



Australian Government

Department of Human Services

Co-Design Community Engagement Prototype Outcomes Report

The project explored how the Australian Government Department of Human Services can join with other levels of government and non-government organisations to deliver better services to the community and individuals, and how to test public engagement as a model for co-design of services at the strategic planning level.

The Australian Government Department of Human Services (the department) partnered with the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) to test a way of engaging and collaborating with the community and stakeholders.

The Co-Design Community Engagement prototype was a research project to test and gather information on how to improve such engagements in the future. It is one of the ways the department is exploring how we can work with the community to involve customers in the design of our products and services. The project does not necessarily represent an agreed position or direction for future community engagement.

The project occurred across regional and urban sites in Victoria and aimed to provide the department with the opportunity to better understand the needs within the community and then to work together to identify local solutions to local issues. The project explored how the department can join with other levels of government and non-government organisations to deliver better services to the community and individuals, and how to test public engagement as a model for co-design of services at the strategic planning level.

Background

Engagement sessions took place in nine sites across Victoria. Each site had a focus on a particular customer group: Camberwell and Rosebud (Older Australians); Maryborough, Epping and Fountain Gate (Working Families/Families); Ballarat (Youth); Corio (Indigenous); Benalla (Sole Parents); and Dandenong (Migrants and Refugees).

Each dialogue included residents, community organisations and local governments, as well as representatives from federal and state government agencies. In each case, up to 30 participants met at least four times to identify and discuss ways to align and improve services for selected customer groups. Each community then developed its own action plan to improve these services.

The participants reviewed federal and state services from a local perspective to consider alignment with local services and discuss what changes were needed in the whole complement of services to better meet local needs.

Overall Outcomes

As a research project, the Co-Design Community Engagement Prototype delivered a range of positive outcomes including:

- the opportunity for the three levels of government and community agencies to be ‘at the table’ discussing local issues
- an opportunity for the department to participate in local planning processes
- understanding the role that local government networks provide in accessing the local community services sector
- building on the critical networking role played by councils in their local communities
- a different and new opportunity for stakeholders to discuss local issues
- residents valuing their participation in the project and having the opportunity to influence government and community service organisation services
- establishing new contacts and networks for participants
- the creation of an action plan for each site developed from the collaborative process with ownership and a process forward.

For the department, the Prototype provided clear evidence that customer and community engagement is a valuable tool for co-design. There are existing processes led by local governments that involve mainly community service organisations and focus on community issues. What made the Prototype different to these existing processes was the range of participants involved and the nature of the dialogue.

By bringing the three levels of government, community agents and residents together within a single process, the Prototype was able to launch a dialogue on aligning public services that moved beyond consultation to community collaboration. Participants regarded this as being the most successful outcome of the process.

Resident Participation

Residents who participated took an active role and valued the opportunity to participate as stakeholders in the discussions. Resident involvement also helped shape the discussion and the outcomes. Residents proved to be a major asset and acted as a check on bureaucratic digressions. Stakeholders stopped using jargon, became more open and flexible about their views and made a concerted effort to work together to arrive at collaborative decisions.

Despite engagement, it was difficult to achieve consistent levels of resident participation across the various sites. Consistent resident participation and high levels of commitment occurred at Camberwell and Rosebud. Resident participation at Maryborough and Fountain Gate was significantly less, due in part to the broad scope of the families customer cohort being sought. Engagement of this customer group was difficult due to the way these customers were recruited, and the lack of flexibility and timing of sessions to suit the cohort. For similar reasons, resident recruitment and participation at Ballarat and Epping did not achieve the levels expected.

One of the key lessons from this experience was the need for the department to adopt non-conventional ways of meeting with residents and adapting to their environment.

Second to this, considerable effort needs to be taken in planning resident engagement and needs to ensure that selection and invitation processes are targeted to the community demographic.

Another lesson from the project was the need to ensure the scope was clearly defined and achievable. Each site had a different topic, selected through an internal process. Some of the topic areas were quite focused; others were very broad and created additional challenges for project participants. This was particularly the case at the three sites where ‘families’ were the nominated focus.

Going forward the department’s approach to co-design should be flexible and adaptable to the needs of different customer groups. For instance, the project has demonstrated that co-design processes can work through engagements with representative bodies as effectively as it does when undertaking engagement directly with customers. The practical difficulties in recruiting suitable customer participants can make engagement through third parties a more realistic option. In some sites such as Dandenong and Corio, alternatives were explored with very successful representation of resident views.

