

Tracking What Works:

Voluntary activity, community strengthening and local government

A report by the Centre for Citizenship and Human Rights, Deakin University
to the Municipal Association of Victoria

January 2007



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Disclaimer

The MAV is the statutory peak body for local government in Victoria, representing all 79 municipalities. The MAV engaged the Centre for Citizenship and Human Rights to assist the Association undertake this work. The MAV would also like to acknowledge the contribution of those who provided their comments and advice during this project. This publication may be of assistance to you but the MAV and its employees do not guarantee that the publication is wholly appropriate for your particular purpose. While every attempt has been made to reflect data accurately the MAV disclaims all liability for any misinterpretation, resultant errors, or any action taken or not taken in reliance on the contents of this report.

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Message from the Municipal Association of Victoria

It is increasingly recognised that active participation is central to achieving community health and wellbeing across social, economic and environmental arenas. There is growing evidence that robust voluntary activity within communities has the potential to:

- influence better education, health, employment, economic and other community outcomes;
- extend social networks and improve the sense of “belonging” or inclusion in communities;
- develop a greater sense of trust and tolerance within communities;
- improve capacity at the individual, organizational and community level;
- contribute to the delivery of social goods and services.

These are compelling arguments for developing a better understanding of volunteering and how it can be understood, supported and developed as a key component of active community participation, community building, community engagement and community strengthening.

In order to understand the real impact of voluntary activity and its connection to community resilience and strength, consideration must be given to its contribution inside and outside formal organisational settings; its relevance and impact across multiple sectoral, geographic, social, economic, cultural, political and other boundaries; and its part in building local democracy.

Voluntary activity reflects individual and community energy and passions and is almost universally admired and commended as worthwhile. However, it is also affected by changing community perceptions, demographics, expectations and priorities. Many community organisations and services are confronted by the difficulty in recruiting and retaining volunteers while other forms of community participation and activity are flourishing. This presents a real challenge in how communities understand and respond strategically to the changing nature of participation in all its forms, including volunteering.

This is becoming an increasingly important issue for government, business and the community. Local government in particular, is positioned to shape and support the conditions in which voluntary associations and social networks develop and thrive. It interacts with the wide array of associations, community groups, business and the formal and informal settings in which participation occurs. Local government is also able to support “whole of community” approaches by facilitating leadership, strategic partnerships, collaboration and planning within the community.

“Tracking What Works” provides a framework for considering the relationship between volunteering and community strengthening. The report draws on the insights of fifteen councils across Victoria. The MAV values the contribution of these councils to an emerging local and international discussion.

“Tracking What Works” reflects the experience of councils and communities in dealing with the impact of changing community participation patterns and the growing need for new ways to stimulate and support voluntary activity at a community level. It relates the

observations of councils and community organisations that traditional recruitment and retention strategies are not sufficient to address these changes, nor to promote wider community participation.

The report argues that taking a community strengthening perspective means taking account of the widest range of voluntary activities that contribute to outcomes such as building trust, developing strong networks, developing and realising community goals and facilitating community driven governance structures.

The emphasis of this work is on understanding and supporting voluntary activity and participation at a strategic, community wide level. The ability to mobilize community resources, generate community ownership and participation, address community issues in a locally responsive way and to act quickly to take up community challenges is integral to achieving positive community outcomes.

While this is a challenge that will be shared by government, business and community alike, the role of local government in facilitating positive community outcomes is central. The move to explore more contemporary approaches to supporting and sustaining voluntary activity as part of strengthening communities will inform and indeed underpin, the directions being taken by local government in community engagement, community capacity building, community planning and community development.

The MAV appreciates the support of the Department for Victorian Communities and the collaboration with the Centre for Citizenship and Human Rights in producing "Tracking What Works".

The MAV commends "Tracking What Works" as a step forward in recognising the important relationship between voluntary activity and community strength and the strategic challenges and opportunities this poses for local government and the community at large.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rob Spence', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Rob Spence
Chief Executive Officer
Municipal Association of Victoria

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Executive summary

● This report investigates the idea of voluntary activity and the ways in which local government in Victoria is engaging voluntary activity within a community strengthening framework. It identifies a range of changes and challenges facing Victorian councils in this task and highlights a number of examples where councils have successfully integrated their approach to voluntary activity with community strengthening outcomes. It is evident from these experiences that taking a community strengthening perspective to voluntary activity means taking account of the widest range of voluntary activities that can contribute to outcomes such as building trust, developing strong networks, developing and realising collective goals and facilitating community driven governance structures.

● This report acknowledges the leadership exhibited by local government in supporting voluntary activity for community strengthening outcomes. In this respect it attempts to document what is already happening 'on the ground' in local communities in terms of a broader conceptual approach to voluntary activity and to stimulate debate in response to these developments. It connects the work of Victorian local government to a proactive agenda for building strong communities and aims to contribute to ongoing national and international discussion on this subject.

● The conceptual approaches identified in this report rest upon a broad definition of voluntary activity as an activity that:

- o is of benefit to the community;
- o is non-obligatory and undertaken without coercion;
- o is without monetary reward

This definition expands the conventional definitions of formal volunteering, which share the above characteristics, but are limited to activity that:

- o takes place in an organised context; and
- o takes place in designated volunteer positions only.

The broad definition of voluntary activity established in this report reflects trends within Victorian councils, where a range of informal activities and diverse forms of community participation are being integrated into strategic approaches to community strengthening.

● There are different ways of approaching the development of policies and programs regarding voluntary activity. This report identifies five key approaches:

- o Civic commitment and obligation
- o Instrumental
- o Service delivery
- o Management
- o Community development

● Local government in Victoria is strongly engaged with community members acting in a variety of voluntary capacities. These include work with volunteer resource centres under a professionalised management framework as well as engaging community members in community planning, consultation and capacity building projects. Individual councils vary on how they define this activity, what terminology they use to describe it, and the extent to which it is approached from a holistic conceptual basis.

● A number of examples exist where councils have successfully integrated approaches to voluntary activity with community strengthening outcomes. This report provides a non-exhaustive description of such examples.

● A number of themes are emerging within Victorian councils as they begin to rethink the strategic framework in which voluntary activity is approached. In particular:

- o a transition from more traditional conceptions of volunteering to a broader conception of voluntary activities. This transition emerges as councils develop more effective and diverse forms of engagement with communities;
- o a strategic emphasis upon outcomes from voluntary activity rather than upon the act of volunteering itself;
- o an assets based emphasis;
- o a growing interest in the value of partnerships between local councils and non-government organisations and businesses.

● Victorian councils identify a series of recent changes in voluntary activity and these raise specific questions for programs linking voluntary activity to community strengthening. Key themes in these changes and challenges are:

- o Declining interest in traditional volunteering activities;
- o Specific community interests and expectations;
- o Changing motivations behind voluntary activity;
- o Corporate volunteering;
- o Demographics and cultural diversity;
- o Bureaucracy and regulations.

● A number of alternative understandings of voluntary activity and complementary conceptual approaches can be articulated by reflecting upon the changes and challenges facing councils and the responses and projects they have developed. This report identifies four approaches to voluntary activity as community strengthening based on:

- o discrete categories of voluntary activity;
- o capacity building and trust;
- o community participation and building strong networks;
- o social and political empowerment.

● A number of key issues and dilemmas remain as councils develop their individual approaches to voluntary activity as a form of community strengthening. These relate to:

- o approaches to cultural diversity;
- o approaches to disadvantaged groups and struggling communities;
- o notions of voluntary activity as ‘exploited unpaid labour;’
- o personal interest and ‘involuntary volunteering;’
- o assumptions about ‘good citizenship;’
- o the impacts of bureaucratised and over-administered volunteer programs;
- o letting go: a whole-of-council approach;
- o maintaining critical thinking.

● This report offers a number of suggested points for councils to consider when facilitating and developing voluntary activity programs within a community strengthening framework. These are:

- o Build a conceptual and strategic framework for approaching voluntary activity;
- o Articulate a working definition of voluntary activity;
- o Develop a working definition of community and community strengthening;
- o Investigate the specific changes and challenges that affect voluntary activity in local communities;
- o Explore new thinking on voluntary activity;
- o Draw upon existing knowledge, experience and resources;
- o Avoid one-size fits all approaches;
- o Share ideas and strategies through networks.

What is this report about?

1

This report appears in the context of growing international interest in voluntary activity and its place in local and global communities. A wide range of international literature, policy development and community sector initiatives are engaging new understandings of voluntary activity and reflecting upon how they can contribute to sustainable communities.

Voluntary activity is increasingly identified by different levels of government as central to building active, supportive and strong communities (Outer Suburban/Interface Services and Development Committee 2006; Pope 2006; Rogers and Robinson 2004; Vinson 2004).¹ This emphasis is consistent with contemporary ideas of how personal agency, active citizenship and community participation are the keystones of a healthy society (Bowen 2004; Jochum, Pratten, and Wilding 2005). Voluntary activity contributes to the 'social capital' that binds communities together in ways that are not always measurable in statistical or monetary terms (Bowen 2004; Putnam 2000; Stukas, Daley and Cowling 2005; Wilson, Spoehr and McLean 2005). From this perspective, voluntary activity provides pathways to the achievement of personal and collective goals, to building community networks and to generating democratic participation in communities and society at large.

Within the local government sector in Victoria new thinking about voluntary activity is emerging against the backdrop of 'community strengthening' as a public policy framework. Councils are thus in the unique position of approaching voluntary activity in the context of a wider strategic focus upon building strong and sustainable communities. Both in Australia and

internationally, however, there has been little research and discussion of the types of voluntary activity supported by local government, and in particular, of the links between voluntary activity and community strengthening at the local government level. This report focuses upon these links explicitly. In doing so, it recognises the leadership role of the local government sector in these areas and connects the work of Victorian councils to a proactive international agenda for building strong communities.

Research for this report began with the following key question:

What is the relationship between voluntary activity and community strengthening from a local government perspective?

As the project progressed it soon became obvious, however, that this question raised a number of important issues about the idea of voluntary activity itself, the purposes for which voluntary activity might be undertaken and the relationship between voluntary activity and community strengthening in general.

This report investigates these issues from a local government perspective. It identifies a range of changes and challenges facing Victorian councils in voluntary activity and highlights a number of examples where councils have successfully integrated their approach to voluntary activity with community strengthening outcomes.

Footnote

¹ Secondary sources for this report include material that is in the public domain as well as internal government and other reports not yet in the public domain.

1 What is this report about?

The report draws on a range of Australian and international literature from the policy, community and academic sectors. Primarily, however, it is based on the results of interviews conducted with fifteen Victorian (rural and metropolitan) councils that are working directly with volunteering initiatives and/or with community building, planning and development projects. The interviews aimed to stimulate discussion and provide information on current approaches, trends, challenges and visions on voluntary activity.

The title of the report, *Tracking What Works*, reflects the outcome focus that emerged as a key theme in interviews conducted for this project. Council staff focus their strategic energies upon the outcomes arising from voluntary activity rather than the act of volunteering itself or the specific terminology attached to particular activities. In general terms, desired outcomes were on building trust and developing sustainable communities. Councils also identified a need for a more explicit framework for formulating their role in supporting voluntary activity.

This report, therefore, attempts to 'track' the links between voluntary activity and community strengthening outcomes. It attempts to identify 'what works' in different contexts. The report identifies how the work of Victorian councils on voluntary activity is at the forefront of developing practical paths toward sustainable communities. In this respect, it attempts

to document what is already happening 'on the ground' in local communities in terms of a broader conceptual approach to voluntary activity. The conceptual tools and practical examples provided in this report are intended to assist local government to further develop holistic and strategic approaches and to prompt further debate on these issues.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to the features of social organisation, such as trust, reciprocity, norms and networks that facilitate co-ordination and cooperation for mutual benefit and increase productive potential (Putnam, 1993, 2000). A group, community or society is deemed to have high levels of social capital when it has strong networks of social relations between its members, when members trust and engage with each other, and cooperate through reciprocal sharing of tasks and responsibilities, for example.

