

Competition and cooperation: coordinating services to establish a lifelong learning hub

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INTRODUCTION

Earlier this year, in advance of the 2005-2006 budget, the Victorian State Government released its \$788 million social policy statement: *A Fairer Victoria*. This document details a five to ten year plan, addressing disadvantage in Victoria through five targeted elements. The fifth of these elements is a commitment to: “making it easier to work with government”. Within this commitment are two strategies for implementing change: “Changing the way we work with communities”; and “Developing better ways of working together at a regional and local level” (State Government, Victoria, 2005).

Underpinning these strategies are a series of promises for changes in the way government services are delivered, based on a move towards partnerships between government and other bodies, devolving decision making to regional and local level organisations, and a commitment to building effective communities which are better able to help themselves. The move is away from a departmental approach to delivery of specialised services and towards integration of services, cross-sectoral approaches to establishing relationships between government and communities and a focus on local level solutions to complex problems of disadvantage, inequality and social exclusion. The underlying rationale also includes the effect of enhancing community capacity to participate in the democratic process, thus improving government’s responsiveness to community demand and empowering communities to address their own needs.

This trend towards governments working in partnership with non-government agencies and the focus on strengthening communities to tackle their own problems is emerging alongside recent policy moves towards developing social capital as a means for enabling communities to function more efficiently and effectively. In the wake of a policy shift towards third way government, whole of government and joined up government initiatives, there has been shift towards place management and a local or community level focus on provision of integrated services. Current rhetoric of ‘social inclusion’ is based in part on the idea of geographically located pockets of disadvantage within an affluent society. Recent research has noted that “place management has emerged as a new term in spatial policy language stressing the importance of breaking down the ‘silos of government’ and viewing the needs of localities in a more holistic fashion.” (Smyth, et al., 2005).

In the context of this policy shift, many government and non-government agencies have begun pursuing partnership arrangements to facilitate interagency co-operation and a ‘joined up’ approach to services. Yet recent public policy in regard to funding of welfare services has seen a rationalisation of funding bases, more centralised planning of services and the rise of purchasing of service delivery and competitive tendering (Nyland, 2005). This has resulted in an ever larger number of for-profit and not-for-profit organisations competing against each other for a shrinking pot of money to fund their core activities. This paper then takes as a case study one attempt at co-ordination of services in an inner city suburb of Melbourne and examines the experience of actually trying to implement new government policy in a real world situation. It traces the development of the project, from the perspective of an independent researcher and details some of the difficulties which were encountered along the way. No one account can hope to represent the full complexity of

an undertaking which involved numerous participants from federal, state and local government agencies as well as the not for profit sector. As well, the project is ongoing, so that this paper presents only one account of a complex and multifaceted endeavour that continues to unfold.

THE CARLTON COMMUNITY LIFELONG LEARNING HUB

The Carlton Community Lifelong Learning Hub is an example of one particular attempt to improve outcomes for a disadvantaged community in inner Melbourne. The aim of the hub project is to establish a centre, based at the local primary school, where a number of activities and programs take place, designed to enhance the learning opportunities and experiences for Carlton residents, in particular those who dwell on the high rise public housing estate. The school already provides the facilities and infrastructure within which a number of independent organisations operate to offer services to residents. These include the local council's toy library and playgroups, a Chinese language school, Carlton Parkville Youth Services, the Islamic Women's Welfare Council and AMES (Adult Multicultural Education Services) who run a cooking and catering enterprise out of the school's kitchen. Yet these services are not co-ordinated and operate independently, in an ad hoc way each dealing directly with the school, but generally not directly with each other.

LIFELONG LEARNING

Lifelong learning is indeed an interesting and useful concept for examining attempts to coordinate services for individuals and communities, for lifelong learning is a policy buzzword to those charged with enabling citizens to participate in the knowledge society. As part of a strategy for enabling communities to address their own learning needs, governments at all levels are beginning to encourage a wider range of options for provision of education, breaking down some reliance on the traditional model of state provided education and training. At the same time schools are being opened up to communities, allowing for better use of community infrastructure and encouraging those who may be disengaged from learning for whatever reason to make use of available facilities and services. As the World Bank has recently noted:

A lifelong learning framework encompasses learning throughout the lifecycle, from early childhood through retirement. It encompasses formal learning (schools, training institutions, universities); nonformal learning (structured on-the-job training); and informal learning (skills learned from family members or in the community). It allows people to access learning opportunities as they need them rather than because they have reached a certain age. Lifelong learning is crucial to preparing workers to compete in the global economy. But it is important for other reasons as well. By improving people's ability to function as members of their communities, education and training increase social cohesion, reduce crime, and improve income distribution.

