

Learnings From Community Strengthening in Victoria

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Overview

- **What community strengthening is – and is not**
- **The Victorian State Government's approach**
- **Lessons from the 'experimenting' phase**
- **Implications for local government**

Community strengthening is.....

‘Any sustained effort to increase the connectedness, active engagement and partnership among members of the community, community groups and organisations in order to enhance social, economic and environmental objectives.’ (Considine 2004, p. 5)

Community strengthening is not....

- **A new invention**
- **A cure all**
- **A quick fix**
- **A substitute for adequate public investment by governments**
- **A substitute for broader debates about alternatives to neo-liberal public policy**

The Victorian State Government's approach

- **Phase 1: Resetting the goal posts (Nov 1999 – Oct 2001)**
- **Phase 2: Piloting and experimenting (Oct 2001 – Dec 2003)**
- **Phase 3: Establishment of the Department for Victorian Communities (Dec 2003 – May 2005)**
- **Phase 4: Mainstreaming and 'changing the way government works' (May 2005 -)**

Community strengthening.....

‘.... lies at the heart of our approach to Government in Victoria. We want to harness the energy of communities so that they can shape their own futures. Government must also change the way it works to better understand and respond to the needs and aspirations of Victorian communities.

We want to find new ways to tackle disadvantage, create opportunities, and deliver tangible benefits such as jobs, educational options, safer places to live and work, better services and a healthy, sustainable environment.

It’s also important to have people with skills to put these plans into action.

We want to encourage partnerships at the local level between community organisations, business and government to really make a difference to the future of those communities.’

John Thwaites: Deputy Premier and Minister for Victorian Communities

Lessons from the ‘experimenting’ phase

‘From Strength to STRENGTH’ (West, 2004)

- **Initial learnings about successful community strengthening in Victoria**
- **Qualitative research capturing reactions at the time**
- **To inform future phases of Victorian community strengthening policy development**

Successful community strengthening projects commonly have...

- **Strong local community leadership and ownership**
- **Participation inclusive of 'hard to reach' and diverse members of the community**
- **Clearly defined and agreed goals**

Successful community strengthening projects commonly have...

- **Clear and tangible benefits for communities**
- **Respectful partnerships**
- **Appropriate commitment of resources and skilled staff**
- **Relevant training opportunities**

Local government expertise

- Experience in seeing 'like the community'
- Long history of participatory processes and community development
- Knowledge of local issues and sensitivities
- Experience in service co-ordination, networking & local area planning
- Expertise in working with other levels of government
- Direct democratic accountability
- Council plans, budgets and resource allocations

An emerging alternative...

- **Devolved power not centralised**
- **Co-operation not competition**
- **Partnering not contracting**
- **Community focused not market driven**
- **Triple bottom line outcomes not just economic**
- **Opportunities to explore revitalised democratic practices**