Bonding social capital

This type of social capital exists when social relationships and networks are between people of the same background and identity, such as cultural and ethnic groups, religion and class background. Bonding social capital can reinforce exclusivity and narrow ideas of identity.

Bridging social capital

Bridging social capital occurs when networks develop between different groups, and when social relations are established between people of different backgrounds. These contacts pave the way to new ideas and sources of information.



Thinking about key terms

2

Before considering voluntary activity from a community strengthening perspective, it is important to clarify the ways in which key terms are used in this report.

Voluntary activity

The multiple facets of voluntary activity are not always understood. Throughout Victoria, community members freely contribute their time and energy to a range of activities. They:

- deliver meals on wheels to the elderly;
- train local sports teams;
- sit on boards of management for the local community hall;
- perform at local festivals;
- plant trees in community gardens;
- lobby their local politicians;
- care for extended family;
- sit on advisory boards;
- raise money for their children's schools;
- establish city-wide friendships with communities overseas.

There are many ways in which they describe these activities: as community participation or engagement; as voluntary activity or volunteering; as active citizenship and as community development.

Community members may stop and start these activities over the course of a few months or may maintain their commitment over the course of their lives. They may be both givers and receivers of the benefits of these activities. Whether these community members are volunteers or not is a matter of definition. People who engage in these activities may or may not consider themselves to be volunteers.

When levels of volunteering are measured only some of this activity makes it into the official count – such as activity that occurs in officially designated volunteer positions or via officially recognised volunteer organisations. Yet all of the activities mentioned above can generate the kinds of outcomes associated with social capital and strong communities.

What would levels of community engagement look like if the range of activities that were counted were expanded? What would be the economic value of these activities? How might a broader view of voluntary activity help to recognise and achieve the types of individual, community and democratic outcomes associated with strong communities?

With these questions in mind, this report employs a broad definition of *voluntary activity* as an activity that:

- is of benefit to the community;
- is non-obligatory and undertaken without coercion;
- is without monetary reward (the payment of out-of-pocket expenses which are a reimbursement for actual costs incurred in the course of voluntary activity are consistent with this definition).

This definition differs somewhat from that associated with *formal volunteering*. Formal volunteering shares the above characteristics but is limited to activity that:

- takes place in an organised context; and
- takes place in designated volunteer positions only.

Understood in this way, *formal volunteering* is a concept which excludes, by definition, a number of spontaneous, informal and extra-institutional activities of

Voluntary Activity Vs Formal Volunteering: What's In A Name?

The slippage between different definitions of volunteering/voluntary activity is important because language shapes ideas, frames of reference and strategic development.

Volunteering Australia

According to Volunteering Australia, a peak organisation for the formal volunteering sector, "formal volunteering is an activity which takes place through not-for-profit organisations or projects and is undertaken: to be of benefit to the community and the volunteer; of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion; for no financial payment; and in designated volunteer positions only." (Volunteering Australia, 2005). The Australian Bureau of Statistics used a similar definition to conduct a survey on levels of volunteering in 2000. In the survey a volunteer was defined "as someone who, in the last 12 months, willingly gave unpaid help in the form of time, service or skills, through an organisation or group." (ABS, 2000)

United Nations

The United Nations Expert Working Group on Volunteering and Social Development employs a broader definition of volunteering that encompasses more activities than the *Volunteering Australia* definition. According to the UN, volunteering should not be undertaken primarily for financial reward, should be undertaken according to an individual's own free will, and should be of benefit to someone other than the volunteer or to society at large (UN 1999). The UN acknowledges that even these criteria are not always clear cut. It identifies four different types of volunteering:

- mutual aid or self help (including forms of informal care between particular kinship groups),
- philanthropy or service to others,
- participation in governance processes,
- advocacy or campaigning (including activism).

Points of Light Foundation

A study into volunteering in low-income communities in the United States, found that "volunteering happens in tough [low-income] communities...but it is not called volunteering. Furthermore, while residents of these communities have a long history of helping, sharing, and giving back, they do not generally do it under the auspices, or with the assistance, of nonprofit volunteer organizations such as Volunteer Centers. Here, volunteering happens instead through neighbourhood associations, community-based groups, and local churches and on an individual level. Often, volunteering in low-income communities received little publicity and, as a result, receives little credit for the impact that it has on building communities and strengthening families." (Points of Light Foundation, 2000)

This report

This report uses a broad definition of voluntary activity that draws in different ways on each of these approaches above. In this report, voluntary activity can mean:

- Service delivery. This involves individuals giving to recipients.
- Activism. This involves collective community self-management.
- Decision making. This can involve community planning.
- Community management of community resources, such as facilities and people.
- Networking and learning exchanges, such as book clubs or 'philosophy in the pub'.
- Mobilising and celebrating resources and people through community festivals.
- Emergency assistance such as bush-fire relief.
- Particular identity groups organising and caring for their own members.



which this report is concerned. Voluntary activity, as defined in this report, encompasses formal volunteering along with a range of other activities.

This distinction is subtle but important. Councils tended to under-emphasise the issues of terminology in favour of a focus on outcomes. However it is clear from the experience of councils that the ways in which voluntary activity is defined and articulated will have significant implications for how strategies and programs are developed, and consequently for the achievement of outcomes. Approaching voluntary activity from a community strengthening perspective means taking account of the widest range of voluntary activities which can contribute to outcomes such as building trust, developing strong networks, developing and realising collective goals and community driven governance structures.

Community and community strengthening

For the purposes of this report:

Community refers to a group of people who share a common identity and sense of belonging. This common identity can be based on sharing the same place, such as a neighbourhood, suburb, town or region; or having a common interest, culture, identity or class. Each individual will be involved in multiple communities. In the context of community strengthening programs, place is an important element of community and thus, in the first instance community refers to commonality through sharing a neighbourhood, suburb, town or region.

Place-based approaches are increasingly significant in government efforts to address community disadvantage. According to the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) a place-based orientation takes a targeted approach in addressing issues of community concern, in which the focus is on departments and sectors working together in what has come to be known as joined-up government. At the core of a place-based approach is the belief that local problems are best solved in partnership with local communities, rather than using traditional centralised governance structures. Councils often support and facilitate voluntary activity across multiple places, requiring broad strategic approaches and responses that also recognise the unique issues and concerns identified with 'place'.

Community strengthening is a policy framework developed by the DVC to provide strategic direction for local government. DVC describes community strengthening as "a sustained effort to increase involvement and partnership among members of a community to achieve common objectives. It involves local people, community organisations, government, business and philanthropic organisations working together to achieve agreed social, economic and environmental outcomes"(DVC 2006). Community strengthening "involves stronger forms of local connectedness

While there is often a strong commitment to the ideals behind community strengthening within the local government sector there is also wariness of the jargon as 'fluffy' and ill-defined on one hand, and "reinventing the wheel" on the other.

2 Thinking about key terms

and better linkages between government and other agencies to mobilize local assets. This has come to be viewed

as an important means to address the twin priorities of prosperity and social inclusion”(Considine 2004).

Given these definitions, *strong communities* have:

- strong partnerships and collaboration between a broad range of community organisations;
- strong local leadership, ownership and control;
- economic, social and environmental assets;
- knowledge and understanding of their community;
- respect for social and cultural diversity;
- the ability to collectively organise the participation of community members around community issues and to determine priorities;
- the ability to make best use of community assets, strengths and resources;
- strong local institutions providing governance structures through which action can be organised.



General approaches to voluntary activity

3

There are many ways of thinking about and approaching the development of policies and programs concerned with voluntary activity. This section identifies five key approaches:

- **Civic commitment**
- **Instrumental**
- **Service Delivery**
- **Management**
- **Community Development**

Each approach should be seen as a type or model to be used for understanding and analysis. In practice, these types overlap and most volunteering programs and activities draw on several approaches.

The focus on civic commitment

This approach has roots in the charity approach to voluntary activity in which helping others is a virtue. It involves a member of a community helping another because of altruism or moral obligation. The altruistic intent requires a desire to 'do good' without reward. Public helping initiatives such as volunteering for the Sydney Olympics and collecting for hospital appeals fall under this approach. Commitment to voluntary activity through moral obligation can be driven through a sense of 'giving back to the community', by a religious belief or the principle of 'noblesse oblige,' in which wealth and power confer social responsibilities.

In this approach volunteers are clearly separated from the 'receivers.' Outcomes of the voluntary activity are not as important as the motivation of volunteers and the intrinsic value of the volunteer

act itself. When research is undertaken from this perspective, it tends to be concerned with the individual attributes of volunteers.

Whilst community organisations traditionally stepped back from direct involvement in volunteer programs based on moral obligation (when, for example, church groups played a key role) encouragement of voluntary activity as civic responsibility has often accompanied recent enjoiners to build and participate in civil society.

The instrumental focus

In this approach the focus is on the *outcomes* of the voluntary activity. Voluntary activity may provide a means of self-development, developing networks, delivering (unpaid) welfare services, providing 'work' experience or facilitating corporate engagement with communities.

Whilst much of the instrumental approach in the past has been concerned with the usefulness of voluntary activity to the volunteer, there has also been a recent interest in the strategic value of voluntary activity for the well-being of whole communities. Community organisations focusing on the instrumental value of voluntary activity have sometimes been engaged directly in the monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes of volunteer programs.

The focus on service-delivery

The service-delivery approach to voluntary activity is concerned with formal volunteering. It is based on the placement of volunteers in positions that deliver serv-

3 General approaches to voluntary activity

ices, generally to 'disadvantaged' members of the community. This approach has dominated conventional views of voluntary activity for the last 20 years. It emphasises a distinction between donor and recipient in that the volunteer is the 'altruistic' giver of services to a needy recipient who is the primary beneficiary of the act. Many Home and Community Care (HACC) services have been constructed around this approach; for example, services for the aged or assistance programs for people with a disability that use volunteers.

One problem with this approach is that the distinction between giver and receiver becomes fixed and hierarchical. Moreover it does not capture the range of motivations that prompt individuals and groups to take up voluntary activity.

An additional concern about using volunteers for service-delivery work is that this kind of voluntary activity can be exploited in the context of funding shortages and volunteers can replace paid workers. This is why most volunteering agencies argue that volunteer work should only be undertaken in specifically designated volunteer positions, although specifically designated volunteer positions can still be created in lieu of paid work positions.

The focus on management

The management approach focuses on the marketing of volunteering and the recruitment and management of volunteers in all types of formal volunteering, not just in volunteering for service-delivery (Evans and Saxton, 2005). It is also concerned with the professionalisation of volunteer services. Research agendas shaped by this approach deal with

the identification of the most effective organisational forms for the management of volunteers, the motivations of people to volunteer and how to attract and keep volunteers (Cuthill and Warburton 2005; Evans and Saxton 2005).

The dominant organisational forms for the management of volunteers are hierarchical. The distinction between giver and recipient is generally maintained. For example, volunteer resource centres or volunteer programs are concerned with matching the volunteers' skills with community or recipients' needs. Corporate volunteering generally fits within this approach, for example when workers list their skills and expertise and these are matched to community needs. Within this approach, volunteers can be viewed as resources which need to be used effectively.

The focus on community development

Community development describes a form of organised development where people come together to collectively decide on their needs and priorities and how to develop and implement strategies for the purpose of controlling their futures, as far as this is possible (Kenny 2006). Community development programs value local views, information and networks, local priority setting and resource allocation (see Blacher 2005).