World Bank, 2003: xvii

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's World Conference on Education for All also articulated a definition of basic learning needs thus:

These needs comprise both essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning.

UNESCO, World Declaration on Education for All, Art. 1, para. 1.

The Commission of the European Communities has this definition of lifelong learning:

all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspectives.

They go on to note that lifelong learning:

promises a Europe in which citizens have the opportunity and ability to realise their ambitions and to participate in building a better society. Indeed, a recent OECD report refers to the growing evidence that learning and investment in human capital is associated not just with increased GDP, but also with greater civic participation, higher reported well-being and lower criminality.

Commission of the European Communities, 2001: 7,9

It may be seen that lifelong learning not only touches on a broad range of disciplines and competencies, but involves individuals from all age groups and communities from every possible social and ethnic background. Moreover it is a policy concern of governments and non-government organisations from around the globe. The development of a project aimed at improving opportunities for participation in lifelong learning therefore provides an ideal context within which to examine attempts to coordinate a range of services and programs in a framework of joined up government and place based governance.

CARLTON IN CONTEXT

Much has been written elsewhere about the policies and practices of public housing in Melbourne and this paper will not discuss specific details of housing allocations or the changing nature of public housing over the past ten years (for more detail, see Paris, 1993; Howe, 1988; Arthurson, 1998; McNelis and Reynolds, 2001; Dodson, 2003). It will suffice here to note that currently all residents of public housing face one or more factors of disadvantage in the community. The most notable factors are poverty or comparatively low incomes. These are often coupled with a range of other difficulties including mental or physical health issues, being recently arrived migrants, often with little or no English, unemployment, lack of education, substance abuse or disrupted family life through abuse or violence. Public housing in Carlton, as elsewhere in inner urban Melbourne, is home to people of many different cultural, linguistic and faith backgrounds, different ages and life stages and with diverse needs and aspirations.

There are, however, some factors which unite residents of public housing, particularly when considered in relation to the surrounding suburbs which in most cases are rapidly gentrifying and opening up to wealthy middle-class home owners. Carlton in particular is interesting in this regard due to its proximity to two major Victorian universities (the University of Melbourne and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) and hence the high proportion of surrounding dwellings given over to student accommodation, very often for full-fee-paying international students.

The Victorian government's Office of Housing manages a number of property types in Carlton, including high rise apartment blocks of both one bedroom (elderly persons units) and two or three bedrooms (family units), walk-up flats and spot purchased separate housing. For the purposes of this report, information will be given which relates to the two main clusters of public housing ('the estates') which contain the high rise buildings and surrounding walk-up flats. The location of these estates is shown in Appendix 1. For comparative purposes, information is also given about the surrounding suburb of Carlton, excluding the estates. The data is taken from the 2001 census conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

There are over 800 flats on the Lygon estate and 250 on the Elgin estate. More than 75% of the households fall into the lowest income quartile for the Melbourne Statistical District, and almost a further 20% fall into the second lowest quartile. By comparison, the figures for the rest of Carlton

are 35% in the lowest quartile and 21% in the second lowest. Less than 1% of estate households have incomes in the highest quartile, compared with more than a quarter of households in the rest of Carlton.

28% of residents on the Lygon estate are aged under 14 years, while the comparable figure for the Elgin estate is 18% and for the rest of Carlton 6%. At the other end of the life cycle, 27% of residents on the Elgin estate are aged over 55 years, as are 18% of the Lygon estate residents and just 11% of residents in the rest of Carlton. Thus it can be seen that the estates' population is skewed towards the very young and the very old, with comparatively few people of working age living there.

Examining these figures more closely reveals that 28% of households on the Elgin estate and 30% on the Lygon estate are sole parent families, compared with a Melbourne average of 11%. The Melbourne average for households consisting of couples with children is 36%, whilst for the Carlton estates it is 12% and 17% respectively. More than 40% of households on each estate consist of a single person only, compared with the Melbourne average of 23%.

Approximately one-third of estate residents were born in Australia. This compares with approximately half of other residents in Carlton being born in Australia and half overseas. The figure for Melbourne as a whole reverses that of the estates, where 70% of people were born in Australia and 30% were born overseas. The biggest and certainly the most visible ethnic group on the Carlton estates is the Horn of Africa community, consisting of migrants from Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan. This group makes up approximately half of all residents not born in Australia, or one third of the total estate population. It is also the most recently arrived and their presence in surrounding areas of Carlton could be considered negligible. The next biggest ethnic group is the Indo-Chinese, who have lived on the estate for somewhat longer and constitute approximately 10% of residents. Other groups include southern Europeans, Turks and Lebanese, as well as a significant population of Egyptian Coptic Christians in the Elgin Street flats.

