform their community plans. It is important that the Department for Victorian Communities makes sure that communities understand and have access to this information.

The next important step for Government is to commission social epidemiology into the long-term changes in people's lives and how they are affected by determinants like community strengthening, social exclusion, health, education, housing, employment, socio-economic circumstances and the environment.

There are some tangible important outcomes of community strengthening, but many are intangible like improved self esteem and relationships within communities. These personal growth and empowerment stories are just as important, but may not be captured by empirical measurement. Community strengthening's importance will resonate better with the community when real people share their own stories with other communities and with Government.

A related issue is that government programs and projects are evaluated mostly by external groups. Including residents and community members in the collection and use of data provides an important opportunity to build communities' skills and abilities, as demonstrated at Atherton Gardens. Here, residents were trained to carry out surveys and collect data and many obtained data collection work outside the estate as a result of their experience. Involving community members and residents also ensures that data is meaningful and useful.

Recommendations for Measurement and Evaluation

5.1 All community strengthening programs within the Department for Victorian Communities and across government must build from the start a consistently applied evaluation framework that:

- Adopts the community strengthening indicators.
- Captures the personal change stories of people who take part.
- Emphasises the importance of measuring outcomes.
- Provides for the identification and measurement of economic, social and environmental benefits.
- Develops templates and tools that help community groups describe what has and has not worked in community strengthening, and to share those learnings with all sectors, the broader community and governments.

- 5.2 Provide the opportunity for residents and community members to be employed and trained in the collection, analysis and use of data and information. This would:
- Enable residents and community members to build their skills and abilities.
 - Provide pathways to meaningful employment.
 - Ensure that data is presented in a way that is meaningful and useful to communities as well as government.
 - Increase the credibility of data.
- 5.3 The Department for Victorian Communities continues to collect and analyse community strengthening data, needs to work in partnership with other organisations to ensure the learnings are shared in the public domain and inform future community strengthening initiatives. The data and learnings also need to be understood by communities and useful to inform community planning.
- 5.4 The Department for Victorian Communities continue to support and become a policy and funding partner with the University of Melbourne and Vic Health in the Community Indicators Victoria Project to:
- Broaden and strengthen the current community strengthening indicators.
 - Capture economic, social and environment benefits.
 - Improve the long-term measurement of community strengthening, both in how it improves people's lives and makes effective use of government investment.
 - Ensure over time that the Victorian Indicators Project expands its analysis of outcomes to include social epidemiological measurement of the impact of community strengthening on the community's health and wellbeing over the long term.

6. Community infrastructure

Important elements of building stronger communities infrastructure are the provision and community use of new or refurbished community infrastructure and better use of existing infrastructure by the community. Community infrastructure ranges from schools, pools, accessible transport, and neighbourhood houses, to the provision and

upgrading of safe open spaces with opportunities for cultural celebration and expression.

The role community infrastructure plays in community strengthening include:

- Fostering formal community networks.
- Providing places where community members can meet and talk.
- Enabling easy access to governments and community resources and services.
- Providing lifelong learning opportunities to build people's abilities and skills.

The Community Support Fund includes a grant program to develop and maintain existing community infrastructure in partnership with communities, and *A Fairer Victoria (2005)* and *A Fairer Victoria: Progress and next steps (2006)* make a major financial commitment to provide various community infrastructure such as Neighbourhood Houses, community transport, community hubs, and schools over the next four years. When providing this infrastructure, it is important that:

- Governments and communities know the full extent of community infrastructure' availability and how communities across Victoria use them.
- The local community has a say in the design to make sure it suits community use and can be accessed by all community groups.

The sharing of community infrastructure, particularly schools, not only makes better use of current community resources but also increases connections and networks within communities. In 2005, the government released its policy *Schools as Community Facilities* which encourages schools to operate as community infrastructure by making it available to the local community beyond the school's immediate parent, carer and staff community. This policy provides practical information on how to share infrastructure and gives many good examples of where schools are achieving beneficial community strengthening results.

Community infrastructure needs to be accessible to all groups in the community. For example, female members of the Islamic Community have spoken to the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities about the discomfort they feel when using public facilities such as parks and public transport. The whole community needs to reclaim public facilities such as parks and places with governments'

support and assistance. There are many individuals and groups who feel excluded from community infrastructure and public spaces.