Voluntary activity as community development involves people organising their own communities through democratic involvement in decision making (sitting on council committees, for example), organising council supported community festivals and developing community-to-com-



munity links with disadvantaged groups internationally. Thus it can include both formal volunteering and other forms of voluntary activity. Community development activities might aim to maintain communities (such as maintaining good inter-racial relations) or change communities (by lobbying councils or even organising protest to change policy on environmental issues, for example). In this approach civic commitment, the voluntary act, the process and the outcomes are all important.

Where this approach differs from those outlined above is that it does not clearly distinguish between giver and recipient,

it is not 'top-down' or managerial in organisational logic and it does not focus on the professionalisation of volunteer services.

Community development is premised on a commitment to mutual development and the view that all people and communities have assets. This approach can also be concerned with research into motivations but in a broad sense (for example, the motivations of community members to participate in community activity as a whole).

Local government and voluntary activity: What's happening?

4

Local government in Victoria is strongly engaged with the community in a variety of voluntary capacities. The following four sections document different aspects of that engagement.

Individual councils vary on how they define voluntary activity in the context of council activities, ranging from traditional civic commitment (such as supporting opportunity shops), volunteer involvement in service delivery (such as meals on wheels), participation in decision-making roles (such as community planning and management activities), to self-directed social and political activities (such as 'philosophy in the pub,' a local book club or political activism).

Voluntary activity: increasing or decreasing?

Some council interviewees report no shortage of volunteers overall. That is, there are more volunteers than positions to match them to. For others, there are difficulties in recruiting as many volunteers as are needed for both service-delivery and more participatory roles. Longer working hours and other demands on people's time make it difficult for people to find time to volunteer.

Some councils minimise the distinction between formal volunteering and the broader sense of voluntary activity. They note that the definition of voluntary activity is already expanded in practice, regardless of the terminology used to describe it. Alternatively, other councils restrict the use of the term volunteer to formal volunteering.

A number of councils have been influenced by recent developments in the

formal volunteering sector which have encouraged the professionalisation of volunteer services. For example, a number of councils work with volunteer resource centres to develop strategic approaches to the recruitment, referral, training, job-matching and recognition of volunteers, both within council itself and in partnership with community organisations. Some councils are developing ideas around corporate volunteering and making links with local businesses as both sponsors of volunteering projects and providers of volunteers. This type of managerial approach lends itself to a service-delivery conception of volunteering where individuals are recruited for specific tasks within specific organisations.

Alongside this focus on formal volunteering, councils also engage community members in a range of voluntary capacities for community development purposes: in community planning, community consultations and capacity building projects, for example. This type of community engagement is encouraged by councils as a way of harnessing the skills and assets present within the community towards collective goals. It is envisaged as a democratic process. When it works at its best, this process strengthens the community's position in decision making and as a legitimate partner in council business. Across different councils, these processes vary in the extent to which they are:

- community or council driven;
- asset or deficit driven;
- effective in engaging diverse sections of the municipal population;
- practically and financially resourced;
- formalised and/or bureaucratic;
- strategically approached from a whole of council perspective;

4 Local government and voluntary activity: What's happening?

- seen as valuable in themselves (process versus outcome);
- incorporated into a 'voluntary activity' framework and strategy;
- linked to community strengthening objectives and outcomes.

While different terminology may be used to describe these kinds of activity, there is a general commitment within councils to the idea that voluntary activity and

community participation are inherently valuable and are linked to healthier and happier individuals and communities. However, it is sometimes harder for councils to identify precisely how these relationships between voluntary activity and well-being actually work. In general, councils acknowledge the need for a more explicit framework for thinking about their role in supporting voluntary activity towards specific community strengthening outcomes.

Councils interviewed for this report support voluntary activity in the following ways:

- Recruitment
- Management
- Governance
- Regulation
- Facilitation
- Advocacy
- Connecting (assisting networking)



Voluntary activity and community strengthening: Some examples

5

This section provides examples of projects undertaken by Victorian councils in which approaches to voluntary activity have been successfully integrated with community strengthening outcomes. The boxed points that follow each description identify these links explicitly. This is, of course, a non-exhaustive list and there are many other examples of good practice underway in the local government sector.

Friends of Lospalos – Mornington Peninsula Shire Council

In May 2000, Mornington Peninsula Shire entered into a friendship relationship with the sub-district of Lospalos in East Timor. While council provides a leadership role, the friendship is driven by a committee of Peninsula residents and sub-committees focusing on issues such as fundraising, women's projects, agriculture and conservation, health and education. Committees work in partnership with Australian Volunteers International and community groups (schools, churches, service clubs etc) to broaden the friendship and raise funds. Over \$200 000 has been raised, as well as in-kind support to assist in a variety of projects in Lospalos. These include the provision of seven motorbikes to community groups, the refurbishment of a guesthouse, assistance to schools and kindergartens and forging links with Australian schools, assistance to women's working co-operatives, assistance with medical supplies and development of food security projects.

Those involved in the friendship program have formed part of a broader consultative network that now provides input into a range of other issues and projects related to council.

This example links voluntary activity to community strengthening outcomes because:

- **it directs a range of voluntary activities (fund-raising, public speaking, skills transfer, project management, etc) towards specific outcomes which can be celebrated as collective achievements;**
- **it helps to build relationships across different community groups (local and transnational) around common community-driven objectives. This is a form of 'bridging social capital';**
- **it generates exposure to processes of social and political change;**
- **it stimulates ongoing community engagement in areas beyond the focus of the friendship relationship. This helps to make community engagement sustainable.**

Lake Bolac eel festival and hEELing walk – Ararat Rural City

The Lake Bolac Eel Festival is an annual event that promotes the ecological restoration of Lake Bolac and surrounding waterways as well as reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The festival was initiated by community members and supported by council by assistance with insurance, promotion, funding applications and organisational matters. The festival is a low cost public event with a concert program, performances, art displays, and craft stalls. It is preceded by a hEELing walk. In 2005 a small group walked from the mouth of the Hopkins River at Warrnambool to Lake Bolac, following the traditional path of the eels returning from the sea. In 2006, walkers followed the Fiery Creek from the source in the Mount Cole Forest to Lake Bolac. The walks are intended to bring attention to the condition of a number of waterways (suffering from salinity, silting, extremely low water levels and dying eels) and to highlight the significance of eeling to Indigenous cultures of surrounding areas. The festival also includes public forums which provide opportunities for community members, land-holders and visitors to discuss the cultural and environmental issues underpinning the event. One specific focus of the forums is to provide an Indigenous perspective on environmental issues.

The festival and walk have increased dialogue between farmers, Indigenous groups, scientists and land management professionals, exposing each to the interests and expertise of the others. Organisers felt that this kind of contact has helped to reduce anxieties and misperceptions about differing interests and perspectives on land issues and has raised

general community interest in urgent environmental concerns. The festival has had a number of spin-off effects including the development of new personal connections; an annual art exhibition supported by students from local schools which has inspired the idea for a student drop-in art centre; an annual football competition to compete for an eel-trophy associated with the festival; and assistance in promoting a community steering committee to collate written and anecdotal histories of the environment and to address issues of land and water management in the region.

This example links voluntary activity to community strengthening outcomes because:

- it encourages dialogue and relationship-building between different groups that may otherwise have little contact with each other (farmers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, land management professionals) focused upon common objectives (environmental restoration). This is a form of ‘bridging social capital’;
- it harnesses community interest in specific concerns (the environment) as a tool for exposure to other community issues (reconciliation) and vice versa. This helps to make community engagement sustainable;
- it links social activities to engagement with processes of social and political change.

For more information see:
<http://www.eelfestival.org.au/>



Casuarina Project – Surf Coast Shire Council

Casuarina is a capacity building project providing training and mentoring to assist community members to initiate and coordinate their own community projects. The program is an initiative of a rural development committee which was keen to develop a leadership program. Each year, 20 participants attend 10-11 day's training. The focus of workshops is upon unearthing ideas, turning passions into projects, working with difficult personalities, going public with projects and specific skills development.

Each participant has gone on to implement their own specific projects. One participant, for example, considered that his training with the Casuarina project enabled him to foster a significant increase in numbers of women and youth participating in a branch of the CFA with which he was involved. Casuarina participants have also become mentors and facilitators for the following year's project. A number of participants have also become involved in the shire's Community Engagement Framework.

Surf Coast Shire Council employed an innovative evaluation technique to measure the outcomes of the Casuarina Project. Participants were encouraged to interview each other about the ways their participation had led to significant changes. This process produced a series of documented narratives which identified outcomes not necessarily envisaged in advance and that would not necessarily be captured in quantitative measures.

This example links voluntary activity to community strengthening outcomes because:

- it fosters the development of confidence and skills which can be applied to a range of community initiated goals and relationships;
- it engenders community 'ownership' of the project by encouraging participants to be leaders, mentors and evaluators within the scope of the project itself and to be engaged in direction setting;
- it generates documented evidence of the link between voluntary activities and tangible outcomes as a core part of the project.

For more information on the methodology used to evaluate the Casuarina Project see:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/mostsignificantchanges/>

Community Engagement Process – Baw Baw Shire Council

Baw Baw Shire's Community Engagement Process has been developed as a way of building partnerships and trust between local communities and local government and of integrating community needs into the strategic direction of council. The process aims to develop 3-5 year community plans as well as to influence long-term (30 year) strategic planning, to deliver community-driven projects, to create open communication, to develop community profiles and to build community skills. Seventeen communities within the shire are involved in engagement processes.

The process begins by establishing community contact teams. These are small voluntary groups of contact people that support council officers to build informal networks and communication channels within communities and to identify key stakeholders (groups and individuals). These networks help to establish the most effective consultation times and methods within particular communities. Meetings are then held to build community profiles and develop draft community plans at times suitable to the community. The sessions are documented and a draft report forwarded to all participants. This ensures the information collected is accurate and reflects community comments.

A process of identifying priorities then follows. The resulting priority list becomes a community resource. Involvement in ranking priorities is not based on available budgets but on identified and agreed community priorities. This process creates a sense of community ownership of projects and directions from

the ideas stage to practical realisation. This avoids the competitive model of project grant application where community skills and desires work in opposition to each other rather than collaboratively and where council is forced to choose between projects on the basis of limited resources. This kind of openness and accountability to money builds high levels of trust. The community views the engagement process in a transparent way and understand exactly where their money is being spent.

The Community Engagement Process attempts to make consultation as uncomplicated and holistic as possible. In order to avoid needless repetition and cross-over of consultation, different levels of government are invited to engage with the process. Council staff have mapped the total range of community consultation over a six month period. This data will act as a resource to engage different levels of government in more effective, streamlined and comprehensive community engagement.

This example links voluntary activity to community strengthening outcomes because:

- **it facilitates collective decision making on community needs, resource allocation and strategies and encourages network-building via that process;**
- **it builds relationships of trust and reciprocity between communities and local government through open communication, transparent budgeting, shared responsibilities and an outcome focused process.**

Communities that Care – Mornington Peninsula Shire Council

Mornington Peninsula Shire Council has introduced the internationally renowned 'Communities That Care' framework to address and prevent risk factors for young people via a 'whole-of-community' approach.

In 2002 a community board was established to strategically direct the program and to work closely with a council officer/team leader. The voluntary board consists of community members with expertise in health, education and business. The program began by dividing the shire into seven areas based on population, geography and communities of interest. Surveys were conducted amongst young people in these areas about risk factors and protective factors. Following the survey, young people, residents, schools and community organisations participated in workshops to produce community service plans to address responsive and preventative strategies for each local area. Council assists local area groups to source funding for the projects they devise as part of their service plans. Two plans are being implemented at present with others in development.

