

MELBOURNE CITYMISSION IN PRACTICE:

Working in Partnership

DECEMBER 2009

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Melbourne Citymission
Building Inclusive Communities

This paper was prepared by Kim Barker, Senior Project Worker, Children and Disability Services, Melbourne Citymission in collaboration with the Melbourne Citymission Locational Disadvantage Team and the Melbourne Citymission Research and Social Policy Unit.

The paper is the second in a series of papers entitled Melbourne Citymission in Practice. The papers articulate the service models and practices that Melbourne Citymission has developed to address social exclusion and promote social inclusion.

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Melbourne Citymission aims to build inclusive communities by facilitating equitable access to opportunities and resources for people who are at risk of, or currently living with disadvantage. We understand that social disadvantage is multifaceted and sometimes concentrated in place. For Melbourne Citymission disadvantage derives from the following interrelated factors:

- Personal and familial life circumstances, particularly:
 - personal health, wellbeing and social connections
 - impoverished family relationships (e.g. inter-generational poverty, violence, displacement, trauma)and/or
- Living in a particular location (e.g. household, neighbourhood, suburb, region, state or country). In these contexts disadvantage may be perpetuated or caused by :
 - physical environmental factors (e.g. air and soil quality)
 - resourcing and infrastructure (e.g. inequitable access to transport, health care, recreational facilities and parkland)
 - social environmental factors, including:
 - limited access and support to engage in education, health and employment facilities
 - limited access to, and opportunity to engage in informal forms of support and connectionand/or
- Structural and political factors:
 - local, state and national policy, particularly in relation to education, health, employment and environmental infrastructure and resources.

To advance this agenda, the agency has engaged as a leader or partner in social planning and programmatic initiatives which promote social inclusion for particular populations of people who experience exclusion.

This paper, 'Working in Partnership', is the second in a series of papers titled 'Melbourne Citymission in Practice' which describes Melbourne Citymission's work in facilitating and promoting social inclusion.

Melbourne Citymission in Practice:

1. *Our Community Development Approach*
2. *Working in Partnership*

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Melbourne Citymission in Practice: Working in Partnership

Melbourne Citymission's Place Based work involves working in partnership to develop integrated, responsive service initiatives that meet the identified needs of people living in an area. By 'Partnership' Melbourne Citymission means a collaboration that could include business, not for profit organisations and governments in which risks, resources and skills are shared in projects that benefit each partner as well as the community (Department of Victorian Communities, 2007).

Within the context of Place Based Services, partnerships are seen as a productive mechanism for sustainable social, environmental and/or economic development within a community.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'PLACE'?

For Melbourne Citymission 'Place' may span suburb(s), municipalities and regions. Although our work is focussed in particular areas, at times it may be concentrated in a specific location such as a school, community hub or service precinct. Our work in these settings is not seen in isolation, it spans across the broader area. We believe this view of place is essential as we recognise that people move on a daily basis around and beyond the places where they live.

WHAT IS A PARTNERSHIP?

Partnership is a broad term used to describe working with other organisations, government, business and the community. Partnerships can be seen on a continuum, ranging from networking through to collaboration. Where a partnership sits on the continuum is dependent on degree of commitment, trust, change required, risk involved, levels of interdependence and a willingness to share resources.

At Melbourne Citymission, we employ the full spectrum according to need and commitment. We utilise the framework developed by VicHealth to describe this continuum of commitment and employ the definitions of their key terms.

The following definitions are taken from the *VicHealth Partnerships Fact Sheet*; see also Himmelman A. 2001, 'On Coalitions and the Transformation of Power Relations: Collaborative Betterment and Collaborative Empowerment', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol 29, No2.

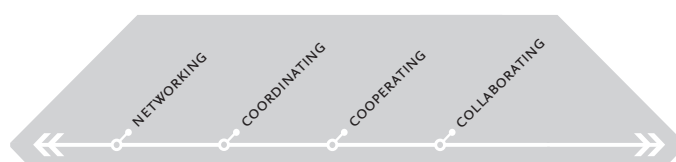


FIGURE 1: PARTNERSHIPS CONTINUUM

EXAMPLES OF PARTNERSHIPS IN PRACTICE

NETWORKING: Involves the exchange of information for mutual benefit. It involves little time and trust between partners.

> Family services within a local government area may meet on a monthly basis to exchange ideas around issues that affect families with young children and provide an update on their work.