Neighbourhood Houses are a critical facility in connecting with groups often excluded by the broader community. They operate on the principles of inclusive participation, community empowerment, lifelong learning and active citizenship. By providing a broad range of community events and social, educational and recreational programs at low cost, they are particularly important to increasing the participation of groups such as those who are newly arrived and culturally and linguistically diverse, and those from low socio-economic backgrounds

Recommendations on community infrastructure

- 6.1 Government in partnership with communities, local government, and the non-government and business sector, should carry out local audits of existing community infrastructure assets. This would consider the community use of that infrastructure, and access. These audits should include a gap analysis of community infrastructure needs to inform community planning and government priority setting for new and refurbished community infrastructure and proposals for community participation in their planning and use.
- 6.2 The Department for Victorian Communities, through Local Government Victoria continue to build on its partnership with Neighbourhood Houses in community strengthening. The Committee recommends that to further strengthen this partnership, the Department for Victorian Communities, through Local Government Victoria, should consider the formation of a Working Group which includes Local Government Victoria, the Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, Adult Community and Further Education, Municipal Association of Victorian and Victoria Local Governance Association. In particular, the Working Group would focus on ways to continue to create more effective and innovative links between Neighbourhood Houses, Departments and Local Governments, in building stronger communities.

7. Inclusion

When we talk of building stronger communities we need to ensure that the Victoria's many and diverse communities are part of the dialogue and decision making and get to share the benefits of community strengthening. The Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian

Communities' consultations and discussions have revealed that many people from Indigenous, newly arrived culturally and linguistically diverse communities, the disability communities, low socio-economic, and some youth and seniors' communities are not included in community strengthening.

Decision makers, including government departments and other community and business leaders, can inadvertently exclude communities and groups from accessing services and resources when they don't understand the cultures of those groups and the barriers to their participation. For example, a newly arrived single Somalian mother at the Atherton Gardens Estate told the committee that she could not attend English lessons because she did not have access to childcare. Yet the key thing she needed to improve her life and that of her family was the opportunity to learn English so that she could get education, training and further employment.

Community strengthening through Neighbourhood Renewal has been extremely successful in removing barriers, strengthening the confidence of residents to participate and providing opportunities to make decisions. Setting up place-based action learning initiatives that specifically address the challenge of how community strengthening can include all groups and communities could further test the learnings from Neighbourhood Renewal.

The Committee has identified that to achieve inclusion in community strengthening for all groups in the community, there needs to be support and resources specifically for those often excluded groups to:

- Define their needs, priorities and solutions and own their results and achievements.
- Strengthen their networks.
- Make decisions about their futures.

From the visits to existing Community Capacity Building Initiative and Neighborhood Renewal project sites, the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities has identified a need for more data, analysis, and evaluation of:

- How and to what extent existing community strengthening initiatives have strengthened the participation of Indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse, the disability community, low-income communities and young people and seniors.

- What the benefits have been for these specific groups; for example in volunteering rates, involvement in committees, determining priority issues and better community relations.

There also needs to be further consideration of how current community strengthening addresses our community's diversity. This consideration will involve both people and place. One issue to examine is how well the current Western approach to community participation and volunteering works for diverse multicultural communities or for marginalised Indigenous communities.

Moving to a place-based approach for these traditionally excluded communities provides an opportunity for:

- Genuine inclusive participation by all communities at the local neighbourhood level.
- Greater integration of these diverse communities into the broader community.
- Inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue.
- Respect and understanding within and across all communities.

Nevertheless, we still need a 'people of interest' approach to make sure these communities are engaged effectively through their primary participation in their community of identity.

Not to understand and appropriately address, support and fund these communities' participation in community strengthening risks further disadvantage, disenfranchisement, and fragmentation. Governments, departments and the non-government, philanthropic and business sectors must make sure that these communities are able to contribute to, access and benefit from community strengthening initiatives. For example, the Department for Victorian Communities' Local Teams, in partnership with local government, can work to engage excluded groups in the community planning process. This can be further supported by the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) ensuring that there is whole-of-Government and whole-of-department support for these specific groups above and beyond DVC's specific divisional support.