Service plans have been developed from a long-term perspective to suit the particular needs of local areas. Outcomes have included the development of 'You Can Do It' self awareness and self-esteem projects in schools, sports clubs and community groups; a 'Good Beginnings' project which links young families new to the area with schools, community agencies and social connections; and organising youth groups and activities. Previously fragmented communities have anecdotally reported positive

changes experienced through the Communities That Care process. Workshops have brought older and younger residents together, helping to reduce some of the ill-feeling that existed between these groups. The process has also encouraged four schools that were previously unconnected to work together on common projects. Networks have been established between the local area groups. Based on the initial results of the program, council has started to think more strategically about how to link the research being produced by local area groups with its work in early childhood development projects.

This example links voluntary activity to community strengthening outcomes because:

- **it fosters voluntary activity in a way that utilises assets and skills existing in the community;**
- **it encourages community members to collectively identify issues of concern and devise strategies for change. In this way it allows for community 'ownership' of visions, projects and priorities;**
- **the process involved builds relationships and networks between groups in the community that were not otherwise in contact;**
- **it creates avenues for government to respond and adapt to community driven initiatives in areas beyond the immediate focus of the program.**

Youth Leadership Development Program – Knox City Council

Knox City Council's Youth Leadership Development Program has been running for fifteen years. Twice a year, forty year 10 students attend a full week program focusing on leadership skills, understanding personal qualities, goal setting, listening and communication skills, group-work, problem-solving, public speaking and participation. Students are invited to attend on a ratio basis across 12 secondary schools.

The program aims to enable young people to experience concepts of leadership. In this respect, participating students develop and enforce their own group rules for the week. Most of the week is spent in small group work and gradually, over the course of the week, students are encouraged to initiate and direct more and more of the program's content. For council, the program is intended as an opportunity to develop the capacities of future community leaders, to demonstrate a commitment to young people in the community and to actively foster active citizenship and community participation.

As a result of the program strong and long-lasting friendships have been formed between participants. Students have been brought together with others they may not otherwise have encountered or engaged with meaningfully. Establishing an open and non-judgemental environment early in the week helps to break down preconceptions about other students based on gender, culture and a range of stereotypes.

Participants have gone on to become involved in a range of community activities including membership of a youth advisory council, committees to organise events for National Youth Week, and a project where young people train older people in SMS technology. They have looked to fill leadership roles in schools (such as in student representative councils) and in extra-curricular activities (becoming peer mediators, for example).

This example links voluntary activity to community strengthening outcomes because:

- **it fosters strong relationships and networks between people who would not otherwise have had meaningful contact. This is a form of bridging social capital;**
- **it fosters the development of confidence and skills which can be applied to a range of community initiated goals and relationships;**
- **it engenders community 'ownership' of the project by encouraging participants to collectively direct and be responsible for its direction and outcomes;**
- **it demonstrates a commitment to and investment in young people and in this way helps build trust between the community and local government.**

The council weblink to this program is <http://www.knox.vic.gov.au/content.cfm?infopageID=5808>

Computer Clubs – Hume City Council

Computer clubs have been developed as part of Hume City Council's emphasis on Learning as the key concept behind a variety of community projects. From this perspective, each voluntary act should provide a learning pathway, in most cases towards possible employment. This framework has been developed in light of the demographics of the municipality which encompasses low-income and traditionally disadvantaged communities. It forms part of a long-term vision that promotes structural change and self-empowerment.

Computer clubs provide a fun and friendly atmosphere for people to develop basic and advanced computer skills. The clubs run for two hours per week over eight weeks in libraries, neighbourhood houses and schools. Different clubs are directed at young people or at adults. They aim to avoid a traditional classroom atmosphere and be welcoming to participants whose experience of formal training may be limited or not especially positive. The clubs are also attended by people with existing professional skills whose lack of computer skills have become an obstacle to finding employment in their chosen field. Council also provides one-on-one 'net.help' training in using internet and email.

The clubs are led by a paid trainer who is assisted by a number of volunteers. Before assisting in these sessions, volunteers spend time working in and familiarising themselves with council's e-play area (free access computer facilities). They participate in additional training organised by council and by external organisations whenever possible. By assisting

paid trainers, volunteers develop their own computer, customer service and communication skills. A number of volunteers have gone on to become paid trainers while others have acknowledged their voluntary experience as being crucial in assisting them to find paid employment elsewhere. Other people attending computer clubs also report direct results from their participation in assisting them find employment.

This example links voluntary activity to community strengthening outcomes because:

- **it fosters voluntary activity in the context of a broader conceptual framework that is aimed at political and economic empowerment at individual and community levels;**
- **it maintains a clear focus on the outcome of skills development leading to employment. The achievement of these outcomes helps to build credibility and trust between local government and community members.**

Emerging Themes

6

Reflecting on the examples provided in the previous section, it is possible to identify a number of emerging themes within the local government sector as it begins to rethink the strategic framework in which voluntary activity is approached.

• A transition from more traditional conceptions of volunteering to a broader conception of voluntary activities. This transition emerges as councils develop more effective and diverse forms of engagement with communities.

A traditional conception of volunteering entails a predetermined role for volunteers and a distinction between givers and receivers of volunteer services. It lends itself to a strategic framework that manages volunteers and coordinates the tasks they fulfil. By contrast, viewing voluntary activity within a broader framework of community engagement leaves open the range of roles, tasks and activities community members may want to contribute. This transition draws heavily upon the 'community development' focus discussed in an earlier section of this report. It encourages a facilitative rather than a managerial role for council. It discourages a distinction between donor and recipient and recognises more circular relationships as community members generate, coordinate and benefit from their own visions, plans, projects, networks, and resources.

• A strategic emphasis upon outcomes rather than acts

Councils are seeking to focus their strategic energies upon the outcomes arising from voluntary activity rather than the act of volunteering itself. In this way, voluntary activity is encompassed within a more holistic framework that works towards achieving strong and sustainable communities, connectedness, and well-being. Voluntary activity is also sustained when linked to projects with specific goals and outcomes. Achieving a project's goals builds trust and credibility in the process through which voluntary activity was generated and taps into community members' interests in specific roles and issues. From this perspective, distinctions of what counts as volunteering and what doesn't are less important than whether or not the activity contributes to a desired outcome.

• An assets based emphasis.

Councils are seeking to acknowledge and harness the assets that exist within their communities. This entails a shift in focus from community deficits and the obstacles they present to existing community strengths and capacities that can be further developed. Such an approach enables councils to take advantage of community interests, passions and skills as they stand. It implies that councils adapt to the community rather than seeking to fit the community to existing council plans.

- ***A growing interest in the value of partnerships between Victorian councils and non-government organisations and businesses***

By linking with the non-government community sector and businesses, local government facilitates a sense of community ownership and commitment to volunteer programs, as well as sharing the wealth of resources, skills and knowledge in a community. This approach recognises

that local government alone cannot resolve community issues and concerns. The emergence of local governance models that reflect the distinct and important roles of government, community and business in addressing community concerns has increasing relevance to facilitating and supporting voluntary activity. Joint projects provide sites for working together collaboratively, extending networks and building social capital.



Changes and challenges

7

Both the literature reviewed and the interviews undertaken for this report reveal significant changes and challenges that Victorian councils are facing in regard to voluntary activity in their communi-

ties. Councils identify a series of recent changes in the 'who,' 'how' and 'why' of voluntary activity that raise specific questions for strategic thinking on the subject.

Changes in patterns of voluntary activity	Key questions for councils
<i>Beyond traditional activities</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall, there is a declining interest in traditional volunteer roles such as delivering meals on wheels and in traditional volunteer organisations. An aging population of volunteers in these areas is not being replaced by new and younger recruits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to address the ageing population issue? How to respond to a potential crisis in these areas with some key services dependent on volunteers and under resourced? • How to enable community organisations to adapt to changing community demographics, priorities and expectations?
<i>Specific interests and expectations</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People are choosier about what they want to do as volunteers and how they want to do it. Today more volunteers want to be involved in identifying the tasks they will do. People tend to be project and time specific and often want to utilise their own specific skills. They are often interested in volunteering for decision making rather than helping roles, i.e. for broader voluntary activities rather than designated and formal volunteer roles. • Young people are especially issue and outcome focused in terms of voluntary activity. For example, they are particularly interested in issues and activities which are focused on the environment. • Community expectations of councils are high. Residents expect councils to facilitate their decision making about the local community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to think strategically about a strong community desire to participate in very specific ways? How to recognise and utilise the assets present within the community towards the generation of collective goals and outcomes? • How to facilitate the development of the specific energies of young people? • How to meet raised expectations of the community with limited council resources?
<i>Motivations</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivations for voluntary activity are varied. Many people volunteer for altruistic reasons and express a desire 'to help'. Others just want to get involved in their community. Others may view volunteering as an opportunity for work experience, as a self-interested pursuit or as a social outlet. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to conceptually and practically link individual benefits of voluntary activity to community outcomes? • How to approach voluntary activity from a life-cycle perspective, recognising that people will start and stop volunteering at different times in their life and for multiple and varied reasons?

Corporate volunteering	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Businesses are increasingly interested in developing opportunities for their staff to be involved in voluntary activities. These are often one-off or episodic events. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to balance the 'PR' effect of corporate volunteering with community needs? • How to best direct the energy devoted to episodic volunteering?
Demographics and cultural diversity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographic changes are affecting the make-up of local communities and their interests in voluntary activity. Particularly in rural and coastal communities, the 'sea-change' phenomenon has introduced a different set of skills and expectations. • Elsewhere, new migrant communities are developing with different cultural concepts of voluntary activity and community participation. In some cases the term volunteering does not resonate culturally despite the informal forms of care, support and neighbourliness that may be extensive with those communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to approach voluntary activity from the perspective of cultural diversity? • How to recognise the contribution of informal activities taking place in CALD and Indigenous communities within a framework of voluntary activity? How to recognise the diverse needs of new migrant and Indigenous communities and to establish a common language of voluntary activity and community engagement? • How to broaden community participation in general and avoid particular individuals or sections of the community from dominating decision-making processes? • How to respond to generational tensions between volunteers and tensions between long term and new resident groups?
Bureaucracy and Regulations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increases in insurance premiums and health and safety regulations complicate community engagement and community initiated projects. • Risk management strategies compel councils to specifically identify volunteers and volunteer roles and the insurance, health and safety risks associated with them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to meet regulatory demands without quashing community energies? • How to balance the effects of risk management (in terms of categorising people and tasks) with a holistic approach to voluntary activity and community participation? • How to reach a balance between strategic thinking on voluntary activity without jeopardising the benefits of spontaneity and informality? • How to encourage broader participation in management and decision-making roles which can suffer from being bureaucratic and onerous?

Approaches to voluntary activity as community strengthening

8

This section discusses different ways in which voluntary activity can be linked to community strengthening. It offers a number of complementary conceptual approaches that emerge from the strategies and projects developed by Victorian councils and upon the changes and challenges they face. This section also draws upon a range of policy and academic literature.

Different aspects of voluntary activity and community strengthening developed in this section may resonate with some communities more than others. Hence the discussion is intended as a tool for councils to reflect upon their own specific experiences in the context of broader trends and to relate their own strategies and projects to different processes and outcomes.