CO-ORDINATING: Involves exchanging information and altering activities for a common purpose. It involves more time and trust.

> Family Services within a local government area may meet and plan a coordinated campaign to lobby Council for more family-specific services. This is further illustrated, where; through discussion two Family Service organisations recognise that they are running complementary parent support groups at the same time, and that many parents would benefit from attending both groups. As a result, one of the Family Service providers changes the time that they run their group, allowing parents to participate in both activities.

CO-OPERATING: Involves exchanging information, altering activities and sharing resources for mutual benefit and a common purpose. It requires significant amounts of time and high levels of trust between partners. It may require

a Memorandum of Understanding.

> A Childcare Centre approaches a Family Services organisation and asks them if they would be able to run a series of parent information sessions in the early evening for parents who are unable to get to the regular information sessions conducted during the day. An agreement is drawn up between the Childcare Centre and the Family Service organisation to outline who provides which resources relating to the information session. The Family Service organisation provides the facilitator while the Childcare Centre provides the venue and childcare.

COLLABORATING: In addition to all of the above, collaboration involves a willingness to increase the capacity of another organisation for mutual benefit and a common purpose.

It requires the highest levels of trust, considerable amounts of time and extensive sharing of resources. Working collaboratively can create an integrated, seamless service system.

> The parent information sessions at the Childcare Centre have been running successfully over a period of time. Parents have indicated that they would like these sessions to continue alongside another more practical series of sessions. Again, due to their work commitments parents at the Childcare Centre have been unable to attend the practical sessions held during the day. To enable the Family Services organisation to respond to this request they work with the staff from the Childcare Centre to teach them how to run the parent information sessions themselves. The Family Services organisation has some funds to skill up the staff at the Childcare Centre and absorb the cost of some ongoing parenting resources. In return the Childcare Centre also opens up these sessions to other parents in the community who have been unable to attend the parent information sessions held during the day.

This frees up the Family Services staff to conduct the additional practical classes—meeting the requests of parents.

WHY DO WE WORK IN PARTNERSHIP?

We assume that partnership approaches will bring benefits beyond the capacity of any one individual organisation. Through partnerships, we are able to maximise the benefits and outcomes for the community. We work with partners to:

- bring together a diverse range of skills and resources for more effective community outcomes
 - The needs of people living in areas of disadvantage are often multifaceted and are unable to be met by one agency working alone.

- Increase the capabilities available to the community.
- Harness the individual skills, practice experience and knowledge of each partner agency.
- plan and develop social and economic infrastructure in a coordinated manner
- leverage for funding from across all levels of government
- plan for, and enhance opportunities for sustainability of ongoing planning and coordination of services, infrastructure, community initiatives and social networks
- advocate with and for the community to influence Government policy and practice to increase access to resources, services and facilities within the community in need.

WHAT MAKES A PARTNERSHIP WORK?

The effectiveness of a partnership is dependent upon the investment in time, effort and resources by all partner agencies. The following key elements contribute to a successful partnership:

- recognition of the need for a partnership
 - each partner agency needs to have a clear understanding as to ‘why they are working in partnership’ and ‘what are the benefits for them’.
- commitment from each agency to be part of a partnership
- resources, which may include:
 - a senior worker to undertake strategic planning, including exploration of partnership opportunities and establishing and resourcing partnership development.
- a Community Development worker to facilitate the work of the partnership, and support the day-to-day operations of the partnership
- finances to implement the partnership initiatives
- ‘in kind’ contributions
- a willingness and commitment from partners to invest in time and resources to build the partnership:
 - It takes time to establish relationships, build trust and develop reciprocity.
 - The time involved in establishing a partnership is unfunded work.
- clarity about the unique contributions and roles of partner agencies and workers.

