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**FOSTERING SOCIAL INCLUSION  
IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES  
THROUGH COMMUNITY  
PLANNING**

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## KEY PROPOSITIONS

1. Social Inclusion can be more effectively pursued through the level of Government closest to citizens - Local Government.
2. Community planning is one critical tool that can address social inclusion.
3. Different people mean different things when we talk about Community Planning
4. An agreed set of Community Planning Principles adopted by all levels of Government would advance all of our efforts to improve social inclusion (see Page 12).

## SOCIAL INCLUSION

Australian thinking and policy development for a more socially inclusive society can learn much from projects and programs in UK such as the Think Family model, where 15 local authorities are driving improved outcomes for families with multiple disadvantage, improved coordination between adult and children's services and searching for solutions through integrated governance.

Similarly there is evidence from other countries such as Canada and New Zealand, with whom we have much in common in terms of social history and governance, of achievements in tackling their visions for greater social inclusion and a fairer, more productive society.

These efforts demonstrate that success requires joint efforts – between governments, institutions, communities, organisations and citizens.

In Australia, Professor Tony Vinson is one commentator who provides evidence that the social divide is increasing. And, he argues, specific community development projects are the only tools capable of ameliorating the significant social disadvantage which seems endemic to Australian society.

However, as Vinson observes, short-term projects do not address the underlying social problems. He warns that “The consolidated disadvantage of decades cannot be reversed in a year or two.” (Reference: *Dropping off the Edge: the Distribution of Disadvantage in Australia* at [www.australiandisadvantage.org.au](http://www.australiandisadvantage.org.au))

From a different perspective, the Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission in its draft report on Enhancing Victoria's Liveability (VCEC May 2008) determined that the main drivers of “liveability” are economic strength and markets, governments, and human rights.

The effective integration of these factors is, in Commission's view, partly dependent on “governance architecture that ensures the development and implementation of planning and other policies are as well integrated as possible.” (Overview p. XLI).

Research undertaken by the University of Melbourne's McCaughey Institute and others into "community wellbeing" is generating some very practical ways for local communities to understand the factors that will promote community strengthening at the local level.

The VLGA believes that concerted and persistent effort from Federal, State and Local Governments working in partnership at the community level will be critical if social inclusion in Australia is to be tackled seriously and effectively.

## **ROLES FOR GOVERNMENTS**

There a number of pressing reasons why governments must act now, and together. These include:

- The Federal Government's recognition of the need to end the 'blame game' between spheres of government, especially between the Federal and State Governments. Over the past decade this tendency to blame has threatened fundamental aspects of our national self-image, including the 'fair go' and our status as a thriving democracy
- The urgent need to optimise our resources – of environmental and financial wealth as well as the skills and needs of individuals and the many communities that make up our nation
- Unprecedented opportunities for integrated policy and action which have emerged through a number of circumstances including the one-party dominance of our federal and state parliaments and the global nature of some of our most pressing problems

The VCEC draft report already noted above, also focussed on the importance of roles for governments in community wellbeing:

*"The Commission acknowledges the extensive efforts of all levels of government to improve community strength, but notes the need to ensure that these initiatives are collaborative and build on the relative strengths of ... governments" (VCEC Overview p.XXX)*

## WHAT IS COMMUNITY PLANNING?

According to one recent and influential report, Community Planning is a process of community building, building trust, tapping community resources and resourcefulness, leading to better informed citizens and Local Governments. (West & Raysmith 2007, 41).

In 2007 the Victorian Government's Stronger Community Organisations Project (SCOP) concluded that:

*"...the capacity for community organisations to engage with people who are marginalised or disadvantaged, and support them in changing their life path is critical for ensuring that all members of society are equipped to participate in the workforce, and in community life more generally."*

Further:

*"Community organisations could have a formative influence on the next generation of government services, the next generation of social investment and the next generation of local governance systems. But to grasp these opportunities, they need the support and partnership of governments, companies and community members..." (SCOP 2007)*

In 2007 the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities advised the Minister for Victorian Communities that:

*"...while communities welcome the Government's commitment to Community Strengthening, they are becoming more concerned with disparate approaches, programs and grants between departments and within departments. To maximize the social inclusion benefit of community strengthening, the Government needs to develop and implement a whole-of-government strategy that builds community empowerment" (Social Inclusion: The next step for a fairer Victoria, May 2007)*

West and Raysmith (2007) formed the view that

*"The weakness of community planning is that it may be ill-defined at the outset and may be poorly connected to implementation at the other end."*

However, the authors concluded that:

*"What also is clear is that Local Governments agree that community planning can be improved by being more integrated with council plans and planning cycles." (West & Raysmith 2007, p.4)*

This underscores the importance of Local Government's responsibility to legitimise community views and values through integration of community planning with the council plan.