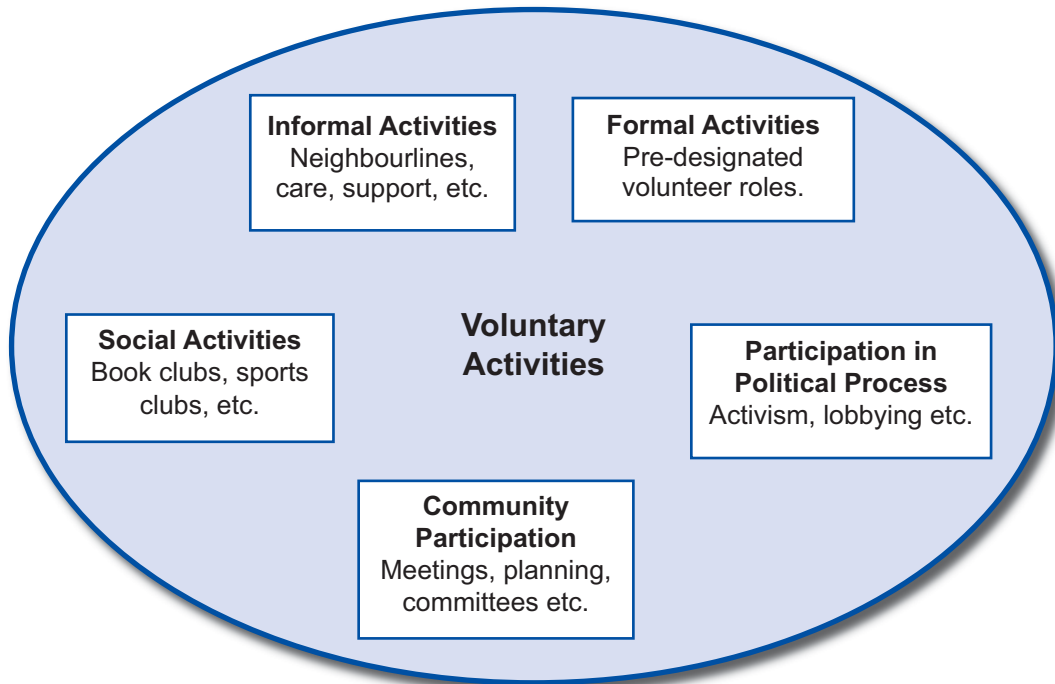
The approaches outlined below link in different ways with the project examples provided in Section 6. In some cases there is a great deal of over-lap and particular examples do not always fit squarely with one kind of approach over another. For this reason, specific connections between examples and approaches remain open to interpretation. Readers are encouraged to identify the links between examples and approaches that speak most clearly to their own experiences.

Voluntary activities as discrete categories

One way of looking at the spectrum of voluntary activity is to divide different kinds of activities into discrete categories. This type of approach separates pre-designated volunteer roles from other kinds of informal community engagement, social activities and democratic participation (Cuthill and Warburton 2005; Evans and Saxton 2005; Hayward-Brown 2004). Discrete categories imply that different types of activities do not necessarily have any relation to each other in how they are strategically approached by local government. From this perspective, a strategic community strengthening approach to voluntary activity is likely to be geared towards the management of pre-designated volunteer roles.

Aspects of this approach relate to some councils' work with volunteer resource centres to develop strategic approaches to the recruitment, referral, training, job-matching and recognition of volunteers in specifically designated volunteer roles, both within council itself and in partnership with community organisations and businesses.

**Conceptual Approach to Voluntary Activity as Community Strengthening
Based on Discrete Categories**



This kind of conceptual approach:

- creates clear definitions of who is and who isn't a volunteer based on the conventional limits of volunteering as a formally defined and designated activity. These definitions can provide the basis for targeted and bounded coordination and management.
- maintains a distinction between volunteers, community decision makers, activists and others when in reality there is much cross-over at individual and organisational levels (Naidoo 2003). It focuses upon the act of volunteering (as a specific kind of act) rather than placing volunteering within a broader framework of community participation that emphasises common outcomes. From a strategic perspective, this conceptual model works against an integrated approach to

harnessing community members' parallel interests in diverse forms of community engagement.

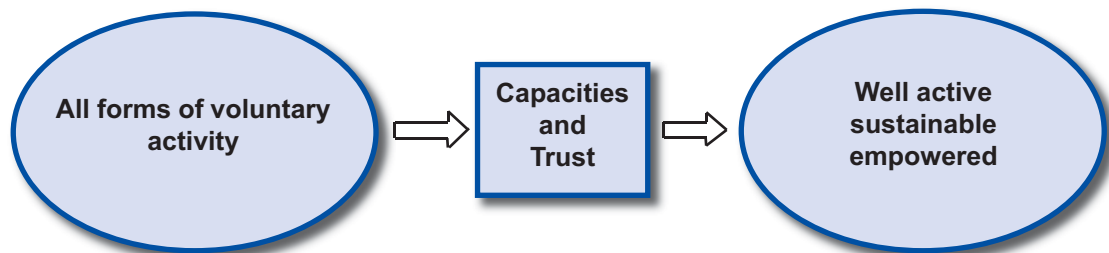
- makes a distinction between roles designated as formal volunteering and the support, caring and neighbourliness that is exhibited in informal relationships. Sometimes these informal relationships may be coercive or matters of necessity (Kerr and Tedmanson 2003). There are therefore good reasons why a distinction between formal activities and informal caring might be applied for strategic purposes. Sometimes however, a strict definition of volunteering may create barriers to broader participation, and risk obscuring strong community skills and assets that are already being mobilised but are not called 'volunteering' (Points of Light Foundation 2000).

Voluntary activities as capacity-building and trust-building

Another way of looking at the spectrum of voluntary activity as community strengthening is to emphasise and value the diverse ways in which different kinds of voluntary activities contribute to the development of skills and capacities and to relationships built on trust. Capacities and trust can be understood as key components of sustainable, connected

and empowered communities. From this perspective, voluntary activity can be viewed as both a stepping stone to achieving collective goals, but also as a good or an outcome in itself at individual, community and governance levels (Bowen 2004). This conceptual approach generates a field rather than a hierarchy of voluntary activities and doesn't weigh the value of one kind of activity over another.

Conceptual Approach to Voluntary Activity as Community Strengthening Based on Capacity Building and Trust



This kind of conceptual approach:

- avoids problematic distinctions between volunteer/non-volunteer and between service donor/recipient. It emphasises instead a whole-of-community framework for understanding who participates in voluntary activity and who benefits from that process.
- allows for a targeted strategic approach based on the answer to the following question: how does the activity contribute to capacity building and trust building?
- recognises a broad field of voluntary activities as good in themselves and worthy of recognition. This approach avoids the

creation of hierarchies between one kind of activity over another and allows for an integrated strategic approach which links diverse forms of community participation.

- under-emphasises what may be coercive or exclusionary aspects of some kinds of activities contained within the general 'voluntary' field. Examples might include community service orders or 'work for the dole' schemes which are filtered through voluntary organisations; obligations placed upon particular cultural group members to provide care and support to other members; or 'voluntary' activities undertaken out of necessity in the absence of sufficient public infrastructure and services.

Voluntary activities as community participation - building strong networks

Another way of looking at the spectrum of voluntary activity as community strengthening is to emphasise and value the relationship between community participation and building strong networks.

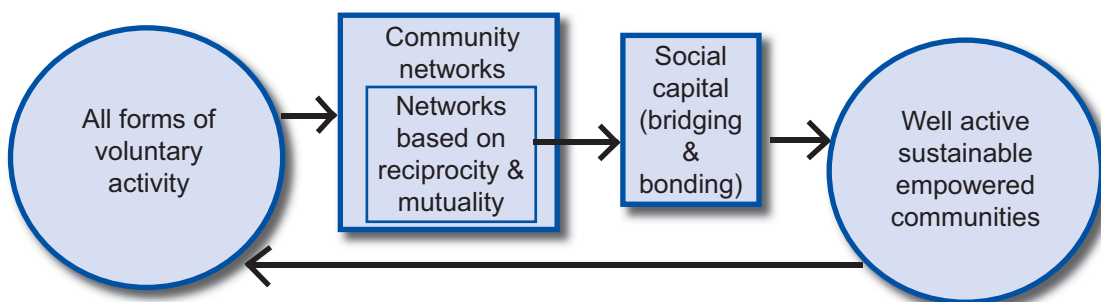
Voluntary activities provide a mechanism for people to participate in their community. As people participate they develop social connections and relationships. This in turn leads to the development of community networks. Community networks provide the infrastructure for community strengthening.

From the perspective of the Department of Victorian Communities, strong networks are the key to strong communities. There are three types of networks that are important for strong communities: close personal networks; broader associational networks; and governance networks (networks of decision makers) (Pope 2006). These networks can be based around relationships between people who are

similar (bonding social capital) or those from different backgrounds of culture and class (bridging social capital). Communities are strengthened when both bonding and bridging types of relationships are developed around principles of mutuality and reciprocity.

Different approaches to voluntary activity can yield different forms of networks. Whilst much is made of the value of extensive networks in a community, networks can be bonding or bridging, shallow or deep and they can be based on hierarchical or equal relationships. Hence networks may not necessarily contribute to community strengthening or may not contribute to it equally. For example, corporate volunteering based on the managerial approach might lead to networks between different people (bridging), but it may or may not engender ties based on mutuality and reciprocity. Strong community networks work best when the relationships are of mutual benefit. Voluntary activity involving people volunteering to decision making for mutual benefit or for community development projects best suit this kind of approach.

Conceptual Approach to Voluntary Activity as Community Strengthening Based on Building Strong Networks



This kind of conceptual approach:

- emphasises a two-way effect: that voluntary activity involves participation and social connections and thus engenders strong communities and that strong communities engender voluntary activity and participation.
- distinguishes between different types of networks and their different contributions to community strengthening. This allows for a targeted strategic approach to voluntary activity based on the answer to the following question: how does the activity contribute to networks based on reciprocity and mutuality?
- assumes that network building of any kind is positive. But voluntary activity does not always lead to positive experiences of networks. Some volunteers are dissuaded from further community par-

ticipation when their experiences of volunteering and the networks associated with it are negative.

- places a high value on community participation. One risk associated with this emphasis is that community members are pressured to be involved in voluntary activities and non-participation is viewed negatively. This can prompt superficial or tokenistic forms of engagement which work against trust building relationships. It can also create unrealistic pressures upon council to provide avenues for voluntary activity and lead to ostracism of those who do not wish to be involved in community life. Cooke and Kothari (2001) point out, moreover, that the fashionable rhetoric attached to participation can be coopted to bring people into line with dominant views and can hide an unjust exercise of power.

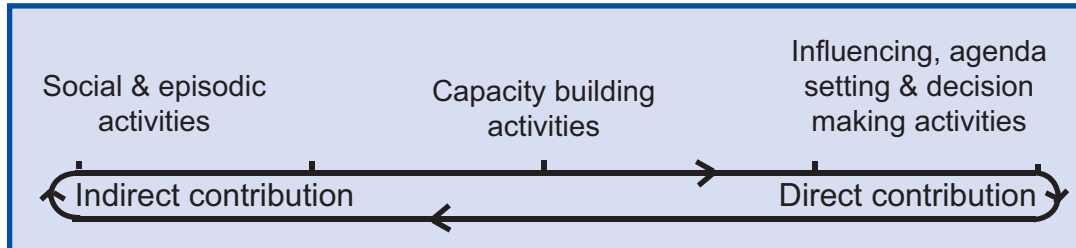
Voluntary activities as social and political empowerment

Another way of looking at the spectrum of voluntary activity as community strengthening is to gauge different kinds of activities in terms of their potential to contribute to social and political change. From this perspective, voluntary activity can be approached strategically as a means to community strengthening through 'active citizenship' (Crick 2002). Active citizens are agents who participate in society to influence agendas, identify rights, obligations, needs and goals and shape and change their society. Active citizens are those who are socially and politically empowered.

