

## *Towards Social Inclusion - Partnerships in Local Government*

### **Introduction**

I'd like to start off my presentation by sharing with you a local recipe.

This is a recipe for community building and social inclusion. Obviously, there are many recipes for any dish, and this should be seen as just one - but hopefully it's one that's going to attract some notice within the policy debates and other activities that follow on from this conference. It goes something like this:

### **KEY INGREDIENTS**

- a) firstly, establish a community vision;
- b) then, undertake some strategic and integrated planning;
- c) throw in a bit of advocacy
- d) where they still exist, co-ordinate and manage community assets;
- e) determine your major priorities; and finally
- f) allocate some resources to achieve your goals.

These ingredients also just happen to be a list of the key responsibilities for local Councils in the Victorian Local Government Act 1989.

Given the synergy of local government responsibilities and the issues being discussed here, it is very encouraging to see that the organisers have included several speakers from Local Government to talk about their current and future activities in responding to social exclusion in the current social, economic and political environment at a local level.

However whilst there are very clear roles for local government in community building and community development, it is important to note that there are still many people who question why local government should be involved in housing issues. After all, the major funding mechanism for housing assistance is between the Commonwealth and the States, and local governments hold no legislative responsibilities for provision of affordable housing.

In fact, when I was about to start my job as the Housing and Urban Policy Officer at the City of Yarra earlier this year, I was questioned by people in the community sector and at the Office of Housing why I was bothering. "After all, local government can't actually DO anything", I was told.

Thankfully, I am here today to be able to tell you that not only CAN local government do something about affordable housing issues, but we ARE DOING SOMETHING. In particular, the work we are doing is intrinsically about building and retaining viable communities. Particularly those communities that are disadvantaged and living within the public housing system.

### **City of Yarra's Role in Building Viable Communities**

A major policy plank in building viable communities has been the development and implementation of an Affordable Housing Statement (or policy). This work is underpinned by Council's commitment to three core values:

1. Actively promoting the positive contribution that affordable housing makes to the City's social and cultural diversity, distinctive identity and the maintenance of a sustainable local economy and community
2. Recognising that appropriate shelter is a fundamental human right, and the critical importance of a range of housing types to meet the diverse needs of our community
3. Providing opportunities for all residents, including those experiencing disadvantage, to participate in all aspects of community life, including planning, consultation and access to resources.

However, in looking at what it's role should be working toward these commitments, the City of Yarra does NOT see itself as a housing provider. We are NOT just about getting additional stock on the ground – although that would always be welcome. With all the best intentions, Council's capacity to provide housing is limited by it's capacity to generate revenue. This holds true for most Councils nationwide. We also have little capacity to influence development

trends, and therefore do NOT see this as a key mechanism for significantly affecting affordable housing levels.

What we DO have in Yarra is an existing high proportion of social housing, in fact the highest in the State, with 15% of our residents living in public and community housing. This social housing represents both a massive physical asset to the city, as well as an incredible resource in social capital. We also have another 35% of residents in private rental, which includes a small and rapidly diminishing number of low cost rooming houses - again representing a group of very marginally housed and disadvantaged tenants.

The public housing residents are mainly located in large high-rise estates of 2000-4000 people. These are the legacy of the slum clearances begun in the 1930s and the social architecture movement of the 1950s and 60s which saw high rise living as the solution to housing working class families close to employment, health and educational opportunities.

However since that time the demographic profile of the estates have changed dramatically, with tenants in these high density living arrangements now being predominantly:

- Single parents with dependent children, or lone person households
- Non-English speaking migrants with a poor command of English
- Households without paid employment, with their main source of income some form of pension or allowance.

These estates are now identified as the sites of growing social problems, mainly as a result of the targeting policies begun in the 1970s, which have resulted in them being concentrations not only of poverty, but of people with multiple disabilities, high support needs, and very often high levels of social dislocation.

These issues were all being felt in our local communities, with the last three years of public housing reforms only exacerbating the situation. Council's response was to embark on developing a range of social policy responses, one of which was an Affordable Housing Strategy. This took 12 months of planning, community consultation and prioritising of strategies.