For example:

- In Dandenong and Corio the flexibility and freedom to adapt the process based on the participant's needs has been successful and allowed for productive discussions.
- Integrating the multiple languages and cultures of migrant and refugee communities in Dandenong proved too difficult to achieve in practice. A separate effort outside of the formal workshop sessions was organised with a smaller number of identifiable community participants with like background, and this provided a reference point for participants later in the process.
- Through a concerted and gradual process of building trust and enrolment of a key local elder, Indigenous Australians were engaged throughout the trial at Corio. Further activities were undertaken with local Indigenous leaders to support Indigenous community participation.

A new way of thinking

The depth of engagement and diversity in thinking that arose from the project indicates this engagement approach is a potential complement to the suite of tools that the department uses to develop its services in the future.

One of the unexpected findings was that a majority of participants expressed the view that the workshops had changed the way they thought about service delivery. There were several reasons for this:

- Being forced to think through problems in simple and non-technical language meant the process generated new insights.
- The different perspectives at the table created an environment where participants were able to widen the scope of discussion and venture into other ideas which would have previously not been considered within the group's mandate.
- Departmental staff were not put in a position where participants turned to them for answers; instead, they were in the unusual and welcome position of being able to reflect on ideas generated and not respond immediately.

Eighty participants were surveyed about the process. First, there was wide agreement across the communities that the most important aspect of the process was bringing all these players to the table. As a result, 81 per cent of survey respondents found that the process involved more collaboration than usual; 94 per cent reported that they had made significant new contacts, and 66 per cent thought the outcomes achieved through their action plan were very usable.

Working with local and state government

This project brought the department into the local collaborative planning process. The department is often not engaged in local planning initiatives where state, local government and community service organisations play a regular and active role.

The level of engagement from state and commonwealth stakeholders varied across the nine sites. Participants indicated that engagement with key local, state and commonwealth government stakeholders was vital to the process. Where these stakeholders were absent the groups found it difficult to narrow the scope of discussions and take forward particular issues and actions. In sites where the representation was strong, existing relationships and participation in ongoing local processes were the supporting factors.

Complex issues cannot be resolved by government alone. It requires the participation of citizens, stakeholders and communities working together. First and foremost, collaboration is about building the relationships needed to make this happen. The capacity to work together in this way requires trust and mutual understanding. Building this relationship is a critical condition for collaborative action.

For departmental staff involved, the project provided an opportunity for them to work with and understand their communities beyond the scope of their current role. This was supported by survey results which indicated that if federal and state governments remain involved, participants felt that a real partnership could evolve, based on learning, mutual respect, interest and trust. This new set of relationships would make possible real and lasting progress on complex goals, such as a healthy community or a sustainable economy.

Action Plans

All sites produced action plans with clearly stated responsibilities for government and community service participants. The action plans for each of the nine sites vary in depth, but most agreed that the dialogues achieved two goals:

- 1 allowed participants to take a holistic approach to aligning services at the local level
- 2 gathered information on how to improve the department's services within the various communities.

The action plans consider the needs and the suite of services available and then ask how the services should be adjusted to fit together better so they serve the community needs more effectively. This holistic approach is more comprehensive and takes into account the diverse range of services provided at the local level.

As the conversations were broad reaching around community needs, most of the actions developed do not focus on specific department responsibilities but sit with local, state and community service agencies. The action plans vary in approaches; however all have practical and collaborative elements.

Across the nine sites, there were common themes identified that apply to service delivery, both at the local and national level.

These are:

- **Housing**—access to affordable housing that meets the needs of the community. For example, in Dandenong, it was highlighted that traditional community housing may not meet the needs of a migrant family which often includes extended family. In the Corio Action Plan, a shortage of affordable housing is seen as having close connections with other issues, such as mental health and literacy. Therefore, dealing with housing in isolation is a formula for failure. Participants called for a more holistic approach to the problem. This, in turn, requires that all three levels of government come to the table, along with stakeholders and residents, so that there can be a single, comprehensive discussion of how to solve housing issues in their community.
- **Transport**—this is major barrier to accessing services and social inclusion for many of the cohorts. Discussions centred on local infrastructure, however in Camberwell, the group explored options to recruit volunteers for an existing program run in the community.
- **Information**—all groups highlighted the need for clear information that is easily available and relevant to their community. Delivery of this information varied from pamphlets to a local based website that provided information about a cross section of services delivered to the community from all three tiers of government.
- **Joined up Services**—all groups confirmed a desire to be able to access a range of services from one point. There was no preference for which tier of government delivered the service, or if it was provided by a community agency. In Dandenong, a simple solution is being trialled through the use of a referral slip which residents can use to take from one service to another. The intention is to support customers who may be experiencing language barriers and preventing them from having to retell their story.
- **Training**—well trained staff were identified as being the key to successful service delivery. In Corio and Dandenong, the need for access to staff with appropriate cultural training and understanding of the customer base was further discussed, in particular in government service delivery agencies such as Centrelink or employment agencies.