Voluntary activity as active citizenship

Bernard Crick (2002) places voluntary activity in a broader framework of 'active citizenship.' For Crick, "All citizenship must involve at some stage volunteering, but not all volunteering involves citizenship. Cleaning up a field after a rave or a blitz to clean up a local park or young children's playground is admirable, as is giving a party for the old and infirm, but it is not citizenship without a knowledge base (how can such despoliation or neglect be allowed to happen at all?), without a process that enhances skills of discovery and advocacy, or without any attempts to influence local authorities, councillors or the police, whatever, whoever is relevant. Volunteering becomes citizenship when the volunteers are well-briefed on the whole context, given responsibility about how to organise their actions, and debriefed afterwards in the classroom or listened to in a formal meeting about whether they think it could have been done better."

Conceptual Approach to Voluntary Activity as Community Strengthening Based on Contribution to Social and Political Empowerment



Activities concerned with influencing, agenda-setting and decision-making (participation in community plans, advisory and management committees and activism for example) have a clear relationship with increasing community involvement in local governance and social and political change. When working at their best, such activities allow for joint authorship and control over community visions, goals and strategies as well as a direct impact upon political processes at different levels of government. Other activities may have less direct impacts upon social and political empowerment. Capacity building activities (leadership programs or gaining work experience for example) might develop specific knowledge, skills and networks which can then be mobilised toward a broader range of social and political goals.

Other activities may have less direct impacts upon social and political empowerment. A one-off voluntary activity (staff of an organisation devote an afternoon to tree planting, for example) may have little direct impact upon the social and political processes that are related to environmental issues. However, this single activity may have different spin-off effects indirectly linked to other outcomes (building awareness of environmental issues, individuals meeting and talking to environmentally focused community groups

who have organised the event). In this way, episodic, capacity building, and influencing activities are related to each other but have different kinds of impacts upon social and political change.

This kind of conceptual approach:

- values voluntary activity for a specific outcome (the instrumental approach) rather than as a good in itself. This allows for a targeted strategic approach based on the answer to the following question: how does the activity contribute to social and political empowerment?
- acknowledges indirect impacts or stepping stones to social and political empowerment and community strengthening as important. However, it tends to create a hierarchy of activities. In particular, it devalues voluntary activities that may be desirable or valuable for reasons that are not related to social and political change, some of which may be highly personal and/or intangible.

Issues, dilemmas & notes of caution

9

A number of issues remain as the local government sector and other organisations rethink their approaches to voluntary activity and link those approaches to stronger communities. Interviews conducted for this project revealed that individual council officers or sections of council are often grappling with particular dilemmas that are common across the sector. Literature reviewed for this project also suggests that there are a number of unresolved tensions requiring careful negotiation as strategic approaches to voluntary activity are developed. This section summarises some of these key issues and dilemmas.

Cultural Diversity

Many councils are grappling with how to acknowledge specific cultural groups within a strategic approach to voluntary activity. This is especially the case with Indigenous communities and recently arrived migrant groups.

These difficulties reflect, in part, the cultural specificity of the concept of volunteering. The concept has developed in a Western context. Research suggests that volunteering simply doesn't register conceptually within certain cultural groups while for others, somewhat ironically, it

“Unless a deeper understanding of the cultural diversity of communities and how broad and intricate are the many ways individuals relate within cultural communities is included in the discourse of volunteering then the conceptualizing of social capital as volunteering will itself, ironically, generate another space of social exclusion – both in public policies about volunteering and in organisational practice.” (Kerr and Tedmanson, 2003:27)

may be associated with coerced activities (Kenny 2003; Points of Light Foundation 2000). Different understandings of the concept present two particular obstacles for the inclusion of cultural minorities in frameworks of voluntary activity.

Firstly, much of the informal activity (caring, neighbourliness, support, etc) conducted within disadvantaged and specific cultural communities goes unrecognised because it does not fit into established frameworks. Secondly, minority group members may be unintentionally excluded from mainstream voluntary activity because of misunderstandings about what those activities entail and the contexts in which they occur (Kerr and Tedmanson 2003).

Disadvantaged groups and struggling communities

For some councils there is a tension between a framework for voluntary activity based broadly on principles of community development and the realities of engaging members of disadvantaged groups and struggling communities. On the basis of experience, there are doubts about whether struggling communities have the energy or motivation to engage in voluntary activities. Issues to do with cultural diversity also play into motivations and opportunities to participate in a mainstream context.

There are also doubts about whether certain types of consultations and community managed infrastructure, for example, actually contribute to intended outcomes such as trust building, relationship building and capacity building. Sometimes, on the contrary, when ambitious community projects fall apart, trust

and relationships are broken both within the community and between the community and local government.

These doubts reflect ambiguities associated with the meaning of voluntary activity. Different responses to these doubts can be formulated on the basis of different understandings of what voluntary activity is.

Voluntary activity is sometimes understood as an 'add on' or something you do when you have spare time and have satisfied more urgent needs. This reflects a traditional notion of volunteering as noblese oblige or charity work done *by the haves for the have-nots*. This understanding raises obvious questions about volunteering as a 'middle class' phenomenon which doesn't engage disadvantaged communities on equal terms. From this perspective, an emphasis on volunteering is likely to reinforce inequalities and to offer little in the way of structural changes and genuine empowerment for disadvantaged groups.

Voluntary activity can also be understood in more democratic terms, as participation in decisions affecting members of the community. It can be understood as a way of mobilising assets in a focused way. For example, struggling communities can often be rich in relationships or skills that aren't being collectively acknowledged or harnessed (Points of Light Foundation 2000). From this perspective, voluntary activity can provide pathways from disadvantage and exclusion towards connectedness and autonomy. But these positive outcomes can be jeopardised by a range of factors such as unrealistic goals, poor communication, inadequate resourcing and tokenistic consultations. These may well lead to cynicism about the links be-

tween voluntary activities, community strengthening and democratic processes.

Voluntary activity as 'exploited unpaid labour'

This concern draws on the Left tradition that holds that voluntary activity is a form of exploited and unpaid labour that is used when governments and community organisations are unable to pay for work that needs to be done (Dekker 2005). Onyx (2006) argues that as well as being a form of civic engagement and active citizenship voluntary activity can be seen as a politically safe form of community mobilisation that generates economic return to governments without causing socially disruptive or politically embarrassing effects.

Similarly, Zappala (2000) identifies two key explanations for the recent interest in voluntary activity. First, it is part of the growth and interest in debates surrounding social capital and civil society; and second, it is a functional part of the reconfiguration of the welfare and community sectors. Alvey (1995) has argued that philanthropic activities (and thus many forms of voluntary activity) decreased at the high points of the welfare state (1950s to the 1970s) and as the traditional welfare state is eroded, there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of philanthropy and volunteering.

Some councils influenced by this view have been reluctant to develop or support volunteer programs in the formal sense. However, as the idea of voluntary activity becomes more linked with self-directed community participation many councils are now exploring ways of rethinking and renaming the concept



in order to emphasise the self-determination of communities and councils' facilitative role.

Personal interest and 'involuntary volunteering'

There is concern about the role of councils in the development of volunteer programs that are narrowly instrumental and even involuntary. For example, people looking for paid work are sometimes urged to volunteer because it enhances their curriculum vitae. Students and recipients of unemployment benefits are sometimes required to become 'volunteers' for the purposes of passing exams or receiving unemployment benefits. Councils are often ambivalent about supporting such programs. While such programs may result in benefits to the community (developing networks for example) and to the individual volunteer (pathways to social connectedness and paid work, for example), it is also possible that they might generate cynicism about the 'voluntary' nature of voluntary activity and work against reciprocal and

mutual relationship building. In line with these concerns, Warburton and others have cautioned against making the assumption that community participation of any kind necessarily facilitates active citizenship, trusting relationships and strong social networks (Warburton and Smith 2003; Warburton and McDonald 2002).

The assumptions of 'good citizenship'

Discussion of voluntary activity and community strengthening tend to assume (1) that people want to participate in their communities and (2) that participation is necessarily good. From this perspective voluntary activity is linked to 'good citizenship'. A note of caution is called for regarding both these assumptions. In the first case, some people just do not want to become involved in their communities. In the context of a commitment to freedom of action it is important to accept non-participation as a part of any community. In the second case, harmony and strong internal bonds in groups and communities are not always necessarily 'good'.

"[C]ommunity building strategies are no substitute for long-term investment in the core public infrastructure ... that provides the foundations for resilient and healthy communities. Community building programs based on a simplistic faith that self-help, volunteering and social entrepreneurship can, on their own, replace public investment in core social programs and services should be treated with considerable caution. This narrow understanding of community engagement is often a convenient smokescreen for ongoing reductions in progressive taxation and public sector investment, policies which will in fact exacerbate rather than reduce inequalities between regions and communities." (Wiseman, 2004b:60)

The now lengthy discussions of bonding and bridging social capital point out that while strong internal networks can foster strong communities they can also exclude those who do not agree with or conform to dominant views. Some strong bonds can discourage diversity and non-conformity, whilst disagreement and dissent can actually contribute to a vibrant, adaptive and evolving community.

Bureaucratised/over-administered volunteer programs

An increasingly litigious environment has led to the development of a new regulatory framework concerned with risk, audit, accountability and insurance. This environment, together with new managerial imperatives, has impacted heavily on council approaches to voluntary activity. Risk management strategies often compel councils to specifically identify volunteers and volunteer roles and the insurance, health and safety risks associated with them.

This categorisation works against a more holistic approach to voluntary activity in all its diverse forms. Councils identify a tension between the need for an integrated and strategic approach to voluntary activity on one hand and the importance of spontaneity and organic development on the other. Informality is often what distinguishes voluntary activity and community participation from the more negative aspects of bureaucracy and regulation associated with all levels of government. Yet the demands of risk management make it challenging for local government to formally support informal and spontaneous activities. Any strategic framework must carefully negotiate these tensions.

'Letting go': a whole-of-council approach

One of the consequences of the growing emphasis upon voluntary activity as an important element of civil society, as well as the professionalisation of voluntary activities, is the increasing pressure placed upon local government to fund, resource and take responsibility for their community's voluntary activities. Increasing expectations in turn raise the ques-

tion of what the role of local government is in regard to voluntary activities. Where is the line between genuinely affirming and facilitating the decision-making capacity of communities and maintaining control of processes and outcomes? At what point can or should councils relinquish control? 'Letting go' of processes and outcomes works against prevailing work-cultures that tell us that we need to be in control in order to be doing our jobs properly. This kind of cultural shift will not necessarily be easy to achieve and is likely to require considerable strategic work at a whole-of-council level (Boyle, Clark and Burns 2006; Wiseman 2004).

If strategies implemented in the spirit of 'letting go' are to be successful and sustainable they require institutional support and adequate resourcing. Councils identify the need for a shared organisational vision and organisational capacity building in order to implement new strategic frameworks. A key part of this process is to re-imagine the role of councils as facilitators and brokers, as learning organisations (learning from and about the community) and to imagine their role as a continuously evolving one (changing with and in response to the community).

'Letting go' can be a source of great anxiety since the direction that genuine empowerment might take and the visions and strategies communities may want to put in place cannot be controlled. Indeed a genuinely empowered community may well come into conflict with councils as a layer of government. Such conflicts reflect a vibrant democratic culture. But being explicit about the potential for conflicts of interest between communities and councils acknowledges the trap of encouraging community participation in tokenistic ways.



Maintaining critical thinking

Applying critical thinking to conceptual approaches to voluntary activity means staying alert to ways in which appealing terminology or frameworks may mask political biases that work against stated goals. Critical thinking does not imply a negative perspective. Rather, it emphasises constant questioning about whether the big picture approach is genuinely directed towards the values it proclaims to champion.