Achieving this will require active recognition of the interdependent roles of elected representatives, the council organisation and the community working together in a participative democratic framework.

While Community Planning may display a number of different faces, the central features are strong and active democracy in which citizens, governments and institutions work together over time to maximise the common good.

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENTS - UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO SPEARHEAD SOCIAL INCLUSION**

Against this backdrop, Local Government is uniquely placed to provide leadership for a place-based approach to social inclusion, not only at the level of municipality or regional community, but also with a more fine-grained focus on townships and suburbs.

Of the three spheres of government, Local Governments are most likely to be held accountable by citizens for the stewardship of the resources that most closely touch their lives. There is a close relationship, in reality and potentially, between Local Government and individuals within a democratic framework.

Local Governments are particularly well placed to identify and reach those in our communities who are socially isolated, in difficult circumstances or otherwise “hard to reach” – the very people for whose needs governments must take especial interest in a democratic society. Integration of these needs into council plans and priorities opens up opportunities for other spheres of government to access and respond to them in a consistent and holistic fashion.

The draft VCEC report on Liveability noted that “The principle of subsidiarity, whereby decisions are taken as close as practicable to those affected, can facilitate consideration by markets and governments of the views of their customers and communities, and can promote engagement, a key component of liveability.” (VCEC Overview, p. XLI)

Local Governments have demonstrated their capacity to work in partnership with community organisations and individuals to deliver programs and services, often in collaboration with State and Federal Governments. In the 1990s the Integrated Local Area Planning (ILAP) Project, involving all levels of government and spearheaded by the Australian Local Government Association, demonstrated the benefits of a coordinated and cooperative approach. The outcomes of this and similar projects are a fairer and more inclusive society.

The Swinburne Institute for Social Research reported in 1995 (*Community Consultation and the ‘Hard to Reach’* 2005 p.11) that:

*“Local Governments have been the drivers of community consultation at a local level for many years. This is not just because consultation enhances the information flow between council and the community, but also because it can be a way to engage and strengthen local communities.”*

Many Local Governments across Australia have developed experience and expertise in developing community based solutions through partnerships with non-government organisations, local communities and interest groups. Local Government has led the way in community engagement practice, giving rise to

effective policies and strategies as well as major achievements within their communities. Right now in Victoria, Local Governments are playing a major role in implementing the State's Human Rights legislation.

Local Governments have also played prominent roles in the State Government's Neighbourhood Renewal program and other projects requiring a whole-of-community focus.

The experience and expertise that Local Governments have built up in consulting and engaging with their citizens, and encouraging community access to the decision-making processes of council governance, can be a rich resource for State and Federal governments as they carry out their own responsibilities for effective planning and policy implementation.

However, community planning at the local level brings some challenges.

1. Making the Council plan an integrated plan and centrepiece that can address the community's aspirations as well as the evidence, statutory requirements and practical considerations

A recent major investigation into community planning in Victoria discovered that different Local Governments hold differing views about the relative importance of various plans – in Victoria it is mandatory for Local Governments to publish a variety of plans including a Council Plan (corporate plan), Municipal Strategic Statement (MSS) and Municipal Public Health Plan (MPHP), but no guidance is given about the interdependencies between these plans.

Communities which have engaged in some form of community planning sometimes feel disappointed that their priorities do not figure as prominently as they wish in Local Governments' corporate planning. "Community planning is considered a separate but interrelated process to council planning... community planning (is) a process that captures the views, aspirations and priorities of the community... Council planning is described as capturing the strategic organisational priorities of Local Governments, linked to resource allocation and work plans." (West & Raysmith, p.7)

2. Connecting State and Federal governments to the formative stages of local planning so that all relevant government policy frameworks and priorities are part of the community planning process

Strong partnerships between spheres of governments are essential for effective policies and practices to reach the lives of citizens, particularly those in areas and populations of particular disadvantage.

Failure by these spheres of government to consult and assist each other in developing programs and projects is well-known: "Some state government policies and processes actually complicate community consultation, as they

can be inflexible in terms of providing funding, or have unrealistic timelines and resources.” *(NB. I need to source this quote)*

3. Ensuring that the necessary skills and resources are available to undertake community planning processes. There is often serious mismatch between community planning and resource allocation. Given the disparity in resources between the three spheres of government in Australia, strong partnerships will be imperative if questions of social inclusion are to be addressed cooperatively and effectively.

## **THE VLGA's LEADERSHIP ROLE IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

The VLGA achieves its objectives through local partnerships and strategic alliances. Key to its approach is the advocacy and action it takes to build the capacity of Local Government and communities to work together. This has been done by focussing successive organisational Strategic Plans on two major outcomes – connected communities and strengthening democracy.