Given the obvious concentrations of disadvantage in public housing communities, Council decided to prioritise those parts of its Affordable Housing Statement that focussed on both advocating to improve the physical stock, and supporting and assisting the communities that live there to have a better quality of life.

Implementation of the Affordable Housing Statement has close links with the implementation of other Council policies, such as the Community Safety Strategy, the Drug Action Plan, and the Multicultural Action Plan. In particular, work on developing "sustainable communities" on public housing estates is bringing together a wide range of community agencies that have not necessarily worked in a coordinated way before.

### **Key Achievements to date**

Under the previous State Government, opportunities for input to State housing policy and programs were limited and Council's advocacy role constrained by a non-consultative approach by the Minister for Housing. However, much that was achieved in this difficult environment can be attributed to strong links with local community agencies with expertise and interest in housing issues. Council's strength was in the existing relationships and goodwill it had built up over many years and in the common vision for social justice that we shared with local agencies providing support to disadvantaged residents.

### **PARTNERHIPS**

I will now cover three areas where we have developed partnerships in working toward our objectives.

#### **With Public Housing Tenants (most enjoyable partnerships!)**

Unfortunately, the defunding of public tenant groups and other housing advocacy groups, the policy of increased targeting to "those in greatest need", and the general reduction of community services over the past few years in Victoria has left the needs of public tenants sorely neglected and in need of

major attention. Some of the initiatives Council has undertaken in conjunction with public housing tenants include:

- Lobbying the State Government for the **appointment of a Community Development worker** on Yarra estates, after the defunding of public tenant groups in 1997
- Council also facilitated the smooth transition between the defunding and closing down of the tenant association offices, and the establishment of the Rental Housing Support Program - part of the Office of Housing reforms that tenants were given no say in.
- We have assisted Public Tenant Groups from Fitzroy, North Richmond, Collingwood area and North Fitzroy in establishing the **Yarra Public Tenant Groups Forum**. This was initiated by the public tenants after they had been through a 10 week **management training workshop** funded and supported by Council. This was part of nearly \$80,000 provided for public tenant initiatives over the past two years.
- Other projects undertaken with this money include:
  - Music program and choir equipment for youth choir
  - Office equipment upgrades, including computers and photocopiers, for PT associations
  - Various youth sport team grants
  - Funding of Housing Week activities organised by tenant groups
- Nearly \$60,000 of other community grants funding went to groups based on the public housing estates, including the African Information Network, the Indo-Chinese Support Agency which runs camps for young people, public arts events on housing estates, a Turkish Women's Support Group.
- Neighbourhood Houses are now established on all public housing estates, with Council providing nearly \$200,000 of funding. These centres run a huge variety of recreational and cultural activities, giving tenants not only the opportunity to develop new skills, but also to interact with other tenants and local residents, forming important relationships and social networks.
- And perhaps the most well-known example is the community gardens project, now established on three estates, which were strongly supported by Council in the initial stages. These gardens have resulted in not only an

amazing array of produce over the years, but brought together tenants from all over the world in a horticultural development project that is now being replicated overseas. Council has also provided massive composting worm farms for these gardens, which have been a big hit with the residents.

- And I couldn't fail to mention the Recycling programs which have been established on all highrise estates. Members of the tenant associations spend incredible hours participating in this recycling program – and you can imagine that collecting cans and bottles from each floor in twenty storey buildings is no small feat.

As I mentioned, these are only some of the initiatives undertaken with the public tenants, however I would just like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the absolute commitment and dedication of all the public tenant groups we are privileged to work with in Yarra. Because without their participation, most of these things would not exist.

### **Partnerships with other agencies in the Community**

Yarra has an extraordinary concentration of community agencies, with the suburb of Fitzroy dubbed “the charitable acre” in the post war period because of the number of charitable and relief agencies located there. This is a legacy of the area being a traditional working class neighbourhood, on the fringe of the Melbourne CBD, and with poverty never too far away for many families.