Recommendations for Inclusion

- 7.1 The Department for Victorian Communities should ensure that people from Indigenous communities, newly arrived culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with a disability, unemployed, low socio-economic, young and older people have greater access to and benefit from community strengthening initiatives within the department and across government. This will require:
- Whole-of-government cooperation to support increased participation in and ownership of community strengthening initiatives by these groups.
 - Whole-of-department support for these groups as well as their respective divisional support.
 - Greater inclusion of these groups in local and state decisions.
 - Ensuring these groups are full participants in a place-based approach to community strengthening.
- 7.2 The Department for Victorian Communities consider moving from an application approach to negotiated agreements as appropriate that provide adequate resources and support to include these groups. Negotiated funding agreements would allow respect for diverse cultures, suitable timelines and assistance to develop initiatives driven by these groups. The Department for Victorian Communities' Local Teams should continue to link with and support these groups and make it a priority.
- 7.3 A component of small grants should be set aside as an accessibility fund to help these groups overcome barriers to their participation like transport, lack of childcare, skills development, language, and costs.
- 7.4 To better engage multicultural communities in community strengthening, the Department for Victorian Communities should consider funding and designing with these communities a series of action research community strengthening partnerships that will:
- Investigate and evaluate the success of existing models of community strengthening involving these communities over a four year period.
 - Implement and resource a suitable community strengthening strategy within place-based multicultural community settings

in two diverse metropolitan regions; for example, one area covering Moreland, Hume, Darebin and Whittlesea and a second area in the growth corridor of the City of Dandenong and Casey.

- Establish a project steering committee driven by the multicultural community sector in partnership with the Department for Victorian Communities, local government, and the non-government, philanthropic and business sectors.
- Further develop leadership, skills and training opportunities to advance these communities' awareness, engagement and participation in community strengthening.

7.5 The existing action research model currently being used with Indigenous communities could:

- Establish community identity, community boundaries, community visions, community priorities and appropriate community leadership and governance processes.
- Build collaborate partnerships between Indigenous communities and the various sectors at local, regional, state and national levels.
- Negotiate resources, develop programs, and establish measurement evaluation and benchmarks.

7.6 Extra resources to be allocated to existing support groups or organisations in these communities, and where needed and appropriate, set up new support groups.

7.7 Increase the availability of leadership and skills training for these communities that would include training for:

- Managing an organisation, governance, roles and responsibilities.
- Financial management.
- How to work with the media.
- Public speaking training.
- Advocacy.

8. Funding and Support

Community strengthening has many levels and sources of funding. One of the results of strengthening communities by government building partnerships with communities and all sectors at the state, regional and local levels, is the opportunity for broadening the current funding sources available to communities. This can reduce their reliance on government funding and help increase the long-term sustainability of community strengthening.

The success of community strengthening initiatives is affected by government policy directions, levels of funding and the way policies and funding are implemented. From the Committee's site visits across Victoria, local communities welcome the Victorian Government community strengthening initiatives. Many communities have responded positively to the opportunities provided by Government to gain funding for local initiatives that have widespread community support and provide real benefits to local communities.

Despite improvements, many communities and local councils continue to find the process of accessing grant funding for community strengthening initiatives too difficult, time consuming and often frustrating. This is due to the multiplicity of government grant programs, the lack of flexibility and sustainability of these programs, and the lack of integration within and across departments and with local community and council priorities.

Specifically many communities have asked for:

- Better co-ordinated funding for community strengthening programs across the Department for Victorian Communities with realistic response time frames, and simplified and standardised guidelines and conditions.
- Community access to funding for placed based initiatives that reflect their needs, priorities and solutions, and is provided through long term block grants that are negotiated between communities and government as in Neighbourhood Renewal.
- A reduction in the level of paperwork and red tape tied to application and reporting requirements.
- Grants-based funding that has greater emphasis on strengthening the ability of existing community organisations in community strengthening rather than establishing new programs.

- Grants-based funding that better encourages and supports the establishment of new groups, networks and partnerships.

Communities are pleased to get grants. However, they believe that participation in community strengthening grants would be more effective if the competitive application approach was replaced with negotiated agreements at the local level through Local Teams. This could enable a better match between communities' needs and priorities and the grants systems.

The Community Support Fund (CSF) plays an important role in community strengthening. The Committee supports Government's framework for the CSF, which is to "support community initiatives to:

- Strengthen the capacity of communities;
- Invest in place-based projects that address the impacts of disadvantage;
- Increase local leadership;
- Involve a wide range of groups;
- Encourage the development of community enterprise;
- Support the involvement of volunteers;
- Improve social learning, cultural employment and economic opportunities; and
- Improve community environments, resources and infrastructure."