The Table 1 shows the employment characteristics of estate residents in comparison to others in Carlton and across the whole of Melbourne. These figures are for persons aged over 15 years.

Table 1

	<i>Elgin</i>	<i>Lygon</i>	<i>Rest of Carlton</i>	<i>Melbourne</i>
Employed	19.6%	17.4%	49.2%	57.7%
Unemployed	8.8%	12.9%	4.9%	4.1%
Not in labour force	64.7%	57.3%	38.4%	33.9%
Not stated	6.9%	12.4%	7.5%	4.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Not only are significantly fewer people from the estates in employment (full-time, part-time or casual), but that the estates are hugely over-represented by residents who are not in the labour force, that is, neither working nor looking for work. Most of these rely on government income support, including parenting payments, disability pensions and age pensions.

The Table 2 shows how many estate residents are engaged in formal learning and at what level. The rest of Carlton column demonstrates the importance of the Carlton area for tertiary student accommodation.

Table 2

<i>Educational institution</i>	Elgin		Lygon		Rest of Carlton	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Pre-school	7	6.5%	20	3.8%	24	0.7%
Primary	17	15.7%	143	27.0%	93	2.6%
Secondary	47	43.5%	133	25.1%	141	3.9%
TAFE Institution	14	13.0%	83	15.7%	313	8.7%
University or other tertiary institution	17	15.7%	84	15.9%	2,882	80.2%
Other	6	5.6%	66	12.5%	140	3.9%
Total	108	100%	529	100%	3,593	100%

Carlton Primary School is located on the grounds of the public housing estate and provides education predominantly to children resident on the estate. The Lifelong Learning Hub project was initiated by the school principal in conjunction with Melbourne City Council. These two organisations clearly have an ongoing interest in the welfare and progress of the community living in the Carlton area, in particular those living in public housing on the Lygon/Rathdowne estate. Yet there are many others who are concerned with precisely the same matters. More than 20 service providers are located in the immediate surrounds of the public housing estates, providing services for residents that include health, adult education, welfare, social work, community development, parenting and family counselling, settlement services for new migrants, preschool education, childcare, financial counselling, senior citizens and youth services among others. Whilst some services are provided directly for public housing tenants, such as the worker based in the older persons' tower at 530 Lygon Street, others are available to anyone in the local community, such as the Carlton Baths and Neighbourhood Learning Centre, or to particular groups, such as the Senior Citizens' Centre. These service providers are also funded from a variety of sources, including Commonwealth, state and local governments and philanthropic organisations.

Interestingly, these are all fairly small, discrete agencies. None of the major not-for-profit agencies which conduct many services and programs across the welfare spectrum in Melbourne operate here. Such agencies would include the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Anglicare, Smith Family and Jesuit Social Services. The legacy of the 1990s conservative government in Victoria continues to be reflected in the lack of tenant based associations or representative bodies (the exception here is Carlton Housing Estate Resident Services [CHERS], a tenant body mainly funded by St Jude's church) as well as in the number of small agencies competing through competitive tendering for limited resources (Guinness, 2000).

The local agencies have conjoined in an informal alliance known as CLAN, the Carlton Local Agencies Network, to facilitate cooperation and communication between services. CLAN meets monthly and provides attendees with a chance to discuss their current projects and programs, coordinate planning and explore joint funding opportunities. It runs on a voluntary basis and represents many, but not all, of the service providers in the Carlton area. It has no legal status and cannot apply for funding, hold resources or employ workers. There is also a lot of pressure on community spaces and facilities and many agencies are located in small or inadequate buildings, or buildings which are under threat due to infrastructure expansion.

Carlton Primary School, on the other hand, is under enrolled with school age students, and has unused classrooms and meeting rooms as well as a fully equipped cooking room, art room and technology centre. It is centrally located on the grounds of the public housing estate itself and is wheelchair and pram accessible.

ESTABLISHING THE HUB

The combination of a high and complex needs community, available infrastructure, a plethora of existing learning services and a dynamic school principal with a vision for education in its widest sense, saw the development of the idea of establishing a Lifelong Learning Hub at Carlton Primary School in late 2004. Melbourne City Council backed the school's vision with a grant to enable a research project to be undertaken into learning needs in the Carlton area, in order to establish a hub which would meet community need, avoid duplication of services and allow for cooperation and collaboration between existing service providers.