Council has strong links with many of these agencies and is a key partner in three current projects focussed on high rise public housing estates within Yarra. These have been initiated by three quite separate agencies - one being the local public housing tenancy advice service (the Bedford Street agency), another through Jesuit Social Services (which focuses on 'Creating Opportunity in Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods') and finally an upcoming Department of Human Services pilot project looking at promoting health education and recreation activities on all estates in Yarra.

Council has also assisted a number of local community housing providers through practical support, such as working with Abbeyfield Housing (a provider

for elderly persons) to write a business plan as part of their strategic planning for the future, and participating on the board of the Yarra Community Housing Group which now houses over 300 residents in community managed rooming houses and single unit dwellings throughout the inner city.

A key issue we have had to work on with local agencies recently has been the threat of privatisation and redevelopment of our high rise estates, with the first example of this at Kensington Estate under the previous government. In response Council developed a paper in consultation with these agencies on Retaining and Improving Public Housing. This is about to be formally adopted by the Council, and will establish the communities response to the future redevelopment of ageing public housing stock within Yarra. The five key principles developed are:

That in supporting the redevelopment of public housing in Yarra Council adopts the following Principles for Retaining and Improving Public Housing:

1. Redevelopment shall maximise the provision of public housing within the city;
2. Redevelopment shall promote social cohesion, community safety, liveability and draw on recognised best practice models for urban renewal;
3. An integrated and planned approach to redevelopment, linking social and cultural life with the physical, environmental and economic development should be implemented;
4. Consultation with the local community must be a key part of any redevelopment process;
5. A strategy shall be developed to minimise the disruption to any tenants forced to relocate during the redevelopment, provide them with choice and assist them to retain local links.

Once adopted, it is hoped that these principles can be widely promoted throughout the broader community, as part of a strategy to promote the benefits of public housing and highlight the important contribution that public tenants make to the life of the city.

Again, it is difficult to properly acknowledge the incredible efforts of the people involved from these community agencies in such a short space of time. But their commitment goes well beyond their paid work, and they are a tremendous resource to the local community.

### **Partnerships with the Office of Housing**

Close working relationships have been developing over a period of time with the local Regional Office of Housing staff. Due to its high concentration of public housing, Yarra seems to be emerging as THE area for undertaking pilot projects, including the employment of a Community Development officer which has been a huge success.

The Regional Manager of the Office of Housing has also been responsible for setting up many innovative and progressive projects, and he is also an active member of Yarra's Housing Reference Group.

We are also looking forward to building strong links with the new Minister for Housing and her colleagues, who have put together a very strong platform for involving local government in affordable housing issues and made commitments to providing a much more open communication channel than we have had for a very long time!

In fact, many of their commitments are complementary to the objectives and identified strategies within Yarra's Affordable Housing Statement. Hopefully there will be greater opportunity for input to Government housing policy and other human services policies that are needed to tackle the issue of social exclusion in public housing communities.

### **CONCLUSION**

Finally, I would like to reiterate that Local Government can and does have a key role to play in helping to build strong and viable communities, and contributing to the debate on how we all achieve this. In the case of the City of Yarra, we

are keen to continue linking our work in the sphere of affordable housing to our work in community building.

However, whilst this whole concept of addressing “social exclusion” may seem like a new concept, and we may be about to enter a new phase of changing language and developing new programs, I think the only people who are not surprised at this shift back to focussing on community needs are the people on the ground. Particularly those people in the community who have experienced first hand the impacts of growing unemployment, family and community breakdown, increasing crime and the effects of the drug wars, the tightening of benefit entitlements and the reduction of basic community services.

At the same time, these communities must also be recognised for the incredible resilience and resourcefulness that they have developed – in supporting each other, in choosing to put hundreds of hours each year into making their communities function better, and in continually demanding to part of consultative mechanisms.

Hopefully these will be the people we are ALL listening to when we start developing the new policies and programs that attempt to address social exclusion.