In its submission to the Victorian Government's Strengthening Community Organisations Project (SCOP) the VLGA estimated that approximately 80% of effort is put into the mid to late stages of the planning cycle. Hence, communities feel excluded from the visions developed by governments who have traditionally concentrated efforts to 'plan for' local communities rather than 'plan with' them.

The submission recognised that leadership in Victoria, and now the Commonwealth, is placing a welcome focus on addressing disadvantage, and it applauded this.

However, the VLGA believes that fundamental flaws in the planning cycle and policy levers will not serve either governments or local communities well into the future. Indeed, they may frustrate rather than prolong a focus on addressing disadvantage and social exclusion.

The main reason for this is that local communities do not believe that partnerships are real when agendas have already been pre-determined. On the other hand, when Local Governments have experienced involving local communities early in the planning cycle the rewards have been clear and profound.

The VLGA believes that, far from being an expensive add-on, effective community engagement practices are pre-conditions for successful community planning and empowerment. A number of 'bottom up' practices need to be observed, including:

- Acknowledgement that community building never ceases but changes over time
- Beginning with local conditions
- Providing incentives for collaboration
- Building relationships and developing local leadership
- Mobilizing communities for action
- Integrating community development and human service strategies

(VLGA Submission to SCOP 2007)

After more than 14 years of working with Local Governments, community groups and others to build local leadership and collaboration in community planning projects, the VLGA is convinced that the best results in community planning happen when they effectively engage and empower local communities.

In terms of delivering the re-investment of resources that would be required to enable community planning to become a reality, the VLGA believes this would be best facilitated by Local Governments and community organisations working partnership at the local level.

Such partnerships would be capable of meeting flexible, high-order compliance guidelines set by State or Federal Governments.

The VLGA's work to connect communities and strengthen democracy lies at the heart of the question "What type of democracy will meet future community needs?"

Commentators are increasingly putting forward the view that a commitment to a new kind of participative or deliberative democracy at the local level is critical if we are truly going to 'do government differently.' These same commentators point to the shortfalls of representative democracy which to date has often shut out local communities from the early stages of community planning and decision-making processes (Johnson, Heady and Jensen 2003).

The VLGA acknowledges that the significant leadership and commitments of State and Local Governments have laid strong foundations for community planning from which, with the added impetus of the Federal government, we can all move forward.

## **PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNITY PLANNING**

### **WHAT WILL IT LOOK LIKE WHEN WE GET IT RIGHT ?**

The following statement of principles for community planning draws mainly from the VLGA publication "*Let's Talk: Principles of a Good Conversation*", enhanced by ideas from a range of other sources.

#### **1. Sincere intent**

Integrity and trust are crucial for good consultation and practice; the invitation to participate in planning is also an invitation to empowerment

Engage community members in exploration and decision-making, recognising that it takes time to develop a genuinely participative culture shared by elected representatives, community members and council staff

Plan a process that is both ground-up and top-down, acknowledging the importance of the early stages of the community planning cycle

Reach an agreed set of principles for the process, and encourage community activism

Be clear from the outset about any limits to community empowerment for decision-making and be prepared to negotiate these to the greatest extent possible

#### **2. Focus**

Develop clearly stated objectives and purpose for the Community Plan

Aim for a broad vision which expresses agreed aspirations and builds consensus

Focus on outcomes, with measurable indicators of progress and use floor targets to drive systemic change

Link community priorities to the planning and operations of all spheres of government including other Council plans and, where possible, State and Federal governments' plans and planning processes

Plan for sustainability of initiatives from the outset

### **3. Inclusiveness, accessibility and diversity**

Assume that a multi-pronged delivery strategy will best serve social inclusion

Encourage ongoing activism within the community and seek out the 'hard to reach' elements

Ensure that active steps are taken to ensure that all interests are adequately represented in the planning process

Foster inclusion and tolerance within the community, the council and administration

Ensure that participation in planning is based on informed content and input, providing good information made available in appropriate forms

### **4. Responsiveness and transparency**

Learn from experiences that strengthen social inclusion and reflect these in policy and practice

Ensure that positive experiences of collaborative participation drive systemic change

Provide feedback to all participants and help people feel that they have been listened to, even if they disagree with the an ultimate decision

### **5. Evaluation**

Use action research to deliver the evidence on whether social participation has been increased and has improved the lives of the people involved over the long term

Monitor and evaluate outcomes against indicators established as an integral element in the development of plans

### **6. Resourcing**

Adequate investment in the planning process can mean that the overall cost of an issue or project is less than it might have been, simply by getting it right and having community ownership

Provide citizens, councillors and council staff with the necessary tools for community engagement