Across some sites, quick wins were identified and some strategies have been implemented immediately.

- In Ballarat, a significant outcome of the collaborative work was around the use of the Outcomes Star as a tool which could be used nationally (by the department and other agencies), to provide a common language to better support young people with complex issues. Social workers from the department have agreed to trial this and report back to the group.
- In Dandenong, recent refugees often don't have appropriate proof of identity documents to access private rental accommodation through real estate agents. The Action Plan calls on the department and local organisations to meet with local agents and the Victoria Real Estate Association to ensure a better understanding of requirements of process, identity points, guarantors, and barriers. The expectation is they all sit down together and address the problem in a way that accommodates everyone's needs.
- The co-design process in Epping aligned with work being undertaken by the Whittlesea Community Futures (WCF), an established collaborative forum of community service organisations and government departments that deals with local issues. The activities and the action plan will be taken to the WCF meetings and integrated into future planning.
- In Camberwell, the action plan and the group will progress the work under the City of Boroondara's Age Friendly Strategy.
- In Benalla, the group has identified options for a survey to clarify local needs, and proposes to shift from using a larger to smaller bus, which could be able to make more frequent runs and serve the community better. The plan calls for a closer working relationship between the State Department of Transport and Benalla in order to pursue such goals more effectively.
- The Central Goldfields Shire Mayor has taken an active interest in the dialogues in Maryborough, and has committed to taking the issues further and reporting on the process to the Go Goldfields group in the New Year.
- The department is working with Rosebud Council to resolve issues relating to a lack of bulk billing GPs for older Australians.
- Understanding and future involvement by the department in existing local and regional planning groups which focus on integrated service delivery and skills development across a range of issues (for example, Benalla and District Task Force, Ballarat Youth Strategy, Mornington Peninsula Positive Ageing Strategy, Goldfields Closing the Gap Strategy, Creating an Age Friendly Boroondara reference group). In several locations, participants agreed to integrate/link these initiatives to the co-design project.
- At the Rosebud site, participants either represented or were members of the Primary Care Partnership, Peninsula Advisory Committee for Elders, GPs, Housing, Social and Community House networks, amongst others. The Rosebud participants went so far as to establish a sub-group, specifically examining information exchange and consolidation for use by all the networks.
- One of the key items to come out of Rosebud was to develop a package that introduces people to online use of department websites to encourage greater self-sufficiency.
- Rosebud is also reviewing options to develop tip sheets for services to engage with senior or carer cohorts.
- Dandenong is looking at options for using a wiki style information page to document and compile a group of migrant and refugee services available in the district.
- A toolkit has been developed using insights that will support co-design and community engagement at the community and service zone level.

For many of the workshops, further actions of this nature are likely to arise as the action plans progress. Many of the action plans are expressed in terms of intended future action as many of the groups were working on some of the short term outcomes as the conversations progressed.

Conclusion

The department's commitment to co-design at the strategic level requires community engagement, along the lines of the Prototype. There are numerous community-based, collaborative initiatives underway, but most are narrower in focus than the Prototype. In terms of the Prototype's goal of aligning strategic directions, these initiatives provide a robust foundation to build on and provide the foundation for co-design at the local level with communities and within Service Zones in the department.

Linking up with other forums is a highly desirable goal. Most participants saw the process as the first step in a longer journey. No one anticipated the issues could be solved in a single round. Indeed, participants agreed that they had barely scratched the surface. The longer-term goals of the Prototype will likely lead to a closer working relationship between community dialogues and other existing policy and service delivery forums. Local council and other community members have indicated their willingness to take a leadership role in helping to establish these connections. The group acknowledged that the "table" is metaphoric and these relationships can continue both through formal and informal mechanisms.

Community processes, like those in the Prototype, offer a promising way to engage the public on bigger policy issues. This is because they allow the participants to approach them from the bottom-up, through reflections on services. This, in turn, in alignment with the department's broader co-design objectives, has the potential to lead to a policy discussion that is cohesive, practical and grounded in local needs and perspectives.

For the department, the effectiveness of the Prototype has to be measured in terms of the immediate impact of the workshops themselves, but also the extent to which they generated lasting benefits in service delivery or community relations. All of the participants who were interviewed considered that the Prototype had been highly successful. These views were confirmed by the majority of participants surveyed.

This Prototype is not the only approach for co-design; and co-design itself is not the only approach to engagement. Collaborative customer engagement is complex and multi-faceted and this Prototype provides lessons for one approach that can add value to the toolkit for co-design and complement other engagement activities conducted by the department.

References

This report draws together the key themes and findings held within the department.

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