IDENTIFY CONTRIBUTIONS OF PARTNERS: UNDERTAKE A MAPPING EXERCISE



FIGURE 2: A MAPPING EXERCISE: IDENTIFY CONTRIBUTIONS OF PARTNERS

- develop a shared vision of what might be achieved within the community, objectives and goals.
- develop clear operating procedures and policies for the partnership. These may include:
 - conflict resolution policy
 - communication strategy
 - complaints policy
 - conflict of interest policy
 - financial policies.
- collaborative decision making, with a commitment to achieving consensus
- a governance structure, that includes how people can be involved and processes for decision making
 - clear documentation, that outlines working arrangements; this may be in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding
 - support from the managers within each organisation.
- mechanisms for developing and maintaining community participation in the partnership
- a sound planning processes:
 - Develop a business plan to guide the initiative or project activities.
- develop good partnering practice:
 - Use language that all partners understand.
 - Schedule meetings at regular agreed times.
 - Manage meetings: keep to the agenda; implement agreed decision-making processes; facilitate participation of each partner; summarise agreed decisions/ actions; finish meetings on time; take minutes of meetings and distribute within allocated time frame.
- evaluation:
 - Agree on evaluation criteria and measures of success.
 - Establish baseline information prior to implementation of new service initiatives.
 - Keep records of the Partnership’s progress, including outcomes of the Partnership’s collective work.
 - Reflect on the Partnership: Is it still working? What needs to happen to make it more effective? Review the range of partners—do new members need to join the Partnership?
 - Is the Partnership achieving its goals? What are the benefits for the community? Is the collective action of the Partnership adding value (rather than duplicating services) for the community?

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP?

Working in partnership to deliver responsive services to people living in under-resourced disadvantaged areas can at times be difficult, requiring partnerships to respond to problems that may result from this way of working. Some common problems are outlined in the table on page 5:

THE CHALLENGES OF WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP, AN EXAMPLE FROM PRACTICE: THOMASTOWN MAIN STREET PRECINCT PARTNERSHIP

The objective of this initiative is to establish a fully integrated Precinct, where:

- there is an integrated, holistic and responsive service system aimed at improving the educational and health and wellbeing indicators for children from early years to young adulthood
- resources are shared
- there are opportunities for strong community connections as well as effective life transitions, and there are opportunities for engagement of all ages in lifelong learning.

To progress this initiative a Partnership has been established comprising key service providers within the Precinct— (for example, schools, community agencies, City of Whittlesea and State and Federal Government). Community engagement, including participation in the Partnership is central to the Precinct model. The work of the Partnership is guided by a Strategic Plan which has been developed by the Thomastown Precinct Planning Group.

The proposed partnership model will create a mechanism for direct community participation in future planning and project delivery and will enhance agency collaboration. This collaboration will aim to maximise resources and achieve a genuine 'whole of government' response to meet community needs and policy imperatives for the Thomastown community.

For many of the organisations, working in partnership has presented numerous challenges and has required much reflection. For Melbourne Citymission this included asking a number of key questions:

- Do we want to work in this area?
- Do our philosophies align with those of other potential partners?
- Do we work in a similar manner to other agencies?
- Do we have the resources (workers and time) to make a long-term commitment to the Partnership? What are the costs?
- What can we contribute to the Partnership (expertise, knowledge, community networks)?
- What are the benefits for Melbourne Citymission?
- Do the benefits outweigh the costs?

TABLE 1: POSSIBLE PITFALLS IN WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP:

PROBLEM	SOLUTION
Lack of understanding of role of partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly define roles, responsibilities and expectations of partners. Develop job descriptions which outline roles and responsibilities of each partner. Use clear, consistent language—develop a glossary of terms.
Finger pointing when things go wrong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> View problems as shared ones rather than someone else's. Identify and share problems honestly and openly. Solve things together, to build trust. Once identified, solve problems quickly. Ensure there are strategies for working with and resolving conflict.
A few individuals dominate discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop good partnering practice, including agreed meeting protocols. Facilitate participation of each partner—Agree that after discussion on key items all members be given the opportunity to contribute their view.
Getting preoccupied with process and forgetting about outcomes for the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a business plan that guides work of the partnership and work plans for each activity. Establish timeline with priorities for the partnership that focus on outcomes for the community. Review progress of work against outcomes on a regular basis.
Competition between agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Choose partners carefully: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are partners willing to share ideas? Are partners willing to share resources? Are partners willing to be flexible to achieve shared goals? Do partners share common philosophies? Build working relationships by developing shared vision, objectives and principles that will inform the way the partnership works. Clarify roles, responsibilities and expectations of partners, including resources that each partner brings to the Partnership. Review partnership membership: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are partners still willing to share ideas/resources to achieve the goal of the partnership? Do the partners continue to benefit individually from participating in the Partnership? Do the benefits outweigh the costs? Have there been organisational changes that have affected the Partnership? Is it time for some partners to leave?
Limited funding / resources to establish and maintain the partnership and implement service responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undertake a mapping exercise to determine the resources that each partner can bring to the partnership. Explore availability of resources from external sources to continue the partnership. Utilise the strength of the partnership to leverage for funding across all levels of Government.
The community aren't interested in participating in the partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use clear, consistent language that can be understood by everyone (no professional jargon). Develop partnership processes (communication, decision making, administrative processes) that are as simple as possible. Ensure partnership processes and decisions are transparent—openness and honesty are important elements of a successful partnership. Hold meetings at times that suit people in the community. Spend time establishing relationships with people; initially there may be a degree of scepticism—trust builds over time. Utilise a range of mechanisms to engage and consult with the community. Respond to community priorities. Ensure that people benefit from participating in the partnership, beyond the benefits of the partnership as a whole. Ongoing benefit can lead to ongoing participation in the partnership, enhancing sustainability.
People arrive late for meetings and/or unprepared, on an ongoing basis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This may be an indicator of lack of commitment to the partnership: It is time to review the partnership. This may be an indicator that meetings are no longer engaging: Review meeting protocols; invite a guest speaker; allow opportunities for social interaction; use the meeting to enhance learning.