Government strategies, including those implemented at the local level, are always infused with particular biases. Ideas about what makes a strong community, for example, will always contain value-judgments about strengths and weaknesses, good and bad features. There will usually be disagreement on these judgements.

Imagine, for instance that a strong community is understood as a community which exhibits the principle of 'self-help'. The notion of 'self-help' can be read in positive terms as a community taking responsibility for its own vision, direction and resources. 'Self-help' can be linked to democratic ideas about autonomy and participation, about placing control in community hands rather than in the hands of impersonal bureaucracies.

But 'self-help' can also be read in more negative terms that refer to an increasingly individualised society in which individuals and local communities are unfairly held accountable for their own misfortunes. From this perspective, the concept of 'self-help' under-emphasises structural causes of disadvantage and forces communities to do the work that governments once used to do.

Critical thinking can help sort through these subtle but important biases. Where an emphasis on voluntary activity is associated with cost-shifting from government to the community sector, for example, it may work to distort the positive effects that voluntary activity can offer. Critical thinking can assist in avoiding tokenistic gestures that damage credibility and generate cynicism about the relationship between local government and the community. Such gestures break rather than build trust.

Shaw and Martin maintain a critical approach to community-building strategies recently introduced in the UK. These UK strategies have influenced Victorian policy development. Shaw and Martin argue that we need to stay alert to community-building strategies that attempt "to reduce the political question of what kind of society we want to live in to a managerial one about how to run things (as they are) better." (Shaw and Martin, 2000:410)

Towards strategic development

10

This section sets out suggested activities for councils to consider when they facilitate and develop voluntary activity programs within a community strengthening framework. These suggestions aim to help councils to work through the conceptual issues that have been raised in this report and to develop their own working definitions, conceptual frameworks and specific goals on voluntary activity. The suggestions are inter-related and each one necessarily affects how the others are undertaken.

Different councils are already involved in a number of these activities. Indeed this list draws directly upon those experiences as communicated in interviews conducted with council staff for this project. These considerations are intended to act as reference points for discussion and debate within and between councils rather than to provide the last word on what-is-to-be-done. Each council's strategic approach to voluntary activity will reflect the unique needs and desires of their communities

● **Build a conceptual and strategic framework for approaching voluntary activity**

This means thinking about the broader purpose for which the council engages with voluntary activity (is voluntary activity considered a good in itself or a tool to other outcomes?). It means identifying outcomes to be achieved through voluntary activity (social capital? social and political change? increased capacities? active citizenship? community empowerment? etc.). It means understanding whether and how those outcomes can be measured and devising strategies

that enable the realisation of those goals.

Interviews conducted for this project strongly suggest that councils are moving towards a **community development** framework for voluntary activity and an emphasis upon a **facilitative** role. However this is not always clearly articulated or validated from a whole-of-council perspective.

Councils may wish to combine different frameworks for different purposes which may present contradictions at the conceptual and definitional level. This may be unavoidable as councils transition into new ways of working and adapt to the diverse needs of communities. Councils will need to remain conscious of such contradictions as they develop and revise their approaches. They will need to decide whether such contradictions present obstacles to achieving established goals.

● **Articulate a working definition of voluntary activity**

Any strategic approach requires a clear understanding and a common definition of the key terms of reference. A working definition may embrace a broad understanding of voluntary activity (as this report has done) or limit the concept to specific kinds of activities. It may mean using particular terminology to describe voluntary activity. Whichever approach and definition is used, it is necessary to understand why one particular definition is used over another and why particular words are used and not others. In this way, the definition articulated is related to the conceptual and strategic framework in which voluntary activity is approached.

● **Develop a working definition of community and community strengthening**

In order to develop a strategic approach to voluntary activity from a community strengthening perspective, a clear understanding about what that perspective means is required. A working definition of community and community strengthening enables a clearer focus upon the links between voluntary activity and community strengthening outcomes.

● **Investigate the specific changes and challenges that affect voluntary activity in local communities**

This step forms part of the 'research' which informs a strategic approach directed towards the unique needs of local communities. The 'changes and challenges' table in an earlier section of this report provides a starting point for this process.

● **Explore new thinking on voluntary activity**

Strategic development on voluntary activity is likely to be an evolving and ongoing process which will benefit from exposure to a range of perspectives and research. Given the trends identified in this report, two areas may be of particular interest to councils:

Voluntary activity based on reciprocity.

As suggested in this report, voluntary activity is not necessarily a one-way relationship involving a giver and a receiver. There are now a number of programs that involve reciprocal assistance given in a voluntary capacity. In Australia we are familiar with the LETS,

an exchange structure that facilitates people exchanging goods and services on a voluntary basis. Overseas, the Open Democracy Foundation is supporting the idea of 'co-production,' where services are exchanged on a voluntary basis 'below the radar' of mainstream work (Boyle, 2006). In Europe there has been growing interest in the idea of 'civil labour' where community organised social action and community involvement are supported by 'civic money' such as vouchers for childcare and other community services (Beck, 2000). These ways of thinking about voluntary activity as well as the critiques of these approaches can provide valuable input into councils' strategic thinking.

Understanding the forms and elements of participation.

If a broad definition of voluntary activity is employed, then participation becomes a central concept associated with the link between voluntary activity and community strengthening. Whilst there has been extensive research on the motivations of volunteers, critical research is still required into the value of participation, the different forms of participation (such as democratic and consultative) and challenges and difficulties in current forms of participation. Councils may well be key sites for new thinking about these issues.

● **Draw upon existing knowledge, experience and resources**

Linking voluntary activity to strong communities is a relatively new frame of reference which is based, in part, on some long-standing and 'common sense' ideas. It brings together new understand-



ings of the role of councils and new approaches to voluntary activity that draw on historical precedents within and beyond local government. New approaches can sometimes be prone to 'reinventing the wheel' or losing sight of important work that is already being done, or that has been done before, and is lost within organisational memories.

It is important to find ways to record, retain and integrate existing knowledge about what makes strong communities and the role of voluntary activities within them. This can mean a number of things for local government:

- keeping track of strategies and projects that have worked well in the past as well as the present and reflecting upon the reasons why;
- generating awareness of similarities in approaches that may use different terminology or have subtly different emphases. In this way, strategic approaches can capitalise on commonalities;
- generating a research agenda that documents evidence of the links between voluntary activity and specific outcomes in terms of strong communities (Bowen 2004; Boyle, Clark and Burns 2006; Wiseman 2004).

● **Avoid one-size-fits-all approaches**

Whilst agreements regarding broad definitions are important for effective communication and joint programs, it is important that each council maintains its own priorities, structures and projects. Councils should withstand pressure to work within a one-size-fits-all program approach to voluntary activity and community strengthening. Too much formality in volunteer programs can become overly bureaucratic and undermine the fun, spontaneity and choice that are central to voluntary activity and to connecting with the specificities of different communities.

● **Share ideas and strategies through networks**

Research for this project indicates that Victorian councils are grappling with a range of common issues and dilemmas as they rethink their approaches to voluntary activity. Establishing networks through working groups or regular meetings between council staff working on these issues would provide opportunities to share information, exchange strategies, develop joint projects and enjoy peer support. Such networks could be a valuable source of ideas and feedback for ongoing strategic development.

Conclusion

11

Victorian councils are at the forefront of developing practical paths towards strong and sustainable communities. Their approaches to voluntary activity are increasingly framed by an outcome focus. This, in turn, has shaped a broad view of the range of formal and informal voluntary activities with which councils and communities are engaged.

This report has documented a range of initiatives and strategies developed within the local government sector in Victoria to integrate approaches to voluntary activity within a community strengthening framework. It has acknowledged the community strengthening initiatives that are occurring 'on the ground' and pointed to the leadership role that local government provides.

It has identified a number of ongoing challenges and dilemmas that face Victorian councils in this task and it offers a

series of steps towards ongoing strategic development.

It is hoped that this report will provide a tool for the further development of the conceptual and strategic foundations that underwrite the relationship between voluntary activity and community strengthening from a local government perspective.

The changing patterns of voluntary activity that councils identify are likely to have significant impacts upon the future of local communities and the shape of local governance. In this period of transition it is important both to track what works and to explore new ways of thinking. New thinking in these areas offers exciting potential for positive change, building upon previous successes. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is hoped that this report will contribute to, and stimulate ongoing dialogue about these changes within, across and beyond the communities that drive them.

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Appendix 1

The context of the project

The Local and Regional Resource Networks Project (now known as the Volunteer Support Grants program)

The Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) is delivering the Victorian government's volunteering agenda through the Volunteering and Community Enterprise Strategy. The Victorian Government committed \$21m over three years to implement the key initiatives under this strategy.

Under this strategy, the Local and Regional Resource Networks (LRRN) project is one action designed to foster innovation in facilitating, supporting and sustaining voluntary activity and participation in communities across Victoria.

It is widely recognised that voluntary activity can:

- have lasting social impact at an individual, organisational and community level;
- positively influence health and social outcomes within communities; and
- contribute significantly to the long-term social, cultural, economic and environmental sustainability of communities.

The LRRN project recognises the significant role played by Local government in facilitating and supporting voluntary activity as a key facet of community strengthening approaches. DVC and the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) formed a partnership in 2004 to support the strategic engagement of the Victorian Local government sector in the development and implementation of community designed approaches to support, facilitate and sustain voluntary activity and participation across the state.

For further information on the LRRN project contact:

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The Municipal Association of Victoria
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Melbourne 3000
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Appendix 2

Project Participants

Ararat Rural City Council
Baw Baw Shire Council
Brimbank City Council
Boroondara City Council
Darebin City Council
Golden Plains Shire Council
Greater Dandenong City Council
Hindmarsh Shire Council
Hobson's Bay City Council
Hume City Council
Knox City Council
Latrobe City Council
Mornington Peninsula Shire Council
Surf Coast Shire Council
Whittlesea City Council



Appendix 3

Summary of interview data

Below is a summary of the interviews conducted for this research. Interviewees' responses have been collated and summarised in point form under the questions and topics of the interview schedule.

How is volunteering defined?

- A spectrum from traditional service delivery to involvement in community planning and building activities, informal activities and activism. Emphases vary across different councils (one interviewee rejected that activists were volunteers).
- There was general agreement that volunteering needs to be conceptualised in broader terms, that community participation is the key issue, that strong and sustainable communities are the desired outcomes.

What terminology is used?

- The term 'volunteer' is meaningful to many people who take pride in being one.
- The term 'volunteer(ing)' tends to be linked to a traditional concept of one-way service-delivery and doesn't necessarily cover the broader definition. 'Participants' don't always identify as volunteers. Members of committees of management aren't always immediately thought of by councils as volunteers.
- Issues with volunteering as an Anglo term. It doesn't capture informal 'volunteering' done in CALD or Indigenous communities.
- Unclear whether a change of terminology is the most useful focus. The emphasis of change should be on outcomes. The activity is more important than the label.
- Alternative terms to encompass a broader definition of volunteering/volunteers include:
 - o Active citizenship (though a large number of interviewees said that this term did not resonate in the community)
 - o Community participation
 - o Community involvement
 - o Community volunteering
 - o Community engagement
 - o Community developers and development
 - o Community representative
 - o Community coordinator
 - o Members (of clubs, groups etc)
 - o Distinction between volunteering (traditional) and voluntary activity (broader).

- While there is often a strong commitment to the ideals behind community strengthening there is also wariness of the jargon as fluffy and not well defined on one hand, and reinventing the wheel on the other.