At the same time Council approved an application for funding to support a project worker whose role would be to implement the findings of the research project and oversee the establishment and initial running of the hub itself. This was approved at around the time that the researchers had called a public meeting for local community members and community organisations to attend and learn about the hub project. In effect, the researchers were able to approach local service providers from government and not for profit agencies and say: "Here is a facility which is available and here is a worker to support you, what would you like to see in this hub?"

To answer this question, a committee was formed consisting of approximately eight representatives of various organisations who had expressed an interest in being involved in the hub project. The committee met fortnightly for almost six months, and took the opportunity to visit another well established hub elsewhere in Melbourne as well as read about and discuss a number of other hub models which could help inform the design of the hub in Carlton. At the end of almost six months, the committee members had not been able to answer the question posed above and were moreover unable to identify any areas of unmet need amongst their clients, whether for more services, more support or more facilities or to agree on what a hub might actually be or do.

This raised a number of very interesting research questions regarding why this occurred. It very quickly became clear that some of the community organisations were reluctant to contribute to a new and innovative approach towards service delivery and integration, and moreover, were concerned about the effects of change to the status quo. This was intriguing given that the new approach was directly aimed at meeting the government's current policy aims of integrating services and providing place based programs rather than the existing model of service 'silos' where numerous small agencies delivered a single service to clients who may have needed assistance with a number of different things. For example a newly arrived refugee family may need affordable childcare for toddlers while parents attend English language classes, access to preschool education for a four-year-old, help with migration issues such as housing, employment and residence rights, culturally specific health education and social outlets with neighbours and community members. Providing incentives for services to work more closely together and to have access to a single worker who could coordinate activities and streamline referrals would appear to be of benefit to a range of organisations whose aim is to improve outcomes for local residents across a range of service areas.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

The scepticism of existing services regarding the hub concept deserves closer examination. Despite voicing their support for the hub project in principle, in practice some of the agencies which committed their time and energy by joining the committee were at best passive observers of the process and at worst, actively resistant to the idea of a hub. Whilst some participants contributed ideas and enthusiasm, in general the committee found itself bogged down with establishing the concept of the hub, at the expense of bringing the fruits of many years of local knowledge to the table. So the question arises as to why existing agencies would see the commitment of \$100,000 to

a community building project in their area as a difficulty which needed to be negotiated rather than as an opportunity to share in this windfall.

One cause for concern seemed to lie in the concept of co-locating services in one building. One committee member stated: “The building will have all the power.” Such a stance seems to indicate the small local organisations’ fierce commitment to independence. This is despite the range of separate pools of funding sources - federal, state, local and private - which support the Carlton agencies. Most of the agencies are therefore not competing directly with each other for funding, and some, such as church based agencies, do not compete for these kinds of funds at all. In recent years, however, there has been another shift in policy, away from support for small, specialised agencies delivering single services and towards partnerships between government and the not-for-profit sector and a local or regional focus for integrated and coordinated services, rather than a separation based on function or type of service (Fine et al., 2005). This new drive towards place based management, community governance or ‘associationalism’ has found a firm place in social policy at all levels of government. It seems that the ‘partners’ on the ground, however, are yet to catch up with the shift.

There are a number of forms which this co-ordination of services might take, ranging from co-location of independent services through cooperative links between groups working together some of the time to a higher form of coordination at planning and resourcing level and onto full integration of services into a single unit (Fine et al, 2005). When the hub project was first mooted and funding applied for, the level of coordination had not yet been fully decided. There was scope for the existing agencies to articulate their own vision and preferences for working together (a rhetoric which was continually espoused) and for flexibility in the development of the hub at a level of cooperation which was above mere co – location of services but within which there was scope for differences in the level of integration and commitment to the hub. At no point did the workers engaged in establishing the hub suggest that agencies would be amalgamated or absorbed into a larger structure, nor indeed did the hub have the power to do so. Concern remained for some, however, that if the hub became larger than any of the other agencies that it would naturally begin, over time to attract more funds and clients to itself, at the expense of others. The fear was never articulated at the level of a loss or disadvantage for clients or the community. In fact the opposite was the case – the hub would be too good, so people would naturally want to go there rather than to existing services.