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF OUR PARTNERSHIP WORK:

By continuously evaluating our work we can demonstrate evidence-based successes and use this as a basis for further development of service responses. A culture of reflection about our practice, including our partnership work, and the outcomes for the people we work with in our Place Based Work is fostered throughout the organisation.

To determine the effectiveness of our partnership work we develop evaluation criteria and measures of success around:

- i. How the Partnership is working
- ii. Partnership activities (service responses/program activities)

Implementation of a partnership self-assessment tool, for example, VicHealth's 'Partnerships Analysis Tool' may also be beneficial in establishing a baseline regarding how the Partnership works at the outset of the project.

Reflection on our partnership work and a willingness to modify our plans and actions accordingly is pivotal to the success of our partnership work.

REFLECTION: KEY QUESTIONS AROUND HOW THE PARTNERSHIP IS WORKING

- Is the Partnership working?
- Is there a clear purpose and shared vision?
- Have decision-making processes been established?
- Are the identified needs of the community being met?
- What needs to happen to make our Partnership work more effective?
- Is the partnership time limited?
- Is the partnership representative of long term working arrangements?
- Do we need to discontinue the partnership?

We develop an evaluation process for Partnership activities (service responses) during the planning phase. There is clarity regarding why we are doing the activity and what we hope to achieve through delivering this response. Throughout the service implementation phase we promote a culture of reflection and implement an Action Research framework.

A CULTURE OF REFLECTION: IMPLEMENTING AN ACTION RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

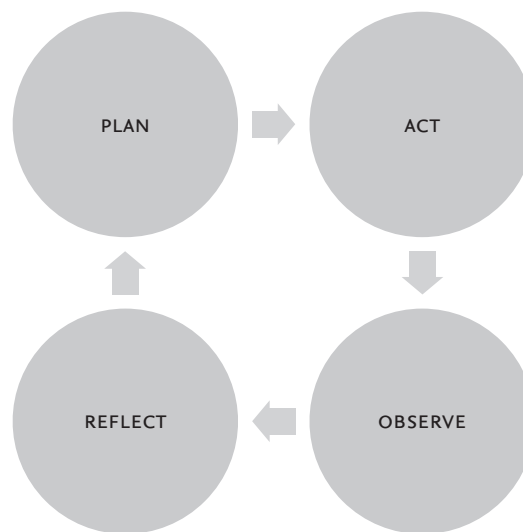


FIGURE 3: A CULTURE OF REFLECTION

Most importantly in evaluating our partnership work we recognise the needs of people living in under-resourced, disadvantaged areas change and are prepared to discontinue our work if it is no longer beneficial or the partnership is no longer effective.

PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABILITY

We work in partnership with stakeholders to plan for sustainability of the work undertaken or facilitated in local areas. We aim to develop activities, programs, processes and resources, within specific geographic locations, that can be maintained over time, with or without us.

Our sustainability work in the Partnership development phases may include:

- identifying resources that each partner can bring to the Partnership
- spending time building relationships; this can be the building block for long-term partnership work
- establishing relationships with identified leaders living in the local area
- exploration of external funding sources to continue the Partnership
- exploration of external funding sources to maintain activities.





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