Current approaches to volunteering within council:

- There is a general commitment to the idea that voluntary activity and community participation are inherently valuable, productive and linked to healthier happier individuals and communities. But it is often difficult to identify more precisely how this relationship works. A number of interviewees expressed a desire for evidence based research which makes the link between community strengthening and voluntary activity explicit (both as a tool for developing strategies and as a tool to make the case for a whole-of-council approach). There is general acknowledgement that a framework for thinking about voluntary activity in this context is required (some councils' frameworks are more developed than others in this respect).
- Most (though not all) councils engaged to some extent in management and professionalisation of volunteer services (recruitment, referral, job-matching, data-bases, training, acknowledgement, celebration, volunteer resource centres etc).
- All councils engaged in community planning/consultative/capacity building/community project processes involving various forms of voluntary activity. There is variation in the extent to which these kinds of activities are
 - o community or council driven
 - o asset or deficit driven
 - o effective in engaging diverse sections of municipal population
 - o practically and financially resourced
 - o formalised and/or bureaucratic
 - o strategically approached from a whole of council perspective
 - o seen as valuable in themselves (process versus outcome)
 - o incorporated into a 'volunteering' framework and strategy
 - o linked to community strengthening / active citizenship / social capital / community development objectives and outcomes.
- Some councils work in partnership with community organisations to build their capacity to support and develop volunteers.
- Some councils are developing ideas around corporate volunteering and making links with local businesses.

Changes in volunteering over recent years and effects of these changes:

- Some interviewees report no shortage of volunteers overall - more volunteers than positions to match them to. For others there were difficulties recruiting as many volunteers as were needed for both service-delivery and more participatory roles. Longer working hours and demands on people's time make it difficult to find time to volunteer.
- People are choosier about what they want to do and how they want to do it. They are project and time specific. They want to be treated well, have their skills and expertise recognised and utilised.
- People are volunteering into decision-making rather than helping roles.
- Young people are especially issue and outcome focused. Often interested in environmental issues. Often volunteering for work experience.
- There is declining interest in traditional services such as meals on wheels and in traditional volunteer organisations (Apex, Lions etc). There is a looming crisis in this area with most volunteers in the older age bracket.
- Motivations have changed. Altruism and community engagement are still evident as motivations but also self-interest and work experience. This is not necessarily a problem.
- There is an increase in requests from businesses for episodic corporate volunteering.
- Demographic changes, especially in rural and coastal areas are impacting upon the nature of local communities in terms of who volunteers and what they want to do.
- Community expectations upon council have increased. People want more from council itself and more assistance to facilitate their own leadership, ie. there is an increasing desire to get involved in decisions about local community.

Major challenges to volunteering today:

- How to address the aging population of traditional volunteers? Councils may need to consider paying for these kinds of services and directing/harnessing volunteer energy towards other areas such as the environment.
- How to cope with insurance and other (health and safety) regulations that complicate community engagement and projects.
- How to harness the energy devoted to episodic volunteering and redirect it towards

more sustainable models?

- How best to support volunteers so as to sustain their involvement and avoid burn-out?
- How to approach voluntary activity from a life-cycle perspective, recognising that people will start and stop volunteering at different times in their life?
- How to harness the energies of younger people?
- How to approach cultural diversity? How to harness/recognise the informal 'volunteering' that is conducted in CALD and Indigenous communities? How to recognise the diverse needs of new migrant groups and understand that motivation to formally volunteer may be low in their priorities.
- How to broaden participation in all forms of voluntary activity?
- How to recruit volunteers for management-type roles which suffer from being bureaucratic and dull?
- How to respond to tensions between older and younger voluntary recruits and between long term and new resident groups?
- How to recover from failed community projects, plans, committees etc? How to rebuild trust and instil a sense of ownership when council steps in to pick up the pieces?

Is it appropriate to stretch the concept of volunteering?

In so far as a broader sense of involvement and participation is encouraged then all interviewees agreed to stretching the concept of volunteering.

But there was greater ambivalence about this question on a number of fronts:

- For some it was not clear that 'volunteering' should provide the term or framework around which this stretched concept was built.
- For others it was important not to lose the positive associations attached to volunteering for many people by replacing it with another term and concept. Volunteering can be a benign disguise for a range of empowering activities within the community.
- For others it made sense to employ a full range of terms from volunteering to participation to offer people a range of concepts with which to self-identify.

- A number of interviewees expressed reservations about the usefulness of a debate over terminology and were reluctant to introduce yet another label for what they felt was already happening on the ground (in terms of broader participatory forms of voluntary activity).
- A number stressed that any shift in the concept of volunteering had to remain outcome focused. What will a broader conception of volunteering help us to do? Outcomes are more important than terminology.
- One interviewee emphasised that activism should remain outside the conceptual limits of volunteering. While another noted that some examples of activism can be destructive and have little to do with building trust and strong communities.

What might a stretched concept of volunteering look like?

Common themes:

- Emphasis must be on the outcome (sustainable communities, connectedness/well-being etc.) rather than the act (volunteering).
- A transition from a contained notion of volunteering (and the distinction between recipient/donor) to an organic notion of community development.
- Volunteering would be approached within a broader holistic community development/strengthening strategy. Volunteering should be integrated into council's role in a quality of life framework from early childhood right through the life span.
- A way of engaging the community and their passions as a driver of council activity and facilitating community ownership of projects, infrastructure and vision.
- An assets based approach: acknowledging and harnessing what already exists within communities. Focusing on capacities rather than deficits.
- A time consuming, evolving and ongoing process.

Other individual comments:

- A pathway to autonomy and democracy. Volunteering should be linked to structural change.
- Linked to a reinvigoration of the concept of the citizen, as opposed to the concept of the consumer, ie. linked to an emphasis on relationships rather than market transactions.

Why is such a stretched notion of volunteering appropriate?

- Because all forms of voluntary activity have benefits at individual and community levels. These can address alienating aspects of contemporary life which work against community strengthening (gated communities, individualisation, social isolation and exclusion, busy and demanding lifestyles).
- To address the unsustainability of older models of generating community participation (traditional volunteer organisations, town-hall meetings) and to move on from the exploitative, controlling and/or paternalistic aspects of traditional approaches to volunteering. There is a need to find different ways of engaging with new generations and new expectations within the community.
- To bring approaches to volunteering up to date with the development of councils' role beyond roads, rates and rubbish towards community well-being. A new notion of volunteering will help council to do this job better.
- There is a need for a solid conceptual basis underlying strategies for community participation (Why do we want participation? What form should it take? What are its outcomes? How do we sustain it?)

Issues involved in conceiving/implementing a stretched concept of volunteering:

Common themes:

Outcome focus:

- Community participation can only be sustained if it is linked to tangible outcomes. On one hand this means directly linking voluntary activity to projects with specific goals and deliverables, and building trust and credibility for the associated volunteer framework in this way.
- The outcome focus expressed in interviews also reflects a strong desire for tangible ways of measuring the links between volunteering and community strengthening and for examples of projects and strategies towards this end. These demonstrated outcomes should be community rather than individual focused (though individual gains may also lead to community outcomes).
- Part of identifying these links means understanding precisely what a strong / sustainable community looks like and using this definition as the basis for developing projects to get there. Whilst there is a desire for solid working definitions, these should also be definitions that leave room for creativity and spontaneity.

Whole of council approach:

- A stretched approach to volunteering and community strengthening has to be structurally integrated and well resourced. It can't be one more thing that council

(or community development workers) have to do in addition to existing responsibilities. In this respect there must be a shared vision within council and organisational capacity building in order to develop the awareness and skills to deliver on this approach.

Cultural diversity:

- A number of interviewees acknowledged that few ideas exist on how to engage with marginalised groups, particularly indigenous communities, but also recent migrant arrivals. The culturally specific terminology and concept of volunteering plays a significant role in this dilemma.
- At the same time, interviewees were also aware that much informal ‘volunteering’ within CALD communities goes unacknowledged. One interviewee suggested that in some respects a stretched concept of volunteering is trying to replicate what already happens in Indigenous or CALD communities. Caution about this approach was also expressed, since that model can sometimes be exclusionary and impose obligations on group members.

Diverse demographics and struggling communities:

- Maslow’s hierarchy of needs was sometimes raised in interviews in relation to whether disadvantaged groups or individuals have the energy or motivation to engage in voluntary and participatory activities. A couple of interviewees raised questions as to whether certain types of consultative programs and community managed facilities were always relevant, productive or possible amongst disadvantaged demographics (examples of failed projects were given). In some discussions around these issues there appeared to be a tension between conceptualising volunteering
 - as an ‘add on’– something you do when you have spare time and have satisfied other needs,
 - as a pathway to connectedness (offering a route out of disadvantage and isolation),
 - in an asset focused way (disadvantaged communities can often be rich in relationships or skills that aren’t being acknowledged or harnessed).

Letting go and accepting unknowns:

- A number of interviewees explicitly acknowledged the connection between genuinely affirming and facilitating the capacity of the community to make decisions and relinquishing control of process and outcomes. Some suggested there was also potential for financial control to shift to the community.
- A number also noted that loss of control and unknown outcomes could potentially create anxiety within council. This anxiety might be prompted in different ways:
 1. Once people are empowered, you cannot contain where that empowerment might lead. There is potential for the community to oppose council from an increasingly empowered position. There is also the potential for community perspectives that are hostile to a community development/ tolerant / multicultural (and so on) frame of reference to become increasingly prominent.

- Finding a balance between an integrated and strategic approach to volunteering and leaving room for spontaneous and organic development. No one-size-fits-all models.
- Encourage a voluntary/participation focus amongst council staff as much as within the broader community.
- Council as a facilitator and learning organisation. Learning process (learning about and from the community as to its profile, needs, wants, passions and about how to gauge them) must be ongoing.

Suggestions for the report:

- Provide visual links / visual maps of concepts.
- Provide examples of good practice and case studies.
- The report should aim to be a catalyst for networking with staff from different councils on these issues.
- The report should be goal/outcome focused. It should emphasise activities rather than terminology.
- The report should encourage a whole of council approach so it needs to be accessible to sections of council beyond community development.

2. In some cases, interviewees referred to the persistence of historical attitudes within councils where the community was seen as an opponent to be convinced and as an obstacle to efficiency, rather than the driver of council activities.

3. The idea of letting go works against the prevailing culture (within council as elsewhere) that if we are not in control and if we are not the expert then we are not doing our jobs properly. Letting go thus requires a significant cultural shift in workplaces and in government.

- Those who identified these anxieties noted a need for organisational capacity building to enable this cultural shift and to recognise the benefits of such a shift in terms of doing the work of council better.

- In related comments, two interviewees noted the need to be explicit about what will sometimes be a tension between council's role as a layer of government and encouraging genuine community autonomy/democracy. Council's facilitative role will sometimes work against its own interests when the community opposes it. This is not necessarily a problem but being explicit about a potential conflict of interest alerts us to the trap of encouraging participation in tokenistic ways.

Cost-shifting:

- Two interviewees noted that an increased emphasis on volunteering was in some ways related to cost shifting. Government at all levels is forcing community organisations to do work that governments used to do. There is therefore the potential for this to distort the positive aspects of community participation because of the compulsion associated with work that would not get done without volunteers.

Other individual comments:

Corporate memory:

- There is a need to develop ways of retaining knowledge about community strengthening and existing and former pathways towards it. This applies as much to volunteering in a community strengthening framework, as to anything else. We don't want to reinvent the wheel every time the terminology changes.

Vision of Council's role in developing volunteering for community strengthening:

- Systemic organisational change to integrate community driven processes into the key functions of council and to generating council-wide strategic approaches to community strengthening which encompass volunteering. Organisational capacity building towards this end.

- As the level of government closest to the community, local government is well placed to institute these kinds of processes and to play a leading role in connecting communities to other levels of government via such processes.

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