The Committee believes that the focus on funding inclusive community planning and better community infrastructure has been particularly successful. Within the framework communities want to see more support for community initiated projects, more integration of local planning with CSF funding decisions and more access for groups that have not traditionally accessed these grants.

Recommendations for Funding

- 8.1 The Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) continue to move from short-term to longer-term funding of four to five years in its programs and place-based initiatives.
- 8.2 A small team comprised of DVC staff and community members and based on the successful approach used to simplify the DVC Small Grants program should be established to simplify the application and reporting requirements and continue to reduce red tape across all DVC grant programs.

- 8.3 The vital role that easily accessed small grants up to \$5000 play in communities continues as a key part of community strengthening resourcing. Small grants could also be extended to enable new community groups to be set by providing up to \$500 establishment costs for incorporation, meetings and venue hire.
- 8.4 The Department for Victorian Communities undertakes the necessary work to reduce emphasis on competitive application-based grants and in their place develop negotiated funding agreements with communities that meet their needs.
- 8.5 Recognising the value and direct experience of the Department for Victorian Communities' Local Teams working with local communities, other regional departments, local government, non-government and business sectors in local regions:
- Continue to make greater use be made of Local Teams knowledge of local needs and priorities by all of those involved in assessing all grants under all DVC grants programs.
 - The number of regional based staff should continue to be increased as the resources become available including employing local Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse community staff.
 - Continue to increase the amount of flexible funding available to local teams to support community strengthening at the local level.
 - Where possible, co-locate Local Teams with other department regional teams or in local government offices.
- 8.6 Within the governments current framework for the Community Support Fund (CSF) priority should continue to be emphasised for:
- Community driven and owned initiatives.
 - The integration of CSF project funding with local government community planning processes.
 - Neighbourhood and community renewal priorities.
 - Providing greater access to funding for the most disadvantaged community groups.
 - Attracting and developing stronger partnerships in community strengthening between communities,

government, local government, non-government, philanthropic and business sectors.

- 8.7 Government consider moving to block funding rather than individual program funding needs to be available for place-based community strengthening through the combined allocation of:
- Community Support Funds.
 - Existing divisional community strengthening programs.
 - Any new government funding for place-based initiatives.
- 8.8 Across its funding programs, the Department for Victorian Communities should rebalance the trend of funding new programs and initiatives against maintaining and advancing the contribution that existing community organisations and networks make to community strengthening.

9. Branding and Communication

There are many individual messages and great success stories about community strengthening. Yet there is no clear overall message that connects communities with the Governments' community strengthening and the role of the Department of Victorian Communities. As greater buy-in to community strengthening is being achieved with local government, business and non-government organisations, there will be a perfect opportunity for government through the Department for Victorian Communities to communicate a significant state-wide message on the role of community strengthening in improving people's lives.

A comprehensive communication and branding plan will provide:

- Clarity by articulating a clear set of strategies on what works in community strengthening.
- A distinctive community strengthening 'brand' that is regularly reinforced through consistent communications and messages.
- Government language that draws communities in to community strengthening. Bureaucratic language by governments is frustrating, disempowering and confusing for communities.

At the program and project level, stories and their inherent learnings are not being shared with the wider communities. Case studies need to

be told in a style that tells the story about learnings, success, challenges and the improvements in people's lives.

"Before Neighbourhood Renewal I was a 'rent payer' – now I am a citizen"
(Resident of Morwell Neighbourhood Renewal)

Recommendations on Branding and Communication

- 9.1 To continue to maximise community ownership, understanding and engagement in community strengthening, a state-wide communications program be developed around the values, principles and purpose of building strong communities, and communicated in the everyday language of communities.
- 9.2 The Department for Victorian Communities enables and supports the community, local government and non-government, philanthropic and business sectors in exchanging good practice on community strengthening. This could include:
 - A working group set up in DVC with representatives from all sectors to develop ways of sharing data, learnings and good practice.
 - Creating a series of sustainability templates, frameworks and models to help community groups plan, learn from and share good practice.
 - The Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) in partnership with other departments, communities, local government and the non-government sector, business and DVC local teams to provide regular communications to governments, communities and all sectors which include *real* stories, of *real* successes told by *real* people active in community strengthening.

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