The subtext here is undoubtedly based on a possibly justified fear of services closing and service providers losing their jobs. Yet this scenario is only a risk if the agencies continue to perceive the hub as an ‘enemy’ and a competitor, and to work in opposition to it. Had the agencies been able to take hold of the project through their membership of the reference committee and to assume ownership and direction of the worker and the funds, then some of that fear may have been alleviated. Research evidence has shown that the level of integration should in fact be matched to the degree of need amongst clients (Leutz, 1999), so that in this case it is probable that coordination of services rather than full integration would be the preferred model. Agencies would retain some degree of independence, but would agree to work together to avoid duplication of services. There would be an overall level of planning and organisation, including foresight and identification of unmet need as well as a streamlining of referrals and getting clients into appropriate programmes (Fine et al, 2005).

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

So what does all this mean for the implementation of the lifelong learning hub? The primary school and the local council, which had already committed funds both for the research project and for a worker to establish and run the hub for the first year, remained strongly committed to the project.

Thus they were faced with the dilemma of wanting to push forward with the project and expend the funds within the budget period for which they had been allocated, yet without alienating the very agencies which they had hoped to engage. Crisis meetings between these two partners and the researchers resolved that the project would go ahead, but that the reference committee which had initially been formed to oversee it would have to be disbanded and a new committee formed with members from outside the small circle of key agency stakeholders. The partners also resolved that, in the absence of a consensually agreed governance structure, vision, mission, goals or strategic plan by the existing committee, the researchers should be charged with developing such structures and presenting them for debate by a new committee.

The old committee, however, were understandably extremely distressed by this turn of events and several members fought long and hard to retain the existing structure despite its lack of progress. They argued that “due process” had to be followed in any community development project, and that once the reference committee had been formed, it must be allowed to continue to work towards achieving its goals (although these had never been articulated) however long and painful a process that might be. This raises an interesting issue about the importance of democratic processes being followed in a community development context, particularly given that the committee existed only informally and was never formally constituted as any legal or governatory body. Interestingly, however, the service agencies generally represented themselves as being the “community”, or at least of representing the “community” despite the fact that none of them lived on the estate, and all were in paid employment by government or not for profit organisations. The lack of direct democratic participation in the decision making process, however, reflects what Hindess has called “democratic deficit”, which is, in fact “the normal condition of the institutions of representative government” (Hindess, 2002: 30). This situation of democratic deficit, or lack of effectiveness of direct participation by citizens in decision making processes will become increasingly apparent as governments continue to push for more community consultation and stakeholder participation.

As the funding and auspicing bodies, however, MCC and CPS were committed to the process, and a new governance structure was adopted. This consisted of an advisory committee which was made up of representatives from the school, council, local police, a senior education administrator as well as one representative from the local agencies and one from the current users of the school building. This group, along with the researchers, developed terms of reference, goals, mission, vision and a strategic plan for itself and its sub committees, which are to be a small operations and management group to oversee the day to day activities of the hub as well as a committee of hub users who will liaise with the hub worker to ensure that services are coordinated and needs are being met. The advisory committee will be formally constituted as a sub committee of the school council, thus obviating the need for an independent constitution as a legally incorporated body. It does, however, mean that decision making remains within the bounds of the school governance, rather than opening it up to community based or other local quasi-democratic, inclusive processes.

Each of these new committees has begun work on its areas of responsibility and the recruitment process for the hub worker is underway. The six or so groups which are already using the school will form the nucleus of the lifelong learning hub. The hub should be fully operational by the end of this year.

CONCLUSION

The policy rhetoric of government and community partnerships, place management and coordination of services is in place but the groundwork has not been done to allow the connections to be easily made. Attempting to create a coordinated hub of services for a disadvantaged community by bringing together a number of existing small services and agencies in this case hit a number of hurdles. It is not enough for governments, including local governments, to change the

way they say they are going to do business. It is important to recognise the conditions on the ground in which there is something of a siege mentality and victim mentality of NGOs (“the government is the enemy”). Agencies are resistant to cooperation: “when you say ‘collaborate’, some agencies hear ‘amalgamate’” (Nyland, 2005). Changing the way government does business also requires non-government organisations to change the way they do business, both with the government and with each other.

The current funding model, which has been developing over the last ten to twenty years, creates competition between agencies for the same bucket of money. This makes things most difficult for small to medium sized organisations - big agencies fare better under this regime. Establishing partnerships between not for profit organisations is made more difficult by these conditions, even when they are not directly competing for the same funds. In this climate then, much more preparatory work needs to be done in order to allow agencies to work together in a collaborative way. Changes to funding models to encourage cooperation, opening up of government departmental silos and clear and open communication between all levels of government and communities will be necessary if cooperation is to come about through genuine, self-established partnerships and not through imposition of a partnership model through an outside agency.

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